

Could We and Should We Write Another *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword?*

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Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* is without doubt one of the most famous anthropological studies of Japan. It has always been controversial, however, in part because it is so ambitious, attempting as it does to discern dominant patterns that run through the entirety of Japanese culture. Today, one wonders how much influence the book still has, at least within anthropology. In 2002, Yale graduate student Allison Alexy asked a variety of contemporary anthropologists of Japan what they thought of the book and whether they used it in teaching. The replies were overwhelmingly negative; most of those who answered seemed to think that the main value of the work was as an interesting specimen of the outdated ways of the ancestors, and an example of what to avoid in modern anthropological practice. (I was one of the few to write positively.) Later works with similarly grand ambitions, such as Nakane Chie's *Japanese Society* (1973), have also received heavy criticism for what are seen, often rightly, as methodological shortcomings. Perhaps for these reasons, books in which scholars purport to offer an analysis of Japanese society or culture as a whole seem to be rarer than they once were. Only the brave, the insouciant, or the foolhardy rush in, when there is the danger that your work will be given the dread label of Nihonjinron 日本人論, with all the consequent potential damage to your academic reputation (at least in some quarters). There have been recent introductions to Japanese society, such as Joy Hendry's *Understanding Japanese Society* (1995) or Yoshio Sugimoto's *Introduction to Japanese Society* (1997), but these are more in the nature of textbooks aimed at the undergraduate student, than ambitious analyses for the expert. Sugimoto's book takes a sociological approach and concentrates on showing the divisions and diversities within Japan, with little attention to patterns of behaviour or thinking either within Japan as a whole, or within the various divisions that Sugimoto identifies.

It is not only Japan that suffers from a lack of analyses of its society as a whole. Other societies do not even have the benefit of anthropological introductions. To the best of my knowledge, there is no anthropological introduction to Hong Kong society, for example, even though I should have thought that such a book, if well written, would have a large potential readership. There is a sociological introduction; when I first came to Hong Kong, I got hold of Benjamin Leung's *Perspectives on Hong Kong Society* (1996), a slim volume packed with the distillation of sociologists' studies of Hong Kong. Similarly, I am not aware of a good anthropological introduction to Indian society, though there is an excellent recent sociological introduction by Deshpande (2003). In fact, whenever I go on holiday, as a good anthropologist I almost invariably look for an anthropological introduction to the society of my destination. So far, I have been disappointed not only in India but also in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. There is, indeed, a wonderful introduction to Vietnam, called *Understanding Vietnam*, written by Neil Jamieson (1993), which makes eclectic use of history, literature and anthropology in drawing a fascinating picture of Vietnam's twentieth-century history. This is a development of Jamieson's doctoral thesis, and his dissertation committee was

chaired by Takie Lebra. It is clear that the work has a strong anthropological dimension, but it also encompasses history and literature, and this comprehensive approach is one of the things that makes the book so enthralling. Even if we grant Jamieson's work as an exception, however, it seems that these days, at least in East and South Asia, most anthropologists are only prepared to write detailed studies of aspects of a society. Very few are willing to attempt a study of the entire society or culture.

The reasons for this situation are not too hard to find. First, the last thirty-five or so years have seen increasing uncertainty within anthropology about the way in which it might be appropriate to see societies or cultures as meaningful units for analysis. In particular, there have been repeated and severe attacks on what Susan Wright has described as the 'old idea of culture' as 'the total and distinctive way of life of a people or a society', bounded, in equilibrium, and with an underlying system of meaning shared among the society's constituent individuals. Culture has come to be seen as a dynamic process whereby meaning is created, power is negotiated and contested, and behaviour is maintained or transformed. This does not seem to fit well with the approach taken by authors such as Benedict, Nakane, or Takie Lebra, with their emphasis on underlying patterns or structures which persist despite changing behaviours and ways of life. Nakane, for instance, writes at the start of *Japanese Society* that she is 'interested in the truly basic components and their potentiality in the society—in other words, in social persistence'. Similarly, at the start of *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour*, Lebra writes that 'historical continuity is a defining criterion of culture', and states that her aim is to 'delineate those aspects of culture and behavior that are both observable in contemporary scenes and that are considered to have persisted roughly over the last one hundred years'. Of course, authors such as Benedict, Nakane, and Takie Lebra were (and in the case of Nakane and Lebra, are) aware that Japanese society was always undergoing dynamic change. What they considered more important, however, at least for their intellectual purposes at the time, were the persisting patterns or structures that they discerned. It is not only in Japan, of course, that authors taking this approach have been criticized for over-simplification or even distortion. In the anthropology of India, Louis Dumont's magnum opus, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), occupies a somewhat similar position.¹

So, theoretical trends in anthropology have made scholars more sceptical of the possibilities of writing an account of an entire society that does not mislead—mislead, that is, by making the society appear more coherent and more static than it actually is. The risks involved have no doubt deterred potential authors from what would be, in any case, a daunting Everest of a task. With the increase in studies of Japan over the last 35 years, an analysis that incorporates a serious synthesis of the literature requires mastery of an immense volume of material. It may also be that many anthropologists today prefer to write fieldwork studies rather than works of synthesis. I suspect, however, that it is a lack of confidence that such a book is worth writing, or can be written at all, that is the main deterring factor.

This is a shame, for two reasons. First, I would argue that ambitious works that give an analytic view of an entire society should be among the highest aims of any anthropologist, one of the pinnacles of achievement, though for that very reason extremely difficult to achieve. I do not believe that this aim is either impossible or that it must inevitably result in a work that misleads more than it enlightens. Certainly, Japan is a constantly changing society, it is far from monolithic or homogeneous, and it has its fair share of conflict. However, this does not mean that it is meaningless or misleading to think of Japan as a society. After all, Japan is united by much that is significant;

¹ One interesting essay that discusses the position of Dumont in the anthropology of India is Das (1996).

most notably, almost the entire population uses the same language, there is a very significant common national media, there is a national public education system used by the vast majority, and there are many widely shared pursuits (from flower arranging to baseball, and from piano to the reading and drawing of comics). To conceive of Japan as a consistent culture as conceived by Benedict or Nakane is admittedly more difficult.² Nonetheless, I do consider that there are in Japan widely shared ways of behaving and of meaning-making, whether across the whole society, or only within one of its social or cultural sub-divisions. It seems to me that the job of the anthropologist is not to despair of the task of describing these, difficult though it certainly is, but to make the best attempt possible, making clear where knowledge and understanding remains imperfect, and also making clear when and how such cultural patterns are in fact varied, inconsistent, disputed, or changing.³

The second reason for attempting such a study is that this is exactly the kind of work that the intelligent reading public would like to read, and that, one suspects, they expect anthropologists to write. It is unfortunate that anthropologists today write little aimed at an intelligent general readership. Of course, one does not expect that they should write mainly for this audience, neglecting to advance knowledge by writing monographs and learned articles for specialists, or reports for policymakers. But at present, it seems that there is no danger of falling into this Charybdis. Most anthropologists are in the jaws of Scylla, writing little or nothing for what Virginia Woolf called 'the common reader'. This is in sharp contrast to historians; even historians of Japan have got into the act, with works such as John Dower's *Embracing Defeat* (1999). It may be fairly argued that there are many more historians than there are anthropologists, and that historians are therefore proportionately more likely to write works for a readership beyond the academy. Surely, however, one might hope that once in a while, anthropologists too might dare and even aspire to write books for such a readership.

So if an anthropologist today were to attempt to write an analysis of Japanese society and culture, how should it be done and what should it look like? Is there anything that can be learned from the approach of Benedict, or is this completely outdated?

The first thing I would say is that a truly anthropological view of Japan will go beyond being a mere compendium of social facts and summaries of others' studies. It may give some basic information about Japanese social organization—social, economic, political, religious, and so on. But my understanding of anthropology is that it is a discipline that considers understanding of such organizational features alone insufficient for the fulfillment of its aims. One of those aims is to discern the more fundamental driving forces that shape and motivate human behaviour at the micro-

2 Benedict writes that 'As a cultural anthropologist ... I started from the premise that the most isolated bits of behavior have some systematic relation to each other. ... A human society must make for itself some design for living. ... People in that society regard these solutions as foundations of the universe. They integrate them, no matter what the difficulties. ... Some degree of consistency is necessary or the whole scheme falls to pieces' (1954: 11–12). (This is a sharp contrast with her view in *Patterns of Culture* (1961: 161–163), where she argues that some cultures are integrated, while others are not.) Nakane writes of 'the basic value orientation inherent in society' and throughout her book tends to write of 'the Japanese' as if broadly consistent values and behaviour are shared by the vast majority of Japanese people.

3 For a similar viewpoint on a land that has attracted controversy comparable to that about Japan, see Sunil Khilnani's delicately phrased suggestion that though the 'unified and bounded space named India' was 'a historical novelty' created in 1899 by 'the arbitrary precisisions of colonial administrative techniques', nonetheless 'the dissimilar agrarian regions of pre-colonial India did share intelligible, common cultural forms, ... mythic narratives, aesthetic and ritual motifs, the typology of caste', that 'did bestow a certain unified coherence on lives in the subcontinent' (2004: 155–156).

level, the level of daily life—including ‘habits of thought and emotion’ and ‘assumptions about the conduct of life’, to quote Benedict. This endeavour has characterized the works of successive anthropologists who have attempted to write about Japanese society and/or culture as a whole, from Benedict, through Nakane and Lebra, to Robert J. Smith (1983). What are the features of Japanese society, and Japanese behaviour, that shed the most light on why Japanese people behave as they do? And how can this endeavour also show the diversity and particularity of contemporary Japanese society, and avoid giving the impression that Japanese people are a more or less uniform, homogeneous mass?

One approach is that of Benedict and Robert Smith: to identify themes which one considers key to an understanding of how Japanese people behave. My own view is that both Benedict and Smith were extremely perceptive in their selection of such themes. I particularly think that Benedict deserves praise for her chapters, ‘Knowing One’s Proper Station’, and ‘Debtor to the Ages and the World’, which I believe, do indeed identify two Japanese mindsets that continue to be very important. However, there are also problems with this approach. First, it can be all too easy to portray key mindsets or ways of behaving as if they are uniform, unvaried, or undisputed in Japanese society. In other words, the approach tends to be too idealized and stereotypical. Secondly, it is easy to neglect to explore the ways in which such mindsets or ways of behaving are maintained by ideological pressures which are concerned to uphold certain dispositions of power. How can these problems be avoided?

First, I would suggest that analysis needs to take as its object specific, closely described cases of human behaviour or thinking. In fact, I would argue that there is a strong case for alternating chapters or sections that comprise descriptions or narrations of particular individuals or groups of people, on the one hand, with chapters or sections of analysis on the other. This should in itself make it more difficult to produce a stereotyped analysis, and it also counterbalances the simplifying effect that analysis almost inevitably has, since a sensitive and full description or narrative will always be somewhat rough-edged and full of the messiness of real life. Such a combination of description and narration with analysis is the strength of ethnography, of course, but here, the task is to go beyond the ethnographic monograph on one small area of Japanese society, and to try to embrace the whole, or at least a large part of it. The value of the kind of structure I have suggested is shown by journalist Elizabeth Bumiller’s excellent book, *The Secrets of Mariko* (1995), which uses the narrative of one year in the life of a fairly representative Tokyo housewife to paint a very perceptive picture of contemporary life in urban Japan. Bumiller skilfully uses different episodes in her subject’s life as ways into subjects such as religion, education, and politics, but because these discussions are always expansions of actual events in the narrative, the reader never loses a sense of the particularity of life, to which generalization can only ever be a rough guide.

An alternative approach might be to take particular aspects of Japanese society for analysis, one after another—family and kinship, cosmology, political behaviour, business, media and popular culture, and so on. This could have the advantage of staying closer to the specifics of particular domains of life, in comparison with the thematic approach; but it might also face the reverse danger, in that it might fail sufficiently to draw out ways of thinking and behaving that cross-cut many different areas. A third alternative might be to combine the two approaches, dealing with some key domains of life as well as some key themes.

The truly ambitious writer might then want to go beyond describing major motifs, patterns or structures in Japanese society or culture, and might also want to try to explain why these patterns or structures exist and work as they do. Here, the anthropologist would have to indicate the

theoretical framework that underlies his understanding of human life in society. Benedict used the fundamentally Boasian idea of cultural patterns that become diffused through an entire society, suggesting in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* that the fundamental mechanism for this diffusion is socialization in childhood and youth. In her earlier work, *Patterns of Culture*, she first conceptualizes the patterns of thought and action in a society as shaped by the dominant goals and purposes pursued by members of that society, and later points out that such patterns change through a complex historical process. Behind this conceptualization lies Boas's attempt to maintain an emphasis on both the shaping influence of wholes upon individual elements, and, at the same time, an obstinate inductive attention to the history of the development of individual elements. In Benedict, however, attention to history is decidedly in the background, while the shaping whole is foregrounded. Nakane, in turn, used the idea of a basic social structure that embodies institutionalized social ideals. In works such as *British Factory – Japanese Factory* (1973), Ronald Dore has used an eclectic approach that embraces world-systems theory, functionalism and historical explanation along with acknowledgement of the reality of power struggle and ideology. Dore's eclecticism seems to me to have stood the test of time better than the approaches of either Benedict or Nakane, and perhaps can also be described as closer than either to the Boasian attempt to keep in mind both the shaping whole and the historical process. Indeed, no analysis of Japanese society and culture today could omit a historical presentation, since doing so would inevitably lead to falling into the trap of prioritizing persistence and a supposedly unchanging essence over the realities of change. It is nonetheless evident that it is very difficult to combine thematic analysis with analysis of historical particularities. In contrast, it is not too hard to see how particular domains of Japanese life could be analyzed using both an anthropological and a historical lens. For me, such key domains would include family structures and relationships, the way politics works, cosmology and ways of giving meaning to life and death, the organization of economic relationships and work, personal relationships, selfhood and agency, media and representation (including literature as well as popular culture), and the relationship of Japanese people to the ecological and material environment. Some of these domains have been neglected to a surprising degree by anthropologists of Japan, especially politics, which is not only a key area of life, but one that anthropologists in general have explored with very enlightening results. The neglect of politics by anthropologists of Japan is doubly surprising when one considers that as long ago as 1971, political scientist Gerald Curtis wrote an outstanding ethnographic study of Japanese politics at the grassroots, entitled *Election Campaigning Japanese Style*. This book shows quite clearly how social structures and values (including ideas analyzed by Benedict, such as *on* and *giri*) made a significant difference to political behaviour in the 1960s. This subject would be perfect for a new study that could provide a historical dimension, showing how values and behaviour had changed or remained the same.

In comparison with historicizing key domains of life, historicizing key themes will inevitably involve more personal judgement about what indeed are the most significant themes to be discerned in Japanese society, or, to use Benedict's own terms in *Patterns of Culture*, what patterns are made most salient by Japanese society's dominant goals and purposes. Such a judgement would also need to take into account the point made by Benedict herself in *Patterns of Culture*, but overlooked by her in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, namely that complex modern societies like Japan are divided into stratified social groups and classes, whose ways of thinking and acting may differ significantly. An approach that demonstrates the dynamics of dispute and change in Japan, and avoids too static a portrayal of the way things happen, might be to devote each chapter to particular social dramas, historical episodes, or representational texts that can be analyzed as a

means of examining particular themes.

Wimal Dissanayake has written one of the best essays to bear on the issue of how to examine Japan in a way that uses important cultural concepts but is not hindered by them. He argues that culturally grounded concepts, such as *amae* 甘え, *giri* 義理, *seishin* 精神 and so on, and particular situations or life stories 'should be allowed to interrogate each other, thereby promoting a more nuanced understanding' of both the concepts and the ways in which Japanese protagonists act as agents. Dissanayake is worth quoting at some length. He writes:

Culturally grounded concepts, . . . which are imbricated with cultural logics and cultural epistemologies, can be extremely helpful in analyzing the interplay between self and society. However, we can best make use of these concepts only if we refrain from totalizing them and absolutizing them, and if we recognize the complex ways in which they are inscribed by diverse forms of power. In other words, we need to historicize, politicize, and pluralize them. We need to attain a more complex understanding of these concepts, situating them in specific historical locations.

Later in the essay, he comments further that 'what we need to do . . . is to use these concepts not as master concepts, but as strategies of reading social and cultural situations imbricated with self'.

In some respects this represents, once more, a reworking of the Boasian commitment to an equal emphasis on the patterning whole and the gritty, empirical, historically changing particular. It is a fine programme. What remains, however, is to attempt to carry the programme out, and at present, few if any seem inclined to make the attempt. Let us hope that another Ruth Benedict, with a different approach but no less ambition, is not too far in the future.

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