Senpai and *kōhai*

In Japan, ***senpai*** (先輩, "senior") and ***kōhai*** (後輩, "junior") represent an informal hierarchical interpersonal relationship found in organizations, associations, clubs, businesses, and schools. The concept has its roots in Confucian teaching, and has developed a distinguished Japanese style, ultimately becoming part of Japanese culture.

In Japanese schools the *senpai–kōhai* relation is taught from an early age as an integral part of daily life.

Contents

Concept

The relationship is an interdependent one, as a *senpai* requires a *kōhai* and vice versa,[1] and establishes a bond determined by the date of entry into an organization.[2] *Senpai* refers to the member of higher experience, hierarchy, level, or age in the organization who offers assistance, friendship, and counsel to a new or inexperienced member, known as the *kōhai*, who must demonstrate gratitude, respect, and occasionally personal loyalty.[2][3] The *kōhai* defers to the *senpai*'s seniority and experience, and speaks to the *senpai* using honorific language. The *senpai* acts at the same time as a friend.[2][4] This relation is similar to the interpersonal relation between tutor and tutored in Eastern culture, but differs in that the *senpai* and *kōhai* must work in the same organization.[5]

The relation originates in Confucian teaching, as well as the morals and ethics that have arrived in Japan from ancient China and have spread throughout various aspects of Japanese philosophy. The *senpai–kōhai* relation is a vertical hierarchy (like a father–son relation) that emphasizes respect for authority, for the chain of command, and for one's elders, eliminating all forms of internal competition and reinforcing the unity of the organization.[3][4]

Over time this mechanism has allowed the transfer of experience and knowledge, as well as the expansion of acquaintances and the building of institutional memory. It also allows the development of beneficial experiences between both, as the *kōhai* benefits from the *senpai*'s knowledge and the *senpai* learns new experiences from the *kōhai* by way of developing a sense of responsibility.[6][7][8] This comradeship does not imply friendship; a *senpai* and *kōhai* may become friends, but such is not an expectation.[9]

The Korean terms *seonbae* and *hubae* are written with the same Chinese characters and indicate a similar senior–junior relationship. Both the Japanese and Korean terms are based on the Chinese terms *xianbei* (先輩/先辈) and *houbei* (後輩/后辈), written in the same Chinese characters (however in Chinese, the term *qianbei* (前輩/前辈) is more common for seniors).

History

The *senpai–kōhai* system is deeply rooted in Japanese history. Three elements have had a significant impact on its development: Confucianism, the traditional Japanese family system, and the Civil Code of 1898.[10]

Demonstrating the use of the *naginata* at a sports festival in Hamamatsu in 1911. Discipline training in school clubs historically has influenced the *senpai–kōhai* system with students.

Confucianism arrived from China between the 6th and 9th centuries, but the derived line of thought that brought about deep social changes in Japan was Neo-Confucianism, which became the official doctrine of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867). The precepts of loyalty and filial piety as tribute (朝貢 *chōkō*) dominated the Japanese at the time, as respect for elders and ancestor worship that Chinese Confucianism taught were well accepted by the Japanese, and these influences have spread throughout daily life. Like other Chinese influences, the Japanese adopted these ideas selectively and in their own manner, so that the "loyalty" in Confucianism was taken as loyalty to a feudal lord or the Emperor.[11]

The Japanese family system (家 *ie*) was also regulated by Confucian codes of conduct and had an influence on the establishment of the *senpai–kōhai* relation. In this family system the father, as male head, had absolute power over the family and the eldest son inherited the family property. The father had power because he was the one to receive an education and was seen to have superior ethical knowledge. Since reverence for superiors was considered a virtue in Japanese society, the wife and children had to obey it. In addition to the hereditary system, only the eldest son could receive his father's possessions, and neither the eldest daughter nor the younger children received anything from him.[12]

The last factor influencing the *senpai–kōhai* system was the Civil Code of 1898, which strengthened the rules of privilege of seniority and reinforced the traditional family system, giving clear definitions of hierarchical values within the family. This was called *koshusei* (戸主制, "family-head system"), in which the head of the household had the right to command his family and the eldest son inherited that position. These statutes were abolished in 1947, after the surrender of Japan at the end of World War II. These ideals nevertheless remained during the following years as a psychological influence in Japanese society.[12]

Terminology

The seniority rules are reflected in various grammatical rules in the Japanese language. A person who speaks respectfully to a superior uses honorific language (敬語 *keigo*), which is divided into three categories:[13][12]

- *Sonkeigo* (尊敬語, "respectful language"): Used to denote respect towards a superior with or of whom one speaks, including the actions, objects, characteristics, and people related to this person.[13]
- *Kenjōgo* (謙譲語, "humble language"): In contrast to *sonkeigo*, with *kenjōgo* the speaker shows respect to a superior by lowering or deprecating him or herself.[14]

- *Teineigo* (丁寧語, "polite language"): Differs from the other two in that the deference is afforded only to the person being addressed, rather than those being spoken about. Use of the verb *desu* ("to be") and the verb ending *-masu* are examples of *teineigo*.[13]

Sonkeigo and *kenjōgo* have expressions (verbs, nouns, and special prefixes) particular to the type of language; for example, the ordinary Japanese verb for "to do" is *suru*, but in *sonkeigo* is *nasaru* and in *kenjōgo* is *itasu*.[15]

Another rule in the hierarchical relation is the use of honorific suffixes of address. A *senpai* addresses a *kōhai* with the suffix *-kun* after the *kōhai*'s given name or surname, regardless if the *kōhai* is male or female. A *kōhai* similarly addresses a *senpai* with the suffix *-senpai* or *-san*; it is extremely unusual for a *kōhai* to refer to a *senpai* with the suffix *-sama*, which indicates the highest level of respect to the person spoken to.[16]

Prevalence

One place the *senpai–kōhai* relation applies to its greatest extent in Japan is in schools. For example, in junior and senior high schools (especially in school clubs) third-year students (who are the oldest) demonstrate great power as *senpais*. It is common in school sports clubs for new *kōhais* to have to perform basic tasks such as retrieving balls, cleaning playing fields, taking care of equipment, and even wash elder students' clothes. They must also bow to or salute their *senpais* when congratulated,[17][18] and *senpais* may punish *kōhais* or treat them severely.[1][17]

At the international level the *senpai–kōhai* relation has spread through martial arts, in which the members of different *kyū* and *dan* levels are sorted by belt colour.

The main reason for these humble actions is that it is believed that team members can become good players only if they are submissive, obedient, and follow the orders of the trainer or captain, and thus become a humble, responsible, and cooperative citizen in the future. Relations in Japanese schools also place a stronger emphasis on the age than on the abilities of students. The rules of superiority between a *senpai* and a *kōhai* are analogous to the teacher–student relation, in which the age and experience of the teacher must be respected and never questioned.[18]

The *senpai–kōhai* relation is weaker in universities, as students of a variety of ages attend the same classes; students show respect to older members primarily through polite language (*teineigo*). Vertical seniority rules nevertheless prevail between teachers based on academic rank and experience.[18]

The *senpai–kōhai* system also prevails in Japanese businesses. The social environment in Japanese businesses is regulated by two standards: the system of superiority and the system of permanent employment. The status, salary, and position of employees depend heavily of seniority, and veteran employees generally take the highest positions and receive higher salaries than their subordinates. Until the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, employment was guaranteed for life and thus such employees did not have to worry about losing their positions.[18]

The *senpai–kōhai* relation is a cornerstone in interpersonal relations within the Japanese business world; for example, at meetings the lower-level employee should sit in the seat closest to the door, called *shimoza* (下座, "lower seat"), while the senior employee (sometimes the boss) sits next to some important guest in a position called *kamiza* (上座, "upper seat"). During meetings, most employees do not give their opinions, but simply listen and concur with their superiors, although they can express opinions with the prior consent of the employees of greater rank and influence in the company.[19]

Outside Japan, the *senpai–kōhai* relation is often found in the teaching of Japanese martial arts, though misunderstandings arise due to lack of historical knowledge, and as the vertical social hierarchy of Japan does not exist in cultures such as those in the West.[20]

Issues

Despite the *senpai–kōhai* relation's deep roots in Japanese society, there have been changes since the end of the 20th century in academic and business organizations. *Kōhais* no longer show as much respect to the experience of their *senpais*, the relation has become more superficial, and the age factor has begun to lose importance. The student body has diversified with Japanese students, who have spent a large part of their lives overseas and have returned to Japan, as well as foreign students without a mentality rooted in the Japanese hierarchical system.[4]

The collapse of the economic bubble in the early 1990s caused a high level of unemployment, including the laying off of high-ranked employees. Companies since then first began to consider employees' skills rather than age or length of service with the company, due to which many long-serving employees lost their positions over being incapable of fulfilling expectations. Gradually many companies have had to restructure their salary and promotion systems, and seniority has thus lost some influence in Japanese society.[4]

Attitudes towards the *senpai–kōhai* system vary from appreciation for traditions and the benefits of a good *senpai–kōhai* relationship; to reluctant acquiescence; to antipathy. Those who criticize the system find it arbitrary and unfair, that *senpais* were often pushy, and that the system results in students who are shy or afraid of standing out from the group. For example, some *kōhais* fear that if they outperform their *senpais* in an activity, their *senpai* will lose face, for which *kōhais* must apologize. In some cases, the relation is open to violence and bullying. Most Japanese people—even those who criticize it—accept the *senpai–kōhai* system as a common-sense aspect of society, straying from which would have inevitably negative social consequences.[21]

See also

- Etiquette in Japan
- Honne and tatemae
- Japanese honorifics
- Sensei

References

1. Blomberg 1994, p. 203.
2. Kodansha 1994, p. 310.
3. Matsumoto 2005, pp. 1480–1481.
4. Davies & Ikeno 2002, p. 187.
5. Kopp 2010.
6. Panek 2006, p. 135.
7. Hassell 1983, p. 61.
8. Rubio, Brody & Castrogiovanni 2008, p. 37.
9. Brinton 2001, p. 159.
10. Davies & Ikeno 2002, p. 188.
11. Davies & Ikeno 2002, pp. 188–189.
12. Davies & Ikeno 2002, p. 189.
13. Matsuura & Porta Fuentes 2002, p. 261.
14. Matsuura & Porta Fuentes 2002, p. 262.
15. Matsuura & Porta Fuentes 2002, pp. 263–265.
16. Matsuura & Porta Fuentes 2002, pp. 115–116.
17. Sugimoto 2003, p. 132.
18. Davies & Ikeno 2002, p. 191.
19. Davies & Ikeno 2002, p. 192.
20. Lowry 2002, pp. 28, 122.
21. McVeigh 2015, pp. 220–224.

Works cited

- Blomberg, Catharina (1994). *The Heart of the Warrior: Origins and Religious Background of the Samurai System in Feudal Japan* (https://books.google.com/books?id=GMKDs1cZB5kC). Routledge. ISBN 1873410131.
- Brinton, Mary C. (2001). *Women's Working Lives in East Asia* (https://books.google.com/books?id=FgvGOHB15BwC). Stanford University Press. ISBN 978-0-8047-4354-9.
- Davies, Roger J.; Ikeno, Osamu (2002). "*Sempai-Kōhai: Seniority Rules in Japanese Relations*" (https://books.google.com/books?id=TW7lHYwXhS4C&pg=PA187). *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Tuttle Publishing. ISBN 0-8048-3295-1.
- Hassell, Randall G. (November 1983). "The Japanese Way" (https://books.google.com/books?id=bNIDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA6). *Black Belt*. Vol. 21 no. 11. Active Interest Media. pp. 60–64, 107. ISSN 0277-3066 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0277-3066).
- Kodansha (1994). *Japan: Profile of a Nation*. Kodansha International. ISBN 4-7700-1892-4.
- Kopp, Rochelle (2010-06-08). "Senpai & Kohai: In Japan, Experience is the Best Teacher" (https://web.archive.org/web/20101014144607/http://www.japanintercultural.com/en/news/default.aspx?newsID=78). *Japan Intercultural Consulting*. Archived from the original (http://www.japanintercultural.com/en/news/default.aspx?newsid=78) on 2010-10-14. Retrieved 2017-03-08.
- Lowry, Dave (March 2002). "Seniors and Juniors" (https://books.google.com/books?id=jtsDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PT27). *Black Belt*. Active Interest Media. pp. 27, 122. ISSN 0277-3066 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0277-3066).
- Matsumoto, Hideyuki (2005). "Impact of Japanese Traditional Cultures on Global IS Management" (http://www.pacis-net.org/file/2005/112.pdf) (PDF). *Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems*: 1477–1484.
- Matsuura, Jun'ichi; Porta Fuentes, Lourdes (2002). *Nihongo: Japonés para hispanohablantes: Gramática de la lengua japonesa* (in Spanish). Herder. ISBN 84-254-2052-0.
- McVeigh, Brian J. (2015). *Japanese Higher Education as Myth*. Taylor & Francis. ISBN 978-1-317-46702-1.
- Panek, Mark (2006). *Gaijin Yokozuna: A Biography of Chad Rowan* (https://archive.org/details/gaijinyokozuna00mark). University of Hawaii Press. ISBN 0-8248-3043-1.
- Rohlen, Thomas P. (1979). *For Harmony and Strength: Japanese White-collar Organization in Anthropological Perspective* (https://archive.org/details/forharmonystreng00rohl). University of California Press. ISBN 978-0-520-03849-3.
- Rubio, Ron; Brody, Irene; Castrogiovanni, Anthony (2008), *Mind/Body Techniques for Asperger's Syndrome: The Way of the Pathfinder* (https://books.google.com/books?id=2ePS2_IXtX0C&pg=PA37), Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 978-1-84310-875-7
- Sechiyama, Kaku (2013). *Patriarchy in East Asia: A Comparative Sociology of Gender* (https://books.google.com/books?id=wN5X31LS6hwC). Brill. ISBN 978-90-04-23060-6.
- Sugimoto, Yoshio (2003). *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (https://books.google.com/books?id=3C_BFE6YO6gC) (2 ed.). Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-82193-2.
