

THE  
Chrysanthemum  
*and the*  
Sword

*Books by Ruth Benedict*

PATTERNS OF CULTURE

RACE: SCIENCE AND POLITICS

THE CHRYSANTHEMUM AND THE SWORD

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*Patterns of Japanese Culture*

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*Peysuh & Sandy*  
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### *Debtor to the Ages and the World*

IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE we used to talk about being 'heirs of the ages.' Two wars and a vast economic crisis have diminished somewhat the self-confidence it used to bespeak but this shift has certainly not increased our sense of indebtedness to the past. Oriental nations turn the coin to the other side: they are debtors to the ages. Much of what Westerners name ancestor worship is not truly worship and not wholly directed toward ancestors: it is a ritual avowal of man's great indebtedness to all that has gone before. Moreover, he is indebted not only to the past; every day-by-day contact with other people increases his indebtedness in the present. From this debt his daily decisions and actions must spring. It is the fundamental starting point. Because Westerners pay such extremely slight attention to their debt to the world and what it has given them in care, education, well-being or even in the mere fact of their ever having been born at all, the Japanese feel that our motivations are inadequate. Virtuous men do not say, as they do in America, that they owe nothing to any man. They do not discount the past. Righteousness in Japan depends upon recognition of one's place in the great network of mutual indebtedness

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that embraces both one's forebears and one's contemporaries.

It is simple to put in words this contrast between East and West but it is difficult to appreciate what a difference it makes in living. Until we understand it in Japan we shall not be able to plumb either the extreme sacrifice of self with which we became familiar during the war or the quick resentments which Japanese are capable of in situations where we think resentments are not called for. To be a debtor can make a man extremely quick to take offense and the Japanese prove it. It also puts upon him great responsibilities.

Both the Chinese and the Japanese have many words meaning 'obligations.' The words are not synonyms and their specific meanings have no literal translation into English because the ideas they express are alien to us. The word for 'obligations' which covers a person's indebtedness from greatest to least is *on*. In Japanese usage it is translated into English by a whole series of words from 'obligations' and 'loyalty' to 'kindness' and 'love,' but these words distort its meaning. If it really meant love or even obligation the Japanese would certainly be able to speak of *on* to their children, but that is an impossible usage of the word. Nor does it mean loyalty, which is expressed by other Japanese words, which are in no way synonymous with *on*. *On* is in all its uses a load, an indebtedness, a burden, which one carries as best one may. A man receives *on* from a superior and the act of accepting an *on* from any man not definitely one's superior or at least one's equal gives one an uncomfortable sense of inferiority. When they say, 'I wear an *on* to him'

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they are saying, 'I carry a load of obligations to him,' and they call this creditor, this benefactor, their 'on man.'

'Remembering one's *on*' may be a pure outpouring of reciprocal devotion. A little story in a Japanese second-grade school reader entitled 'Don't forget the *on*' uses the word in this sense. It is a story for little children in their ethics classes.

Hachi is a cute dog. As soon as he was born he was taken away by a stranger and was loved like a child of the house. For that reason, even his weak body became healthy and when his master went to his work every morning, he would accompany him (master) to the street car station and in the evening around the time when he (master) came home, he went again up to the station to meet him.

In due time, the master passed away. Hachi, whether he knew of this or not, kept looking for his master every day. Going to the usual station he would look to see if his master was in the crowd of people who came out whenever the street car arrived.

In this way days and months passed by. One year passed, two years passed, three years passed, even when ten years had passed, the aged Hachi's figure can be seen every day in front of the station, still looking for his master.

The moral of this little tale is loyalty which is only another name for love. A son who cares deeply for his mother can speak of not forgetting the *on* he has received from his mother and mean that he has for her Hachi's single-minded devotion to his master. The term, however, refers specifically not to his love, but to all that his mother did for him as a baby, her sacrifices when he was a boy, all that she has done to further his interests as a man, all that he owes her from the mere fact that she exists. It implies a return upon

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this indebtedness and therefore it means love. But the primary meaning is the debt, whereas we think of love as something freely given unfettered by obligation.

*On* is always used in this sense of limitless devotion when it is used of one's first and greatest indebtedness, one's 'Imperial *on*.' This is one's debt to the Emperor, which one should receive with unfathomable gratitude. It would be impossible, they feel, to be glad of one's country, of one's life, of one's great and small concerns without thinking also of receiving these benefits. In all Japanese history this ultimate person among living men to whom one was indebted was the highest superior within one's horizon. It has been at different periods the local seigneur, the feudal lord, and the Shogun. Today it is the Emperor. Which superior it was is not nearly so significant as the centuries-long primacy in Japanese habit of 'remembering the *on*.' Modern Japan has used every means to center this sentiment upon the Emperor. Every partiality they have for their own way of living increases each man's Imperial *on*; every cigarette distributed to the Army on the front lines in the Emperor's name during the war underscored the *on* each soldier wore for him; every sip of *sake* doled out to them before going into battle was a further Imperial *on*. Every kamikaze pilot of a suicide plane was, they said, repaying his Imperial *on*; all the troops who, they claimed, died to a man defending some island of the Pacific were said to be discharging their limitless *on* to the Emperor.

A man wears an *on* also to lesser people than the Emperor. There is of course the *on* one has received from one's parents. This is the basis of the famous Oriental filial piety

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which places parents in such a strategic position of authority over their children. It is phrased in terms of the debt their children owe them and strive to repay. It is therefore the children who must work hard at obedience rather than as in Germany—another nation where parents have authority over their children—where the parents must work hard to exact and enforce this obedience. The Japanese are very realistic in their version of Oriental filial piety and they have a saying about *on* one receives from parents which can be freely translated 'Only after a person is himself a parent does he know how indebted he is to his own parents.' That is, the parental *on* is the actual daily care and trouble to which fathers and mothers are put. The Japanese limitation of ancestor veneration to recent and remembered forebears brings this emphasis on actual dependency in childhood very much to the fore in their thinking, and of course it is a very obvious truism in any culture that every man and woman was once a helpless infant who would not have survived without parental care; for years until he was an adult he was provided with a home and food and clothing. Japanese feel strongly that Americans minimize all this, and that, as one writer says, 'In the United States remembering *on* to parents is hardly more than being good to your father and mother.' No person can leave *on* to his children, of course, but devoted care of one's children is a return on one's indebtedness to one's parents when one was oneself helpless. One makes part payment on *on* to one's own parents by giving equally good or better rearing to one's children. The obligations one has to one's children are merely subsumed under '*on* to one's parents.'

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One has particular *on* to one's teacher and to one's master (*nushi*). They have both helped bring one along the way and one wears an *on* to them which may at some future time make it necessary to accede to some request of theirs when they are in trouble or to give preference, perhaps to a young relative of theirs, after they are dead. One should go to great lengths to pay the obligation and time does not lessen the debt. It increases rather than decreases with the years. It accumulates a kind of interest. An *on* to anyone is a serious matter. As their common saying has it: 'One never returns one ten-thousandth of an *on*.' It is a heavy burden and 'the power of the *on*' is regarded as always rightly overriding one's mere personal preferences.

The smooth working of this ethics of indebtedness depends upon each man's being able to consider himself a great debtor without feeling too much resentment in discharging the obligations he is under. We have already seen how thoroughly hierarchal arrangements have been organized in Japan. The attendant habits diligently pursued make it possible for the Japanese to honor their moral indebtedness to a degree that would not cross the mind of an Occidental. This is easier to do if the superiors are regarded as well-wishers. There is interesting evidence from their language that superiors were indeed credited with being 'loving' to their dependents. *Ai* means 'love' in Japan and it was this word *ai* which seemed to the missionaries of the last century the only Japanese word it was possible to use in their translations of the Christian concept of 'love.' They used it in translating the Bible to mean God's love for man and man's love for God. But *ai* means specifically the love

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of a superior for his dependents. A Westerner might perhaps feel that it meant 'paternalism,' but in its Japanese usage it means more than that. It was a word that meant affection. In contemporary Japan *ai* is still used in this strict sense of love from above to below, but, perhaps partly due to the Christian usage, and certainly as a consequence of official efforts to break down caste distinctions, it may today be used also of love between equals.

In spite of all cultural alleviations, however, it is nevertheless a fortunate circumstance in Japan when *on* is 'worn' with no offense. People do not like to shoulder casually the debt of gratitude which *on* implies. They are always talking of 'making a person wear an *on*' and often the nearest translation is 'imposing upon another'—though in the United States 'imposing' means demanding something of another, and in Japan the phrase means giving him something or doing him a kindness. Casual favors from relative strangers are the ones most resented, for with neighbors and in old-established hierarchal relationships a man knows and has accepted the complications of *on*. But with mere acquaintances and near-equals men chafe. They would prefer to avoid getting entangled in all the consequences of *on*. The passivity of a street crowd in Japan when an accident occurs is not just lack of initiative. It is a recognition that any non-official interference would make the recipient wear an *on*. One of the best-known laws of pre-Meiji days was: 'Should a quarrel or dispute occur, one shall not unnecessarily meddle with it,' and a person who helps another person in such situations in Japan without clear authorization is suspected of taking an unjustifiable advantage. The fact that the re-

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ipient will be greatly indebted to him acts, not to make any man anxious to avail himself of this advantage to himself but to make him very chary of helping. Especially in unformalized situations the Japanese are extremely wary of getting entangled in *on*. Even the offer of a cigarette from a person with whom a man has previously had no ties makes him uncomfortable and the polite way for him to express thanks is to say: 'Oh, this poisonous feeling (*kino doku*).' 'It's easier to bear,' a Japanese said to me, 'if you come right out and acknowledge how bad it makes you feel. You had never thought of doing anything for him and so you are shamed by receiving the *on*.' '*Kino doku*' therefore is translated sometimes as 'Thank you,' i.e., for the cigarettes, sometimes as 'I'm sorry,' i.e., for the indebtedness, sometimes as 'I feel like a heel,' i.e., because you beat me to this act of generosity. It means all of these and none.

The Japanese have many ways of saying 'Thank you' which express this same uneasiness in receiving *on*. The least ambivalent, the phrase that has been adopted in modern city department stores, means 'Oh, this difficult thing' (*arigato*). The Japanese usually say that this 'difficult thing' is the great and rare benefit the customer is bestowing on the store in buying. It is a compliment. It is used also when one receives a present and in countless circumstances. Other just as common words for 'thank you' refer like *kino doku* to the difficulty of receiving. Shopkeepers who run their own shops most commonly say literally: 'Oh, this doesn't end,' (*sumimasen*), i.e., 'I have received *on* from you and under modern economic arrangements I can never repay you; I am sorry to be placed in such a position.' In English

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*sumimasen* is translated 'Thank you,' 'I'm grateful,' or 'I'm sorry,' 'I apologize.' You use the word, for instance, in preference to all other thank-you's if anyone chases the hat you lost on a windy street. When he returns it to you politeness requires that you acknowledge your own internal discomfort in receiving. 'He is offering me an *on* and I never saw him before. I never had a chance to offer him the first *on*. I feel guilty about it but I feel better if I apologize to him. *Sumimasen* is probably the commonest word for thank-you in Japan. I tell him that I recognize that I have received *on* from him and it doesn't end with the act of taking back my hat. But what can I do about it? We are strangers.'

The same attitude about indebtedness is expressed even more strongly from the Japanese standpoint by another word for thank-you, *katajikenai*, which is written with the character 'insult,' 'loss of face.' It means both 'I am insulted' and 'I am grateful.' The all-Japanese dictionary says that by this term you say that by the extraordinary benefit you have received you are shamed and insulted because you are not worthy of the benefaction. In this phrase you explicitly acknowledge your shame in receiving *on*, and shame, *haji*, is, as we shall see, a thing bitterly felt in Japan. *Katajikenai*, 'I am insulted,' is still used by conservative shopkeepers in thanking their customers, and customers use it when they ask to have their purchases charged. It is the word found constantly in pre-Meiji romances. A beautiful girl of low class who serves in the court and is chosen by the lord as his mistress, says to him *Katajikenai*; that is, 'I am shamed in unworthily accepting this *on*; I am awed by

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your graciousness.' Or the samurai in a feudal brawl who is let go scot-free by the authorities says *Katajikenai*, 'I have lost face that I accept this *on*; it is not proper for me to place myself in such a humble position; I am sorry; I humbly thank you.'

These phrases tell, better than any generalizations, the 'power of the *on*.' One wears it constantly with ambivalence. In accepted structuralized relations the great indebtedness it implies often stimulates a man only to put forward in repayment all that is in him. But it is hard to be a debtor and resentments come easily. How easily is described vividly in the famous novel *Botchan* by one of Japan's best-known novelists, Soseki Natsume. Botchan, the hero, is a Tokyo boy who is teaching school for the first time in a small town in the provinces. He finds very soon that he despises most of his fellow teachers, certainly he does not get along with them. But there is one young teacher he warms to and while they are out together this new-found friend whom he calls Porcupine treats him to a glass of ice water. He pays one sen and a half for it, something like one-fifth of a cent.

Not long afterward another teacher reports to Botchan that Porcupine has spoken slightly of him. Botchan believes the trouble-maker's report and is instantly concerned about the *on* he had received from Porcupine.

'To wear an *on* from such a fellow even if it is for so trifling a thing as ice water, affects my honor. One sen or half a sen, I shall not die in peace if I wear this *on*. . . The fact that I receive somebody's *on* without protesting is an act of good-will, taking him at his par value as a decent fellow.



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Instead of insisting on paying for my own ice water, I took the *on* and expressed gratitude. That is an acknowledgment which no amount of money can purchase. I have neither title nor official position but I am an independent fellow, and to have an independent fellow accept the favor of *on* is far more than if he gave a million yen in return. I let Porcupine blow one sen and a half, and gave him my thanks which is more costly than a million yen.'

The next day he throws a sen and a half on Porcupine's desk, for only after having ceased to wear the *on* for the glass of ice water can he begin to settle the current issue between them: the insulting remark he has been told of. That may involve blows, but the *on* has to be wiped out first because the *on* is no longer between friends.

Such acute sensitivity about trifles, such painful vulnerability occurs in American records of adolescent gangs and in case-histories of neurotics. But this is Japanese virtue. Not many Japanese would carry the matter to this extreme, they think, but of course many people are lax. Japanese commentators writing about Botchan describe him as 'hot-tempered, pure as crystal, a champion of the right.' The author too identifies himself with Botchan and the character is indeed always recognized by critics as a portrait of himself. The story is a tale of high virtue because the person who receives *on* can lift himself out of the debtor's position only by regarding his gratitude as worth 'a million yen' and acting accordingly. He can take it only from 'a decent fellow.' In Botchan's anger he contrasts his *on* to Porcupine with an *on* he had received long since from his old nurse. She was blindly partial to him and felt that none of the rest of his family appreciated him. She used to bring him se-

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cretly little gifts of candy and colored pencils and once she gave him three yen. 'Her constant attention to me chilled me to the marrow.' But though he was 'insulted' at the offer of the three yen he had accepted it as a loan and he had never repaid it in all the years between. But that, he says to himself, contrasting the way he feels about his *on* to Porcupine, was because '*I regard her as part of myself.*' This is the clue to Japanese reactions to *on*. They can be borne, with whatever mixed feelings, so long as the '*on* man' is actually oneself; he is fixed in 'my' hierarchal scheme, or he is doing something I can imagine myself doing, like returning my hat on a windy day, or he is a person who admires me. Once these identifications break down, the *on* is a festering sore. However trivial the debt incurred it is virtue to resent it.

Every Japanese knows that if one makes the *on* too heavy under any circumstances whatsoever one will get into trouble. A good illustration is from the 'Consulting Department' of a recent magazine. The Department is a kind of 'Advice to the Lovelorn' and is a feature of the *Tokyo Psychoanalytic Journal*. The advice offered is hardly Freudian but it is thoroughly Japanese. An elderly man wrote asking for counsel:

I am the father of three boys and one girl. My wife died sixteen years ago. Because I was sorry for my children, I did not remarry, and my children considered this fact as my virtue. Now my children are all married. Eight years ago when my son married, I retired to a house a few blocks away. It is embarrassing to state, but for three years I have played with a girl in the dark [a prostitute under contract in a public house]. She told me her circumstances and I felt

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sorry for her. I bought her freedom for a small sum, took her to my home, taught her etiquette, and kept her as a maid. Her sense of responsibility is strong and she is admirably economical. However, my sons and daughter-in-law and my daughter and son-in-law look down on me for this and treat me as a stranger. I do not blame them; it is my fault.

The parents of the girl did not seem to understand the situation and since she is of marriageable age they wrote wanting her returned. I have met the parents and explained the circumstances. They are very poor but are not gold-diggers. They have promised to consider her as dead and to consent that she continue in her situation. She herself wants to remain by my side till my death. But our ages are as father and daughter and therefore I sometimes consider sending her home. My children consider that she is after my property.

I have a chronic illness and I think I have only one or two years to live. I would appreciate your showing me what course to take. Let me say in conclusion that though the girl was once only a 'girl in the dark,' that was because of circumstances. Her character is good and her parents are not gold-diggers.

The Japanese doctor regards this as a clear case of the old man's having put too heavy an *on* upon his children. He says:

You have described an event of daily occurrence. . . .

Let me preface my remarks by saying that I gather from your letter that you are asking from me the answer *you* want, and that this makes me have some antagonism to you. I of course appreciate your long unmarriedness, but you have used this to make your children wear the *on* and also to justify yourself in your present line of action. I don't like this. I'm not saying that you are sly, but your personality is

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very weak. It would have been better to have explained to your children that you had to live with a woman,—if you couldn't help having one,—and not to have let them wear the *on* (for your remaining unmarried). The children naturally are against you because you have laid such emphasis on this *on*. After all human beings don't lose their sexual desires and you can't help having desire. But one tries to overcome the desire. Your children expected you to because they expected you to live up to the ideal they had formed of you. On the contrary, they were betrayed and I can see how they feel, though it is egoistic on their part. They are married and sexually satisfied and they're selfish to deny this to their father. You're thinking this way and your children the other way (as above). The two ways of thinking don't meet.

You say that the girl and her parents are good people. That is what you want to think. One knows that people's good and evil depend on the circumstances, the situation, and because they are not at the moment seeking an advantage one can't say they're 'good people.' I think the girl's parents are dumb to let her serve as concubine of a man about to die. If they're going to consider their daughter's being a concubine, they ought to seek some profit or advantage from it. It's only your fantasy to see it otherwise.

I don't wonder the children are worried about the girl's parents seeking some property; I really think they are. The girl is young and may not have this in mind, but her parents should have.

There are two courses open to you:

- 1) As 'a complete man' (one so well rounded that nothing is impossible to him) cut off the girl and settle with her. But I don't think you could do that; your human feelings wouldn't permit.
- 2) 'Come back to being a common man' (give up your pretensions) and break up the children's illusion about you as an ideal man.



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About the property, make a will immediately and state what the girl's and the children's shares are.

In conclusion, remember that you are old, you are getting childish, as I can see by your handwriting. Your thinking is emotional rather than rational. You want this girl as a mother substitute, though you phrase this as wanting to save her from the gutter. I don't think any infant can live if its mother leaves—therefore, I advise you to take the second course.

This letter says several things about *on*. A person once having elected to make even his children wear an extra heavy *on* can change his course of action only at his own risk. He should know that he will suffer for it. In addition, no matter what the cost to him of the *on* his children received, he may not lay it up for himself as merit to be drawn upon; it is wrong to use it 'to justify yourself in your present line of action.' His children are 'naturally' resentful; because their father started something he couldn't maintain, they were 'betrayed.' It is foolish for a father to imagine that just because he has devoted himself entirely to them while they needed his care, the now-grown children are going to be extra solicitous for him. Instead they are conscious only of the *on* they have incurred and 'naturally they are against you.'

Americans do not judge such a situation in this light. We think that a father who dedicated himself to his motherless children should in later years merit some warm spot in their hearts, not that they are 'naturally against him.' In order to appreciate it as the Japanese see it, we can, however, regard it as a financial transaction for in that sphere we have comparable attitudes. It would be perfectly possible for us to

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say to a father who has lent money to his children in a formal transaction which they have to live up to with interest, 'they are naturally against you.' In these terms too we can understand why a person who has accepted a cigarette speaks of his 'shame' instead of saying a straightforward 'Thank you.' We can understand the resentment with which they speak of a person's making another wear an *on*. We can at least get a clue to Botchan's grandiose magnification of the debt of a glass of ice water. But Americans are not accustomed to applying these financial criteria to a casual treat at the soda counter or to the years' long devotion of a father to his motherless children or to the devotion of a faithful dog like Hachi. Japan does. Love, kindness, generosity, which we value just in proportion as they are given without strings attached, necessarily must have their strings in Japan. And every such act received makes one a debtor. As their common saying has it: 'It requires (an impossible degree of) inborn generosity to receive *on*.'