

Cheap Talk In Japan

"Thinking Aloud in Japan" by Masao Miyoshi, in *Raritan* (Fall 1989), Rutgers University, 165 College Ave., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

The written word is not faring well in Japan. But the problem is not that the mass of Japanese are badly schooled or illiterate, writes Miyoshi, a professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego. In Japan, the written word is suffering because intellectuals and academics are abandoning it for the spoken word.

In the pages of scholarly journals and the few remaining serious journals of opinion, essays are being crowded out by interviews (*intabyū*), dialogues (*taidan*), panel discussions before an audience (*tōron*), and round-table talks (*zadankai*). And more and more of Japan's new books are merely collections of these transcribed "conversations." This "group talk-think," Miyoshi argues, cripples critical thought: "One does not think alone, or rather one does not think so much as circulate suggestions The art of conversation consists of a sensitivity to the flow of the group's desire, inclination, and mood. Ignorance and error do not matter much; they simply provide a blank for others to fill in as a gesture of grace and cooperation If there is warmth in the group, it can stand in for intellectual rigor."

Miyoshi has other criticisms of Japanese "conversationalism" [see box]. He sees its rise as part of a larger system of social control meant to ensure social consensus. It is nothing less, he asserts, than "purchased talk" for most Japanese, who, because the quality of life in Tokyo and other cities has been deliberately degraded, no longer have much opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions among themselves.

Lest American intellectu-

als begin congratulating themselves, Miyoshi cautions that they too have succumbed to a form of "conversationalism": the endless chatter of meetings, conferences, and workshops. "What is fascinating," says Miyoshi, "is that in many of these meetings, conversations simply fail to take place. The participants behave almost in contrast to their Japanese counterparts; they adhere to their written texts, hardly ever deviating from prepared lectures." There is no meeting of minds or alteration of views, just the endless (over) refinement of positions. American intellectuals, he observes, "have a defensive isolationist resistance against exchange and intercourse; they need their own brilliance to be left unquestioned."

Obviously, the American-style conference is no antidote to the Japanese *zadankai*, Miyoshi says. Intellectuals in both countries need to change their ways.

'Inch-Long' Thoughts

Conversationalism "has come to infect the general style and substance of written discourse" in Japan, Masao Miyoshi writes in *Raritan*.

The fragmented and paratactic nature of the conversational form has become a feature of current cultural conditions in general. A person who habitually participates in zadankai thinks and writes in a similar fashion when he or she indeed must write. Japanese writing style may be undergoing a radical change lately, and whether the change is a cause or effect, conversationalism is the dominant mode. Writers feel free to make assertions without much attempt to back them up with hard evidence. As in a conversation, they assume a pervasive consent and approval. If faced with disagreement, they can always apologize or forget. Thus the colloquial formulaic disclaimers—"I am not an expert on this, but . . .," or "I don't have enough time now, but . . .," or "I await your guidance and correction, should I prove to be in egregious error"—are unselfconsciously utilized as if the rhetorical alibis were sufficient excuses, or substitutes, for non-arguments. Views and opinions tend to be no more than random thoughts (sunpyō, or "inch-long comments"; dansō, or "fragmentary ideas"), respectable only because they emanate from respectable masters.