

Sugimoto, Y. (1997) *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 1-4, pp. 11-13 (extracts)

Multicultural Japan

Suppose that a being from a different planet arrived in Japan and wanted to meet a typical Japanese, one who best typified the Japanese adult population. Whom should the social scientists choose? To answer this question, several factors would have to be considered: gender, occupation, educational background, and so on.

To begin, the person chosen should be a female, because women outnumber men in Japan: the 1990 census shows that sixty-three million women and sixty million men live in the Japanese archipelago. With regard to occupation, she would definitely not be employed in a large corporation but would work in a small enterprise, since fewer than one in eight workers is employed in a company with three hundred or more employees. Nor would she be guaranteed lifetime employment, since those who work under this arrangement amount at most to only a quarter of Japan's workforce. She would not belong to a labor union, because less than a quarter of Japanese workers are unionized. She would not be university educated.

Stereotype- female, she works in a small company, she is not unionized, she is not university educated.

The identification of the average Japanese would certainly involve much more complicated quantitative analysis. But the alien would come closer to the 'center' of the Japanese population by choosing a female, non-unionized, and non-permanent employee in a small business without university education than a male, unionized, permanent employee with a university degree working for a large company. When outsiders visualize the Japanese, however, they tend to think of men rather than women, career employees in large companies rather than non-permanent workers in small firms, and university graduates rather than high-school leavers, for these are the images presented on television and in newspaper and magazine articles.

The media= the opposite

Reality is different

Some academic studies have also attempted to generalize about Japanese society on the basis of observations of its male elite sector, and have thereby helped to reinforce this sampling bias. Moreover, because a particular cluster of individuals who occupy high positions in a large company have greater access to mass media and publicity, the lifestyles and value orientations of those in that cluster have acquired a disproportionately high level of visibility in the analysis of Japanese society at the expense of the wider cross-section of its population.

While every society is unique in some way, Japan is particularly unusual in having so many people who believe that their country is unique. Regardless of whether Japan is 'uniquely unique' in sociological and psychological reality, it is certainly unique for the number of Japanese publications which propagate the unique Japan argument. The so-called group model of Japanese society represents the most explicit and coherent formulation of this line of argument and remains the most influential framework for interpreting the Japanese and Japanese social structure. Put most succinctly, the model is based upon three lines of argument.

The uniqueness of the Japanese culture is emphasized by Japanese people themselves.

First, at the individual, psychological level, the Japanese are portrayed as having a personality which lacks a fully developed ego or independent self. The best-known example of this claim is Doi's notion of *amae* which refers to the allegedly unique psychological inclination among the Japanese to seek emotional satisfaction by prevailing upon and depending on their superiors. They feel no need for any explicit demonstration of individuality. Loyalty to the group is a primary value. Giving oneself to the promotion and realization of the group's goals gives the Japanese a special psychological satisfaction.

1. *Amae*: the group is more important than the individual.

The group gives satisfaction

Second, at the interpersonal, intragroup level, human interaction is depicted in terms of Japanese group orientation. According to

Nakane, for example, the Japanese attach great importance to the maintenance of harmony within the group. To that end, relationships between superiors and inferiors are carefully cultivated and maintained. One's status within the group depends on the length of one's membership in the group. Furthermore, the Japanese maintain particularly strong interpersonal ties with those in the same hierarchical chain of command within their own organization. In other words, vertical loyalties are dominant. The vertically organized Japanese contrast sharply with Westerners, who tend to form horizontal groups which define their membership in terms of such criteria as class and stratification which cut across hierarchical organization lines..

Loyalty and organization is 'horizontal'

Japan: loyalty and sense of membership is vertical

Finally, at the intergroup level, the literature has emphasized that integration and harmony are achieved effectively between Japanese groups, making Japan a 'consensus society'....

3- the importance of intragroup harmony

At least four underlying assumptions remain constant in these studies. First, it is presumed that all Japanese share the attribute in question – be it *amae* or miniature orientation – regardless of their class, gender, occupation, and other stratification variables. Second, it is also assumed that there is virtually no variation among the Japanese in the degree to which they possess the characteristic in question. Little attention is given to the possibility that some Japanese may have it in greater degree while others have very little of it. Third, the trait in question, be it group-orientation or *kanjin*, is supposed to exist only marginally in other societies, particularly in Western societies. That is, the feature is thought to be uniquely Japanese. Finally, the fourth presupposition is an ahistorical assumption that the trait has prevailed in Japan for an unspecified period of time, independently of historical circumstances...

False beliefs: 1. Every Japanese person behaves like this, 2. They all are this way in the same degree 3. It exists only in Japan. 4. It has always been this way

Japanese culture, like the cultures of other complex societies, comprises a multitude of subcultures. Some are dominant, powerful, and controlling, and form core subcultures in given dimensions. Examples are the management subculture in the occupational dimension, the large corporation subculture in the firm-size dimension, the male subculture in the gender dimension, and the Tokyo subculture in the regional dimension. Other subcultures are more subordinate, subservient, or marginal, and may be called the peripheral subcultures. Some examples are the part-time worker subculture, the small business subculture, the female subculture, and the rural subcultures.

Core subcultures have ideological capital to define the normative framework of society. Even though the life-time employment and the company-first dogma associated with the large corporation subculture apply to less than a quarter of the workforce, that part of the population has provided a role-model which all workers are expected to follow, putting their companies ahead of their individual interests. The language of residents in uptown Tokyo is regarded as standard Japanese not because of its linguistic superiority but because of those residents' social proximity to the national power center.

The slanted views of Japan's totality tend to reproduce because writers, readers, and editors of publications on the general characteristics of Japanese society belong to the core subcultural sphere. Sharing their subcultural base, they conceptualize and hypothesize in a similar way, confirm their portrayal of Japan between themselves, and rarely seek outside confirmation. In many Nihonjinron writings, most examples and illustrations are drawn from the elite sector, including male employees in managerial tracks of large corporations and high-ranking officials of the national bureaucracy.

Reality= a multitude of subcultures

1 the subculture which makes up the core culture> image that is the 'typical Japanese' for the Western culture.

Core subcultural groups overshadow those on the periphery in intercultural transactions too. Foreign visitors to Japan who shape the images of Japan in their own countries interact more intensely with core subcultural groups than with peripheral ones. In cultural exchange programs, Japanese who have houses, good salaries, and university

education predominate among the host families, language trainers, and introducers of Japanese culture. Numerically small but ideologically dominant, core subcultural groups are the most noticeable to foreigners and are capable of presenting themselves to the outside world as representative of Japanese culture. Élite, limited number of people belonging to a core subculture. They represent Japan around the world.

Stereotype- female, she works in a small company, she is not unionized, she is not university educated.

The media= the opposite

Reality is different

The uniqueness of the Japanese culture is emphasized by Japanese people themselves.

2. Amae: the group is more important than the individual.

The group gives satisfaction

Loyalty and organization is 'horizontal'

Japan: loyalty and sense of membership is vertical

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TaskB2.1.3



Interestingly, Sugimoto writes that it is not just popular guides published *outside* Japan for those visiting, living in and working in Japan, that 'propagate the unique Japan argument', but numerous Japanese publications as well.

- > Try to find examples of descriptions of the 'culture' of the country you live in published both in your country, *and* in another country (you will find extracts from such guides on the Internet, as I did in the case of TextB2.1.2).
- > Do either or both of these guides propagate the argument that your country is 'unique'?
- > If so, what is the nature of this uniqueness?