

INTRODUCTION

We English-speakers have grown skeptical of the power of proverbs. Most of us would roll our eyes at someone who seriously uttered a phrase like, “A stitch in time saves nine,” “The early bird gets the worm,” or “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.” Although we all recognize these sayings and know what they mean, these short, pithy bits of homespun philosophy seem hopelessly locked in the amber of a bygone era. The old one about the early bird sounds like something that grandma or grandpa might have said.

Japanese proverbs, on the other hand, have remained far more relevant in contemporary language than their English counterparts. One encounters proverbs frequently in Japan, in newspapers, business negotiations, and daily conversations. A salaried office worker may emphasize the need to move quickly on the development of a new product with the phrase *hayai mono gachi*. Parents admonish their more unfocused offspring with the expression *tagei wa mugei*. And there are a host of Japanese proverbs that cover friendship, enmity, and romantic relationships. You will eventually hear most of them used, provided that you speak Japanese for enough years for all the applicable situations to arise.

Some Japanese speakers seem to regard a mastery of the proverbs as a sign that a foreign speaker has “really” learned the language. I worked for a Japanese automotive components maker a number of years ago. One of my colleagues, a thirtyish corporate samurai named Yoshi, delighted in quizzing me on my knowledge of the proverbs. I remember his particular satisfaction one day at having stumped me with *gyōfu no ri*—an expression that you will find within these pages, along with many others.

Like most *gaijin*, I enjoy learning Japanese slang; but I must confess a clear preference for the proverbs. Slang expressions have a limited shelf life. Much of the Japanese slang that I learned in the early

1990s is already passing from the scene. The proverbs, by contrast, have staying power. Many of them have been around for generations, and continue to hold their value as linguistic currency.

Even if you never have the opportunities to use all of the proverbs you are about to learn, they will give you some illuminating insights into Japanese culture. One of the first things you are likely to notice is that many of the proverbs contradict other proverbs. The Japanese, just like the Americans, Britons, and Canadians, struggle with conflicting ideas and sentiments. The Japanese have proverbs that are boldly optimistic about human nature—and others that are darkly pessimistic about it. There are proverbs in this book that advocate group harmony, and at least a few that argue for rugged individualism.

The time you spend familiarizing yourself with the Japanese proverbs, or *kotowaza*, is sure to pay dividends in the long run. Enjoy the journey.