

# Japanese Values Re-examined: Exploring Traditional and Modern Values in Contemporary Japan

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to attempt a re-examination of what are commonly assumed to be Japanese values through an evaluation of the results obtained on items concerning general attitudes included in the survey conducted in April 1998<sup>(1)</sup>. In considering differences in response by age group, three cohorts are dealt with: the young, including those under 39 years of age; middle aged, indicating ages between 40 and 59; and the aged, including all over 60 years old. In addition, comparisons with results obtained in similar surveys will be presented as possible<sup>(2)</sup>.

As Table 1 shows, the first question on the survey regarding the relative importance placed on various domains of life yielded the following results, in order from highest to lowest: family (92.0%), friends and acquaintances (87.0%), leisure time (79.0%), work (75.7%), politics (48.7%), and religion (18.0%). In recent years a retreat from public life has been noticed in advanced industrial countries throughout the world, and here as well movement towards the privatization of life is apparent. Increasing importance placed on friendship and leisure is especially apparent among the young in the present survey.

**Table 1. Importance of Life Domains (%)**

	Japan (1998)	USA (1995)	Europe (1990)
Work	75.7	82.9	87
Family	92.0	99.1	96
Friends	87.0	95.8	90
Leisure	79.0	87.2	83
Politics	48.7	58.5	35
Religion	18.0	82.9	48

*Sources:* 1995 American data from Dentsusouken & Yokokaihatu Center (1999: 171-6).

1990 European data from Barker, Halman & Vloet (1992: 7).

In comparison with the 1995 data from United States of America and the 1990 data from Europe, it is worth noting that the order of importance given to politics and religion is reversed, as well as the relatively lower level of importance given to family, friends, work and leisure overall in Japan (see Table 1). Although Japanese work habits are often highlighted, it is interesting to point out that the level of importance placed on work in Europe is fully ten points higher than in the Japanese survey.

The importance placed on both work and family has, in the past, been described as part of the Japanese value system. However, at least in regard to the results gathered by the 1995 American survey and the 1990 European survey, Japan appears to place less emphasis on both of these domains. We might ask, then, just what constitutes Japanese values today? Japan is often

described as having achieved modernization while preserving traditional values. In the following remarks we will want to explore the actual relationship of traditional and modern values in contemporary Japan.

## 2. Two Clusters in Traditional Values

Question 2 in the Japanese survey explored the importance placed on twelve general values. In order from highest to lowest, the following results were obtained: honesty, cooperation, being well mannered, obeying the law, being serious, helping others, diligence, success at work, being a member of a group, obedience, patriotism, and following authority (Table 2).

**Table 2. Norms for General Behavior**

	Percentage	Average	Young (-39)	Middle Age (40-59)	Aged (60-)
Honesty	95.0	1.54	1.66	1.46	1.48
Cooperation	95.0	1.68	1.71	1.71	1.58
Manners	94.0	1.63	1.69	1.66	1.45
Obeying the law	92.0	1.66	1.85	1.60	1.43
Serious	87.7	1.74	2.03	1.64	1.43
Helping others	85.7	1.74	1.96	1.83	1.78
Diligence	83.0	1.91	2.15	1.72	1.84
Success	66.0	2.16	2.16	2.08	2.31
Groupism	64.0	2.20	2.35	2.10	2.11
Obedience	60.3	2.27	2.41	2.26	2.05
Patriotism	59.4	2.24	2.60	2.17	1.73
Authority	24.3	2.87	2.89	2.89	2.80

(Percentage is a total of those responding “Very important” and “Somewhat important”. The average is calculated by assigning 1 to “Very important” and 4 to “Not at all important”).

What is particularly remarkable about these results is that traditional values form two clusters, one above and one below the two modern values of diligence and success found in the middle of the above scale. The cluster above these two values — honesty, cooperation, man-

ners, and lawfulness — could be described as a personal morality governing general human relationships. On the other hand, the lower cluster — groupism, obedience, patriotism, and following authority — have to do with the preservation of vertical relationships within the group. Both the upper and lower cluster can be called traditional values, in that they are all Confucian in origin, but, although those that regulate horizontal relationships continue to enjoy considerable support, those regulating vertical relationships are not highly prized. Despite the image of Japan as a group-oriented, vertical society, at least in terms of the twelve items tested in this question the values underlying that image attract only a relatively low level of support. In the World Values surveys conducted in 1981 and 1990 Japan also scored relatively lower than other countries in terms of the value placed on authority (Inglehart, 1997: 274), indicating that we can no longer speak of Japan as an authority-oriented society.

In addition, the interest in almost all of these items is lower as the age of the respondents decreases (see Table 2). This indicates that we might see further erosion in the support given traditional values as time progresses.

The two clusters of traditional values are also seen in the results obtained from Question 12 of our survey, where the respondents were asked to choose two items from a list of four values, two of which were traditional and two modern (Table 3). The four items were filial piety, gratitude (repaying of debts), respect for individual rights, and respect for individual freedom. Once again, the modern values of rights (48.7%) and freedom (44.0%) are placed in the middle of the scale, with filial piety attracting the most support (63.0%), and the debt of gratitude the least support (33.3%). Even allowing for the fact that respondents could make only two choices, the low level of value placed on gratitude is worth special mention. Furthermore, no difference according to age was reflected in the responses to this question.

**Table 3. Traditional Values and Modern Values (%)**

Filial piety	63.0
Rights	48.7
Freedom	44.0
Debt of gratitude	33.3

We can see from these results that although traditional values in general are not receding, those concerning vertical relationships attract only a low level of support. It would appear that traditional values that restrict the freedom of the individual are no longer highly respected.

**3. Preservation of Traditional Values**

Traditional values that are not necessarily authoritarian, especially those oriented towards a sense of duty or charity (J. giri ninjou), continue to be highly evaluated. In this regard we can look first at Question 3 in our survey (Table 4). Respondents were asked their opinion regarding the importance of four relational and two individualistic values. In level of importance these values were ranked as follows: concern for those in trouble (81.0%), efforts for one to whom you are indebted (70.0%), avoidance of differences of opinion (60.7%), following the orders of superiors (54.6%), maintaining one's own opinion (43.0%), individualism/egoism (23.7%). In this order of importance the top three can be described as general relational, the fourth as authoritarian, and the bottom two as individualistic. As with Question 2, we can see a decrease in interest in the top four values (general relational and authoritarian) among lower age groups.

**Table 4. Relationalism and Individualism (%)**

Concern	81.0
Debt of gratitude	70.0
Avoid difference of opinion	60.7
Obedience to superiors	54.6
Defending your opinion	43.0
Individualism/egoism	23.7

The orientation towards relational harmony over individualism can also be seen in the response to Question 13, which deals with the image of the desired human being (Table 5). The achievement-oriented person who accomplishes tasks well but is unconcerned for others was chosen by only 13% of the respondents, whereas more than 75% chose the harmonious person who gets along well with others but is not very good at work.

**Table 5. Image of desirable human being (%)**

Concerned, but not a good worker	75.7
Good worker, but unconcerned	13.0

The contrast in responses to Question 21 concerning a desirable boss is even starker (Table 6). A boss who makes unreasonable demands but takes care of his or her workers (81.3%) is overwhelmingly more popular than a boss who makes no such demands at work but also does not take care of his/her employees (14.3%). In response to a similar question included in a 1988 survey, although only 51.4% of Americans favored a charitable boss 80.3% of Japanese did so. Furthermore, we see no difference by age in regard to these two questions; all age groups show a strong orientation towards tight human relations.

**Table 6. Image of desirable boss (%)**

	Japan(1998)	Japan(1988)	USA(1988)
Not demanding, unconcerned	14.3	9.0	44.9
Demanding, concerned	81.3	80.3	51.4

Source: 1988 Japanese-American data from Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998: 468-9).

Bellah (1957) characterizes Japanese society since the Edo era in terms of the achievement orientation, based on a system of particular groups. Hamaguchi (1977) finds the unchanging organization principle of that society in a "humanism" or "contextualism" that prizes a relational orientation rich in concern for others rather than a group orientation oppressive of the individual. Both of

these interpretations position Japanese society outside of either an oppressive groupism or a liberated individualism. While the present survey confirms that relational and charitable orientations remain strong, these are removed from a traditional authoritarianism. The concern for others and value placed on harmony in contemporary Japan cannot be dismissed as a premodern hold-over. This relational orientation might rather correspond more with postmodern mutual trust and mutual dependence, transcending modern individualism.

#### 4. Penetration of Modern Values

The inclination to give importance to relationship in Japanese society is not necessarily a premodern hold-over, and therefore it can be thought of as parallel to the development of modern values. In fact, the importance placed on modern values can be seen in the results of the present survey. For example, Question 11 asks the respondents to choose two reasons for poverty, and the results in order of importance are the following: laziness and lack of willpower, societal injustice, an inevitable part of progress, lack of luck, parental poverty, and karma. Here individual effort is given as the most important reason for the existence of poverty.

The modern emphasis on merit is the topic of Questions 22 and 23, which test the criteria for hiring a new employee (Tables 7 & 8). In Question 22 the respondents are asked who they would hire if a relative did second best on an employment exam, and 62.3% of the respondents said that they would choose the person who scored highest over their relative, with only 29.0% choosing the relative. It would appear that merit is given preference over blood-ties, at least in the formal work situation. However, there is considerably less emphasis on merit in the response to Question 23, which asks what the respondents would do if the son of an important benefactor had scored second highest on the exam. Here only 51.0% would choose the top scorer, while 39.3% say they would choose their benefactor's son. It should

also be added that more Japanese said they would choose a benefactor's son than did Americans in a 1988 survey (see Table 8). We may say that debts of gratitude are still made much of in contemporary Japan.

**Table 7. Employment (Merit and Blood-tie) (%)**

	Japan(1998)	Japan(1988)	USA(1988)
Top scorer	62.3	60.4	65.9
Second on exam, relative	29.0	22.8	29.5

*Source:* 1988 Japanese-American data from Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998: 468-9).

**Table 8. Employment (Merit and Benefactor) (%)**

	Japan(1998)	Japan(1988)	USA(1988)
Top scorer	51.0	40.6	64.9
Second on exam, son of benefactor	39.3	42.3	30.4

*Source:* 1988 Japanese-American data from Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998: 468-9).

It is interesting to point out that although filial piety scored higher than debts of gratitude in Question 12, looked at earlier, here we find the opposite result. The orientation towards blood-ties is not as strong as is commonly assumed (see Bellah 1957, Benedict 1946, Sakuta 1972). Be that as it may, we should also note that in both of these cases it is the orientation towards merit that supersedes that of personal relationships. In this respect it may safely be assumed that modern values are widely shared within Japanese society.

The importance placed on modern values can also be seen in Question 65 C and D, where attitudes towards competition and diligence are tested (Table 9). Regarding competition, on a ten-point scale (where the middle point is 5.5) an average of 4.30 was attained, leaning towards the importance of competition over its harmful effects. Diligence achieved an average of 4.08, its importance being recognized over luck and connections. Although we saw that cooperation in human rela-

tions was prized in the items covered in the previous section, here it would seem that individual achievement wins out, however slightly.

**Table 9. Competition and Diligence**

Average	
Competition necessary (1) 4.30	(10) Competition harmful
Diligence necessary (1) 4.08	(10) Luck/connections necessary
(Ten-point scale/the middle point=5.5)	

We must conclude, therefore, that although the relational orientation remains strong in Japanese society, modern values emphasizing merit also enjoy a considerable level of penetration. The positive interaction of personal trust based on the sharing of traditional values and impersonal trust based on common modern values can contribute towards the appearance of a rather strong society. In fact, many would argue that herein lies the strength of Japanese society. Just how are personal and impersonal trust expressed in contemporary Japan, however? It is to this question that we turn to next.

**5. The Future of Social Trust**

Japan is generally seen as a society that enjoys a great deal of trust, both in terms of informal human relationships and formal structures and institutions. The present survey, however, presents a different picture.

Let us first consider Question 6, where the respondents were asked to identify groups of people who they would not want as neighbors (Table 10). The top five on this scale were drug addicts (83.0%), right wing extremists (56.7%), left wing extremists (56.3%), people with a criminal record (49.0%), and emotionally unstable people (42.0%). In all cases the percentage objecting to these groups as neighbors was much higher than that obtained in the 1990 European survey. Can this level of distrust towards “outsiders” be the opposite side of the trust shown towards one’s own group in local society, or is it rather a sign of a more general distrust towards other

human beings?

**Table 10. Not Wanted as Neighbors (%)**

	Japan (1998)	Europe (1990)
Drug addicts	83.0	58
Right-wing extremists	56.7	37
Left-wing extremists	56.3	33
People with criminal record	49.0	35
Emotionally unstable people	42.0	27
Heavy drinkers	31.7	51
Homosexuals	29.0	31
People with AIDS	27.3	28
People with a strong faith	27.0	
Immigrants/foreign workers	13.3	13
People of a different race	8.3	10
People of a different faith	8.3	
People without any faith	3.3	
People with large families	2.0	9

Source: 1990 European data from Barker, Halman & Vloet (1992: 23).

Question 7 asked whether, in general, people can be trusted (Table 11). Only 30.3% responded positively to this question, while 64.3% said that in general one must be careful in dealing with people. While more than half of the respondents in the European survey shared the view that one must be cautious in dealing with others (Barker, Halman & Vloet, 1992: 23), these results belie the image of Japan as a trusting society. Furthermore, 1988 Japanese-American survey shows that the level of trust in Japanese society is under or almost the same as that in American society. All of these results serve to indicate that Japanese society is not as characterized by unconditional mutual trust as is commonly assumed<sup>(3)</sup>.

**Table 11. Trust in Others (%)**

	Japan (1998)	Japan (1988)	USA(1988)
Trust	30.3	39.1	42.4
Cautious	64.3	46.0	54.5

Source: 1988 Japanese-American data from Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998: 468-9).

A similar result is attained from Question 8, which asked whether, generally speaking, most people try to be a help to others (Table 12). Only 30.7% of the respondents held an altruistic view of their fellow human beings, while 62.7% responded that most people are only concerned about themselves. In this case Japanese were overwhelmingly more negative concerning human nature than American respondents in the 1988 survey. That two people out of three in Japan have a negative view of others in our 1998 survey is a rather surprising result.

**Table 12. Image of Others (%)**

	Japan (1998)	Japan (1988)	USA(1988)
Altruistic	30.7	31.2	53.6
Egoistic	62.7	54.2	43.6

*Source:* 1988 Japanese-American data from Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998: 468-9).

How do social organizations and institutions fare in terms of trust then (Table 13)? Question 67 queried the level of trust in various social institutions, with the following results: religion 12.6%, the military (Self-Defense Force) 52.0%, education system 38.7%, legal system 63.4%, the press 45.0%, trade unions 29.0%, police 68.6%, parliament 19.6%, civil service 25.3%, major companies 25.0%, social security 44.0%. Compared to the European results, Japanese society has a higher level of trust in only the legal system and the press, while the military and police enjoy about the same level of trust. The remaining seven institutions have exceedingly low levels of trust as compared to Europe. Some have argued that the organizing principle of Japanese society and Japanese structures is not personal emotional relationships but rather latent impersonal, rational rules (see Whitley 1991 for example). However, in the present survey it appears that impersonal trust is extremely low throughout the institutions of government, the economy, and culture. It would appear that confidence and trust can no longer be used as keywords for Japanese society.

**Table 13. Trust in Institutions (%)**

	Japan (1998)	Europe (1990)
Religion	12.6	48
Military (Self-Defense Force)	52.0	52
Education system	38.7	57
Legal system	63.4	52
Press	45.0	34
Trade unions	29.0	34
Police	68.6	69
Parliament	19.6	44
Civil Service	25.3	39
Major companies	25.0	50
Social security	44.0	52

*Source:* 1990 European data from Barker, Halman & Vloet (1992: 11).

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, traditional values that place importance on personal human relations have not necessarily lost their vigor in contemporary Japanese society. However, these values have lost almost all their connection with premodern authoritarianism and groupism. Therefore, contemporary Japanese value an informal relationalism, combined with an orientation toward achievement based on modern individualism.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to say that people trust either the personal other or impersonal social institutions. Indeed, Japanese nowadays rarely put trust in others or institutions. Under both modernism and postmodernism individualization has advanced broadly throughout the advanced industrial world (Ester, Halman & de Moor, 1993; Inglehart, 1997). And in Japan, individualization seems to have reached an extreme, acute stage.

Earlier, in looking at the continuing orientation towards charity and human relations, I suggested that this could indicate the emergence of a postmodern mutual trust that transcends modern individualism. However, what we have found in fact is a mutual distrust

that can only be described as egoism. The importance placed on values of harmony, as seen in the tendency to choose someone who gets along with others over an achievement-oriented worker does not indicate the presence of vital emotional relationships as much as a reaction against the hollowing-out of those relationships. The preservation of traditional values gives a graphic account of just how strongly Japanese desire warm, trusting relationships in the face of the present anomie and loss of mutual trust.

Is the pursuit of relational values destined to fail in the face of widespread egoism? Or will the desire for trusting relations succeed in turning back the advances of egoism? This will be a key question in studying the future of Japanese society.

## Notes

- (1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Boston in March 1999. Research upon which this paper is based was carried out jointly by Robert Kisala, Felipe Muncada, Tetsushi Fujimoto, Mikiko Nagai and the author. For the survey a random sample, weighted for age and sex, of three hundred subjects from the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas was chosen from resident registration roles, and interviews were conducted with the subjects. I acknowledge the institutional support given the research by Nanzan University. I am profoundly grateful to Robert Kisala who has helped me to write this paper in English.
- (2) Sources of these surveys are as follows. 1988 Japanese-American survey= Toukeisurikenkyujo (1998), 1990 European survey= Barker, Halman & Vloet (1992), 1995 American survey= Dentsusouken & Yokakaihatsu Center (1999).
- (3) For a discussion of this point, see, for example, Yamagishi (1998).

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