



Radio Exercising

This is one story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

Did you see the 'National Million-man Radio Exercise Meeting' on NHK the other day? It was at 6:30 AM, which is a good half-hour before I usually wake up, but down here in the country for the summer, our schedule is set by the kids' aunt, who gets up around five or so every day to start making rice for breakfast. She turns on her TV to get the up-to-date weather forecast, so we thus get quite familiar with early morning programs while we're here.

Now of course, having lived in Japan for eight years, I'm basically familiar with 'radio exercising'. A number of the factories near my Tokyo apartment broadcast it in the mornings over their PA system, and I see the workers exercising as I cycle by on the way to my morning swim at the local pool. I must say that they don't look too enthusiastic about doing it, but I quite sympathize with them. Compulsory exercising has never been a favorite with me, either. In fact, pretty much every single time I've seen people doing radio exercises, the only ones who look like they're enjoying themselves are the people standing up front leading, who presumably are the ones who organized the activity in the first place. My image of radio exercising then, is that it is an activity that most people would rather forego, but one that 'organizer-type' people, factory managers, school principals, community leaders, etc., are rather fond of.

I was thus a bit astonished to see on the TV screen the image of an entire sports stadium full of people all swinging their arms in those familiar patterns, to that familiar piano music. Not only was the playing field totally covered with the swaying figures, but the stands as well. Thousands and thousands of people. And this was a 6:30 AM live TV broadcast! At what time of the morning had they all got up in order to get to the stadium on time to do this? And why?

As the cameras panned back and forth across the field, and then moved in for close-ups, I got a few hints as to the answer. This patch of blue colour here looked like a community baseball team, over there was a boy scout troop, and next to them was what looked like a seniors' gateball club. In fact, nearly everybody I could see was wearing some kind of uniform. Of course! They were all members of various community groups, and I suppose when their leaders got the 'request' from NHK to join this event, there was just no way they could refuse. And then the members of each group just did what they were told, and presented themselves at the stadium on time, ready for the event.

Japanese readers are probably wondering why I think that any of this is worthy of comment, but believe me, from a Canadian's point of view, this is rather an unusual activity. Yes of course, Canadians also get together in stadiums for various reasons, and perhaps even at unusual times of day (although offhand, I can't quite think of any reason for them to assemble at 6:30 AM!), but if you were to ask the members of any particular group in a typical Canadian town to be at their sports stadium at this time of day to do ten minutes of stretching exercises and then go home, they would probably not react very favourably to the idea. They just don't have the tradition of doing radio exercises, and I think also that their ties to clubs and groups are weaker than in this country, and they can say "no" more easily to things they would rather not do.

But for people in this country, when the leader calls ... out they come. And what about those among them who would rather stay in bed? At least they can take consolation in the fact that if NHK is rotating this program from prefecture to prefecture each year, then it'll be nearly half a century before it comes around to their turn again!

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