Modernity through Westernization: The Case of Japan

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1. The Dilemma of Heterogeneity

First, I would like to consider some methodological issues that must be addressed if one attempts to develop a general theory from interpretations grounded in the analysis of a localized subject. In the case I will examine, that of Japan, social scientific analysis inevitably falls into what may be called the "dilemma of heterogeneity." This dilemma is a product of the intellectual environment that has defined Japanese social science research since the Meiji period.

The social sciences originated in Europe as a means of understanding the social and historical changes that occurred as a result of modernity, itself a concept with a strongly European flavor. New analytical approaches were developed within a context that was specifically European, and the terms of analysis were—necessarily because of the experience of those who devised them—European (and later North American). It is important for us to realize, I believe, that when the object of analysis is a different society (particularly a non-Western society such as Japan), and these approaches and terms are simply applied without allowing for local qualities, a slippage naturally occurs between theory and observable reality. If we choose to stand by the established theories, Japan will in many instances be viewed as an exceptional case. Conversely, if we distance ourselves from this social scientific tradition and apply theories meant exclusively for interpreting Japanese society, those theories may have little explanatory power outside of Japan. Thus our dilemma is that irrespective of whether we choose to rely on orthodox social scientific theories (whose claims to universality can be questioned because they incorporate so many social and historical characteristics of the West), or whether we rely on theories grounded in the experience of Japan, we end up with interpretations of Japan which stress heterogeneity.

The American political scientist and Japan specialist Chalmers Johnson, well known as the author of *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (Stanford University Press,

1982), points out that Western economic theories, whether neoclassical, Keynesian, or Marxian, are unable to successfully explain Japan's economic achievements. He notes that rather than attributing this failure to problems with their own theories, Western economists prefer to declare Japan an exception, using "cultural uniqueness" as a means of avoiding the issue, or else they manipulate the data on Japan to make it conform to the theories.[1]

Johnson's analysis is instructive. Logically, existing Western economic theories should be modified when they cannot adequately explain Japan's economic performance. What in fact happens, however, is that the data is manipulated, or emphasis is placed on Japan being an anomaly or marginal case that cannot be properly accommodated within the theories. In order to protect a presupposed universality, thus, instead of enhancing the universality of the theories by adjusting them to accommodate actual (but inconvenient) case studies, Japan's experience is excluded.

The reason given for inability to explain Japan's economic performance rationally within these theoretical frameworks is that Japanese behavior and values are anomalous. In other words, by stressing the heterogeneity or "uniqueness" of Japanese culture, the crisis of meeting a challenge to the universal applicability of the theories can be weathered. Or as has often been the case in Japanese social scientific analysis, social phenomena that are not present in the West have tended to be explained in terms of Japan's backwardness or as remnants of its feudal system.[2] Attempts are thus made to regulate the slippage between theory and reality by emphasizing that these social phenomena observable uniquely in Japan have survived in a particular form from ancient times.

Of course a theory derived through a one-sided emphasis of reality will, by its very nature, inevitably produce discrepancies in the analysis of any society. Nakane Chie points out that while it is to be expected that discrepancies between theoretical models and reality will be evident in both the West and Japan, it is the nature of these discrepancies that is important. In other words, the quality of a discrepancy will differ depending on whether it appears in an area removed from the core of a problem, or whether it appears in a critical area.[3]

In order to analyze Japan under an independent theoretical framework, rather than relying on existing theories produced in the West, we must integrate the social and historical particularities of Japan into the core of the theory. To do otherwise will likely result in the slippage between theory and reality occurring in a critical area. Some slippage occurring at the margins can be accepted, I would argue, because

it allows for analysis with only certain qualifications to the theory. But when the slippage occurs in a critical area, the limitations of the theory's applicability are exposed and it becomes clear that extensive modifications are required.

However, what we have actually been presented with are token explanations based on the argument that certain trends and attributes appearing as theoretical imperatives are lacking in the case of Japan. For example, if we assume a purely theoretical model—here I am thinking of civil society, individualism, political democracy, and the like—abstracted from the historical experiences of France and Britain and premised on the complete disappearance of feudalism, there will naturally be little discrepancy with the reality of the West. Conversely, however, with a country such as Japan, whose social and historical particularities were not absorbed during the theory-building stage, discrepancies will occur in areas critical to the theory. The token concepts used to argue that contemporary Japanese society derives from feudalism have been devised to account for such discrepancies.

In any country there remain signs of previous institutions. No society experiences clear-cut social change or a complete rupture with the past. Despite this, Japan alone is viewed theoretically as showing enduring signs of feudalism for the simple reason that its social idiosyncrasies have not been absorbed into the core of the theory. In other words, crucial areas cannot be adequately explained by the theory, yet the very absence of trends and attributes assumed by that theory is transformed into an explanatory principle that exemplifies the country in question. Here, the theory's inability to elucidate becomes an elucidation in itself.

During Japan's long, hard struggle to introduce various Western models over the last century, the reform of reality was inseparably intertwined with its analysis, and the shortcomings of the "absence viewpoint" methodology were not apparent (and therefore did not seem to require serious reconsideration). The idea was to reform reality by introducing from the West what was lacking in Japan; this, in itself, was often perceived as constituting an analysis of reality. However, the fact is that as long as Japan fails to have its own social sciences, the social and historical idiosyncrasies of Japan will remain outside the core of the theories, and the social scientific elucidation of Japan will remain unrealized.

2. Bureaucracy in Comparative Perspective

The most powerful group in pre-war Japanese society was the bureaucracy. After the fall of the samurai as a class, it was the bureaucracy that took over the

control and administration of Japan. In a break with the past, high positions in the bureaucracy were not gained through hereditary social rank, family connections, or wealth. The bureaucracy was based instead on meritocratic principles, with recruitment conducted through open competition and subsequent advancement determined by individual achievements. An analogue in Europe is the recruitment of the higher bureaucracy in France from the graduates of the École Polytechnique.

In the early Meiji period, the bureaucrats came for the most part from the ranks of the samurai class, who had both the drive to devote themselves to the administration of the state and the educational background needed. During the 1880s, men of samurai background comprised about seventy-five per cent of the graduates of the Law Faculty of the Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo), which then as now was the principal recruiting ground for the bureaucracy. Before long, however, a system of uniform and universal compulsory education was implemented throughout Japan, and this gradually reduced the gaps between the social classes. Fairly quickly it became ordinary for commoners to graduate from the university and then to become successful candidates for the bureaucrats.

During the 1890s, almost fifty per cent of those who passed the examination for admission to the higher levels of the bureaucracy (the Higher Civil Service Examination, instituted in 1894) were of samurai origin. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, the proportion had sunk to nearly twenty per cent. Since the former samurai class comprised only some six per cent of the total population of Japan, even a figure of twenty per cent can be described as over-representation. But this was not a result of social discrimination; rather, it was the product of such factors as cultural motivation and levels of educational attainment. There was a great difference here from the situation in England, where alongside a system of open examinations for entrance to the administrative grades of the civil service, discrimination continued to be exercised under the guise of an interview system.

The bureaucracy achieved its unrivalled power in Japan not simply as a result of the centralization of powers in the modern Japanese state. As successful candidates who had passed open examinations designed to test their academic aptitude, they were in a sense an embodiment of the new meritocratic ideals, and this also was an important factor. In contrast to Great Britain and Germany, there were very few members of the aristocracy to be found in Japan's bureaucracy. This is a point worth noting. In Europe the recruitment of the bureaucracy and the military may well have been based on meritocratic principles, but European systems of education were

anything but meritocratic and embodied a considerable amount of social segregation. This led to a state of affairs in which large numbers of administrative and military professionals were of aristocratic origins. In Japan, by contrast, since everybody received the same kind of education and since the competitive examinations were conducted on a fair and impartial basis, it was no easy matter for members of the aristocracy to pass the examinations for entrance to the bureaucracy. It was for these reasons that the Japanese bureaucracy, which was drawn from all classes of society, was able to establish itself as a powerful body. The social prestige of the bureaucracy was high, too—in court the bureau chief of a government ministry had precedence over a viscount (*shishaku*) or a baron (*danshaku*), and the Chief of the General Staff had precedence over a prince (*kōshaku*).

The central government of Japan before the Second World War consisted of the Finance, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Education, Agriculture and Commerce, Posts, Railways, War, Navy, and Home Ministries, with the last-named of these exercising a supervisory role over the population via the police and local government. Bureaucrats who had passed the Higher Civil Service Examination were given accelerated promotion after being assigned to one or another of these ministries, and their careers differed from those of the ordinary bureaucrats. They exercised their considerable powers with a sense of mission, a sense of belonging to an elite and pride at being involved in the running of the country.

In Japan, the Diet and the political parties have to be taken into consideration, too, in connection with the role of the bureaucracy. The existence of the party cabinet system, which only became established in the twentieth century, may suggest that the senior bureaucrats exist only to serve politicians faithfully. From 1900 through 1945, however, twenty-seven of thirty Prime Ministers came from the bureaucracy.

The large number of ex-bureaucrats who became Prime Ministers can be explained by the eagerness of the political parties to enlist leading members of the bureaucracy as party leaders in the hope of extending their influence and power. Between the bureaucrats on the one hand and the industrialists, landowners, and journalists who constituted the bulk of the ordinary party politicians on the other, there were, of course, differences in ways of thinking and acting, but when it came to forming a cabinet and assuming responsibility for the governance of the country, there was plenty of room for a compromise to be worked out. The pre-war constitution, which was enacted in 1889, contains no mention of a party cabinet system. In the early years of its implementation, the Prime Minister was selected by a group of so-called Elder Statesmen, or Genrō, and then confirmed in his appointment

by the Emperor. And it was members of the bureaucracy rather than party politicians who enjoyed the confidence of the Genrō when it came to selecting a Prime Minister. Therefore the majority parties in the Diet were eager to have at their head a powerful member of the bureaucracy, and it was in this way that members of the bureaucracy came to play an important role outside the bureaucracy itself.

These political traditions continued after the war, as well. Parties could not afford to ignore the talent and policy-planning abilities many bureaucrats had, and in consequence post-war cabinet positions have similarly been filled with former bureaucrats, including the post of Prime Minister. The generally poor quality of party politicians has been an important factor here, too. Ordinary Japanese citizens have wavered between opposition to bureaucratic types of organization and trust in the excellence of the bureaucracy itself. However, in recent years, in various aspects of its running of the country, bureaucrats have shown signs of incompetence and irresponsibility, and as a result the bureaucracy is now facing its greatest challenge since its formation in the Meiji period.

1 Nakajima Mineo 中嶋嶺雄 and Chalmess Johnson, ed. *Chiiki kenkyū no genzai* 地域研究の現在. Taishūkan Shoten, 1989, p. 55.

2 Nakane Chie 中根千枝. Tate shakai no ningen kankei タテ社会の人間関係. Kōdansha, 1967.

3 Ibid., p. 11.