# Can There Be a Japan without a Japanese Culture?

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Japan exists as a nation state with laws, borders, passports and a central government. But does Japan exist as a cultural whole? Can we make statements about "Japanese culture" as opposed to "Chinese culture" and "American culture?" After all, this is how most people talk about our world. The world is understood to be divided into cultures which shape our behavior and distinguish us from others. This description creates neat and simple categories in which every person theoretically has a place. Does it accurately describe our experiences as human beings? This paper argues that it does not and considers alternative ways to discuss Japan.

Japan specialists today no longer write books that attempt to explain Japanese culture as a whole in the tradition of Ruth Benedict, Nakane Chie or even Edwin O. Reischauer. This has come about for several reasons including the proliferation of academic specialization and the specialization of academic writing. Perhaps the most important reason for the disappearance of these kinds of works was the demise of the culture and personality paradigm in anthropology, or the idea that a culture can be understood as a personality. This approach is no longer acceptable because it assumes a static view of culture and denies the diversity of individuals.

It is also no longer fashionable for anthropologists to write about Japanese culture. Anthropologists will rarely write sentences such as "In Japanese culture . . ." or "According to Japanese culture . . . ." Yet many Japan anthropologists continue to write about culture as a real thing and the primary subject of their analysis. They use other words such as "standards," "norms" or "values," for example, as synonyms for culture, meaning an abstract pattern that pervades the geographic area of Japan and is consistent over time in determining behavior. Sociologists and political scientists are less afraid of the term "Japanese culture" and use it more frequently. Many view Japanese culture as an entity that can be abstracted from lived experience. They talk about culture as a factor or variable. They may ask, "How does Japanese culture explain this?" as if there is a basic universal institutional reality that is then colored by cultural factors. Many social scientists seem to think of culture as a marginal variable that sometimes determines behavior and sometimes merely adds texture to the serious, core variables of economics, politics and institutions.

This view of culture is convenient for social scientists because it reduces culture into an easily handled entity that can be dissected, analyzed as well as dismissed. Yet in my view, this is a construction of social scientists and not a reflection of the way human beings experience meaning in their lives. Like many others, I believe that cultural meanings are historically created and sustained by specific institutions and individuals, immensely variable, and subject to change in the messy practices of everyday life. Cultural meanings constitute the way human beings create and experience our institutions, politics, and economies. Cultural is not a variable to be applied more in primitive societies, less in advanced societies. Culture is not an optional variable because meaning is at the heart of all human experience.

The argument that we belong to national cultures, however, can certainly be made and is in many respects compelling. Nation states often control or at least influence the media, direct national projects and ideas, and shape educational systems. The Japanese state certainly has a hand

in all of these. These structures form the basis of nationally shared values and beliefs. Nonetheless, the process of receiving, interpreting and acting upon national beliefs and values is never evenly or homogeneously experienced throughout society. National values and ideas are seen and acted upon differently depending upon where you are located in that society and where you stand in relation to centers of power. Therefore, I suggest we focus on positioning, negotiation and individual relationships to ideas and institutions. In the remainder of the paper I will discuss ways in which the idea of Japanese culture and culture in general has been critiqued in recent academic work. Then I will discuss possible ways of thinking about human experience without relying on reified categories.

The arguments against the idea of a Japanese culture emerge from several sources. One source is works that criticize *Nihonjinron*, or theories and studies of Japaneseness. Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku's 1992 *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* and anthropologist Harumi Befu's 1993 *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia*, for example, both argued that *Nihonjinron*, with its emphasis on Japanese homogeneity, purity and uniqueness, is a form of nationalism. Both point to the elitist origins of *Nihonjinron*, as it is produced primarily by academics, and circulated by the government and business community; it is the ideology of the establishment. Further, it is prescriptive rather than descriptive, in that it states what ideal behavior should be rather than describes the diversity of actual experience. Yoshino and Befu's works were not directed at criticizing the idea of Japanese culture, but they did point out the problems of conflating geography, race, language and culture. In *Nihonjinron*, all four are seen to be interrelated, with culture, carried through race and language, mapped onto the geographic area of the Japan (Befu: 115).

A second line of attack has come from a substantial number of scholars who, beginning in the 1990s, criticized the idea that Japan is homogeneous and mono-ethnic. Sociologist John Lie's 2001 book, *Multiethnic Japan*, and historian Michael Weiner in his 1997 edited volume, *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* are just two examples. Whether or not Japan is mono-ethnic or multi-ethnic, Lie points out, is a matter of perspective, as there is no question as to whether a variety of minority groups live in Japan. The idea that Japan is multiethnic cannot be argued, it can only be asserted. These works thus begin with the assertion that Japan is multiethnic and diverse. They dismiss the idea of a socially and culturally homogeneous Japan as a postwar myth. Michael Weiner describes homogeneity as a "master narrative" that precludes the existence of minorities (xiii).

To state that Japan is multiethnic and diverse, however, does not necessarily preclude the idea that Japan exists and we can talk about Japanese culture. As historian Oguma Eiji points out in his *Tan'itsu minzoku shinwa no kigen* (The Myth of the Homogeneous Nation), published in 1995, the prewar government developed the theory that the Japanese nation, from time immemorial, has consisted of mixed peoples and has assimilated various peoples. This, of course, was used to support Japanese policies of expansion and assimilation.

Oguma also describes how the idea that Japan is a homogeneous nation from time immemorial emerged in the postwar period as the numbers of non-Japanese in Japan suddenly plummeted. He points out that to revert to the idea that Japan is a multiethnic nation with a hybrid culture would not necessarily be an improvement upon the current dominant idea that Japan is mono-ethnic with a homogeneous culture because *both* are national myths. Oguma states clearly that he does not believe Japan exists and his work focuses on Japan's political and ideological construction. To say that Japan does not exist, however, is not the same as saying that differences do not exist. Differences clearly exist. Life in Tokyo, for example, is distinct in many ways from life in London.

And there are many similarities and commonalities among life patterns in Japan. Yet for

every generalization that we make about Japanese culture, we can think of exceptions and contradictions. The position of considering whether or not to talk about Japan and Japanese culture as a whole is primarily one of considering the consequences of using these terms.

The problems of talking about a cohesive culture have been extensively explored by anthropologists. Here I draw heavily upon anthropologist Abu-Lughod's 1991 essay, "Writing Against Culture." Abu-Lughod writes that culture is the anthropologist's "essential tool for making other." The other to which she refers is a group of persons who are different and, arguably, ultimately inferior to oneself. She writes, "As a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain and understand cultural difference, anthropology also helps construct, produce and maintain it. Anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident" (143). Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup, among others, has written that anthropology is comparative by nature. She argues that cultures "juxtapose themselves to one another through an exaggeration of difference: anthropology cements this exaggeration" (1995: 7). Thus many scholars have pointed out that culture in the 20th century has taken up the role played by race in 19th century discourse in assigning immutable qualities to groups of people.

Although culture, unlike race, seems to allow for variability, learning, and change, Edward Said shows that "in mapping geography, race, and culture onto one another, Orientalism fixes differences between people of "the West" and the people of "the East" in ways so rigid that they might as well be considered innate" (144). Culture, thus, has become the basis upon which we create differences between people in our world. What is wrong with creating differences? One problem is that these differences are constructed by asserting internally consistent cultural arenas. This way of imagining culture must necessarily flatten internal difference, struggle and negotiation, as already mentioned. It ignores the variety of positions through which cultural meanings and ideas are experienced. It dismisses the large areas of experience that are hybrid and marginal.

Anthropologist Dorinne Kondo has famously discussed the problems she experienced as a Japanese-American in Japan with supposedly "Japanese blood" who could not always speak Japanese well or follow the rules (1990). Many other people feel themselves to be between cultures or a mixture of cultures. Theories of culture do not account for the experiences of these people.

More importantly, however, the emphasis on Japanese culture or any culture for that matter, generally privileges and describes the culture of the elite. John Lie and others have discussed the ways in which Japaneseness bestows cultural capital and rewards in Japan, while nonJapaneseness risks humiliation and exclusion. Many others have discussed how nonJapanese or marginally Japanese people in Japan have hidden their identities in order to pass as Japanese. In other words, the insistence on deciphering and celebrating Japanese culture tends to reproduce the privilege of the elite and punish the marginal and those who are already struggling.

One might argue that cultural discreteness and difference do not have to imply value and discrimination, as twentieth-century anthropology has promoted cultural relativism over evaluation and judgment" (146). Yet many anthropologists question whether it is really possible to create an Other without participating in fields of power in which the Other is denigrated.

I believe, as we have learned from feminist studies, that it is probably not possible to create an Other that is different without being inferior. Further, as Abu-Lughod points out, culture is part of a professional discourse of "objectivity" and expertise. Culture is therefore "inevitably a language of power…it is the language of those who seem to stand apart from and outside of what they are describing.. it represents the perspective of those involved in professional, managerial,

and administrative structures and is thus part of "the ruling apparatus of this society" (151). To talk about another's culture or even one's own is to demonstrate control and mastery over that culture. This is probably why it is so satisfying and persistent.

If we accept that there are problems with the Japanese culture concept, then how do we proceed with Japanese studies? Historians and sociologists have shown that to give up the idea of a cohesive Japan is not to give up studying Japan. As Oguma has shown in his numerous works, the construction of Japan and the construction of community and difference provide enormously rich materials for scholarship. In my own work and life, I cannot say that I have successfully managed the problems of dealing with Japanese culture. I do not use the term "Japanese culture" in my teaching or writing. But I do teach a course titled, "Introduction to Japanese Culture and Society" although the title was not of my own choosing. In this course I must discuss widely held views and practices in Japan. In my own attempt to deal with the problem of assuming a coherent Japanese culture, I discuss the source of these ideas, what different groups of people in Japan would tend to believe and practice, introduce conflicting opinions, and locate ideas and practices in a historical context. That is, I attempt to show cultural change, human agency, and diversity. I also attempt to show commonalities between Hong Kong and Japan. This may or may not be a sufficient solution.

In my writing I have found it useful to pay attention to the ways in which cultural ideas and meanings are created and mediated through relationships of power. As discussed earlier, what we describe as "Japanese culture" or even "widely held beliefs" are usually the values and beliefs of the elite. This became particularly apparent to me in my two fieldwork experiences over the past decade. The first involved older, working class people who identified themselves as community volunteers and the second involved urban unmarried women in their 30s and 40s.

The people I met in the first study were primarily middle-aged residents of a low-income public housing estate. Most had never been outside of Japan and did not question that they were Japanese, yet they struggled with concepts of what constitutes a Japanese identity and lifestyle. They described what I understood to be mainstream Japanese cultural ideals and ways of living as "high class" or the ways of the rich. "We're poor!" people told me frequently. "What you see on TV is only what the rich people do." They understood themselves to be excluded from middle-class levels of consumption. Perhaps because of my educational background, some people told me that they thought I was more like the "high-class Japanese" they see on TV than themselves.

Many of these people were dismayed with the directions Japanese society was taking with its emphasis on material success and the decline of community and human relationships. This dismay inspired them to organize help for the elderly and children in their neighborhood. They realized that without resources, they could do very little. They did not have the funds or human resources to care for the many elderly living alone in their housing complex. At best they could manage weekly lunch box meal delivery and occasional *gētobōru* (gateball, a sport similar to croquet popular among the elderly in Japan) and karaoke gatherings to raise morale. They felt themselves to be providing only a little psychological support to people who had been failed by the government and society.

These volunteers saw themselves as marginal to the centers of power in Japanese society yet they referred to their achievement of dominant postwar ideals in explaining their actions. Women claimed competence in having successfully raised children to adulthood and having taken care of their families for many years. They referred to this competence when expressing their opinions about how community voluntary activities should be run. Men spoke from the perspective of hav-

ing spent their lives working for their companies and making Japan strong. They also referred to this experience in explaining and justifying their actions as community organizers.

These people's understanding of meaning emerged from their positioning themselves in a particular relationship to what they saw as the culture of the elite. They saw themselves as relatively powerless members of society but nonetheless members who had a right to be heard. They were a product of their times and shaped by the main ideas of the 1990s. But they were not representative of Japanese culture of the 1990s. They made use of the dominant views of the 1990s to create meanings and to try to shape their society and their world.

In my second research experience, starting in 2000, my research partner and I interviewed unmarried women in their late 20s to mid-40s living in urban areas in Tokyo and Hong Kong. These women also considered themselves to be atypical Japanese. They emphasized their sense of isolation and difference from other Japanese in being unmarried and without children.

Nearly all of these women said that they wanted to marry, even those who were over 40. Unlike the community volunteers, they did not discuss the necessity of changing Japanese society. They were not rebelling against social norms. Many very much wanted to live a "normal life" with a husband and children. Nonetheless, they did not want to marry simply because it was expected that they marry by a certain age. They wanted to marry the "right man," a man whom they could respect and love. For this, they were willing to wait.

I was impressed by many women's sense of alienation or of being left behind even though they were living in Tokyo, supporting themselves, and often had many friends who were also unmarried. Like the Japanese media's creation of "make-inu" and "kachi-inu" (loser dogs and winner dogs, the winners being those who had married), these women seemed to think that they had been unlucky in finding a mate. They worried whether they would be able to continue to find employment and support themselves if, for some reason, they lost their current jobs.

In this sense, they felt stigmatized for not following society's expectations and in darker moments wondered whether they had compromised their own happiness. At the same time, they did their best to enjoy their lives, pursue hobbies, and improve their educational and professional credentials. They noted that their friends and sisters who had married were not living perfectly happy lives. Many women said that their relatively free and enjoyable lifestyle was envied by their married friends. Some of their married friends said that they regretted marrying and some had already divorced.

The volunteers and the unmarried women, I suggest, were not inauthentic Japanese who were marginal to an authentic Japanese culture. Rather, they were responding in different ways to changing values and expectations, social conditions, and in doing so they were reformulating cultural ideals.

These people's varied relationship to dominant ideals caused a great deal of anguish but also was the source of creativity and humor. When TV shows portraying "make-inu" appeared on TV, my single friends called me and told me to watch. They laughed about the show the next day, criticizing the exaggerations and conceding accuracies. Over drinks and dinners, they discussed previous boyfriends, agreeing that "you were lucky not to have married that one," and urging faith that the right one would come. To focus on their experiences as reflections of Japanese culture can be done but such a study would not have captured the varied meanings that the women brought to their lives.

## Conclusion

To conclude, a case can be made for widely shared Japanese values, but statements about "Japanese culture" as representative of all people living in Japan can only be made by ignoring difference, the historical and political production of values and ideals, the porosity of borders, and the struggles and suffering of the subaltern. This is too high a price to pay.

The emphasis upon a coherent culture creates unnecessary distinctions and draws lines in world that is already divided. It reifies a disembodied culture, thus perpetuating the assumption that cultural difference is the central feature of human experience. The imaginary categories that academics produce without harmful intent nevertheless become the bases of privileging one "cultural" group over another when passions are aroused. In times of conflict, the humanity of the "we" group is privileged over those defined as "they" (Rorty 1989).

Anthropologists generally do not emphasize Japanese culture as a coherent whole but neither do they actively work against this idea. This task has been taken up by sociologists and historians. I suggest that Japan anthropologists need to be taking a stand on this issue because in one way or another, culture may be taken from them as a subject of study; usurped either by those who superficially explain culture or by those who rigorously critique culture by examining its political and historical construction.

I have suggested that we consider human experience in the context of the structures and ideas through which life is made meaningful. In other words, rather than focusing on explaining culture, I think we can explain how individuals make sense of the range of practical and discursive choices their society provides. In her book, *Final Days: Japanese Culture and Choice at the End of Life,* anthropologist Susan Long portrays the decisions of individuals as well as discursive and institutional choices available to them as they near the end of their lives. Long skillfully demonstrates how "cultural scripts" regarding dying and institutional factors shape people's decisions. She also illustrates how individuals make choices given these possibilities. I believe that this kind of work generates understanding of common human experience.

I see Japanese studies, ideally, as a discipline that transcends Japan by demonstrating the nature of our shared experiences as human beings. I believe this is possible by writing against the idea of culture as determinative or primary in understanding human experience. I suggest that we instead explore diversity through the specific contexts in which experiences occur. The lives of working-class volunteers or urban single women, for example, can be understood through the ways in which these people position themselves and are positioned, structurally and discursively, in relation to the wider society. That is, we may explain life in Japan through examining the contexts which give life meaning, and not through the pre-determined lens of "Japanese culture."

I follow Rorty (1989) who suggests that we write in ways that create solidarity. He writes that the process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than them is a matter of detailed descriptions of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like (xvi). Although he was referring primarily to the possibilities of the novel, I believe that academic studies of society and culture have a similar potential. Writing for solidarity to me means to write in a way that makes human experience, no matter how seemingly different and alien, understandable as the actions of other human beings. I am not suggesting that we write only about what is good in others. Our scholarship will benefit from turning our attention to the full range of contradictions, cruelties, misunderstandings and suffering, as well as kindness and compassion that characterize human experience.

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