

The New York Times

Foreign Desk; A

Tokyo Journal; Loyal Samurai's Suicide: An Alarm Bell for Japan?

By DAVID E. SANGER, Special to The New York Times

1197 words

19 May 1989

The New York Times

Late City Final Edition

English

Copyright 1989 The New York Times Company. All Rights Reserved.

TOKYO, May 18 -- A year ago, before friends could have predicted that a political scandal would lead him to suicide, Ihei Aoki wrote a telling message in his high-school alumni newsletter about the ugly side of Japanese politics.

A year ago, before friends could have predicted that a political scandal would lead him to suicide, Ihei Aoki wrote a telling message in his high-school alumni newsletter about the ugly side of Japanese politics.

"Behind the scenes of this peaceful democracy are the same bloody power struggles to the death that were waged time after time by medieval warlords," wrote the 58-year-old Mr. Aoki, one of Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita's closest aides and his chief fund-raiser.

Mr. Aoki's somewhat prophetic writings are among the intriguing details of his last days that have fascinated the Japanese since, in a gesture seemingly out of feudal Japan, he slit his wrists and hanged himself late last month, hours after Mr. Takeshita announced his plan to resign.

The suicide, a scene from Japan's past reaching disturbingly into its modern age, has become the grist for conflicting psychoanalytic theories and endless political introspection. Add to this a good deal of mystery - Mr. Aoki left several still-secret suicide notes, including one reportedly addressed to Mr. Takeshita - and it is easy to see why Japan's tabloids have seized on the image of a loyal samurai taking the blame for the acts that felled his leader. A Warning About Politics

More than any other individual, Mr. Aoki controlled the bank accounts and stock transactions of the Takeshita political faction. In the days before Mr. Takeshita resigned, he told many people that he felt personally responsible for the revelations of \$1.5 million donated or lent to the Prime Minister from the Recruit Company, the fast-growing services enterprise at the center of Japan's recent political drama. Such suicides are hardly new here: since the end of World War II, more than a score of political aides have killed themselves, usually when seamy under-the-table deals became publicly tied to their bosses.

But sociologists and political professionals here have begun to wonder whether Mr. Aoki's suicide was more complex. Like his note to his high school friends, they suggest, it marked yet another effort to send a warning about the political illnesses of modern Japan. Mr. Aoki's suicide was prompted by more than guilt, they say; it was a protest against a political system that looks far more democratic from a distance than up close.

"Throughout history, suicide has been a means of communication for the Japanese," said Toyomasa Fuse, a professor at York University in Toronto and an authority on suicide in Japan. "Death has as much meaning to many Japanese as life, and this was a way of communicating his views on a social issue and his own pain and anguish at once."

The shadows surrounding Mr. Aoki's death parallel those that obscured his life. Mr. Aoki's was among Mr. Takeshita's closest professional friends; the two had worked together since 1958, when Mr. Takeshita was a newly elected young Member of Parliament. A Reputation for Fund-Raising

Mr. Takeshita has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the great fund-raisers of Japanese politics, and Mr. Aoki was the reason. By all accounts, he was a master of gently twisting arms, the man who turned more than a thousand companies into regular contributors and who would arrange a giant fund-raising party only to stand quietly by the front desk all evening. And when public works projects were being ladled out, it was Mr. Aoki who made sure that subcontracts were placed with friends.

But if Mr. Aoki's was a fixer, he was also a filter. A key job of confidential aides is to assure that while money flows through the door, the boss never has to swim in it.

"Politics takes money, and a secretary has to collect money from various sources," Mr. Aoki said several years ago, in a rare interview with the Japanese press that was recently republished. "His first duty is to make sure that such activities will not cause trouble to the politician he serves. I believe that a secretary who divulges what he happens to know in his position is scum."

Mr. Aoki could not defend himself by arguing that he was acting on the general instructions of the national leader. In a society where personal relationships are everything, Mr. Aoki would have been reviled if he betrayed the Prime Minister, yet

he would have been considered a liar if he denied knowledge of the transactions.

"It is exactly the kind of conflict that makes Japanese very vulnerable," Professor Fuse said. "In other societies you would testify, then write a book, sell the movie rights and make a million dollars. Here suicide is considered a reasonable way out." A Disease of the Elite

Suicide is definitely a disease of the elite here; among the overall population, Japan's suicide rates are in line with other industrialized nations. In fact, the number of suicides is dropping; last year it declined 3 percent, to 23,742.

But the concept of honorable suicide is still ingrained at an early age. Every schoolchild here knows the story of the 47 ronin who avenged the death of Lord Asano, their leader, after he was unfairly sentenced to death in 1702. After killing his rival, the ronin killed themselves. Japanese still come every day to Sengakuji to place incense at their graves.

Perhaps the best known social-statement suicide in Japan was that of the right-wing author Yukio Mishima, himself a product of a samurai family, who killed himself in 1970 after an unsuccessful demonstration against the impotence of Japan's armed forces under the postwar Constitution.

Every recent political scandal has also been marked by suicide: one of Kakuei Tanaka's drivers killed himself during the Lockheed scandal of the 1970's, and 10 years ago an executive of a trading company involved in a political scandal with the Grumman Corporation, the American military contractor, threw himself from a window in downtown Tokyo. Curiously, the major political figures themselves rarely turn to suicide.

The weekend before Mr. Takeshita's resignation announcement, it was disclosed that Mr. Aoki had arranged for a crucial \$400,000 loan to the Takeshita faction at a key moment in Mr. Takeshita's drive for the Prime Minister's office. That news spurred the resignation, which Mr. Aoki watched on television with other members of the Prime Minister's staff. Later he talked to Mr. Takeshita by telephone, then left the office, apologizing to people for the trouble he had caused.

"From now on, it's your turn," he told them. "It's going to be rough, so good luck."

Photos of Ihei Aoki, one of Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita's closest aides (Asahi); the right-wing author Yukio Mishima moments before committing suicide in 1970 (AP)

Document NYTF000020050425d15j008fm