

The Tearless Children of Japan



EVERY JAPANESE CHILD IS TAUGHT THE ART OF WRITING.

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FOR God's sake, stop that crying." To hear this good missionary English in a nest of Japanese houses—and Japanese houses are so thin that everything the neighbors say is easily heard—was startling. In four months we had never heard any scolding or seen a child punished.

This unusual event proved to be one of those international households not uncommon in the east. It was the Anglo-Saxon half of the child that roared and tyrannized over its submissive Japanese mother. His English father had bought him a bright blue ulster with brass buttons. In this he strutted up and down Negishi Mura, bossing all the children of the quarter. A plainer instance of heredity and racial traits is rarely seen.

No one was more shocked at John Tashira than O Tara, the little niece of our maid, O Yen, "The Honorable Miss Dollar." Even when O Tara had the toothache she smiled through her pain.

"Bad boy," said O Tara. "His rudeness-to-Honorable-foreign-lady-is. Evil-matter-to-respected-ears-of-the Augustly-Honorable-one is," with great dignity, and bowing her little head down to the floor.

Even Japanese babies are popularly supposed never to cry. This comes pretty near the truth, for the land and all there is in it seems to be theirs.

In any country where Shintoism or ancestral worship prevails the children are bound to have a good time. A son is necessary to carry on the worship of his parents and to keep the ancestral fires lit. If a man has not a son he adopts one or takes another wife. If a woman has not a son she knows what to expect. Polygamy finds its excuse in religion. Japanese girls are by no means so highly valued, but, as can be seen, they work into the general scheme. Children being a religious necessity, their place is fixed. Supplementing this is the natural joy of parents in their own progeny and the sense of possession.

Curiously enough, pampered as they are, the children are never caressed. The Japanese regard kissing as vulgar, animal and unsanitary. Even foreign children would willingly give up being kissed in return for never being scolded or whipped.

When a Japanese child is born, everybody brings it gifts. Fish and eggs are the proper presents, particularly eggs, on which the family probably subsists until satiation sets in. On the third day it is named, and goes to the temple to be blessed by the priest. Girls are generally named after some flower or fruit, as "Ume," plum blossom, or "Kiku," chrysanthemum. Boys are nicknamed, as "Eitaro," "glorious big one," or perhaps "Saburo," meaning No. 3, the third boy.

A baby wears layers of those long easy slips we know as kimonos, which cover its feet and its hands. Consequently it has no cause for crying when it is dressed. Even the poorest baby has its daily hot bath. Hot in Japan means 110 degrees Fahrenheit, a temperature that gives even a grown person lively recollections. Its head is shaved, with the exception of a small tuft, until it is 3 years old. One of the few repulsive sights in Japan is the number of sore-headed children seen on the streets. These sores are not allowed to heal, the theory being that in this manner all the evil humors of the body are expelled.

When a baby is a few weeks old, it is strapped on the back of one of the younger children and sent out into the streets. When our children are being cradled and sung to the Japanese baby is beginning its

education. This seems to explain that expertness of the Japanese nation which within fifty years has become a world power.

The children of the poor play in the streets and the temple grounds, and every third child has a baby on its back. This makes no difference in the games. The children play battledoor and shuttlecock, toss their rice bags, run, jump and even walk on stilts with the last born nodding its helpless head or perhaps fast asleep, its face turned upward and head lying back on its bearer's shoulders. As the baby gets older it takes an interest in all that is going on and daily adds to its stock of knowledge.

Children are carried in this manner until they are 3 years old, and have their dolls strapped on their backs. Thus entertained and with plenty of company a Japanese child has little cause for complaint.

Indoors the mother performs all her household duties with the baby on her back. Our manner of carrying a child in the arms seems very wasteful of time and strength to a Japanese mother, who keeps her arms free and cares for her baby at the same time. Meanwhile the baby learns to cling with its toes and fingers like a little animal. It unconsciously learns what its elders know, and the precocity of the Japanese children in taking care of shops, in selling and carrying on that exercise of mental shrewdness which farmers call a "dicker" is the astonishment of every foreigner.

Every boy and girl in Japan has the same birthday, regardless of dates of birth. These the whole country unites in celebrating.

The girls' birthday is called the "Feast of Dolls" and takes place on March 1. On that day all the dolls of the family for generations back are brought out and ranged on a red covered shelf. Among these are the emperor and empress. Little lacquer tables are put before the dolls, and for three days food is served to them. A tremendous amount of visiting goes on and the streets are filled with gaily dressed children going to see one another's dolls and sharing in candy and rice cakes. At the close of the festival the dolls are carefully packed away with new additions to their company.

There is a common belief that if dolls have enough companionship, in time they will acquire souls. O Tara had a bare polled doll, which she cared for tenderly. Each day she bathed its eyes in hot water.

"Wherefore, O Tara," I asked. "It has eyes, but sees not."

"No, augustly honorable foreign lady. But if O Tara loves enough, baby see."

The boys' birthday is May 5, and is called the "Feast of Flags." Sacred to the boy is the carp, the fish of greatest strength and courage. It alone can leap waterfalls and travel up stream. The country bristles with flagpoles and from each wave brilliantly colored paper fish. These fish are made double, and the wind entering the wide mouths swell them out until they seem to be swimming in the air. Each pole will have a half dozen fish of different hues, and the color effect of this forest of gay masts viewed from some friendly hill is one of those beautiful results that this artistic people know so well how to produce.

The children enter into almost every form of Japanese life. When the mother goes to the temple to pray she brings home gifts for the children. Many of the temple grounds are like a continual fair with toy and candy booths and open-air entertainments.

Japanese toys are innumerable and cheap.



TWO LITTLE SHAVERS OF JAPAN.

One sen is a half cent. Ten rin make 1 sen; many of these toys cost no more than 1 rin. Here is O Saru, the honorable monkey. He is of red cotton, concealing a bamboo spring. Press the string and he runs up a pole. This costs 2 rin. A box of soldiers, samurai in full armor, costs 9 rin.

One of the simplest toys is the "Tombo," or dragon fly. Imagine two pieces of wood shaped like a T. The upper bar is daubed with color. By twisting the lower piece and suddenly letting go, the toy darts into the air, dipping, rising, hovering, in its rapid motion looking like a dragon fly, and making the same humming sound.

The children, too, are in the temple grounds imitating their parents' devotions by shooting prayer arrows, "firing" rolled up prayer papers, as our children throw spit balls, piling up votive stones, and sending paper prayer boats, touched off with a match, to burn on the temple ponds.

Hair is to the Japanese almost what the toga was to the Romans. The gun trigger style of hair dressing for men has gone down before western civilization. The boys wear their hair short, and a shock of hair is to the little boy what breeches with pockets are to our children. All the girls wear their hair in the same way until they are married. Even little girls require a hair dresser, for nobody but a professional could master the intricacies of the Japanese coiffure. It is to preserve this that the little pillows of wood and paper are used to sleep on. A greater sacrifice to vanity can scarcely be conceived. It is placed under the nape of the neck and grows stonier each hour. The boys can have cotton pillows.

The children all dress like their elders. There are no "baby clothes." At 7 a girl gets her obi, or sash, which gives her a hump-backed look, but is to the Japanese what diamonds are to the westerner. Only little girls and geishas wear gay kimonos. A bevy of little girls together in their flower-like kimonos with long-winged sleeves is like a flock of bright-hued birds. Dressed for any function their faces are painted dazzling white and red. This is not to deceive. Paint is frankly a decoration.

Another mark of girlhood is the red petticoat. It is an oblong piece folded around her and crossing in front. Now she begins those pigeon-like steps of the "Three Little Maids from School." This is to keep her skirts together and not show her ankles, for in all Japan there is not a stocking. At the race course I have seen the knees of high-born young girls disclosed by the rude wind. When the girl marries she gets a white petticoat and changes her style of hair dressing.

But child life is not all play. The streets are full of school children, with their bags of books. But imagine the boon. All Japan speaks softly. The children do not scream and yell even in play, and never in four months did I see a quarrel or fight. Teacher is held in such respect that until recently the children in reciting turned their backs, it being rude to stare him in the face.

In the Orient the children study aloud.

This is to make sure they are studying. As there is no alphabet in Japan the children have to commit a starter 3,000 Chinese characters, a mental effort which makes the foreigner understand the nimble, facile minds of these people.

The education of the boys and girls take different directions. That of the girl is to make her the accomplished servant of the man. If she is ill, she must conceal it. She must always be well and willing, have a smile on her lips and her hands free to serve. She is taught to sew and cook, to make herself attractive by playing the samisen and koto, and to execute, what she thinks, is singing. She must be skilled in the involved paths of Japanese etiquette, to go through the tea ceremony, the "O Chan Yu," the foundation of all elegance, and to arrange flowers according to her text books and rules—a beautiful accomplishment which makes our bouquets seem barbarous. She does not dance. Geishas are paid to do that.

Both boys and girls must write well. Handwriting ranks as a virtue in Japan. This they do with a brush in vertical lines that read backward. The boys' studies are more like those of our western world. Chinese is their Latin, and English our French. American text books are used. They have athletic contests, tugs of war and grotesque races in which two boys are tied by the legs. There is an ancient contest known as "Taking the Castle." There are two bamboo towers covered with paper over twelve feet high. These are besieged by opposing parties with wooden balls. Inside are bowls filled with burning fluid. The castle that takes fire first wins the game for the besiegers. In the end there is a glorious bonfire for both sides.

But the chief thing taught to every boy is loyalty and devotion to the emperor. Ask any boy what is the dearest thing in life and he answers: "To die for the emperor." This is the secret of the bravery of the Japanese soldiers. It was a Japanese mother who, when her only son was brought home dead from the battlefield, smiled and said, "Then he was able to be of some service."

At the theater this loyalty is prominent in most plays. A celebrated play is "The Troubles of the House of Date." The lord is a little child. His playmate is another child, his subject. A rival faction seeks to poison him. A box of candies is sent as a present. The child knows his duty and calmly eats one, dying that the trick may be exposed and his lord's life saved.

In the long winter nights the children sit around the brazier of coals, which is the Japanese hearth, and listen to stories of the children's god, whose name is Jizu. When the children die they go to Jizu. Jizu wears a kimono with long sleeves, and when the goblins are after them they run and hide behind these sleeves. Here are bits from a hymn to Jizu:

"Poor little soul, your life was brief indeed."

"So soon were you forced to make the weary journey to the Mado."

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