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# REVIEW ESSAY

## NATIONAL CHARACTER STUDIES OF JAPANESE

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One faces innumerable difficulties in linking something as macro and complex as societies with individual behavior or values. In reviewing studies of social structure and personality, House (1981) summarized their major criticisms of early national character studies: "it was assumed, but not empirically demonstrated, that shared behavior patterns were produced by shared personality patterns, which, in turn, were the outcome of shared child-rearing experiences" (1981:534) and the literature shared a tendency to use "cultural differences" to explain everything.

Some studies have departed from this emphasis on cultural explanations and have focused rather on certain social structural elements that induce standard responses. Representative of such efforts is Inkele's (1960, 1969, 1983) work on how the exposure to the institutional environment of modern society (education, factory work, mass media) induces the development of standard characteristics of individual modernity (openness to new experience, punctuality, etc.) despite the countervailing effects of varying cultures. The research of Kohn (1969, 1983, 1986) and others on structural conditions, such as complexity of work, that induce self-directedness in the work place, home, and school also suggests that certain structural conditions induce standard responses despite the counter-effects of cultural influences. The Kohn results have been replicated with women as well as men and cross-nationally (Miller et al., 1981; Miller, 1985; Atsushi et al., 1985; Schooler et al., 1985).

The concept of national character implies values and behavior characteristic of the members of a certain society. However, obsession with cultural uniqueness blinds one to the universality of the basis of such behavior. Structural conditions may encourage similar behavior despite other influences elsewhere. Unless both the uniqueness and universality of the basis of national characters is defined, the results of a national character study of one society will be but a case study offering little contribution to a broader understanding of the relationship of society to national character. Similarly, comparisons between societies offer a better ground for generalization than one-society case studies.

Cultural explanations have mainly focused on differences between national characters and structural explanations on the similarities. It may be argued that a study of national character requires both a cultural and structural explanation dealing with both its uniqueness and universality. The existence of common structural conditions inducing similar behavior, the uniqueness of cultural and historical conditions inducing differential behavior, the influences of cultural transmission, and the differences in structural conditions inducing differential behavior all contribute to a better understanding of national character.

In this paper, I suggest that the national character studies of Japanese have

largely been focused on cultural explanations. Thus, they share the weaknesses attributed to this approach. After a review of the literature on Japanese national character some possible future directions are suggested.

### JAPANESE NATIONAL CHARACTER

Japanese national character has interested many who study Japanese society and its people. What is referred to here as Japanese national character is a composite of behavioral characteristics of conventionally called groupism. This behavioral pattern, frequently contrasted with Western individualism, has often been caricatured, exaggerated, and stereotyped. Especially since international attention has turned to such things as the Japanese economy, Japanese management, and Japanese education, increasing concern has developed for Japanese behavior and the mechanisms of Japanese society which support such behavior. This coincides with an upsurge of confidence among the Japanese themselves in what are considered "Japanese" traits.

Japanese group orientation has been repeatedly contrasted with "Western" traits, though some have evaluated it critically and others more positively. Benedict's path-breaking national character study, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), labeled Japan a "shame culture" in contrast to the "guilt culture" of the West, implying a greater other orientedness for the Japanese. Benedict's thesis has been criticized (Sakuda, 1967) for being too simplistic in its distinctions. However, the general idea that Japanese tend to be more other oriented than Americans (or Westerners) is prevalent in national character studies, other scholarly literature, and popular writings.

The resurgence of confidence in traditional "Japanese" traits on the part of the Japanese since the economic success of the 1960s and 1970s (Hanley, 1982; Pyle, 1982), as well as a parallel reevaluation from abroad of traditional Japanese values, has changed the tone of many of the evaluations of this so-called "Japanese trait." The original conclusion that Japanese lack individuality is now questioned by some as a Western-centered perspective.

Eshun Hamaguchi and Shumpei Kumon (1982) question the "Western" individual versus the group paradigm. The Western view implies a conflict situation where, in order to conform to the group, the individual must sacrifice a part of his/her individuality. The Japanese paradigm is different--individuals reason that it is more advantageous to pursue one's own interest through cooperation; thus, conformity is not a sacrifice of individuality. This perspective is expressed in terms such as "corporativism" (*kyodo dantaishugi*) and "contextualism" (*kanjinshugi*).

Non-Japanese have also commented on the value of group conformity or group cooperation in Japan. There, conformity is seen as inner strength and self-discipline (Reischauer, 1977:152) and individual welfare is seen as a function of group welfare (Beardsley et al., 1959:7). Whether considered a weakness due to lack of individuality, or a strong point in Japanese culture, group orientation has been repeatedly asserted to be a Japanese behavior characteristic in contrast to the "West."

However, the literature is in no way systematic or empirical about the topic. I will try to summarize what is meant by group orientation in the fragmentary and often vague literature.

Japanese group orientation seems to indicate a willingness to adjust one's behavior to the (perceived) expectations of members of a reference group. It is considered to be based on an individual mentality including the following attitudes: a) a tendency to avoid confrontation or conflict; b) a tendency to identify oneself with reference groups (often based on personalistic relationships), and see one's interest as contingent on the group's interest; c) a high level of empathy and sensitivity to others' expectations and feelings, and a psychological trait that stresses interdependence.

The notion that Japanese stress harmony and avoid conflict has become a well-known stereotype. The tendency to avoid conflict or confrontation at the individual level is said to enable individuals to hold conflicting beliefs without admitting the conflict--what Hiroshi Orihara (1969) calls a "non-conflict marginal man." This can be seen, for example, in religious attitudes where the same person can adhere to different creeds (Befu, 1971), some of which would conflict if logically pursued.

At the group level, this tendency to avoid conflict results in what Kazuko Tsurumi (1972) calls a multi-structural type of group conflict in which people in a group try to ignore the existence of conflict and evade confrontation by such practices as situational behavior or by avoiding interaction that may lead to conflict (*tsukaiwake* or *kirihanashi*). The non-confrontational attitude, when consciously transmitted into an official doctrine of an organization such as a school or firm, becomes what may be called "socialization for harmony" (Rohlen, 1974:7).

Japanese have been noted to extend the personalistic family ideal into different sectors of society by showing strong attachment to groups in which they are members and identifying their interests with the group's interest. There have also been repeated observations that Japanese behavior is particularistic, situational, or context-bound compared to Westerners (Lebra, 1976; Reischauer, 1977; Nakane, 1967; Minami, 1953, 1983). These assertions support the view that Japanese define themselves through relationships or roles more than do Americans (Befu, 1986; Lebra, 1976:148).

The clinical works of Miyoshi Kasahara (1977) provide insight into what people constitute the boundaries of the reference group. He noted that the findings from treatment of a neurosis in which patients become too self-conscious in front of other people and become obsessed with the idea that they will be laughed at, disliked, etc., indicate a dysfunction unusually common in Japan compared to Western countries, which he sees as a result of cultural fit. The people with whom the patients become most self-conscious are "half-known" (*han shiri*), people whom one has met or seen but with whom one is not close. Kasahara concludes that patients become most self-conscious in front of people whom they do not know well enough to expect then to be unquestionably accepting--*amaesaseru*. These people are the boundaries of their reference group.

To be other oriented is analogous to being sensitive to the feelings and expectations of others. Japanese are claimed to stress non-verbal communication (Benedict, 1946) and show high levels of "empathy" (Lebra, 1976:153). A famous proponent of Japanese interdependence, Doi (1971), defined the concept *amae* as the term used to express a psychological state that calls for a high level of unquestioned acceptance, support, and empathy.

In sum, the literature suggests that Japanese have a group oriented mentality and values, in contrast to "Westerners" individualistic mentality, and act in ways

consistent with the mentality.

## ANTECEDENTS OF JAPANESE GROUP BEHAVIOR

The bulk of the literature on the antecedents of this mentality/value set has discussed the child-rearing process, especially the role of the mother. The literature on Japanese child-rearing is conspicuous in its preoccupation with the maternal role. Japanese women are considered to have low social status but are said to be domestically dominant (Lebra, 1984:134; Wagatsuma, 1977), affecting all aspects of child-rearing. The mother-child link is considered to be the central relationship in the family, in contrast to the wife-husband link in America (Masuda, 1969:58-64; Befu, 1986; Vogel, 1971). The maternal role is said to permeate spouse relationships, where the husband is treated like the oldest child (Lebra, 1984; Vogel, 1971). The whole society is thought to be maternal, in contrast to the fraternal society of the West (Kawai, 1976). It is claimed that Japanese have a different course of ego development: one overcomes the great mother instead of the great father as in the "West" (Okonogi, 1982).

Various scholars have commented on how the Japanese image of "mother" carries with it visions of a selfless and sacrificing being who is unquestionably forgiving, a source of support and guilt (Lebra, 1976:154; Okonogi, 1982). This "mother fixation" (Lebra, *ibid.*) is claimed to be everything from a source of an achievement motivation (Devos, 1960; DeVos et Suarez-Orzco, 1986) to a semi-religious sentiment where the appreciation and guilt one feels toward the mother is comparable to Christian feelings of "original sin" (Yamamura, 1971). The glorification of the "mother" also leads to blaming her for all the problems related to children.

Naturally, the obsession with the maternal role leads to the idea that the "unique" strong mother-child tie in Japan engenders a "unique" Japanese mentality which is the basis of "unique" Japanese behavior. Table 1 is a summary of what are considered the characteristics of Japanese child-rearing in contrast to American child-rearing.

All Japanese child-rearing practices stress empathy and sensitivity to others and the close mother-child tie. Scolding techniques are characterized by engendering sensitivity to what others think (e.g. ridicule leads to the warning, "people would laugh at you if you did that") or convey the implication that the child's misbehavior might hurt the close mother-child tie (e.g. threat of abandonment) or hurt the mother herself.

The literature on the antecedents of behavior patterns other than child-rearing practices has been, at best, fragmentary. This is quite surprising given the importance of other influences, such as the mass media, now occupying an important place in the lives of both young and old and cutting across social class and regions of both the United States and Japan. Data show that the children in the two countries spend considerable time watching TV every day. Also, the circulation of magazines, comics, and other publications is very large. Although there are studies on American mass media, they are non-comparative, and there is only limited evidence on the contents of Japanese mass media (Niyekama, 1984; Schodt, 1983; Soeda, 1977).

Japan	U.S.
Close mother-child tie	Spouse relationship central
<b>Basic family relationship is:</b>	
Mother = child vs. father (Masuda, 1969; Hsu, 1971; Lebra, 1984; Vogel, 1971)	Wife = husband vs. child
Indulgent child-rearing	Discipline stressed
Less strict punishment (Whiting, 1963; Befu, 1971)	Strict, more physical punishment
Close sleeping arrangements	Room of his/her own
More non-verbal communication	Verbal communication
More attention (Caudill, 1966, 1969)	More hours alone
<b>Manner of scolding:</b>	
Threat of abandonment (Befu, 1971; Lebra 1976)	Appeal to parental authority (Hess, 1986)
Ridicule (Yanagida, 1970)	
Stress on role conformity (Lebra, 1976; Befu, 1971)	
Appeal to guilt feelings (Devos, 1960; Okonogi, 1982; Hara and Wagatsuma, 1974)	
Appeal to empathy (Hess, 1984)	
<b>Underlying notion:</b>	
Child as inherently good and "among the gods until 7" (Hara and Wagatsuma, 1974)	Calvinist notion of child as sinful and in need of discipline.

Empirical research on schools as antecedents of behavior patterns has also been neglected, despite the widely recognized importance of the school in children's lives. Studies on Japanese schools by Japanese have been predominantly surveys or speculative works, often using results from official statistics. Field work has been uncommon, especially in studies by Japanese. The actual activity in schools and classrooms has been left a black box opened partially through the efforts of non-Japanese scholars, usually anthropologists (Rohlen, 1983; Singleton, 1967; Cummings, 1980).

In comparative studies of Japanese and American schools, there is some indication that Japanese schools utilize small groups more in tasks such as cleaning duties (Okihara, 1977) and have more ceremonies in which children are asked to gather in one place (Tezuka, 1977), which may reflect group-oriented ideas. Teachers tend to address whole classes or groups rather than certain individuals and dislike ability grouping or singling out students (Cummings, 1986; Lewis, 1986).

It has been suggested that Japanese elementary school children engage in less inappropriate classroom behavior than their American counterparts, such as talking to peers, asking irrelevant questions, or wandering about in the room (Stevenson, 1986:210-211). Teaching methods may be more indirect in Japan, not directly focusing on the child's performance (Lewis, 1986).

The works of Stevenson *et al.* (1986) on in-class activities of Japanese and American school children provide interesting quantitative data on possible differences such as more frequent use of group instruction in Japan. Unfortunately, however, such attempts are exceptions, so that it is almost impossible to talk about repeated empirical evidence in the literature.

In sum, the literature on the antecedents of Japanese group behavior relies heavily on assumptions about the existence of group oriented values in society, which, in turn, are linked to child-rearing for explanations of how they are transmitted. The literature seems to jump from early child-rearing practices to adulthood, seeing tendencies internalized in the former period as ever-lasting. Alternative explanations are weak.

If group-oriented behavior exists in Japan to a degree worthy of special attention, the vagueness of existing explanations for it calls for new investigations on the topic. Such investigations should simultaneously answer two questions: how one can state with precision the manifestation of group orientation in Japanese society and what experiences lead to the orientation.

Despite the widely accepted assumption of the existence of "unique" Japanese behavioral traits which are the basis of "Japanese" phenomena and achievements, there have been very few empirical studies on the subject. Rather than having been demonstrated by empirical examination, certain behavioral traits, such as "groupism," have been taken for granted. Thus, although Japanese group orientation has been used to explain many "Japanese" phenomena, just what those traits are, and, even more, their social structural basis, have not been closely examined. The lack of cross-cultural comparisons and identification of social structural factors supporting Japanese behavioral patterns have led to the glorification of the "unique" Japanese mentality. It has become the independent variable with which everything is to be explained.

The literature is geared toward "cultural uniqueness." Since the literature has



consisted predominantly of one-society studies with an implicit comparison with the "West" -- usually meaning America --and the approach has been to either describe the cultural values or to explain behavior and phenomena through those values, it has been easy to get caught up in "cultural uniqueness." Comparisons of Japan with other countries may have revealed that many of the cultural values are shared with other countries. In addition, examination of structural conditions that contribute to the values may have revealed that similar structural elements can be seen elsewhere. The obsession with "cultural uniqueness" in the literature has limited its utility to a more general theory of society and behavior. Comparative and structural perspectives may offer a different starting point for generalization and theory.

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