

The culture of ‘gaman’

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“Gaman dekite eraine”

My mother would always praise me whenever I let my sister pick between the two gifts our father’s colleagues gave us. Whether that be a handkerchief, notebook or t-shirt, I patiently waited for my sister to make her choice and settled for the leftovers. “Gaman dekire eraine” “How admirable your endurance is” she said, patting me on the head. In every Japanese household, patience and perseverance is an honorable characteristic. I became proud of my ability to gaman, thinking that this made me more mature than my sister. My mother enforced this belief by applauding the capacity of my endurance. Gaman is seen as a national virtue, a virtue that all Japanese people practice in some way or another. The foundation of our nation lies in the spirit of patience and perseverance, and this value is cemented into the minds of Japanese citizens since childhood.

On March 11th 2011 the most powerful earthquake in the history of Japan hit the Tohoku region, taking the lives of more than 18,000 people in a matter of seconds. People lost their jobs, homes, possessions and loved ones in a single afternoon. They found themselves in overcrowded gymnasiums, without adequate food or water, as the cold seeped into their bones. Yet even in the aftermath of natural disasters the decorum of Japanese culture did not crack. Victims formed neat lines outside of supermarkets. Not a single person took advantage of the situation to steal from abandoned shops and homes. Although there were some cries of frustration and signs of irritation nobody raised their voice in anger. The virtue of gaman is etched so deeply into Japanese culture that it shines through even in the brink of heartache and disaster.

Yet we cannot deny the underlying elements of compliance, repression and conservatism that are crucial to gaman, that cannot be fully expressed as

English translation. The internalized coercion of this national virtue is exemplified in the tragedy that occurred at the Okawa elementary school in Miyagi due to the great earthquake of March 11th. Out of the entire student body and staff, only 7 survived. At first everybody thought that their deaths were the inevitable product of natural disaster. As time passed, however, it became clear that this tragedy was the result of personal and systemic failure. There was a hill in front of the school, high enough to rise above sea level and low enough that even the small children could climb with ease. Since the teachers insisted on following the education manual, the hill was not an option as guidelines stated they must evacuate to vacant land nearby. When two boys rebelled by heading for the hill, they were forced to come back and told to shut up. The teachers lead the students to vacant land, just as the manual stated, only to be swallowed up by a massive sheet of water. When the parents who had lost their children due to the incident sued the school and local government, they arrived at court bearing a banner donned with the words “we did what our teachers told us”. Imagine. The young lives that could have been saved, the heartache that could have been spared, if the trappings of gaman had not kept the teachers from making independent decisions. If the silent cage of conventional submission had not kept students from doing what they thought was right.

Cultural values shape who we are. The virtue of gaman has given the people of this nation the ability to overcome difficult situations they have no control over with dignity and grace, preserving its peaceful nature. But if Japanese society keeps romanticizing gaman as a heroic feat of self-sacrifice and endurance our country will never evolve. How will Japanese people escape the cycle of self-neglect, if the invisible tsunami of emotional control is a constant presence in our lives? Will Japan be able to break free from its stagnant state, if society keeps teaching its citizens to shut up in order to comply with the harmony it has created over generations? The plaintiffs of the Okawa Elementary School case won. They received compensation of 1.4 billion yen. Their children will only exist in the fragments of their memories, in the frozen smiles family portraits. All they can do now is “gaman”.