

Japan: A Paradox of Traditional and Modern?¹

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In practically every area of Japanese culture, it is a popular scholarly pastime to stress the unique "dual character" of Japan, in other words, the co-existence of the "traditional" and the "modern". Japan has undergone the same industrial revolution as the West, yet her social structure, her language, her music and art, her religions, her consumption patterns remain, to a considerable degree, "feudalistic". There are two characteristic reactions to this situation. The first, typical of Westerners, is surprise that industrialization has not produced in Japan a culture more like that of the West, i. e., "modern". The second, more typical of Japanese, is concern over the persistence of "feudalistic" elements in spite of Japan's efforts to "modernize", and a belief that these elements not only lower Japan in the eyes of Westerners but inhibit economic development.

We may observe at the outset that if the persistence of traditional ways in Japan actually does lower Japan in the eyes of Westerners, this is due, in most cases, not so much to inherent defects in the traditions as to the cultural myopia of Westerners and the irrational and ethnocentric tendency of people everywhere to regard something as inferior simply because it is different. With respect to economic development, it is only necessary to point out that Japan, for the past ninety years, has enjoyed one of highest per capita growth rates in the world, leading some to suspect that at least some of the traditional Japanese elements, far from inhibiting economic growth, may actually have supported it.²

1. The writers wish to express thanks to Professors Iwao Ayusawa and Norman Sun for helpful suggestions.

2. See, for example, Henry Rosovsky and Kazushi Ohkawa, "The Indigenous Components in the Modern Japanese Economy," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. IX, No. 3, April 1961, p. 497.

Our principal contention, however, is that there is no reason why industrialization should destroy all traditional or feudalistic elements. It has not, in fact, done so in the "modern" West and it should not be expected to do so in the East. The old and the new co-exist in more or less useful combinations in both Japan and the West. Much of what scholars call "modernization" in Japan has actually involved the application of Western ideas many centuries old, while some innovations in the West appear to be adaptations of pre-capitalistic traditions of Japan. In the discussion which follows, we hope to provide adequate support for these views with illustrations drawn from several areas of both Japanese and Western societies.

In the economic sphere, much has been made of the so-called "dual structure" of the Japanese economy. This is usually described as the existence side by side of traditional, pre-capitalistic, feudalistic, small-scale, family-operated firms and modern, capitalistic, large-scale firms. The traditional sector is often considered the locus of the principal ills of the Japanese economy. It is said to be characterized by out-dated low-productivity methods of production, low wages, poor working conditions, long hours, "disguised unemployed" who cannot find work in the high-productivity large-scale firms, and feudalistic relations between employers and employees.³ The array of data in support of many of these assertions is indeed formidable, and justifies some concern over the social inequities arising from these conditions and the possible impediment to future economic development. But granting all this, the contrast between Japan and a Western country like the United States appears in several respects to be somewhat overdrawn. The United States also has numerous small-scale family firms existing side by side with large-scale modern corporations. Even in manufacturing,

3. A good summary of the nature of the dual structure and its problems may be found in Economic Planning Agency, *Economic Survey of Japan: 1956-1957*, Tokyo, 1957, pp. 22-28.

more than half of all American enterprises employ less than ten workers.⁴ As far as family-operated firms are concerned, their continued importance in the U.S. economy is indicated by the fact that more than 80% of all business organizations are single proprietorships.⁵

It is true that wage differentials between large-scale and small-scale firms are greater in Japan than in countries like the United States, England, and West Germany⁶, but there is some doubt about the extent to which this results from unique traditional elements present in the small Japanese firms. Recent statistics show relatively little difference in the wages paid new employees in large and small firms. The main source of the differential in average wages appears to lie in the differences existing among older workers.⁷ This, in turn, is due partly to certain aspects of the traditional Japanese family or clan system which large firms have been able to maintain more successfully than small firms.⁸ Loyalty to the firm as "family" requires the regular employee (*honkō*) normally to

4. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Manufactures: 1954*, Vol. I, Washington, D. C., 1957, p. 203-1.
5. Based on Internal Revenue Service statistics for 1953 reported in U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1957*, Washington, D. C., 1959, p. 483.
6. In common comparisons showing average wages in firms with less than 10 workers as a percent of average wages in firms with a 1000 or more workers, the figure for Japan is only about 40% as against approximately 60% for the United States and about 80% for the United Kingdom and West Germany (Economic Planning Agency, Economic Research Institute, *Employment Structure and Business Fluctuations*, Bulletin No. 2, Tokyo, July 1959, p. 70)
7. See Kazushi Ohkawa, "The Differential Employment Structure of Japan", *The Annals of the Hitotsubashi Academy*, Vol. IX, No. 2, April 1959, pp. 212-14.
8. For an excellent description of how the system operates in practice, see James G. Abegglen, *The Japanese Factory: Aspects of its Social Organization*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1958. It is probable that the new industries which developed during and after World War I were strongly motivated in adopting the system not only by traditional attitudes but by economic factors current at the time. Skilled labor willing to work in the factories was

remain permanently with the firm and obligates the firm to keep him as long as it remains in business.⁹ Added to this is the custom of automatically increasing the worker's pay as he grows older, a practice reflecting the traditional attitude towards age as a major determinant of status. Consequently, large, economically strong companies tend to have a larger proportion of older, highly paid workers than small firms among which the turnover is great and whose capacity to provide annual wage increases systematically is limited. One might say that one of the main reasons why wages and working conditions differ greatly between large-scale and small-scale firms is precisely because large firms are capable of being *more* traditional than small firms with respect to employer-employee relations.

As far as techniques of production are concerned, admittedly the capital equipment per worker in Japanese small-scale firms is considerably less on the average than in large-scale firms. Yet this

difficult to find and to hold. Lockwood observes that this situation in the Meiji period "was a constant drag on industrial progress. Everywhere the turnover of labor was high. Rural workers, especially men, entered the factory only with great reluctance and in response to various pressures and inducements." (William W. Lockwood, *The Economic Development of Japan*, Princeton, 1954, p. 162). The attempts of the new capital-intensive firms of the World War I and post World War I period to develop a stable skilled labor force are referred to in Economic Planning Agency, Economic Research Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 19. In this study, however, the use of higher wage rates rather than the attraction of an industrial family system is emphasized.

9. It should be noted that this system does not apply to the "temporary workers" (*rinjūkō*) who have no job security, receive relatively low wages even in the largest firms, lack union protection, and generally bear the brunt of fluctuations in the labor requirements of the firm. (See Solomon B. Levine, *Industrial Relations in Postwar Japan*, Urbana, 1958, pp. 18-20, et passim). An excellent discussion is also found in Hiromi Arisawa, *Labor Force and Employment in Japan* (mimeographed paper presented at the Conference on Industrialism and Industrial Man, Tokyo, January 21, 1959), pp. 18-24. The exclusion of the wages of temporary workers in computing average wage differentials according to scale may have exaggerated the size of the differentials, since the proportion of temporary workers in large firms is greater than in small firms.

does not mean that no change in techniques has occurred. The availability of electric power to virtually all shops and homes has led to the extensive use of electrically driven equipment even in the smallest enterprises.¹⁰ Another factor to consider is the character of the products produced by small-scale enterprises. A large proportion of these products are traditional-type consumer goods where the Japanese emphasis is on aesthetic qualities requiring considerable hand work and not attainable through capital-intensive mass-production techniques.¹¹ In such cases, the "pre-capitalist" methods are still the best methods for meeting consumer requirements, and, as long as this is true, there is no reason why they should be abandoned. One of the neglected dimensions of economic growth is the qualitative side of production with respect to variety as well as artistic character. A nation does not necessarily gain economically if it increases the quantity of its product at the expense of its quality.

In England and the United States, consumers still demand products which could be classed as traditional, but, in contrast with the Japanese consumer, the American and English consumers appear historically to have placed less emphasis on variety and artistic quality within a given category of goods and hence have responded enthusiastically to the production of low-priced, highly uniform, mass-produced goods.¹² Where capital goods production and newer Western-type consumer goods (electrical household equipment, automobiles, Western-style textiles) are involved, Japan is successfully employing large-scale, mass-production techniques. One may well conclude from this part of our discussion that the techniques of

10. See Mitsubishi Economic Research Bureau, *Japanese Trade and Industry: Present and Future*, London, 1936, p. 64; also, Lockwood, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

11. This point has been stressed by such writers as G. C. Allen, *A Short Economic History of Modern Japan*, London, 1946, p. 83; Lockwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-8; and Rosovsky and Ohkawa, *op. cit.*

12. The French, however, appear to be more similar to the Japanese in their emphasis on aesthetic qualities in traditional consumer goods,

modern capital-intensive production, so highly valued by proponents of economic development, are largely applicable only when the aesthetic sensibilities of consumers are rather dull or not involved. Where traditional product characteristics are still preferred, traditional techniques of production may be economically sound and should cause no concern.

Some small firms in Japan are linked through subcontracting arrangements with large concerns. Their techniques in producing semifinished products are often fairly advanced, but they are said to serve as a kind of cushion for large firms against business fluctuations. The large concern is able to achieve regularity in its own output and employment partly by varying its orders and even its payments to the subcontracting firms.¹³ The relationship of the small firm to the large firm in this case appears to be conducive to a kind of exploitation by the large "high status" organization of the small "low status" enterprise. This hierarchical arrangement could be regarded as "feudalistic," in a sense, but it is a characteristic involving the "modern" large firm as well as the "traditional" small firm.

In general, the position of the small relative to the large enterprise in Japan is highly complex. To describe it simply as a "dual structure" of "traditional" and "modern" firms existing side by side is a misleading oversimplification. The description may apply roughly as far as techniques of production are concerned, but, with respect to employer-employee relations, the real contrast appears to be within the large-scale firm where, as we have noted, a traditional family-system social structure exists side by side with the most modern equipment and production methods. This puzzles those who associate the "rugged individualism" and greater social egalitarianism of the West with industrialization. Where it is assumed that the economic incentives of Western-type individualism are necessary

13. G. C. Allen, *Japan's Economic Recovery*, London, 1958, pp. 96-7, et passim.

to rapid economic development, the source of economic motivation of workers in a Japanese firm seems a bit of a mystery. If the regular employee is assured of permanent employment and regular increases in wages whether he works hard or not, why should he work hard? Those who ask this question are unaware of the motivating power of the loyalty of a Japanese worker to his firm, a loyalty possibly derived originally from the clan system of pre-historic Korean invaders and later strongly reinforced by hierarchical Confucian principles which both the Tokugawa and post-Restoration governments endeavored to instill in the people.¹⁴ Under this system, the individual receives much of his status from his group so that in serving his group well he serves himself. Ironically, today, we see some attempt on the part of Japanese to adopt some of the individualistic philosophy of the West, while, in the United States, at least, many companies are endeavoring to instill something resembling the feudalistic clan loyalty of Japan in their executives and thus create the "modern organization man".¹⁵ Whether they can achieve this without providing the other side of the Japanese coin, adequate job security, remains to be seen.

In any event, Western economic individualism is not the product of the Industrial Revolution. Its origins may be traced back at least as far as the "commercial revolution" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Adam Smith, regarded by many as chief apostle of economic individualism, published his great work, *The Wealth of Nations*, when the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in England were barely perceptible. It is also clear that, whatever its other merits,

14. Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan Past and Present*, Tokyo, 1954, pp. 12, 86-7, 127-30. Abegglen asserts that, "Despite the absence of a threat of firing, it does not seem justified to argue that the Japanese laborer is less energetic in his job performance than his Western counterpart. However, his present energies are compelled by such matters as loyalty to the firm and close relations with his immediate supervisors. These motivations to job effectiveness would be removed if the impersonal job relationship of the West were substituted for the present system." *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

15. See William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man*, New York, 1956.

Western economic individualism is certainly not essential to rapid industrialization. In Japan's case, its absence and the retention of the traditional Japanese social structure in industry is held by some to have actually facilitated the process of technological modernization by providing a labor force with high motivation and little resistance to technical change.¹⁶

The persistence of traditional consumption patterns in Japan in the face of industrialization should be no cause for surprise or concern. Home-grown rice has continued to play a major role in the Japanese diet, not, as some have argued, because "Japan is so poor", but because most Japanese thoroughly enjoy it. In fact, for the lower income rural groups, high rice consumption is a relatively modern innovation. During the Tokugawa period, rice was the food of the relatively wealthy, while most of the farmers who produced it had to substitute "inferior" grains such as barley.¹⁷ Today, wheat is gradually coming to play a more important role largely as a result of the stimulus provided by the early postwar situation when consuming American wheat was, for many, the only alternative to virtual starvation. The heavy rice diet is viewed with some alarm by nutrition experts, but perhaps is no more harmful than the tendency toward over-eating by so many Americans. Milk and meat consumption are increasing and the prospects are favorable for considerable nutritional improvement without abandoning the traditional foods which form the basis of the diet. Modernization of food consumption, as in the West, appears to be

16. E. H. Norman, in commenting on Japanese "feudal loyalty" and the "patriarchal system," said that "Some observers might regard this spiritual legacy of Old Japan as a gloomy specter which haunts and inhibits its present. But here again, the anomalous, the accidental and the outmoded have been turned to good purpose; a weakness, if you like to call it that, has been transformed into an advantage. Much of the stress and shock of industrial life, its ugly clashes of jostling interests, have been cushioned by the old habits of thought." *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State*, New York, 1940, p. 9.

17. Keizo Shibusawa (ed.), *Japanese Life and Culture in the Meiji Era*, Tokyo, 1958, pp. 52, 56.

taking the form mainly of new methods of processing and packaging customary foods in order to increase the convenience of preparation of meals.¹⁸

Much has been made by some Western observers of the "primitive" character of Japanese housing, and wonderment has been expressed at the failure of Japan to "modernize" its housing in the process of industrialization. It is true that, with the exception of some of the new postwar apartments, Japanese houses have changed little since feudal times as far as basic construction and style are concerned. But if "modernization" means the heavy insulation, limited window space, and walled interiors of most Western houses, the Japanese may have done well to avoid it. The open, airy construction of a Japanese-style house is admirably suited to the hot and humid summer climate of the heavily populated southern area of Japan. This, to be sure, creates a heating problem in the winter, but the winter climate for the majority of Japanese is more moderate than is usual for most of the population of North America and Europe. Furthermore, the Japanese have developed highly the art of heating the body rather than the room through the use of such devices as heavy underclothing, the hot bath, and the *kotatsu*, a heated depression in the floor topped by a low table and blanket under which arms and legs may be put. The underlying rationale seems to be that the discomfort or inconvenience suffered in the winter is considerably less than what would have to be endured in the summer in a typical Western-style house.¹⁹ Modernization of heating facilities is, of course, taking place, but

18. Intriguing current examples are found among the "insutanto" (instant) preparations, such as "Insutanto Gomoku" (a sauce used on rice) and "Insutanto Misoshiru" (bean paste soup).

19. See A. H. Gleason, "Postwar Housing in Japan and the United States: A Case Study in International Comparisons," published in Japanese (trans. by Takao Fukuchi) in the International Christian University Social Science Research Institute, *Journal of Social Science*, No. 2, March 1961, and in English in a forthcoming volume of occasional papers of the Center for Japanese Studies of the University of Michigan.

largely within the framework of existing patterns. Electrically heated *kotatsu*, electric radiant heaters, and gas-heated hot baths are increasingly evident.

From the style standpoint, it does not seem that the Japanese house would profit much from imitation of the modern "neo-soap-box" type of American dwelling so prevalent in burgeoning middle-income suburban housing developments. At the moment, the flow of cultural importation appears to be reversed and one finds an increasing number of upper-income American homes which are classed as ultra-modern because they have many features of traditional Japanese architecture and interior decor complete with "tatami" room.

The "pre-modern" sanitary facilities of most Japanese houses have called forth rather strong comments from foreign observers, especially those Americans who have come to regard the flush toilet as the *sine qua non par excellence* of modern living and perhaps even consider it as one of the finest achievements of the Industrial Revolution. Such a convenience has a somewhat lower position on the value scales of Europeans who, like the Japanese, are less apt than Americans to see anything paradoxical about a house with ancient plumbing arrangements and a television set in the living room. It should be noted that Japan's traditional sewage arrangements have served the very practical purpose of assisting in the maintenance of the fertility of the relatively small quantity of arable land.

As far as bathing facilities and their use are concerned, the Japanese were apparently more advanced in their late feudal period than most Western countries today, if one includes the ubiquitous public bath houses. Townsend Harris, first American consul to Japan, wrote in his journal more than one hundred years ago, "The Japanese are a *clean* people. Everyone bathes every day. The mechanic, day laborer, all male and female, old and young, bathe

every day after their labor is completed.”²⁰ It is interesting to note that, as late as 1950, more than one fourth of all United States dwellings lacked either a bath or shower, and in France, in the same year, 85% of all homes were without bath.²¹

Turning briefly to clothing, it is hard to say whether the traditional *kimono* of “old Japan” contrasts more strongly with the latest Western styles than the traditional stove-pipe hats and cutaway coats of “old Europe” which are still worn on ceremonial occasions, not to mention the striking native garb of Scotsmen and the feudal vestments of Western clergy and academicians. The tendency in Japan, as in the West, is to relegate traditional dress increasingly to formal occasions.

It is perhaps in the field of transportation and communication that the process of industrialization has had the greatest impact in replacing old ways with new ways. This is as evident in Japan as in the West. Japan’s railroad, bus, street car, and subway systems are excellent, though naturally overcrowded in expanding urban areas. Her air lines are among the world’s best. The traditional *jirikisha* is rarely seen today outside of Western school books purporting to describe modern Japan. Passenger automobiles, however, are relatively few—only about 1 per 350 persons as compared with 1 per 3 persons and 1 per 11 persons in the United States and Great Britain respectively.²² Japan is definitely lagging in the modernization of her roads with only about 2% of the total mileage paved. The terrifying nature of her bumpy, narrow, and precipitous mountain roads is matched only by the courage and skill of the

20. Townsend Harris, *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris* (Intro. and Notes by Mario E. Cosenza), New York, 1930, p. 252.

21. From Milton Gilbert and Irving B. Kravis, *An International Comparison of National Products and Purchasing Power of Currencies*, Paris, 1954, p. 139.

22. Estimated from data in Statistical Office of the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Statistical Yearbook : 1959*, New York, 1959, Tables 1 and 143.

intrepid bus drivers who negotiate them. But even with road improvement, it is doubtful that Japan will ever give the automobile as prominent a role as it has in the United States or even in Europe, though not because of any traditional resistance to this type of transportation. The rugged, mountainous topography of most of the land, an area only about the size of California, and a population density second only to Belgium make the automobile less of a convenience and pleasure than it is in the United States. On the other hand, bicycles, motor scooters, and motorcycles abound in Japan with at least one of these three types of vehicles for every 5 persons.²³

Our discussion so far has centered on Japan and the rationality of many of the traditional elements of its economy and consumption patterns. In the West, the old and new also co-exist so harmoniously that few scholars give much thought to the extent to which the "modern" Western culture remains permeated with "pre-capitalistic" survivals. Examples are not difficult to find.²⁴ Most of the rituals and customs connected with Christianity, of course, date back many centuries. The sacraments, the marriage customs, including the quaint garb of the bride, the vestments of the clergy, and the use of Latin, incense, candles and icons in the Roman Catholic Church all reflect ancient traditions, some stemming from Hebrew practices several thousand years old. They can scarcely be considered more modern than the Buddhist-Shinto practices which appear so ancient to the Western-oriented mind. It may be noted further that, historically, Christianity, though regarded by many Japanese as a Western religion, was "borrowed" by the West from a semi-oriental group in the Near East. Even the Protestant Reformation, which "modernized" so many church

23. Estimated from Office of the Prime Minister and Ministry of Transportation data.

24. The following illustrations are derived largely from general references and personal observations.

practices, occurred four centuries ago and at least half a century before the Tokugawa period began in Japan. The religious celebrations of Christians, while still the occasion for worship by the devout, are combined with ancient festivals whose customs and symbols are rather curious pagan survivals. Some of the Easter traditions, such as the Easter rabbit and Easter egg, both originally symbols of fertility, are said to derive from the festival of the Teutonic goddess of spring, Eastre, whose name is probably the source of the word "Easter". The Christmas festival includes the use of Yule logs, holly, and mistletoe. These customs are believed to come from pre-Christian celebrations of the winter solstice held by Germanic and Celtic tribesmen. The Christmas tree custom, so enthusiastically adopted by Japanese department stores, is believed to date back to the pre-Christian Roman era.

Turning to social behavior, the Westerner who writes entertainingly on the "quaint feudal manners" of the Japanese, forgets that the Western handshake is reputed to stem from a medieval habit of knights, ostensibly to guarantee to the other party that one's hand was not free to draw the sword for a surprise attack. The practice of tipping or raising one's hat may have originated from another knightly custom of raising the visor of the helmet for identification purposes and to indicate one was not intending to engage in combat with the other party. Whether or not these hypotheses concerning origins are correct, there is no doubt of the venerable age of these customs. Other interesting ancient practices linger on in the universities. Western professors still walk pompously in academic processions sporting the "feudalistic" cap, gown, and hood (purportedly once used for collecting donations from grateful students). College diplomas and salutatorian commencement speeches are still occasionally in Latin. The resistance of modern American students to modernization was recently exhibited at Harvard University when the young intellectuals rioted (perhaps not very seriously) over a decision to stop inscribing the diploma

in Latin.²⁵

In the field of drama and music, the classic *NJ* play of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has its counterpart in the classic Western opera whose beginnings go back at least as far as the early seventeenth century. Much of what the actors sing is incomprehensible in either case, though perhaps for different reasons, and long explanatory program notes are normally required in both instances to enlighten baffled audiences as to what is going on. The highly stylized dancing of *Kabuki* dramas may be said to have its counterpart in the highly stylized Western ballet. Both forms were developed largely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ancient and modern music forms exist today in both Japan and the West. The Gregorian chants of the sixth century are heard in Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic churches. They correspond to the ancient chants of the Buddhist Sutra. While musical comparisons are extremely difficult, to the writers' ears, at least, *Kabuki* music and even the ancient court music (*Gagaku*) of Japan bear more resemblance to some of the more recent works of modern American and European composers than do Mozart's works for example. Oddly enough, traditional Japanese vaudeville (*Yose*) music is characterized by syncopations strongly reminiscent of modern Western jazz.

25. The source of the American four-year college system, implanted in Japan under the Occupation, recently was explained with some irony by Sharvy G. Umbeck, president of Knox College. "Note", he said, "the profound analysis and study which undergirds the widely-accepted idea that a college education consists of four years of post-high school study—not three years, or three and a half, or five or six, but *four* years. Well, it happened like this. The main reason for the four-year college course today is that Harvard adopted it in 1636 (324 years ago). Harvard adopted it because Cambridge and Oxford, when started in the middle of the 13th century, adopted it. Oxford adopted it because English parents who had been sending their sons to Paris to study informally, decided some years earlier that four years of university study . . . would be a reasonable length of time to stay away from home. In this careful, studied, scientific fashion we have concluded that four years constitutes a complete college education." (Reported in *Saturday Review*, January 21, 1961, p. 78).

Further illustrations of the role and extent of traditional elements in both Japan and the West could be readily provided, but the examples we have discussed should suffice to support our view that there is nothing paradoxical or even unique about the co-existence of traditional and modern elements in any area of Japanese culture. Western culture is permeated with traditionalism even in the United States in spite of that country's relative newness as a nation and the heterogeneity of its population. Much of what Japanese consider modern simply because it is Western actually is derived from traditions or cultures many centuries old and not a few of which are Eastern rather than Western in origin. In both Japan and the West, the survival of traditional elements in the economy in the face of industrialization usually has a rational basis deriving from such factors as consumer preference patterns, the character and extent of productive resources, and the existing social structure. The historical experience of Japan, as well as other countries, shows that rapid economic development is possible in cultures with widely varying political systems, social structures, consumption patterns, and psychological motivations.

On the whole, in Japan, as in the West, there appears to be a continuous process of adjusting the combination of old and new to the changing needs of society, and it is scarcely surprising that this combination will vary among countries, as well as within each country over a period of time.