The Expansion of Japanese Business and Images of the World Order : The Case of Japanese Executives in Singapore

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Introduction

In this paper I examine the images the underly the activity of Japanese business executives in Singapore. In other words, I examine the models or schemas (Ortner 1973; D'Andrade 1992: 29) that members of the Japanese business community in Singapore have of "overseas service", "international enterprises", or "global competition". In other words, my aim is to uncover the images and interpretive schemes that lie at base of mundane or common sense international business knowledge. Such cultural models constrain concepts of reality mainly through providing deep- rooted, implicit assumptions concerning such things as relations between individuals and organizations, in groups and out groups, nationalism and internationalism, and societies and the world as a whole.

Given the continued expansion of various Japanese corporations into countries around the world in general, and into Asia in particular (Yoshikawa 1991), an overseas assignment is slowly becoming a prerequisite for advancement into senior managerial posts in many companies. Partly as a reaction to this situation, recent decades have been marked by the publication of studies of families of executives who have returned to Japan (White 1988) and investigations of returnee schoolchildren (Goodman 1991; Kobayashi 1978). But while these studies further our understanding of the problems that people face upon coming back to Japan, as of yet, apart from journalistic observations and some limited scholarly work (Inamura 1982; Hamada 1992) no extended study of Japanese expatriates in their host country has ever been published in English. My inquiry aims to fill in this lack, and this specific paper does so by focusing the manner by which business expatriates reason about, and make sense of, their stint overseas.

There are three elementary, but not mutually exclusive, models of the world and of international business which lie at base of the reasoning of the business people I have studied. The first model is a classic one of center and periphery (or centers and peripheries). In this model Japan, (and in a related manner) America and Europe are conceived of as being cores while their business outposts are thought of as peripheries. The second schema is based on the *Nihonjinron* notion in which Japanese culture is considered to be a delimited and unique entity. The main idea here is of cultural contact and mediation between the bounded

Japanese entity and other cultures. Japanese expatriates (and to a lesser degree other persons) translate and negotiate the understandings and expectations of these cultures. The third model involves a picture of a family of 'civilized societies'. The central image is one of certain international standards of advancement and cultivation which a country must meet before being recognized (by others) as civilized. In this view Japan is contradictorily perceived as belonging and as not (just yet) belonging to a set of advanced civilizations.

Such models of the globe rarely appear in the empirical world as ordered representations or systematic categorizations of areas and countries. Rather, while global, such schemas are actually very private because they reflect individuals' experiences and hopes, and what they see as being personally relevant. Following Plath's (1989: 72) suggestions, I propose that these various models of the world are essentially refracted through peoples understandings of their life-course. Along these lines, I suggest that we join an analysis of the models I have been talking about to a life-course approach. Put simply, my contention is that it is through the meeting between certain conceptions of the life course (primarily concepts of careering) and the three basic models of the globe that I have outlined that overseas service is understood.

Why Japanese Business Expatriates in Singapore?

This paper is the first report of a study of the Japanese expatriate community in Singapore. I chose that country, because I thought that it would be a suitable venue for examining the social and cultural implications of the 'globalization' of Japanese business. Thus between June 1992 and February 1994 I carried out my study primarily through interviews and participant observation. Of my 93 interviewees 60 people were related to business (they were overwhelmingly men). Reflecting the general patterns of the Japanese presence in Singapore almost all of these sixty people are white-collar organization men (managers and executives) who have been posted to the country for a period of between three to five years at the end of which they return to Japan.

In terms of the analytical issues I have set out to study, there are a number of reasons for choosing this research site. One, Singapore is an international city *par excellence:* it is such a city in the material sense of being a hub of business headquarters and manufacturing facilities for all of South-East Asia, and in the social sense of comprising a concentration of arenas for contact and communication and the meeting between different (national) business communities. Two, Singapore stands at the forefront of Japan's move into East and Southeast Asia: in it are located a plethora of production facilities, headquarters, and sales and financial centers. As such it forms a prime location of the 'internationalization' of Japan. Three, the Japanese expatriate community is made up of the actual people who figure in Japan's global reach: not politicians and top bureaucrats, but the managers and engineers through whose efforts Japanese companies are expanding. Four, the very economic success of Singapore in itself is an issue which raises, for Japanese as for others, the issue of understanding and

making sense of such success. Being situated between some postulated ideals of 'East' and 'West', the Singaporean city-state questions for Japanese in ways that other world cities — London or Paris, for example — do not.

Exemplification: Two Extracts

Let me move on to the more analytical part of my paper by presenting two "revelatory incidents" (Peacock 1986) that give the flavor of the kind of material that I am working with. The first passage is from an interview with the deputy manager of Komatsu's Singapore office (opened at the beginning of the 1970s). The man, aged forty and a graduate of Tokyo University's faculty of engineering, had been out of Japan on many business trips, but this was his first assignment overseas. When I interviewed him in 1993 he had been in Singapore for three years. We were discussing the move to a foreign country.

There is something very subtle here (*bimyo*). Throughout your career if you say that you want to be posted overseas then on the one hand they can say that you are a positive person, very good. But on the other hand, if you say you want to go abroad too often, then they may say that you don't like your work. This is risky and you must not say too many times that you want to go abroad so as not to create the wrong impression, and you must not be too quiet because then they will not pay attention to you.

But Singapore is a good opportunity for me. But here again there is a danger because you don't know what will be in the future. If you will be here too much time, then they may not know you in Tokyo; and so you constantly have to show Tokyo that you are working hard, and that they will constantly say Yamanoto is in Singapore but he works hard. Everything is controlled from Tokyo, your salary, your promotion. If I stay here for twenty years maybe I will have a lot of power but I am finished in Tokyo because they will not know me. . .

It doesn't really matter if it's Europe or America or Singapore. In principle, Tokyo always looks at your performance, at how you work. . . The question they always ask is how much this person has contributed to the company. That's what they look at. . .

In this point there is an advantage to being overseas. Look, I am an engineer. In Japan there are a lot of bulldozer engineers that are much better than me in the technical side. But if there comes a stage in which they will compare me with someone who designs machines, then my advantage when I go back is that I know the conditions of the market, the prices in Southeast Asia and then maybe they will say that I have to be his boss.

The second extract is from an exchange with the general manager of Sumitomo Bank (which set up business in Singapore in 1972). Now in his early fifties and a graduate of Keio University, this was his fourth posting abroad (after the United States, Venezuela, and Italy) and his second year in Singapore.

Here the general manager is appointed for three years and the other Japanese for four or five years; and when they decide on the number of years here, they take into account whether you are here with your family or not. At the other Japanese banks like the Bank of Tokyo or Sakura the GM [general manager] changes every two years.

When I was in New York I was in charge of aff of America and Canada and South America. . . I visited most of these countries and tried to introduce syndicated loans to them all, including the Japanese Companies in these countries. . . Then they sent me to Venezuela to open up a representative office there and I spent two and a half years there. Despite the fact that the economy of the area went down during that time, I arranged for loans to places like Trinidad and Colombia and I became famous in the bank for someone who knows this kind of business.

Then in 1985, I don't know the word exactly, but I was brought back to Japan [laughs] for rehabilitation after I was outside for such a long time. I was in a department in charge of internal auditing and then a manager of one of the Tokyo branches of the bank. It was a small branch but very successful. . . Then they sent me to Milano in 1989 and they sent me here directly to Singapore in 1991. . .

I don't think I will be at a disadvantage when I go back to Japan after Singapore. The experience overseas is maybe more important these days than the experience in Japan. These days international business is becoming more important. . .

This is the time of Southeast Asia and not America or Europe and that's why places like Singapore or Hong Kong are so important. From the bank's point of view they are strategically important and that's why it's a challenge to be here. . . Especially for Sumitomo Bank we are lagging behind the other Japanese City Banks and my mission is to recover position here in Singapore. . .

You can make decisions here, decide about new directions, implement new things.

What are the cultural understandings — the models or schemas — that lie at base of these passages?

The World Personalized: Careering and Internationalization

From an organizational point of view, the essence of a career is that it is a predictable sequence of movements, a relay of roles set up to normalize the potentially turbulent flow of persons through the organization. But from an individual's point of view, as Skinner (1983) reminds us, careers are uncertain, unpredictable. Given the numerical limits on promotion only some people will be able to advance up the organizational hierarchy. This contention stands in contradiction to many portrayals of contemporary Japanese organizations. While it has by now become a commonplace notion that in the much vaunted life-time employment system (applicable to men in large corporations) one can find job security, what is much less appreciated are the uncertainties over promotion that mark this system. The result of this

situation is that individuals must constantly and actively undertake strategies and investments to assure promotion along what Hamada (1992: 136) terms the long-term career marathon of Japanese corporations. The implication for our analysis is to uncover the cultural images or models which underlie the actual life strategies and movements of Japanese business expatriates as they bear upon, and are actualized in, overseas assignments.

A model of organizational life. I begin by tracing out the basic elements of what may be termed the cognitive model of Japanese white-collar organizational life. Please keep in mind that it is conceptions that we are talking about and *not* the patterns of actual behavior studied by social scientists. Basically, these people understand their career as a generally upward movement within one hierarchical organizational structure. This path is accomplished through a more or less regular pattern of rotation and promotion within company headquarters, and between headquarters and branch offices or facilities. But this movement is not a smooth or automatic flow from one position to another. Rather, organizations, according to this view, are comprised of individuals who constantly maneuver and jostle for promotion to an ever decreasing number of senior executive posts. In the competition for intra-organizational advancement, individuals must actively undertake a variety of strategies aimed at succeeding in business dealings and cultivating support networks (comprising an individual's seniors, juniors and counterparts). Along these lines, each new assignment within the general patterns of rotation presents both potentials and hazards for one's career prospects.

With the expansion of a firm's business interests beyond the borders of Japan, and with the establishment of offices and production facilities abroad, an assignment overseas corresponds to the patterns of rotation within the company. But such an assignment is also a sort of promotion: because companies situated outside of Japan are like "daughter companies" (*kogaisha,* although their exact legal definition may vary), people who were (to give two examples) department heads (*ka-cho*) in Japan become division heads (*bu-cho*) overseas, and section heads (*kakari-cho*) become department heads. This point was put to me rather picturesquely by the engineering advisor of Kitamura (a small company producing for semi-conductors) who said that "while in Japan I was just an engineer in charge of a small area, here I am like the head of a factory". Hence in comparison with posting to new positions in Japan, the stint abroad presents opportunities to handle greater responsibilities and more important tasks.

Let me now chart out the models or schemas of the world order that lie at base of this view and then relate them back to notions of careering.

Center, Periphery and Promotion

Center and periphery as 'folk' conceptions. The most obvious schema at base of the view of Japanese business expatriates in Singapore is a center and periphery model. The fundamental conception is one of Japan as a center and the various outposts and stations abroad as peripheries. According to this logic, expatriates are sent from the center in order to

provide knowledge, while people from the periphery usually stay in their place and are sometimes sent to the center to learn and to enrich themselves. The center holds both economic and technological power, and the authority to bestow or withhold recognition and in both senses is "the" place where things happen. One example are the words of a manager at a Japanese city bank who boasted of the fact that apart from Singapore the only other places where they have a date processing center connected to Japan are London and New York. In this way, of course, he both evoked the image of a network of communication and information centered on Japan, and portrayed the relative importance of different peripheries.

The firm's reference group. Underscoring the view of Japan as center is a widespread notion that competitors are primarily (but not exclusively) other Japanese companies. The implication of this view is that "getting ahead" is overwhelmingly a matter of getting ahead of other Japanese companies. The short excerpt from the interview with the general manager of Sumitomo Bank that I presented earlier, underscores this point most forcefully. Similarly, the deputy general manager of Komatsu (which is the second largest heavy machinery manufacturer in the world after Caterpillar) conceded the competition with the Americans, but quickly related it to the Japanese context: "our business is to fight with Caterpillar, they are our big competitor; but also we compete with Hitachi and Kobleco. It depends on what sort of machine we are talking about". The competition that "really matters" thus takes place on the basis of standards set at the center: Japan.

Yet the terms 'center' and 'periphery' may be too static to exemplify the dynamic aspect of people's images. The expressions that people use depict a vibrant globe in which the ebbs and flows of their company's business meet the currents (and sometimes, torrents) of other enterprises in various locations where competition for markets, goods and sources takes place. For example, the perception of Southeast Asia's growing economic strength and the business potential that this power represents figures in the primacy attributed to it in global terms. But the more fundamental point is that for these people, the map of the world — the cognitive lay out of the 'globe' — is arranged according to how the firm's business activities and possibilities bear upon an individual's prospects for promotion. While these "business maps" of cores and peripheries may be isomorphic or disjunctive with other maps of the world (say with sketches based on a perceived status hierarchy of societies), from the business person's point of view this is the most relevant map. Why are they relevant?

Overseas posting present opportunities and dangers for promotion in the firm. Three major themes appear in discussions about the potentials and hazards of the stint abroad. Not surprisingly, all three directly bear upon the issue of future promotion: the skills that one garners abroad, possibilities for developing business deals, and the networks of people one cultivates. All of the people I interviewed, including men from banks or general trading companies who had been abroad a number of times, emphasized that a tour of duty in a foreign country was an opportunity to learn new skills and abilities. They talked either about the knowledge gathered about the specific place where they undertook their post (the local or regional markets and legal environments) or more general capacities such as sales and

marketing skills, management of large and ethnically diverse numbers of employees, or the knowledge of English.

While these points are seen as advantageous, they are also seen as potentially dangerous: the skills and knowledge garnered abroad may come at the cost of gathering capacities and experience relevant to functioning within Japan and, in this way, hinder one's prospects for eventual advancement. Thus the deputy director at a large Asahi Glass factory confided that while he may learn about the Singapore's legal and business environment, he was not sure that this would be of "good benefit" upon his return to Japan, and that he would have to "catch up" with his colleagues who had stayed there. But the main danger of staying abroad, which came up time and again throughout my interviews, as well as in Hamada's (1992: 146ff) study, was related to the disconnection, the lack of contact, with networks of personal supporters in Japan. Thus for example, a manager at an equipment company mentioned that "you may feel out of pace after a few years, and then you can end up being sent to the edge of Japan, like Hokkaido". Many others talked about their careers depending on Tokyo and the need to constantly monitor their relations and contacts with important people at "head office".

Cultural Uniqueness and Cultural Mediation

Another schema, an attenuated form of the *Nihonjinron* approach (Dale 1986; Miller 1982), is used alongside the center and periphery model to make sense of service abroad. It is used primarily to account for the cross-cultural contact within the (overseas) workplace and secondarily to reason about the long-term organizational implications of living outside of Japan. This schema consists of three elements related to intercultural encounters: a subtle but strong differentiation between the Japanese parts of the company and other parts, the unique quality of Japanese verbal and non-verbal communication, and the need for cultural mediators to bridge the gap between the two 'cultural' parts of the organization.

While there are a variety of formal and legal discriminations between head office and branches, or main and daughter companies, the most important one is the informal differentiation between the Japanese and other parts of a company. This differentiation is grounded in an invisible but nevertheless highly significant boundary around what could be termed the 'actual' company. To put this in another way, formal relations within an organization's offices are not the meaningful ones. Rather, for Japanese expatriates the 'real' — both in the sense of personally relevant and culturally shared — organization is the one in which Japanese people participate. While this view is consonant with the emphasis on careering and the centrality of Tokyo (or the head office), its locus is elsewhere: on the special understandings and connections that only Japanese people can have. At the heart of this schema then, is a rather certain view of the essence of Japanese-ness. Japanese culture, according to this schema, is so unique, so special that only some people can participate in it. To be sure, this culture is not exclusionary in an hermetic sense. A few foreigners can and do cross over into the 'real' part of the company, but they do so only if they master the Japanese

modes of communication.

One central role of Japanese business people within this schema, and this a very widespread self-conception among expatriates, is to be cultural mediators. This notion was often phrased in humorous terms as when I was told that the primary function of Japanese managers was to translate documents or telephone messages for the local staff. More significant aspects entail teaching Japanese customs and manners to locals. A manager at a servicing facility for a large manufacturer told me about how uncomfortable he and his colleagues feel when called by their name without the addition of "-san" at the end. He went on to tell me how they have to teach each new local employee who is recruited to the company to add the "-san" to the Japanese people's names.

Other issues are the distinct and 'classic' qualities of the purported Japanese corporate culture. In the words of the regional general manager of the Japan Travel Bureau office, unlike the Japanese local Chinese people have trouble working in group. According to a man who works in a financial service company: "In Singapore I feel that there is more hierarchy. Like between people who have finished their A levels and O levels... And this leads to people building up a wall around themselves and not willing to take responsibility for anything outside their area; very different from the Japanese". Again, while the marketing manager of Kinokuniya Bookstores noted that Singaporeans lack "cooperativeness" (*Kyoocho*), the managing director of NYK Shipping Lines observed that they lack "loyalty".

Consistent with this view is a danger that may accompany cultural mediation, and one that came up time and again in my exchanges. The risk is one of losing one's Japanese essence: to appear to "have gone native", to be seen as too localized. There is a very strong and widespread conception among the expatriates that they must maintain the appearance — the demeanor, language and attire — of Japanese. To give but one example, a high level executive in one to the securities firms noted that he dressed differently when meeting Singaporeans and when meeting other Japanese: "When l meet Japanese guests I always wear a suit. If I don't I will feel awkward, very uneasy. Maybe they will think that I am too localized, too relaxed. So in order that they don't get that impression I dress this way".

These are far from unimportant issues, as is brought out in Merry White's (1988) somewhat overworried book. The problem is important because international business is perceived to pose certain threats to one's 'Japanese'. The dander has less to do with the actual character of the company as an actor in the international arena as such, as with the possible influences of exposure to other cultures on individuals. The director of Sumitomo Bank mentioned that after "I returned to Japan after a good few years abroad they thought that I needed to be rehabilitated and they gave me work in internal auditing and then running one of the Tokyo branches of the bank". And, the director of Uchida Yoko mused good naturedly,

last year I returned to Japan for reeducation: part of the reeducation that they carry out for people who return from abroad. There was this guy there in the personnel department who said that there are people overseas that become maybe a little too much independent, more

than in Japan. And maybe their way of thinking is different from normal people that work in the main office in Japan.

Thus the model here is that of a unique, somehow clean society that must be protected from external influences. Here again, however, the basic model is personalized: it is related to the life course, and to the standards by which individuals and their significant others appraise themselves.

'Civilized Societies'

The essential elements of the third model are a family or group of 'civilized societies' that are perceived to be marked by a certain level of cultivation or sophistication. Societies wishing to enter this elite group must adopt the standards of refinement and urbanity by which it is distinguished. Historically speaking, as Gong's (1984) has brilliantly shown, this 'folk' model is related to the emergence of an international standard of 'civilization'. My argument is that this international, diplomatic and elitist model has today become a 'folk' model. For the Japanese business people that I studied (and for others) a major image of the world is centered on the inclusion or exclusion of societies in a family of 'civilized societies'. The criteria for incorporation are not only technological advancement, but no less importantly a certain kind of cultivation of style and etiquette, and interpersonal behavior.

Take the following passages. The personnel manager at Sumitomo talked about the lack of manners among local women receptionists: "They don't have the same attitude as in Japan. For example, on the telephone in Japan the women learn to speak with a pretty voice, but here you don't find it. Sometimes I even feel that they are not kind to customers". When I asked a senior manager at one of the city banks about the kind of preparation that he thought would benefit employees before going abroad he answered: "Listen, language is important, but I would also like young Japanese to learn the culture and customs of overseas countries; like how to dine. For example, I often feel shame that they don't know which glass of wine to use, how to eat with a knife and fork, how to offer bread to clients". These examples underscore the intricacy of this model: Japan, at one and the same time, is a 'civilized society' that other societies must try and emulate, *and* a society that needs to go further and itself follow more advanced countries in America and Europe.

This model and the standards intrinsic to it find their strongest expression in the manner by which Singapore is talked about. For many of the people I interviewed, Singapore is problematical because it stands on the boundary, just outside of, the family of 'civilized societies'. One example that came up in some interviews was the purported lack of appreciation by Singaporeans of "who they are", of their tradition and roots. Being civilized however, does not directly imply being Westernized. A closely related theme that I encountered involves to membership in a purported 'Asian' civilization. Historically speaking, the notion of Asian civilization may be traced to the idea of the 'Greater Asian Co-prosperity

Sphere". But of no less importance are current debates about "Asian-ness" that are appearing in such places as China, Korea and Malaysia and that are a central issue in public debates in Singapore. From the perspective of Japanese expatriates Singapore becomes a sort of 'test case' through which to explore notions of Asian-ness and Westernization.

For many Japanese that I met, Singapore represented an Asian country that is very Westernized. A senior manager at a general trading company evoked both the exclusivist Japanese model and the schema of civilized societies, when he ruminated:

> Let me say this directly. Maybe you as a European feel that we and the Singaporeans are the same thing: we have the same black hair, brown eyes, or color of the skin. But I feel that although we all look like orientals as though we are similar to each other, the Singaporeans are very different. They have names like Desmond or Tom, and this creates a very strange feeling for me (*hen na kimochi*); as though they are in some way Western. It's funny, their roots are in China and in this way they have a relation to us Japanese. But the younger generation here have lost their identity because they don't speak good Chinese, they have lost their Chinese [language]. . . The personal philosophy of many of them is very Western so many times I feel I don't understand them.

Notice the terms that this man uses: orientals, European, racial features, Western, and language as an indicator of cultural identity and belonging. What is apparent is that these expressions have become almost a common set of idioms for articulating issues of global situatedness around the contemporary world.

Conclusion

The thrust of my analysis lies in the contention that in order to understand contemporary Japanese society one has to "go international" (Breckenridge and Appadurai 1989; Robertson 1992). In this regard, I question the assumption lying at the base of many studies of Japan, that there is an isomorphism between the geo-political boundaries of the state and its social and cultural limits. My contribution should be seen as proposing a first step towards a reconceptualization of Japanese culture. This culture — without assuming too much about its unitary nature — could be understood not only along the lines proposed by most social scientists who have studied Japan, but also as a set of negotiated symbols and meanings that travel *across* national boundaries (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Brannen 1992; Creighton 1991). To put this by way of example, just as it is possible to gain a richer appreciation of the variety of experiences entailed in being Japanese through accompanying various tour groups to Europe or China, or visiting their hangouts in Thailand, so it may be possible to learn something about "Japaneseness" in contemporary Singapore.

The theoretical innovation of my study (if you allow me a slight exaggeration) lies in linking an examination of 'folk' models of the world to an analysis of the guidelines people

use to make sense of their life-course. On the one hand, I have delineated three main models — the center and periphery, cultural exclusionist, and 'civilized' societies schemas — which Japanese business expatriates use to understand what is going on in the contemporary world. On the other hand, I have examined the most central schema of personal development that these people hold: the model of careering within the organization. One can understand the basic cognitive categories by which these people think by juxtaposing the two kinds of models: the general and the individual. Accordingly, to 'go international' implies not only placing our analysis at the macro level of global processes, but no less importantly to 'go personal' to the micro level of individual consciousness and reasoning.

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