

A Thinking Reed

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As you all know there are arranged marriages in Japan. Long before the marriage ever takes place, however, the first meeting between the prospective bride and groom, or "omiai," takes place. After the couple meet, they will decide whether they are interested in getting married.

The "omiai" is a very formal occasion and many Japanese buy a book which might be called "Kankon Sohsai Manual," or "Wedding and Funeral Manual." This manual contains helpful advice, such as where to hold the "omiai," and what to wear. But that's not all, it also tells you how to act, what to talk about, how to talk. In fact, it almost tells you what to think! In other words, everything about "omiai" is PREDETERMINED by what is in the manual. YOU MUST NOT BE YOURSELF!

There is even more. Let me quote.

"Points for Making a Decision about the Other Party after the 'Omiai.'"

"(1) Can you get along with him or her as a friend?"

"(2) Can you bring yourself to date the other party, with the understanding that you are dating one another with marriage as the final goal?"

"(3) With the understanding that you are friends because you are interested in marrying each other, will you be able to break off the relation if one of you decides not to go through with the marriage?"

Did anybody hear a single word about how you felt? This manual not only tells you what kind of person you must be, but it also gives you criteria for choosing a spouse. Who cares what the guy is REALLY like, or whether you LIKE the guy or not?

A manual is defined as, "a handy book of facts, instructions, and so on, for use as a guide, reference or the like." Today, there are a countless number of manuals. Go to a book store and you will find many, many manuals on almost every topic. The abundance of

manuals in Japan today has led some people to say that this is a manual-oriented society.

In a sense, this is not a bad thing. Manuals are convenient and they help us in confronting new things or situations. They can help us use machines without breaking them and help us to learn new things.

The big problem with manuals is the blind faith placed in them. Many people tend to take anything in written form as gospel. Furthermore, because manuals go into great detail, they keep people from thinking for themselves. And because it is so easy not to think, many people just follow the instructions which are written down in manuals without thinking about the various circumstances which may occur.

A good example of this is a story about MacDonald's. As you probably know, MacDonald's has a very comprehensive manual which describes everything from how to make hamburgers to how to greet customers. That manual helps to ensure that you can have the same hamburger at any MacDonald's around the world. But, that is also where the pitfall lies.

As the story goes, a customer came to MacDonald's by himself and ordered 20 hamburgers. After taking his order, the attendant asked the next thing which was in the manual, "Will you be eating here?"

Now, think about that. How many people can eat 20 hamburgers?

Let's take this one step further. Suppose there was a manual which said you should dislike certain types of people? What if it said that the world would be better without them?

Once there was such a manual. Its title was "Mein Kampf" written by Adolf Hitler. It led to the Holocaust in which millions died.

There were other similar manuals. They were used in Japanese schools at one time. They said that the Japanese were a superior people and must save the other Asian peoples from the Imperialism of the Western powers. Those manuals led to the Rape of Nanking, and, in the end, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not saying that all manuals are bad. As I said earlier, there are many helpful and convenient manuals. But at the same time, there are many ridiculous and, sometimes, dangerous manuals.

A manual's usefulness depends on how we utilize it. If we use them with thought they are a great convenience.

And that is the key, to use them with thought. The French philosopher Pascal once wrote, "Man is no more than a reed, the weakest in nature. But he is a thinking reed." So I ask of you, put not your faith in manuals, for if you do, man, the weakest reed, will be even weaker yet.