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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Notes on interviews and
attitudes in Japan

27 Lugard Road,
Hong Kong.

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Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y..

Dear Mr. Nolte,

I have just spent two of the most interesting and frustrating months of my entire Institute life, in Japan. As in the other Asian countries that I have visited my objective was to find out about the impact of science on the society. Of necessity this involved talking to a great many people in many walks of life -- university professors and administrators; government officials in various ministries; industrialists; politicians; businessmen; scientists in research laboratories; and newspaper men. Nowhere else did I encounter such polite evasion to my questions as I did in Japan.

Part of the difficulty was the language barrier. But that was not the main problem. The typical interview would be somewhat as follows: I would be given a letter of introduction, or perhaps a mutual friend would call on the telephone and arrange an interview. I would arrive and be introduced. Visiting cards would be exchanged. We would then sit down, usually on Victorian easy-chairs around a low table, and green tea would be served. I would begin by explaining my project. During these preliminaries, my prospective interviewee would toy with my card, looking at it from all angles -- one man even held it up to the light as though expecting to see invisible writing. I knew what was coming .."I'm afraid I don't quite understand who you are working for ... er ... what exactly is the Institute of Current World Affairs?" I would try to explain, but nobody really believed that there could be such an enlightened body as I described. It was no use. I would abandon that approach and stress my unofficial connection with the University of Toronto. This was better. Some had even heard of Tuzo Wilson, my ex-professor and the instigator of my project, and then it was easy.

Sometimes this sizing up would go on for fifteen minutes or more. Then a decision would be made, my card placed rather deliberately on the table and, "What can I do to help you?". I would breath an inaudible sigh of relief and plunge in, the first hurdle over.

In an interview of this type questions are merely a key to try to unlock the other's mind. One starts with a few specific questions and leads to the general, hoping to establish a rapport which will lead to frank expression of opinions. In about four out of every five interviews in Japan this did not happen. For the specific questions people would go to no end of trouble to find

answers. I got more statistics from official handbooks than I ever knew existed. But as soon as we got on to the general questions, seeking opinions as well as facts, I struck a brick wall and got nowhere. This was not always the case, and on a few occasions I met someone with whom a rapport was established and we would probe, parry and thrust for three and even four hours at a stretch. These were exciting interviews which more than made up for the others, but particularly at first, they were few and far between.

After one particularly frustrating day I met Larry Olson of A.U.F.S. (American Universities' Field Staff) and told him of my problems. Larry has lived in Japan for nine years and is widely regarded as one of the most astute observers of the Japanese scene. He laughed and showed me a copy of his book, New Dimensions of Japan. In the introduction he described his experience in collecting material for his A.U.F.S. reports. It was almost identical to my own.

I gathered that one of the main reasons for this difficulty in communications stems from the paternalistic employment system. Once employed by either government, university, or industry, the Japanese almost always stay with their employer throughout their working lives. Promotion comes through seniority rather than merit, so employees are content to jog along trying not to make mistakes. Hence when an unusual situation is thrust upon them (such as Larry Olson or myself!) they avoid saying anything which may cause embarrassment later.

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Two interviews did not fit the usual pattern, nor did they tell me much about Japanese science. They did however, give an insight into two contrasting Japanese attitudes -- attitudes which I learnt later were representative of fairly large segments of Japanese society.

The first interview took place in Osaka, the second largest Japanese city and center of the iron and steel industry. There I talked with Mr. Sato, president of a large trading company. I had been given his name by a mutual friend with the advice, "Go and see him when you are in Osaka, he is a fine man and he speaks good English".

He was indeed a fine man. About sixty-five years old, he calls himself an oldtime Japanese conservative, and owns a Buddhist monastery. "My interests," he said, "are literature and Zen Buddhism, and I know nothing about science." Science however, had caught up with his company. "We now employ scientists and engineers as machinery salesmen, and five years ago I was talked into getting an electronic computer. But I don't really understand these things and I have decided to retire soon to make way for a younger man who does." Mr. Sato regretted the intrusion of science and technology into the old traditional Japanese way of life, but accepted it as inevitable. "Japan," he said, "is the

first non-Western society to be sacrificed on the altar of science." He recognized that science had brought great benefits to his country, and that it is inevitable and perhaps even desirable that all countries will tend towards an international world culture with science in the vanguard. "If only we could find some way of retaining the best of our traditions and customs; but they are all being replaced by the offspring of science. Other Asian countries are following our example. In the mad rush to become modern they are discarding their own traditions, and unfortunately for the world, our present contribution to the new world-culture is minimal."

The other interview was quite different. It was with a nineteen year old girl in Hiroshima. In one sense I had gone to Hiroshima as a pilgrimage. Not only was this the city of the bomb, but it marked an important milestone in the subject which (thanks to ICWA) I now feel committed -- the impact of science on society.* At first I thought of it as being the birthplace of the subject. Certainly never before Hiroshima had scientists and laymen alike been so conscious of the role of science in society. Never after Hiroshima could scientists stay in their laboratories and say that what they did was of no concern to the rest of mankind. But on second thoughts, the contact and conflict of science and politics, science and religion, goes back to Galileo and beyond. Nor does Hiroshima mark the coming of age of science affairs, the day when universities accept it as a legitimate subject of academic enquiry has not quite arrived; instead, I decided Hiroshima marked a sudden onset of adolescence.

It was with these thoughts running through my mind that I arrived in Hiroshima in one of Japan's super deluxe limited express trains from Osaka. It was a hot sunny Saturday afternoon and I had to be back in Tokyo on the Monday morning. With time thus limited I decided to take a guided tour to give me a quick overall look at the city, after which I could return to those places which interested me most. It was a fortunate decision. Not so much because it was a good tour, but because it enabled me to meet a Japanese girl, born the year of the bomb, who had lived in the city since she was three years old and had received all her school and college education there. She was the guide for the tour. Her unemotional delivery of the information about the destruction of the city prompted me to inquire about her own views on the bomb.

The city has much of the small town atmosphere about it. It is of course, completely rebuilt. There is little to remind the visitor that this is the Hiroshima. What there is, is somehow pathetically inadequate, and the overall impression is one of a small town's efforts to commemorate one of the most significant events in the history of mankind. It doesn't quite come off. The now famous dome of the town's exhibition hall which was near the hypocenter of the bomb has been left a ruin as a memorial. There is a rather

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* Many names have been suggested for this subject. Among them are: science of science; social science of science; scientology; subject X; and science affairs. None are entirely satisfactory, I have used "science affairs" for lack of a more descriptive name.

gruesome museum of relics and photographs, and a Park with two memorials. One memorial is dedicated to all the Hiroshima citizens who died as a result of the bomb. The other was erected with donations from the children of Japan and is the most touching. One of the arts of Japan is that of paper folding, and Japanese children are fond of making paper birds. It is a custom when children are ill that they make garlands of the birds which are supposed to help them recover. One poor child, suffering from radiation sickness, died before she could complete her garland. Her story touched the hearts of all Japanese children and money was raised to build a memorial to her and other children who died as a result of the bomb. It is not a particularly striking monument, but deeply moving because it is hung with literally thousands of completed garlands of paper birds made and brought by visiting school children.

After the tour I talked with the guide and asked her about the attitude of her classmates at school and college to the bomb. "Frankly," she said, "we hardly ever discussed it." I asked if she and her friends realized how significant Hiroshima has become to the rest of the world. "Since I have been a guide I have begun to realize, but before, I don't think any of us had much idea." I then asked about the older people. "What do your parents think?" "Oh, most people in Hiroshima would prefer to forget the whole thing. Many would like to pull down the dome." There was no bitterness, hardly any interest. Though a serious and well educated girl, to her and her friends the bomb is history, the present is good -- "So why worry about the future?"

The girl fitted Mr. Sato's description of the younger generation, of which he despaired. She wore Western clothes, frequently ate Western food, and had Western furniture in her home. She took lessons in flower arranging and the tea ceremony only to satisfy the interests of the tourists she met during her work as a guide.

Mr. Sato and the young guide gave some insight into the conflicting attitudes which Japan's meteoric modernization has produced.

Yours sincerely,

C.H.G. Oldham

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