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Fukuzawa and Maruyama: How to Understand Japan

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If the ideas sketched out in yesterday's lecture are roughly right, they have considerable implications for the way in which we should try to understand Japan.

As I set out for Japan in June 1990 I did not consider myself an ethnocentric westerner. The increasing sense of shock which I will describe in my encounter with Japan was not caused by moving out of the only culture I had known into something different.

It is true that I had worked a lot on European and British history and culture and I had lived in England for over forty years. Yet I has also spent over 18 months in Nepal and visited my anthropological fieldwork area there some five times, travelling through India on the way. I had been teaching anthropology at the University of Cambridge for sixteen years and had read about, taught and supervised many students working on tribal, peasant and other cultures around the world. I had absorbed many of the relativistic anthropological truths and the general sociological framework developed by the great thinkers from Montesquieu to Max Weber.

Yet it is now clear to me that I did have a number of largely unexamined assumptions which caused difficulties in understanding what I was about to encounter in Japan.

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When I went to Japan, putting it rather over-simply, I thought there were only two major forms of society. There were integrated, largely oral, 'tribal' worlds, such as the ones I had read about in Africa, South America and the Pacific, and visited in Nepal. These societies were still 'enchanted' because they did not divide off the supernatural and natural worlds, 'embedded' because their economy and society were not separated, without institutional divisions of the kinds I accepted in my western existence. These places were the core of what anthropologists had tried to understand. They were small, often peripheral, worlds struggling to retain their unseparated otherness on the fringes of larger civilizations.

After the rise of societies with writing, cities, settled agriculture, crafts, states, formal religions, the world had changed. Although the dissociations and separations were not completed until perhaps the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the great world civilizations were at least partially dis-enchanted, de-familized, dis-embedded. This transition was the great divide in my mind. I thought not so much in terms of 'pre' and 'post' industrial, as tribal and civilizational.

This scheme lay untested and unexamined in my mind. So what I expected to find in Japan was a civilization which was in essence totally removed from the tribal type.

Whatever its form, it would be a variant on the great civilizational systems around the world. Thus while France, England, America, India or China were all very different, they were clearly within a similar order of world history, that is to say there had been a great deal of institutional separation. Even if they were not entirely 'modern', they had elements of modernity in their make up. They had, in Durkheim's typology, moved a long way down the continuum from mechanical to organic solidarity.

I was full of certainty, confidence and unexamined assumptions about my categories. These ideas seemed to fit all of the other worlds I had encountered in more than twenty years attending seminars, teaching and writing on anthropology. I doubted whether Japan would challenge them. It was just a matter of seeing where it fitted.

Yet as I wrestled to understand Japan through the 1990's I found it became more and more confusing. I felt in the position that David Hume described. 'Let an object be presented to a man of never so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects.'¹ This was a rather negative reaction, just bewilderment. I had come across a new species that could not be classified or appropriated using the familiar sociological tools which I believed would be appropriate.

Then, as I learnt to see Japan through the guidance of my friends Professor Toshiko and Kenichi Nakamura, and through the eyes of Fukuzawa and Maruyama, I began to see a shape dimly emerging. It was of a totally different kind to that which I had expected, yet not entirely beyond comprehension. Slowly I began to realize the deep wisdom of Kurt Singer's observation that 'The Japanese are difficult to understand, not because they are complicated or strange but because they are so simple.'²

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For a long time I found it impossible to see the world within the Japanese mirror, nor to understand it when I did get glimpses of it because it is not just trivially different from the west and other civilizations, but different at such a deep level that the very tools of understanding we normally use fail us.

I believe that it is not possible to understand Japan if we use the conventional sociological and philosophical models of the west. The meta-tools which sociology developed in the nineteenth century, the famous oppositions between Community and Association, Status and Contract, Feudalism and Capitalism, do not seem to help us in understanding Japan. Japan does not fit within that framework.

When anthropologists went to South America, Africa, New Guinea, South East Asia, they encountered tribal societies which did not fit within the grid of western categories. It would have been fruitless to ask if they were based on status or contract, individualism or holism, or any of the other western-derived oppositions. Instead the anthropologists tried to form a notion of the inter-connections, the relations between parts of a culture.

They came up with a basically holistic methodology. They stressed the functional interdependence of the parts and the impossibility of understanding any part except in relation to others (structural functionalism). And they looked at the structural homologies between different realms (structuralism). Their final description was placed within a comparative endeavour which, rather than merely classifying societies, saw each as a variant, different, yet in some ways a comparable entity.

The outcome of accepting Fukuzawa and Maruyama's characterization of Japan as a deeply 'non-modern' civilization, is to lead us to wonder how an anthropologist would describe it. He or she would do so on the basis of two premises. The first is holistically, that the parts are not separated, so that in order to understand any part we have to understand the whole (as opposed to the methodological individualism which helps us to understand western, divided, societies). The second premise is relationality or structuralism, that is to say that the meaning of things does not lie in the individual parts, but in the relations, and in the relations of relations.

Much of the work on Japan by outside scholars has been based on the assumption that we are dealing with a 'modern' and hence 'separated' and individualistic society. Hence analysts look at bits of Japan, parts of the system. On the whole such work is unsatisfying, it comes away empty handed because the net is wrongly constructed and catches little. On the other hand, the work of some anthropologists has given rich insights into particular aspects of Japan, because they do have a more comparative and holistic a methodology. They have touched parts of the strangeness.

However, what no analyst has really done as yet, it seems to me, is to link their cross-sectional portraits (of the anthropological kind) to the historical explanations of what they have found. Furthermore, most anthropological accounts tend to concentrate on the social and cultural side of life and pay less attention to the political economy of Japan.

Furthermore, with the exception of one or two authors, they have not often seen that French structuralist anthropology of the kind most famously practiced by Levi-Strauss and, to a certain extent Bourdieu, with its emphasis on relations, is better fitted to understand Japan than the rather more individualistic Anglo-American structural-functionalism.

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Increasingly over the years I have felt that the difficulty of understanding Japan is because the methodological, individualistic, functional, approach of much anthropology and sociology is not suitable. If we try to grasp Japan as a 'modern' civilization where there are things ('individuals') or discrete institutional forms ('economy', 'religion', 'politics', 'society'), we remain baffled.

So it is necessary to realize that in studying Japan the lowest entity is not a thing or an institutional sphere, a molecule or individual, which is assumed in much of western thought, including Durkheimian or post-Cartesian atomism. Rather it is a *relation*. Everything is situational, relational, symbolically linked to something else. Barthes' *Empire of Signs* recognized this well enough, the sign stands between signified and signifier in Saussurean structuralism. This is how Japan works.

In Japan, gardens, ceremonies, people, none can be understood in themselves, but always in relation to something else. It is a hall of mirrors, all reflecting each other, all empty in themselves. So to understand Japanese civilization we have to apply an approach which, to a certain extent Granet applied in his wonderful book on Chinese civilization (being a French structuralist in the Maussian school), but more obviously Levi-Strauss in his work on Amazonia.

In an odd way, we have to approach Japan 'as if' it is the Bororo, or some tribal, structural, civilization, yet with 120 million people rather than a few thousand. If we do this, many of the 'both/and' contradictions which first puzzle us make sense.

Frequently, like many others, I have been struck by the hybridity of Japan, the way in which it seems to combine opposite things, violence and peace, innocence and pornography, and many more. This makes sense when we realize that the Japanese relations cut across or bridge things which we hold apart in western thought. Natural and supernatural, individual and group, mind and matter, all the dichotomies stemming from Greek thought and later, and indeed of all monotheistic and even to a considerable extent Hindu and Chinese, societies vanish away.

We have relations between areas with which we are totally unfamiliar. The bundle of associations and meanings in each part of Japanese life is different. Anthropologists have long been aware of this in the tribal societies they have studied where 'marriage', 'gifts', 'spirit', 'law' cannot be translated into western languages without either great explanations or distortions. Yet it has seldom been recognized that this problem also applies to one world civilization.

Of course each nation and civilization is unique. For Dumont to explain how Indian hierarchy and caste works, or Geertz to analyse Balinese concepts of the person, has required a similar effort. Even to translate Italian or French culture into English is difficult. Yet in each of these cases, the grid of the models we apply fits a good deal in, and then we have to explain what does not fit.

What is odd about Japan is that nothing fits. There is no congruence. From the very beginning we are in an unfamiliar landscape, another planet as many have put it, where the laws of gravity, time, motion, as we are familiar with them, do not work. We are in an Einsteinian or Escher-like world, as bizarre (to us) as the most bizarre of anthropological tribes. Yet, on the surface, Japan is sitting there with its 120 million inhabitants looking innocently as western and 'modern' as anywhere – if not more so. It is this Looking Glass world into which we fall when we encounter Japan, as Alice fell down the rabbit hole, with a strange feeling of turning head over heels into a world with a different logic to it.

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If we look at Japan as a holistic, relational, civilization, a great deal of the dichotomies, contradictions and confusions fade away. We can begin to understand it and enjoy it as the last great working alternative to the capitalist, individualistic, world of the west.

It is a methodology which allows us to see Japan as it is, not through a western gird, for the epistemological framework of modern anthropology was designed specifically for situations where observers had to enter into other cultures which they could not initially understand and which clearly did not fit into their categories. They needed a fairly value-free and non ethno-centric methodology in order to get inside other cultural logics.

If we consider Japan as basically of the ‘tribal’, that is holistic and relational, kind, it does not make them identical to the Nuer, Bororo or Hageners or the Gurungs whom I study. After all, they have writing, cities, high crafts and money. The Nuer do not yet have the shinkansen or pachinko as far as I am aware. Yet it places Japan in a class of object which is well approached through the holistic and structural anthropological approach.

Of course there is a danger that the method will construct the object, that abandoning the methodological individualism (which normally creates individualists), we will create structural persons, individuals in Stratherns’s phrase. We may make a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is a danger, but I believe that the test as to whether it is worth pursuing this approach is the degree to which it really helps us to understand the complexity of Japan.

Certainly I found that the classical sociological western framework just creates, as Bruno Latour might have predicted, hybrids, Japan as neither this nor that, without offering much beyond this negative understanding. The holistic method fits over the Japanese mixings so that they make some sense and can be translated, as the Nuer, Azande or Bororo worlds have been translated.

This approach also shows how we can allow Japan to be different, not to absorb it mechanically into our world. It can be allowed to contribute some variation into our over-saturated and increasingly one-dimensional imaginations. As Maruyama correctly observed, the function of intelligence consists in any age in understanding others – to use Hegel’s terminology – *as others (In ihrem Anderssein)*.³

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The fact that Japan is the one great world civilization which cannot be divided into segments, like an orange, has an effect on how we come to understand it. Like a photo or painting, Japan is a *gestalt*, it is something we have to take in with one glance, or not at all. In this sense it is like the standard ‘tribal’ society studied by anthropologists. We cannot understand the tribal societies by looking at bits. The pieces of the jigsaw mean nothing away from the whole. Everything only has meaning when fitted with the other parts.

This is one reason why I am trying to create a simple, but total portrait. While necessarily superficial in relation to any one part, tries to look at the whole in the hope that the sum of the parts will give a truer sense than if one lingered longer on any one area at the expense of others. While it makes sense to approach somewhere like America or France by studying it bit by bit, Japan eludes us if we do so.

The idea of taking a total picture of a total civilization, something similar to Tocqueville on America or Dumont on India, is important. By focusing on part of Japan, as even Ruth Benedict did by analysing only parts of the present and omitting much of the ecology, technology, economics and politics, means that the essence is lost. The meaning is not contained in a series of parts, but rather in the relations between the parts. For example, kinship only has meaning when examined in relation to ritual, power and production. To dissect, is to lose this.

This makes it difficult to study and write about Japan. It may partly explain why I have had to wait for some fifteen years before I felt I might have a chance that I could 'capture' an understanding of Japan, as on a photograph.

As we work day to day, it is only possible to approach an understanding bit by bit, using the usual Cartesian method of breaking complex problems into solvable smaller parts. Then, and only then, when all the bits are roughly mastered, have I found it possible to put it all together again. The lapse of time is needed in order for all the bits to fit together in the mind. So it has taken five visits, slow sedimentation, many conversations, a great deal of thought, comparisons with macro social theories, experience of Nepal and China, to make it possible to get 'Japan' into focus.

This also affects the writing strategy. I have had to break 'Japan' artificially into parts, ecology, bonds, arts and so on. Yet in each part and then in each chapter, it was clear that the bits were struggling to link to other parts of the book. The seamless robe was being artificially torn apart.

This has always been a central problem in anthropology, where an investigator lives in a small village and knows that everything they see or hear is possibly relevant to understanding, and that any separation of the parts will end in artificial distortion. Yet while holding all this together and studying all aspects of a society is a large enough problem when working on and then writing a book about two thousand people studied over a year or so, it is compounded greatly when dealing with millions of people over two thousand years.

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You might say that I am just re-iterating the approach pioneered many years ago by Ruth Benedict, and to a certain extent that is true. But I think that the difference is that we need not just anthropology but history as well. If we stick with the present, we end up with what is basically a psychological interpretation – the Japanese are different because of some inner essence. It tends towards *nihonjinron*, the idea that Japan is unique and inexplicable and superior.

We are liberated from this temptation and led into greater understanding if we ask ourselves not only what has happened, but how, historically, it has happened. And here I return to the insights of both Fukuzawa and particularly Maruyama in his *basso ostinato* theory, that we need to understand the deep history of how Japan has evolved. Here is a lighting sketch of what, I guess, has caused the extraordinary situation in Japan.

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My friend Gerry Martin coined the phrase ‘bounded but leaky’ to explain how innovations happen in situations where there are sufficiently strong boundaries for strong developments to occur, yet the boundaries are sufficiently porous to allow in new ideas as they are needed. A metaphor would be a rock pool, developing its own rich life, but needing the periodic deposit of outside nutrients as the tide periodically sweeps over it. In our discussions on what might have happened in Japan, we often thought of this metaphor. After his death, as I come to think about how Japan has preserved within its rocky pool a world inhabited by wondrous creatures behaving in ways long lost in other world civilization, I return to his idea.

The first great western historian of Japan, Engelbert Kaempfer, described the fabled island of Japan. ‘Indeed it seems Nature purposely designed these Islands to be a sort of a little world, separate and independent of the rest, by making them of so difficult an access, and by endowing them plentifully, with whatever is requisite to make the lives of their Inhabitants both delightful and pleasant, and to enable them to subsist without a commerce with foreign Nations’.⁴

Throughout Japanese history, there has been a curious tension between closeness and distance from its Asian neighbours. It is this middling position which explains a great deal about the odd features which it has developed.

In terms of closeness, the fact that Japan is only a few hundred miles away from the greatest, most ancient and most creative of all civilizations, China, has overshadowed its whole history. The flow of high culture both from China and also very considerably from Korea, has put it in a very fortunate position. Imagine if Japan had been where other great islands in the Pacific are mainly located, in the Indonesian archipelago.

Placed thousands of miles away it would not have become a rich mirror of all those very early and hugely impressive technologies and cultural artefacts which we associate with China. Much of its history has been one of living in the shadow of a mighty tree, which constantly shed new and exciting fruit and seeds upon it; pottery and porcelain, silk, tea, weapons, writing systems, governmental systems, religions and philosophies. What was it to do with this rich downpour?

What it learnt to do was to take the Chinese inventions and to re-adapt them, often turning them over and improving them even further. Thus it improved or elaborated the pottery, the tea ceremony, the armour and swords, the gardens, the Buddhism, the writing system. It maintained its bass note, Maruyama’s *basso ostinato*, but imported treble notes. It changed, yet retained its essential otherness.

China itself had been in many ways a bounded but leaky civilization. It had developed perhaps the greatest, most coherent, and most powerful civilization in history by the time it came to deeply influence Japan. It was itself in many ways far from the type of civilization which was to develop at the western end of Eur-Asia.

The art of screening, importing what was useful, and then improving on it, learnt over two thousand years, stood Japan in good stead when it had to do the same thing twice again in its recent history. At the time of the Meiji restoration and early industrialization a flood of 'western things' came in. Then again after the Second World War and during the economic miracle, 'American things' flooded in.

The Japanese are historically the greatest imitator-improvers in history. The large (some twenty million people by 1720), energetic, literate and urbanized population was a perfect hot-house within its bounded island. It took seeds from elsewhere and made them grow into something exotic, both the same as their parent plants, but tended into new and more impressive shapes like the miniature trained trees or *bonsai* which decorate Japanese gardens.

The novelty of the developments was made possible by the distance of Japan from China and elsewhere. If Japan had been, like Korea, linked by land to China, it would have been over-run by its dominant neighbour, as Sinicized as Korea became.

Even a small gap of relatively peaceful ocean like the twenty-mile English Channel would not have protected it against such a mighty influence. The English were able to develop their relative autonomy and peculiar variations because they were normally faced by a divided set of relatively small nations. Seldom were they faced by a united great Empire and, when they were, in the case of Rome, they were over-run and Romanized. Closer to China, Japan would not have struck off in its singular way.

The hundred miles of dangerous sea, combined with the inward turn in Chinese culture after it gave up its great maritime adventures in the early fifteenth century, protected Japan from invasions. In particular, along with western Europe, it was the only part of the Eur-Asian continent not conquered by the Mongols.

Japan became a sort of human Galapagos islands. Ideas and institutions which had originally migrated in from many different sources mixed and formed a new mixture which, according to Japanese myth, set into a unified and largely uniform 'Japaneseness' from north to south and east to west.

We know that in fact even until the end of the nineteenth century the social structures, marriage systems and folklore of parts of Japan show that there were three great waves of in-migration. Strong traditions and peoples came in from the shamanic north through Sakhalin, to the centre through Korea. Much of Japanese culture and some Japanese clearly migrated in from China. And from Malaya, Polynesia and other parts of the Pacific, peoples island-hopped along the Riyuku islands to inhabit southern Japan. All this coalesced into a unique mixture which, as anyone can see from a short scrutiny of the vast variation of Mongolian faces on a Japanese street or underground, came from very different places.

Yet, as in England, with its mongrel population, the islandhood gave it very early a sense of national identity and of difference. It contained many civilizations, but mirrored none of them. There were strong dialect and cultural differences, yet there was a unified national language of literature, religion and administration for more than a thousand years. It had the size and diversity then to develop and experiment

with what worked best within the particular ecology and geography of this long rocky island.

Over a period of over a thousand years it constantly tried out new schemes. In terms of politics and law, Chinese, feudal, quasi-Chinese, Germano-French, American layers of civilization were built on top of an original civilization which had already reached a very considerable sophistication and maturity by the seventh century. In the realm of religion and philosophy, a Shinto, Confucian, Buddhist, neo-Confucian, Shinto-western-neo-Confucian mix, followed by the modern American phase, were all archaeological layers. Each set of new clothes was re-shaped to fit over the older clothes on the same growing body. There was great continuity, but also constant, often revolutionary, changes.

There was a very careful filtering and selection of what came in from outside, which still prevails in Japan and was seen at its most explicit when the Dutch were limited to living and trading on a tiny island in Nagasaki bay for several centuries so that their influence could be monitored carefully. Dutch goods and some knowledge were fine. Western religion and diseases were less welcome. So what was thought useful was imported, adapted and spread and the rest was excluded.

The Japanese have devoted huge energy to quarantining themselves. They want to be seriously bounded, but allow in a certain amount, having discovered that this is the most satisfactory way to live. Controlled immigration, not so much of people but of ideas and technologies and influences, has been at the heart of Japanese history.

In the light of this separation, the odd shapes which I have encountered in many aspects of Japanese culture and society begin to become comprehensible. The refusal to fit into the categories of thought and action which were developed in either the west (for instance in the categories of thought in which I was trained), or the East (especially in China and also India) become comprehensible.

As with Britain, almost all the elements in Japanese civilization were imported from abroad. There are very few macro-inventions which we associate with Japan of the order of gunpowder, compasses, printing, silk, tea, or the other great inventions of China. The Japanese cannot compare to the first great set of Chinese and Islamic inventions, or the later philosophical and technological macro-inventions from the seventeenth century in the west.

Yet they took each of these macro-inventions and added value. So their pottery, gardens, swords, pottery, tea ceremony, etiquette, temples, lacquer-work, became exquisite and different. Just walk a few paces from the Chinese gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London into the adjacent Japanese room. You will immediately feel that you are in a vaguely familiar, yet entirely different civilization. In many ways it is a more delicate, sensitive and playful world. It has the quirky, irregular feel of real creativity, all the more surprising since most of it originated from the hall next door.

Those who live in the largish island of Britain have some idea of what has happened, because the British too were great borrowers, but then refined what they took. They borrowed their religion, law, language, social system and technologies

from the rich heritage of continental Europe, which in turn had borrowed much of it from Islam and ultimately from China. Yet over time the British, and particularly the English branch, also developed into a minor Galapagos islands, separating off in its peculiarities from the mainland. So by the early eighteenth century astonished foreign visitors to England marvelled at how they seemed to be in a different world to their homelands.

If this could happen when an island was only twenty miles from France, and when the histories of England and the continent had long been inter-twined by trade, travel and war, how much greater was the potential for a unique and separate experience there was in Japan. The total population of Japan in 1700 was roughly five times greater than that of Britain. It had far greater cities, a far longer history of high culture and ancient continuities stretching back for thousands of years.

Japan had the size and position to develop a system which stands alone in the world, being neither of the East nor the West. It has absorbed and transformed three great Chinese waves and three European/American ones. All of them have broken over the rocky coasts of Japan, leaving valuable alternatives and enriching it. Yet none of them have altered its basic, 'mechanically integrated', 'enchanted', nature. Beneath the surface of restless small changes, it has, like a miraculous Australia, maintained a unique set of flora and fauna which enriches us all.

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For the Japanese, despite Maruyama's pessimism and some disastrous failures, have managed to combine the un-combinable and produce a pretty decent life for a large number of people in a difficult environment. They seem to have avoided what seemed the inevitable traps facing all modern civilizations. They have largely avoided Marxist alienation, Durkheimian anomie and Weber's iron cage of rationality.

That they have achieved the apparently impossible alters the way in which we look at the world. As Fosco Maraini puts it. 'Japan is a great electric shock. It makes us realize that modern civilization, the one that we so fondly and naturally imagine to be civilization tout-court, can have different versions, alternative patterns. The Western model of modern civilizations... turns out as one of a series of possibilities. Japan opens our mental horizons... If Japan did not exist, Japan would have to be urgently invented.'⁵

In order to understand the Japanese exception, two of our principal guides are Fukuzawa and Maruyama. They understood Japan and they almost understood the west. Without their insights and translating skills, I would have found myself lost for ever in the magical enchantment that is Japan. They helped me explore *Looking Glass Land*, and they have also helped me to return out of the mirror to look at my own world in a different way.

¹ Quoted in Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958), 7

² Kurt Singer, *Mirror, Sword and Jewel, the geometry of Japanese life* (Kodansha, 1990), 47

³ Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (Oxford, 1969), p.348

⁴ Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan, together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam, 1690-1692*, (1727),
tr. J.G.Sheuchzer (1906), vol. 1,102

⁵ Maraini, *Patterns*, pp. ?? – 12 [fill in full ref]