SOME ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF
JAPANESE MODAL PERSONALITY

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The purpose of this paper is to call attention to some problematic issues in the study of Japanese modal personality and to make some suggestions for their further study and resolution.

We shall first note in passing that the concept of modal personality raises serious methodological problems when applied to a society as large and internally differentiated as Japan. Some sort of national representativeness is implied, and this would require statistical sampling of different regions, classes, occupations, age levels, etc., for best results. Most of the work which we discuss is either impressionistic or restricted in scope.

Questions of modal personality are handled in a number of other papers in this volume. It has, therefore, seemed best to select three problematic issues for discussion: the place of rationality in Japanese personality, attitudes toward lineality versus collaterality in social relationships, and attitudes toward happiness and good fortune. Each of these issues poses a seeming paradox. Our hope is to resolve the apparent conflict or confusion.

Numerous authors, both Japanese and Western, have expressed the opinion that the Japanese have a weakly developed sense of logic and a tendency to be irrational. The ethnologist E. Ishida wrote with some sympathy of "the love of compromise and the pliability—in a different light, the lack of consistency—of the Japanese" compared with the "tenacity" of the European (1961). H. Nakamura speaks of "non-logical tendencies; . . . emotional tendencies; . . . lack of ability to form complex representations" (1967a: 143). According to former Ambassador Reischauer, for the Japanese "A graphic example carries far more weight than the neatest syllogism. Emotional expression in art or poetry is more their forte than a reasoned analysis" (1950: 117). Mary Ellen Goodman notes, "a well-knit system of religious thought is not a feature of Japanese culture. . . . Nor is Japanese culture significantly affected to date by a pervasive scientific ethos though it has considerable dependence on a scientific technology" (1962: 376). Elsewhere Nakamura notes that the Japanese

have traditionally stressed esthetic values in human events as well as in natural phenomena. These esthetic values may supersede values based on morality, truth, logic, and rationality (Nakamura 1949: 228-290).

On the other hand, a number of observations seem to call into question the concept of the typical Japanese as weakly rational. Nakamura says, "I am not completely disappointed with regard to logical thinking by the Japanese," and cites the Japanese emphasis on careful use of economic products (Nakamura 1967a: 160). The remarkable industrial and economic development of Japan since the Meiji Restoration could hardly have been produced by a people who lack a capacity for persistent and elaborate planning. Japanese incorporation of Western technology has often been stereotyped as being blindly imitative, especially in the early period of intense contact, but the view expressed by Hulse seems to us to be more accurate: "The extent to which selectivity has been attempted, the intentness of the ruling groups upon control and censorship over the items to be picked . . . are . . . characteristically Japanese. This people seems to be openly sensitive to the matter of congruity of items within a complex, to actually think about it rather than just feeling about it" (Hulse 1962: 300). Jansen and Maruyama in a volume edited by Jansen both make similar points (1965: 88, 493). The "spiritual training" which many contemporary Japanese firms provide for new employees might be cited as "anti-rational," but we would not so judge it since the stress on "spirit" is directed largely to promoting employee efficiency and productivity.

Other accepted characteristic traits of the Japanese modal personality fit better with an emphasis on rationality than with the reverse. For example, situational adaptability may in some instances mean little more than obeying an authority in a new situation, but it also may involve a rational and thorough consideration of the requirements of each situation, and a willingness in one situation to put aside inappropriate values acquired in another situation. Emotionality is in some sense a characteristic of Japanese modal personality, but emotional control is also a long-standing characteristic. Situational adaptability depends in part on effective emotional control which enables the individual to participate in new and sometimes unpleasant situations. Emotional control is generally regarded as a prerequisite for extended use of logic and rational thought. Ishida in the passage cited above spoke of Europeans as having more "tenacity" than the Japanese, but it seems to us that in certain circumstances Japanese demonstrate long-range planning and great persistence. The popular story of the 47 Ronin is one example of this. At a more mundane level one might consider the careful, long-range savings plans and household budgets of many modern middle-class Japanese families. We are left, then, with a dilemma: Is the typical Japanese capacity for

rational thought weak or strong? We shall postpone the answer while we present two related dilemmas.

Our second dilemma has to do with the Japanese attitude toward authority and social hierarchy. The Japanese have generally been regarded as sensitive to social hierarchy, but some writers have recently seen "collaterality" or "equality" in certain situations. Caudill and his associates have particularly emphasized the importance of collateral social relations within the Japanese family, which contrast with the lineal associations characteristic of a purely hierarchical social structure (Caudill 1962; Caudill and Scarr 1962; Caudill and Doi 1963). Caudill and Doi describe collaterality as an attitude which "stresses the welfare of the group, and consensus among its members, as primary goals" (1963: 400). The family is not regarded as existing mainly for the benefit of its most senior member, though he will receive special deference. The dependence of family members on each other is not solely that of juniors on seniors. As Singleton notes, "The Japanese family system is bound up in the continuing interdependence of parents and children, so parents must avoid alienation of their children's affection" (1967: 47). This interdependence may be especially marked in the case of the mother and children. As Caudill writes, "the intense, almost symbiotic tie between mother and children is repeatedly stressed in the literature" (1962: 201). This interdependence moderates the senior position of the mother in the family hierarchy. In facing the outside world, family members are in a sense equal. Smith, speaking of the farming family, states, "the household is held accountable for the acts of all its members" (1961: 526).

In hierarchical organizations of all sorts in Japan, juniors may be substituted for seniors fairly freely. This substitutability implies potential equality. Nakane emphasizes the greater importance of simple seniority in Japanese hierarchies as compared with criteria of ability and achievement in Western hierarchies (Nakane 1967); Japanese assume that seniors and juniors are equal in ability, which makes it easier for subordinates to substitute for superordinates when necessary.

In spite of these qualifications on the hierarchical principle of social structure, there is abundant evidence that the Japanese are now as concerned with relative social rank as they were in the past. Sofue has recently stated, "Although the surface of the Japanese personality has been considerably changed in accordance with the drastic post-war reforms . . . extreme awareness of the superior-inferior relationship is still the most important feature of the Japanese personality" (1969a: 528). In this book, DeVos mentions (see p. 164) the "generally high scores on authoritarianism in Japan," which are presumably a result of the emphasis on hierarchy in social structure. We have suggested that social hierarchy is

tempered within the family by a shared interest in the welfare of the entire group, but Ruth Benedict made the point, "In Japan it is precisely in the family where respect rules are learned and meticulously observed" (1946: 43). It would be an exaggeration to say that the most extreme forms of respect behavior are found between members of the same household, and it also appears that some of the teaching of respect behavior within the family is to prepare the child for proper behavior outside the family— for representing the family properly to outsiders. Nevertheless, Benedict is right in emphasizing the importance of hierarchy within the family.

The hierarchy in the household is obviously associated with the hierarchical organization of groups of related households. Ideally, the oldest son of a family inherits the main family home and farm or business and assumes the status of family head, while junior sons may be provided with a new house and a piece of farmland and set up by the main or stem family to form "branch families." The stem family assists the branches in time of economic hardship, and the branches supply labor to the main family. Befu notes, "In sum, this is a hierarchically organized corporation of families patrilineally related (fictively or otherwise) in which the stem and its branches are mutually bound by complex relationships of reciprocal obligation" (1963: 1331). The social hierarchy in Japan thus finds a major model and stimulus in the family and kinship system.

Japanese interest in personal advancement and achievement indicates a concern with hierarchy and relative status. This is an old interest, as implied by a phrase in Iga's paper for this volume, "the traditional ideal of *risshin shusse* (to rise up in the world)." The Japanese attitude toward achievement is often closely tied with the wish to please a parent. As DeVos has said, "The Japanese individual frequently views the ultimate meaning of his life as fulfilling a goal set by his parents" (1962: 163). Personal achievement is phrased less individualistically than in the West, but there is still a keen concern with relative rank.

A third paradox involves the Japanese attitude toward happiness or good fortune *(kōfuku)*. On the one hand it has been asserted repeatedly that the Japanese traditionally have indulged in many minor pleasures without a sense of guilt, yet tend to be melancholy and suspicious of happiness as transitory and likely to be accompanied by trouble. (For the latter view cf H. Minami 1953: 41.) Norbeck and DeVos note that Japanese popular songs deal predominantly with themes of pessimism, fatalism, and loneliness (1961: 24). They do not report comparative statistics for other nations, but it would be rare for a song as optimistic as "Whistle While You Work" or "Happy Talk" to reach the top ten in Japan.

Perhaps part of the explanation of the happiness paradox is that the Japanese consider happiness as desirable but trivial. Fulfilling burdensome social obligations has a higher priority than the pursuit of happi-

ness. The teachings of Buddhism may also have something to do with Japanese suspicion of happiness. Bellah suggests that the establishment of Buddhism introduced "a quite new feeling of human limitation, transcience and consciousness of death" (1965: 380).

We have presented three apparent contradictions in Japanese modal personality: The Japanese are said to be 1) weak in logic yet careful and critical in their planning; 2) very sensitive to hierarchy, yet emphasizing collateral social relationships; and 3) they are said to indulge in pleasure freely without guilt yet at the same time to be suspicious of happiness and expect danger or misfortune to follow. Several approaches to the resolution of these paradoxes may be suggested. Our observers may have been combining descriptions from earlier and later times. For example, the contemporary Japanese tend to associate logic with Western culture. While we do not consider this association fully valid, logical thought does seem to be more developed in technology, commerce, and government, where there has been much borrowing of Western practices. Thus one might argue that the Japanese are becoming more logical as they adopt more Western culture. With respect to hierarchy, the type of family described by Benedict in which respect for seniors is meticulously observed would be regarded by many contemporary Japanese as somewhat old-fashioned. A typical modern family has an internal hierarchy, but the use of honorific speech toward the father, and other marks of etiquette, are declining. Free indulgence in pleasures is tending to decline, for adult males at least, as women's rights are strengthened in the postwar society.

Another approach to the resolution of these paradoxes would be to propose that our observers have combined descriptions of Japanese from different areas, occupations, and other positions in a well-differentiated society. In general, inhabitants of typical villages in northeastern Japan emphasize lineal social relationships more than do villagers in southwestern Japan, where collaterality is more pronounced (Fukutake 1949). Sofue (1969) has discussed local variations in Japanese modal personality according to prefecture. Persons associated with government bureaucracy are especially sensitive to hierarchy. Developed logical thought may be especially characteristic of leaders in industry, commerce, government, and the military, whereas intuitive and emotional thought may be more characteristic of the average individual of moderate rank. We are saying essentially that it is not enough to describe a single modal personality for a large, complex nation such as Japan; rather, one must describe a series of modal personalities for persons in major statuses.

These approaches have obvious merit, but it may be a mistake to rely on them too heavily. Although Japan is a changing society, there are important continuities in social structure and presumably also in modal

personality. And although Japan is a well-differentiated society, it has also been a long-united society, with good internal communication which has become even more efficient in recent generations with the development of modern transportation, mass communication, compulsory education, and so on. Individuals in different statuses know a fair amount about each other and have a sense of what is typical and what is not.

Still another approach to resolving these contradictions in modal personality is to regard the modal personality itself as well-differentiated, as involving opposed tendencies which in some cases are balanced and in others are expressed alternately in different social situations. Japanese kinship involves two different systems, the patrilineal *dōzoku* and the bilateral *shinrui*, or personal kindred; an individual tends to be lineal in his attitudes toward *dōzoku* members and collateral in his attitudes toward non-patrilineal *shinrui*. Concerning the question of rational thought, it appears to us that in certain situations Japanese typically do not favor rational thought, whereas in others they do. Feudal military leaders were generally quite rational in planning their military strategy, but the same individuals might be less rational and more emotionally fatalistic in extreme difficulties, e.g., after they had lost a conclusive battle. In contemporary Japan well-educated men of the new middle class who are quite rational in daily life are apt to choose a lucky day for their wedding according to the traditional divinatory calendar. Many otherwise rational city dwellers consult fortune-tellers when they continuously suffer illness or other misfortunes. In expressive situations—art, religion, recreation—Japanese tend to be less systematic and less logical than Americans or Western Europeans. In other situations, such as employer-employee relations or commercial negotiations, Japanese may be quite rational and thorough but avoid exposing their full line of thought for fear of offending the other party. Nakane has described this sort of situation as involving the precedence of a concern about human relations over logic (1967: 173-174). Admittedly this can block the development of ideas by open rational criticism and discussion, but at the same time such sensitivity to even implied criticism can cause the individual to think out situations more carefully. One might argue that because the Japanese appreciate the force of a well-reasoned argument, they are usually reluctant to offend potential opponents by making the argument too explicit.

The reluctance to use explicitly systematic, logical arguments is especially marked between junior and senior in a hierarchical relationship. For the junior to make such an argument would be to challenge the authority of the superior and to expose himself to rejection. For the superior to use such an argument would be in effect to abdicate his position. However, subordinates who are normally quite meek in the presence

of their superiors, may be quite cogently critical behind their backs, and may have a keen interest in trying to deduce and predict their future decisions.

We have just presented the argument that sensitivity to hierarchical rank may limit the expression of rational thought. We have also indicated that a strong feeling of collaterality accompanies this sensitivity to hierarchy, which in part may be explained as an attempt to cover up overt expression of differences in rank which might hurt the feeling of those of lower rank. As Benedict wrote, "The Japanese have always been inventive in devising ways of avoiding direct competition" (1946: 154). She cites the use of the go-between as a device by which "the Japanese prevent direct confrontation of two persons who are in competition with each other" (ibid.). The Japanese are quite as concerned as any other people with ranking and evaluating individuals and institutions, but they try to avoid or minimize an open, public contest for rank in which one person "wins" over another. This reluctance to make public decisions on rank is consistent with an emphasis on collaterality, but is not convincing evidence of it.

One feature of Japanese social structure which affects the attitude toward hierarchy and collaterality is the importance of membership in social groups. The major social groups, particularly the household and the place of employment, generally perform more functions for and involve more of the life of their members than do corresponding groups in Western societies, where individualism and specialization of the group's function are more valued. Nakane discusses the importance of belonging to a group (*ba*) in Japan versus an emphasis on individual specialized status or qualifications (*shikaku*) in India and elsewhere (1967: 37-48). A company that impinges on the lives of its employees in many ways besides the primary sphere of work activity is more appealing to a Japanese employee than a company that merely offers a particular position. Contemporary firms in Japan emphasize loyalty and life-time commitment of their employees much more strongly than do their American counterparts.

In the United States sensitivity to hierarchy is moderated by the notion that hierarchies exist only for limited purposes: a low-ranking employee may salve his disappointment over his lack of occupational success by convincing himself that he is a better athlete, a more loyal church member, or a more skilled home craftsman than his boss and fellow employees. In Japan sensitivity to hierarchy may be moderated differently, by the idea that all members of the group, whatever their rank, share many common interests and are obligated to help each other and further the interests of the group. An attitude of noblesse oblige exists

in Japanese hierarchies, accompanied by a corresponding loyalty of the subordinates.

This interdependence of group members in Japan finds its origin or its model in family life. One of the emphases of Japanese child training is that all family members are to avoid disgracing the family in public. Severe physical punishment seems to be rare, in part perhaps because of the bad family image it presents. Control over children is maintained largely by two methods: satisfying the children's wants where possible, thus building up a positive image of the parents, and using the possibility of disapproval or ridicule by outsiders as the most important negative sanction (cf. Vogel 1961: 163; Haring 1948: 403; Gorer 1962: 332).

The nature of Japanese groups as discussed above may have an important bearing on the typical Japanese attitude toward happiness and good fortune. Both the childhood and adult model of happiness may involve the notion of an impossibly benevolent superior bestowing care and favors. Happiness in this sense is not so much under the individual's direct personal control as something which is made available to him from time to time by others. The existence of a real benefactor creates a social obligation which must be repaid, which in itself is an unpleasant burden to carry. But even where there is no real benefactor there may be the feeling, not entirely conscious, that good fortune is the gift of a more or less capricious and personalized fate, and not under the individual's direct control. If good fortune is thought of as a gift received rather than as an achievement won, then it is subject to being taken away, like the good favor of a disappointed parent or employer. In brief, the feeling of uncertainty about good fortune may be based on strong feelings of psychological dependence and doubts about one's own powers.

As a result of the work of DeVos and others, the role of guilt feelings in Japanese modal personality is becoming increasingly appreciated. To the extent that one's debt to one's parents and other superordinate benefactors can never be fully repaid, one may feel guilty about any good fortune or happiness bestowed by fate, and await withdrawal of the favor.

In conclusion, it would seem that the contradictions in Japanese modal personality which we have discussed really exist in many individuals. The Japanese typically are less rational than Westerners in certain situations, and extremely rational in others. They are extremely sensitive to their rank in a social hierarchy, but at the same time group members of different rank are strongly concerned with the mutual welfare of the group. Finally, the Japanese at a conscious level are morally tolerant of personal pleasure, but also seem to be rather suspicious of it, which may be evidence of unconscious guilt. An individual who generally thinks of himself as happy is likely to feel guilty if he thinks his parents are

not happy. This feeling of guilt stems from the intense and long-lasting tie between parents and children.

In summary, it is reasonable that contradictory statements have been made on all three of these issues. One-sided statements on any of these issues are not wrong but are incomplete. The need is to specify more fully the conditions under which the statements apply, and to fit the contradictory parts together in developing a plausible picture of Japanese modal personality.

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