

# Individual Rights vs. Common Good? A Case Study on Japanese Self-Restraint (*jishuku*) and COVID-19

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## Abstract

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have been facing one of the most severe challenges of our modern era. As the world experiences ever-greater globalization, a process of assimilation has accelerated in numerous spheres such as cultural, educational, economic, etc., but it is notable that the measures taken by countries to combat the impact of COVID-19 vary significantly. A considerable number of countries have implemented lockdown strategies backed by new laws, whereas some others have been relying on the virtues of good citizenship in order to not depend on their legal systems. Within Asia there are also contrasting approaches; for instance, China and Korea responded with a quick and effective tracking method, while Japan depended on a self-restraint strategy.

The Japanese and Swedish approaches to COVID-19 are unique and ambiguous, because they are based on voluntary self-restraint. There is no legal or political mechanism to control people's behaviours. Still, in rough terms these methods seem to have been working, at least until now. In order to understand the puzzling practice of self-restraint, this research explores the origin and cultural background of self-restraint in Japan descriptively and evaluates its positive and negative consequences. Rather than utilizing the philosophy of communitarianism as the theoretical base, it examines the deep relationship between Japan and the surrounding environment, and the use of self-restraint in various events, including those related to COVID-19. Moreover, this study adds to the debate on seeking the right balance between the communitarian common good that is especially emphasized in the East, and an individual's rights and freedom that are highlighted in the West.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Japan, self-restraint, communitarianism, disaster culture

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## Individualna pravica proti skupnemu dobremu? Študija o japonskem samoomejevanju (*jishuku*) in COVID-19

### Izvleček

Od izbruha COVID-19 se soočamo z enim najhujših izzivov sodobne dobe. Kljub temu da svet doživlja vse večjo globalizacijo in se je proces asimilacije pospešil na številnih področjih, kot so kulturno, izobraževalno in gospodarsko, je mogoče opaziti, da se ukrepi držav za boj proti vplivu COVID-19 med seboj znatno razlikujejo. Veliko držav je uveljavilo strategije zaprtja, podprte z novimi zakoni, medtem ko so se nekatere, da ne bi bile odvisne od svojih pravnih sistemov, sklicevale na vrline dobrega državljanstva. V Aziji obstajajo tudi nasprotujoči si pristopi; na primer Kitajska in Koreja sta se odzvali s hitro in učinkovito metodo sledenja, Japonska pa je bila odvisna od strategije samoomejevanja.

Japonski in švedski pristop h COVID-19 sta edinstvena in dvoumna, saj temeljita na prostovoljnem samoomejevanju. Ne vsebujeta pravnega ali političnega mehanizma za nadzorovanje vedenja ljudi. Kljub temu so te metode grobo rečeno vsaj do sedaj dobro delovale. Da bi razumeli zapleteno prakso samoomejevanja, pričujoča študija proučuje izvor in kulturno ozadje samoomejevanja na Japonskem ter ocenjuje njegove pozitivne in negativne učinke. Namesto da bi kot teoretsko podlago postavila filozofijo komunitarizma, preučuje globlji odnos med Japonsko in obkrožujočim okoljem ter uporabo samoomejevanja pri različnih dogodkih, vključno s tistimi, povezanimi s COVID-19. Poleg tega študija prispeva k razpravi o iskanju pravega ravnovesja med skupnim dobrim komunitarizma, ki je še posebej poudarjen na Vzhodu, ter pravicami in svoboščinami posameznika, ki so poudarjene na Zahodu.

**Ključne besede:** COVID-19, Japonska, samoomejevanje, komunitarizem, kultura nesreč

### Introduction

Since the arrival of COVID-19 we have been living in extraordinary challenging times full of uncertainty, as if the pandemic is testing our capacity and intelligence to cope with the hardships. Confronting this new disaster, determined efforts have been made by all humanity at every setting from the micro or personal level to the governmental macro level. Our world in the 21st century is largely driven by globalized individualism and neo-liberalism, and a sort of assimilation of certain practices in areas as diverse as politics, economy, education, lifestyles and so forth. However, when it comes to the measures taken by governments against the COVID-19 pandemic, they vary in accordance with relevant background, experiences and cultures. For instance, in China or Italy, where the first cases were found, they immediately exercised strict movement restrictions. Broadly speaking, such measures can be split into two categories: forced lockdown and self-restraint

(Katafuchi, Kurita, and Managi 2020, 2). Generally, the great majority of countries in the Western tradition have been taking the policy of lockdowns, enabled and justified by legal pressures. In contrast, some other countries chose a self-restraint policy relying on the civic virtues of all working together for the common good. Japan is one of these countries, as it seems that under the social norm of self-restraint (*jishuku* 自粛), this country has trusted the voluntary decisions of its citizens to refrain from any actions that may raise the danger of infection spreading, such as going out on the streets or meeting with friends and family members. However, this particular social behaviour of self-restraint did not appear all of sudden at this serious moment. In fact, Japan has overcome numerous crises and disasters based on the use of self-restraint. The communitarian-oriented culture that developed along with the long history of Japan has contributed to the establishment of such social conduct.

Despite some critical comments and observations, the Japanese approach of self-restraint seems to be working so far, and there have already been a few studies on the effectiveness of this strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the roots and cultural background of self-restraint have not been examined sufficiently. As such, this study aims to explore the origin, history, cultural background and surrounding key thoughts around the idea of self-restraint in Japan in a descriptive and interdisciplinary way. To start, we use the philosophy of communitarianism as a theoretical framework and observe the Western and Asian approaches within this concept. Then, we carefully examine the Japanese form of communitarianism, which is also called groupism, and the practice of self-restraint in relation to natural disasters. Finally, we study the present Japanese situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of self-restraint to evaluate the positive and negative consequences this measure brings to Japanese society. At the same time, these observations leave us some room to further explore the classic, but still appreciated, debate covering the dichotomy of individualism on one side and communitarianism on the other. Although this work does not intend to give a concrete answer to this long-lasting question, it attempts to encourage the discussion once again at this very moment when we need to recognize the importance of both the pursuit of the common good and the protection of one's individual freedom.

## Communitarianism

The question of how to build a good community where diverse individuals meet and interact has been discussed throughout history. The nature of human relationships,

the balance of individual rights and the welfare of the affiliated community is a historical, but at the same time contemporary, debate. In fact, in ancient Greece where democracy was born, the philosophy of freedom and equality was promoted, yet simultaneously a mechanism to restrain the egoism of members and raise the awareness of community was also emphasized (Chiba 2000, 5–18; Dahl 1989, 18). In fact, the citizens of Athens at the time were expected to be subordinated to the common good before enjoyment of their own interests (Panagopoulos 2015, 36). Along with painful battles and revolutions, both French-European and English-American democratic models promote freedom and encourage individualism, but do not necessarily disregard the centrality of participation in the wider community (Chiba 2000; Tocqueville 2003; Huntington 1993). Still, the shift to liberalism and accompanying movements toward more rights in the contemporary world are undeniable, not only in the West but also in the Eastern sphere. In fact, Fukuyama (2004, 18) comments that politics in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen as a reaction to the challenges provoked by liberal ideas.

The idea of communitarianism emerged to as an alternative against the hegemony of extreme liberalism that demands more and more rights and liberty in Western societies (Fox 1997, 563). To oppose to modern liberalism, as represented by the famous book *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1971), contemporary communitarianism puts the focus on the importance of each person's responsibility before joining the community, or as Delanty (2003, 73) puts it, the move "from contract to community". This does not imply the elimination of a rights-based approach. Rather it is considered as a descendant of Tocqueville's school, one that brings the factors of groups, associations and communities into the theory of democracy (Smith and Grønbjerg 2006, 230). Thus, the basic attitude of the Western communitarians emphasizes some degree of (but not total) sacrifice of individual rights and freedom to achieve better functioning and welfare of the community, since humans cannot escape from the practices of socialization (Bell 1993, 9). In addition, in order to achieve this social order, the communitarians rely on governmental intervention to promote active participation by citizens in community matters (Smith and Grønbjerg 2006, 230). Communal ties are thus created and strengthened in three ways: 1) the reciprocal approval of legitimate authority, 2) by the collective participation in community actions, and 3) by the combination of both of these two. Finally, these processes make it possible to establish the concept of the common good as a social norm (Fox 1997, 569). Nevertheless, there is no judicial guarantee that all societies will educate their citizens morally enough to maintain the communitarian system, since no concrete or explicit contract has been made.

Now we turn to the variety of visions that contemporary communitarianism encompasses. According to Delanty's categorizations (2003, 74), there are four basic

lines: liberal communitarianism, radical pluralism, civic republicanism (civic communitarianism) and governmental communitarianism. First, liberal communitarianism represents the original ideas that emerged in opposition to Rawls' liberalism. Researchers such as Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor challenge Rawls' argument from philosophical points of view and develop their idea of community to realize the democratic political unities. For instance, Sandel claims that the communitarian idea is indispensable to ensure liberty in a community. That is, if we want freedom, first, we need a community in which to exercise it, and second, we need a sense of belonging to create a community (Sandel 1996, 6). Radical pluralism positions itself opposite to liberal patriotism, and tries to promote the rights of minority groups, and this approach can be seen in feminist theory. Civil republicanism or civic communitarianism shares much of its ideas with the theories of the civil society and social capital, although a nostalgia for "the good" old days in some ideal liberal protestant community in the past is strongly reflected in civil republicanism (Delanty 2003, 85). Finally, governmental communitarianism promotes the empowerment and mobilization of communities to bring neo-capitalist societies back onto "the right track", and claims that communitarian policy is an essential part of any governmental plans in this regard (ibid., 74, 87). The fact that governmental communitarianism that welcomes any government interference is a notable difference from the other three forms of communitarianism. Etzioni (2004b, 13–24), one of the proponents of governmental communitarianism, emphasizes the necessity of the marginalization of some rights and liberty in order to raise the sense of responsibility among community members and to recover social morality in the contemporary world.

A number of warnings about communitarianism have been expressed by liberal thinkers for its closeness to traditionalism and conservative values, which can lead a community toward intolerance, violence and hatred (Talisso 2001, 291). Essentially, the critical views cast towards communitarianism boil down to a key issue over human history: the supremacy of the individual over community, or *vice versa*. Thus, there is a long debate about communitarianism and its extreme moral discourse (Talisso 2001, 293; Bell 1993, 1; Delanty 2003, 88). Moreover, the departure point of Western society is in the liberal tradition, which naturally appreciates as much freedom as possible. Therefore, even Etzioni, a devoted supporter of communitarianism, is too faithful to liberalism (Beng Haut 2004, 5). This is the very reason why non-Western studies point out the idealistic trait of Western communitarianism, and Western researchers criticize the Asian Confucian-based communitarianism (which we will examine in the next section) for the lack of freedom that the members of communities enjoy. Although they both seek the common good and a healthy community, a fundamental difference occurs due to

their background cultures: an individual orientation on the Western side, and collective conformity on the Confucian Asian side.

Now we look into the Confucian-style of communitarianism, which is sometimes also called soft authoritarianism (Fox 1997, 562; Fukuyama 1995a, 13), because it shares the principles of Western communitarianism, yet there are some significant differences to examine. One claim is that people born in East Asian societies are not as much inspired by liberal ideas as their Western counterparts, because Asian traditional values teach them to live harmoniously within a community even though they sometimes have to sacrifice themselves to serve the well-being of others (Etzioni 2004a, 9). This rather undemocratic nature of Asian communities is often criticized using the term authoritarianism by researchers. For instance, Fukuyama calls it paternalistic authoritarianism (cited in Beng Haut 1999, 579) while Etzioni uses authoritarian communitarianism (2004a, 9). Thus, the Confucian-style of communitarianism is seen to sit somewhere between communitarianism and authoritarianism. However, this view adopts a Western-philosophy-based approach without much consideration of the richness of the Confucian tradition. Beng Haut (1999, 578), who tries to bridge the gap among West and East, explains that the essence of the collective orientation to maintain the social order should always be accompanied by the minimum consensus of community members. Asian societies have long been shamed and made to suffer due to the label of authoritarianism that has been given to their social systems, along with the related undemocratic image (Chan 1997, 46), which was the reason for the absence of dialogue between Western and Asian communitarian scholars. Notwithstanding this, there has been a slow re-evaluation of Asian communitarianism as an alternative of form of social governance. Fukuyama observes as follows:

The most significant challenger being posed to the liberal universalism of the American and French revolutions today is not coming from the communist world, whose economic failures are for everyone to see, but from those societies in Asian, which combine liberal economies with a kind of paternalistic authoritarianism. (Cited in Beng Haut 1999, 579)

In other words, now it makes sense to study both Western and Eastern communitarianism so that a new model for a better society may be found. Moreover, this is true when it comes to considering the recent global situation, as will be discussed later.

Giving Asia's vast size and cultural diversity, it is not an easy task to identify the roots of Asian communitarianism. Still, some studies indicate the centrality of the Confucian influence over East Asian societies (Fukuyama 1995a; 1995b; Tu 1996; Beng Haut 1999; Fox 1997; De Bary 1998), although most Asian people are in



fact not very conscious about the significance of Confucian thought in their lives (Chan 1997, 40). Due to the long history and several schools of thought within Confucianism, it is not easy to grasp the general Confucian characteristics Asian societies share. Still, Tu's observation helps us to understand the overall features, which are: 1) consensus is a preferred method for decision making, 2) negotiation is a conventional way to solve conflicts, 3) informal arbitration substitutes for formal legal procedures, and 4) mediation by third parties is used frequently to avoid problems among rivals (Tu 1996, 1–10). These are strategies that developed over time for the construction of harmonious societies, because the latter is an indispensable precondition for the well-being of community members (Fox 1997, 574, 579). Still, what is lacking here are some practices or customs to form the social norms so that the individuals in the community can learn the correct ways to behave. As an answer to this issue, and similar to Western communitarianism, Asian Confucian societies have valid authorities approved by members of the related communities, as well as the members' participation in communal activities to strengthen their sense of belonging. These two factors are the central pillars to constructing social norms (ibid., 570). In addition, the informal judgement and penalties exercised by the ritual practices are the principal tools to maintain the communitarian orders in these societies, and legally codified rights play a secondary role (ibid., 572). In other words, the creation and maintenance of civic virtues in Asian Confucian societies is based upon moral conviction, the fear of being reported by the rest of the community members, and thus feeling ashamed in front of the eyes of the whole community (ibid.). In Asian Confucian societies, the force of social sanction is the one factor that sustains the social order, without the need for legal authorities to monitor the citizens.

When it comes to the case of Japan, a communitarian orientation is often expressed by the name of groupism (*shūdan shugi* 集団主義). Compared to the original Confucian communitarianism that put the emphasis on the importance of family and the father figure, Japanese groupism pays less attention to the centrality of those in order to avoid the ideological conflict with the role of the Emperor (Fukuyama 1995a; 1995b; Pye and Pye 1985; Hendry 2003; Fukuyama 1998;). Thus, the focus shifts to the priority of the various belonging groups, which can be the nation, companies, clubs, neighbourhood units, etc. (Harootunian 2000, 28). Such a philosophy is part of the typical image of Japan introduced to the world in general (Komai 2000; Takano 2008; Yamagishi 2010). However, evaluations of Japanese groupism vary. Fukuyama (1995b, 27–28) praises the positive disconnection with the familial ties that often constrain traditional Confucian societies, whereas Yamagishi (2010) argues that Japanese groupism is the rational action of the Japanese in order to obtain mutual aid. In contrast, Takano (2008) concludes

from his interdisciplinary and comparative research that his findings do not show the evidence of any form of “groupism” in Japan, and hence this is merely a false image created by the theories of *nihonjinron* and Orientalism. In many ways, further research into Japanese groupism is still needed.

As observed above, despite the slight differences among countries and traditions, the general inclination towards communitarian in East Asian nations is beyond doubt. Since our world is now facing one of the biggest challenges in recent history caused by the unexpected and sudden COVID-19 pandemic, one thing we can do to take advantage of the studies that have been done on Asian Communitarianism is to mirror the discussions on the Asian style of communitarianism and Western individualism to promote a dialogue between them. By doing so, we may be able to seek a path that brings a better social order into today’s shaken societies around globe. In this sense, De Bary (1998, 9) is right to say that the fundamental debate between Western individualistic liberalism and Eastern autocratic communitarianism is not a matter of geographic or cultural variation, but rather it is a never-ending challenge to all humanity to struggle for the right balance between individuals and social communities. Bell (2006, 8–18) also adds that if we pay sufficient attention to the Asian communitarian cultures and practices, the exchanges of ideas and experiences between West and East will contribute to the making of a better world order, which is likely true and thus absolutely vital for this difficult moment in time.

### Natural Disasters, Disaster Culture and Self-Restraint (*jishuku*)

According to the definition offered by Barton (1969, 38), the founder of disaster studies, disasters are situations of collective stress caused by the malfunction of a social system that is expected to supply and protect adequate social and living conditions. Furthermore, there are two subcategories of disasters: those caused by external causes and those provoked for internal reasons. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, typhoons and so forth fit into the first subcategory, while economic recessions, revolutions, civil wars and strikes are in the latter group (Barton 1969, 38; Gillespie 1988, 347). Under the pressure caused by disasters, both societies and individuals need to behave in the correct manner to reduce social disorder and further danger until normality is re-established, which is what we have been doing at this moment. However, in some cases these temporary arrangements stay as normalized practices even after recovery (Gillespie 1988, 349), and become part of the culture. For this reason, it is particularly important to consider the role of culture and how it should be integrated into



the strategies to cope with dangers, loss, and tragedies associated with disasters (Hewitt 2012, 86).

In fact, Watsuji ([1929] 2006) claims that disasters, nature and culture are deeply correlated to each other, and nature determines the cultural, philosophical, religious and thought orientation of a nation, although the environmental determinist view remains a subject of discussion. As far as Japan is concerned, this country has constantly suffered from catastrophic natural disasters due to its geographic circumstances. Therefore, its institutional memories and cultures have developed in order to cope with the forces of nature (Duus 2012, 175). In his research on earthquakes since the Tokugawa period up to the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake in 2011, Duus (2012, 176) presents the five stages that the Japanese people have passed through every time disasters occur: blaming, coping, hoping, learning and forgetting. In the first phase, politicians, journalists, the mass media, and practically everybody blames somebody or something (and especially outsiders, with one of example being the Slaughter of Koreans after the Great Kanto Earthquake (Into 2013)) that may have provoked the disaster, but that is a rather natural reaction because “when a tragic event occurs our impulse is to explain it rationally” (Duus 2012, 176). Since the Edo era, or perhaps even before and influenced by Buddhist tradition (Oogi 2016), the Japanese often blame nature itself, which lead to “can’t be helped” thinking (*shōganai* しょうがない) (Urushihara 2017), or under the understanding of Confucian tradition, they blame the immorality and selfishness of human actions that eventually trigger the anger of Mother Nature (Duus 2012, 177). Next, the coping stage is particularly interesting for us, because this is when personal trust and social ties nurtured in the Communitarian environment serve as a well-prepared base for cooperation and the sharing of suffering (ibid., 179). During the Edo period, the provision of relief and support was already being expressed in the forms of voluntary charity, mutual support and donations. The Meiji government promoted a sense of unity and altruism that went beyond the immediately affected communities, so that the whole nation became a kind of imaginary big community and all citizens were involved in the nationalized process of recovering from disasters (ibid., 181). In this sense, the expected behaviour of the Japanese people is to share the suffering and burden caused by disasters. To some extent, this is the root of self-restraint, which will be discussed in more detail later. The other three steps after a disaster, namely hoping, learning and forgetting, are indispensable to drive a country forward to the future. Since the entire population of the country is expected to identify themselves as victims of disasters, all citizens also have to work on the creation of hope, to learn the bitter lessons disasters teach and to plough ahead. This is a Japanese disaster culture shaped by

the country's nature and experience. Indeed, inspired by Button (2010), Okada, Fang and Kilgour (2013, 47) claim that Japan has developed its own disaster culture that is apparently not obvious, but more of a hidden culture: a culture of mutual aid and cooperation, which helps with effective community management. At the instant of an emergency caused by natural catastrophes being declared, the most urgent and central need is to think about the common good of the local community (ibid.). In the case of Japan, this communitarian orientation expands to the whole country, hence under national emergency provisions everyone has to behave for the good of Japan, although this may limit their own individual interests. As observed above, this strong and firm approach, which sometimes appears in positive ways but also in negative ones during natural disasters, is one of the essential reasons for the Japanese communitarian culture (Amat 2007, 85–86; Calantas 2007, 91–95; Montero 2007, 101). This educates the Japanese to self-sacrifice to achieve the common good of the nation when faced with disasters, no matter whether they are direct victims or not. Nevertheless, as has been seen in many disasters, such as the Haiti Earthquake of 2010 (Munro 2014), and as stated in the Sendai Framework, collective responsibility of people, communities, governments and civil societies has long been exercised and should be acted on all over the world (UNDRR 2019, 28).

The practice of self-restraint (*jishuku* 自肅) has been formed and strengthened in Japan along with this disaster culture. *Jishuku* in Japanese literally means self (*ji* 自) abstention (*shuku* 肅), which can be also translated in a Japanese context as self-control, voluntary restraint, self-censorship, and voluntary ban, among other terms. Within this social norm, when a disaster or tragedy occurs the Japanese are expected to behave in such a way as to achieve the common good of Japanese society, hence they should control their behaviour and refrain voluntarily from whatever activity that might cause social disharmony and which might be considered selfish (Kaneko 2019, 110). Although such action have been around for a long time because of the Japanese communitarian disaster culture, the appearance of the term *jishuku* in academic writings does not have a long history, only dating back to the 1980s when the Shōwa Emperor Hirohito passed away (Higuchi 1990, 58; Fujita 1992, 827). It is said that the origin of the strict and powerful norms of self-restraint action can be found in Japan during the Second World War. At that time, the military regime obliged all Japanese citizens to be responsible and carry themselves to serve for the good of the nation. This norm became a part of the social custom taught through the imperialist ideology, and later it penetrated and stayed as a part of Japanese culture (Abe 2016, 245). It may appear to be strange that the members of a society voluntarily give up their rights to enjoy what they want in order to experience with the

suffering of the whole country. This is where the problem of the “free-rider” in rational choice theory comes up (Vasi and Macy 2003, 980). Still, there are two conditions to discourage free riders, which are persuasive communication and crisis messaging (ibid., 981). A tragedy plays an important role here, because some studies show that the uncertainty associated with a crisis causes anxiety that one will not be able to overcome the present difficulty alone, thus increasing the need for cooperation (ibid., 982). The unique situation of Japan, with its firm conviction and communitarian tradition, meet these two essential elements for successful self-restraint for the common good. From the view of an outsider, Japanese self-restraint is similar to a process of mourning, although Kaneko (2019, 110) explains that *jishuku* is instead a movement that wants to achieve cultural harmony and individual sacrifice to show solidarity with the victims of disasters.

Although the first appearance of *jishuku* was in the 1980s, it started to be paid more attention by mass media and the academic field after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (*Higashi nihon dai shinsai* 東日本大震災) in 2011. Since that time numerous self-restraint actions were observed. For instance, many concerts and party events were cancelled, shops and restaurants shortened their working hours, families and individuals made an effort to use less electricity and even politicians performed their political campaigns “silently” (Kimura Ida et al. 2015, 32), which addressed some critical social problems such as the lack of electricity caused by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant accident. Joy Hendry, who has been engaged in Japan studies for many years, confesses in her work the surprise she felt when discovering such *jishuku* activities when she happened to be in Japan during the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake in 2011. Despite her extensive studies on Japan, this was the first time that she observed and felt the atmosphere of Japanese self-restraint (Hendry 2014, 176). Kaneko (2019) documents in her ethnographical study the self-censorship exercised by Japanese musicians and radio stations after the earthquake of 2011 to very carefully select the themes and songs to broadcast, so that the victims were not upset, and to later produce music to cheer up the victims and encourage the recovery of destroyed areas. Whereas Abe (2016) studies the tension between the self-restraint norm and anti-nuclear power protests on the streets played by *chindon-ya* (marching bands typically used for commercial advertising). Moreover, according to the observation made by Kitamura et al. (2015), the self-restraint movement was even extended, and it crossed the Pacific Ocean where Japanese communities in the United States also participated in *jishuku*. These self-restraint activities happened because of prior social conditions and the disaster culture constructed by the Japanese communitarian tradition, which aims to achieve social harmony and the common good of

the nation as an extended large community, in spite of the fact that it involves an individual's sacrifices. Putting this in a different way, the practice of self-restraint developed and has been strengthened as a part of Japanese communitarian culture because it is one way to live in a natural disaster-prone country and thus overcome such disasters when they occur.

## COVID-19 and Self-Restraint

Ever since the World Health Organization warned of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 19, 2020, countries all over the world (with some exceptions) have been struggling to save as many of their citizens lives as possible by taking different measures. Clearly the virus is an immense threat to the health of all humanity, and prevention strategies such as wearing masks and cancelling of major events are meant minimize the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, there is no doubt that numerous people of all nations have been cooperating and voluntarily changing their behaviour in order to overcome this health crisis. Yet, it is also true that some concerns and unease have surfaced. Principally they are caused by the lengthy lockdowns that are having a negative impact on the world economy (Bohoslavsky 2020, 383), and there is also a danger of some other human rights violations, such as the rights to food, housing, health, education and work, to name only a few (ibid., 384). In addition, a central discussion has been on the freedom of movement, the right to information, and the freedom of association (Yabuki 2020).

First of all, we draw a big picture of the situation of COVID-19 and related measures in the world. Using the framework elaborated by Katafuchi, Kurita and Managi (2020, 2), the restrictive policies used to avoid the pandemic spreading can be divided into two general categories: the legally justified forced movement restriction on one hand, and the informal movement restriction request relying on the self-control of citizens on the other. The former strategy has been carried out by numerous countries, particularly Western countries such as France, Italy, the United States and more, whereas the second option is less used in a limited number of countries, such as Sweden and Japan (ibid.), and some studies reveal that the countries utilizing soft restriction policies have legal limits on aggressive governmental interventions (Klamberg 2020; Itagaki 2020).

Secondly, when we focus on the Asian region, it is noteworthy that Asian countries are taking specific measures considering their political context, public health service situation, previous experiences with pandemics and the development of information and communication technology (Lewis and Mayer

2020, 1–2). Some of these countries, such as China, Singapore and South Korea, use strict and forceful movement restrictions, using the best of their experience with infectious diseases like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) and the advances in contact tracking technology as well as the use of big data (ibid.). However, contrary to the rest of Asia, the Japanese strategy of self-restraint or *jishuku* is remarkable. *Jishuku* has partially been enabled due to cultural practices like bowing instead of handshaking, and the social and civil focus on issues such as hygiene, despite the difficulties caused by Japan's high population density and aging society (ibid.).

Looking more closely at Japan, the first action taken by Prime Minister Abe was on February 26th, 2020—a request (*onegai* お願ひ) to all Japanese to conduct themselves according to what each person interprets from the concept of *jishuku*, self-restraint. *Onegai* could be understood as a petition, a suggestion, or a favour, in other words without the support of a law. However, immediately after Abe's speech, many Japanese understood what to do and what was meant by the self-restraint message, thanks to their previous experiences (Nishi 2020), and results was actually more powerful than merely words would suggest (Miwa 2000). Almost two months after the rest of the world, the Japanese government declared a State of Emergency (*kinkyū jitai sengen* 緊急事態宣言) in seven prefectures, including Tokyo and Osaka, on April 7th, 2020 (Naikaku kanbō 2020a) and for the whole of Japan on April 16th, 2020 (Naikaku kanbō 2020b). Although the State of Emergency was announced, one of the notable characteristics was that there was no judicial power to lockdown cities or the whole nation (Itagaki 2020). Putting it in a different way, the announcement would only be effective if the Japanese citizens choose to pay attention and/or obey it (Katafuchi, Kurita and Managi 2020, 3). It was thus a “voluntary lockdown” (Watanabe and Yabu 2020, 2). Takasu observes that, besides the disaster culture and communitarian tradition that Japan has, there is a strong reluctance in Japan to impose an aggressive lockdown policy or to monitor citizens' movements because of the painful experience of totalitarian control and invasions of privacy carried out by the police before and during the Second World War (Takasu 2021). Another study argues that the unwillingness to use active political intervention is rooted in the incorrect and misleading monitoring of leprosy and cholera patients (Watanabe and Yabu 2020, 3). Overall, Japan did not want to carry out the same track and trace systems to prevent the spread of COVID-19 that South Korea and other Asian countries adopted (Ichihara 2020).

People outside of Japan wondered how it was possible that the Japanese stayed home without the threat of penalty or the presence of police on the street. In fact,

the international press such as *Bloomberg*, *The Guardian*, *ABC News* and *Foreign Policy* wrote about the Japanese case as a “mysterious success” (Du and Huang 2020; McCurry 2020; Sturmer and Asada 2020; Sposato 2020). Reports by the mass media probably exaggerate correct behaviours of the Japanese, since there were also many lawbreakers (Reuters 2020; The Japan News 2021). It is also true that these types of solidary actions were seen everywhere in the world. In this sense, the Japanese case is not exceptional. However, what is unusual is that Japanese politics chose a strategy that relies on the citizens’ good will, as this has previously been used to overcome natural disasters, although this raises of the questions of how effective this approach has been, and whether it was in fact an irresponsible policy. However, so far this policy seems to have been a success because people are accustomed to living together in difficult environments, without much political leadership (Hiroi 2020). In fact, according to the Hiroi’s information (2020, 903), despite the reports of people acting without self-restraint that were often exaggerated in the mass media, the data shows that a considerable number of people were cooperating with the norms of self-restraint. Public opinion supported the idea that going out unnecessarily instead of staying at home under the State of Emergency is a totally anti-social activity (Katafuchi and Managi 2020, 3). Shops and restaurants also followed the self-restraint norm and cooperated to reduce non-essential commercial activities without receiving any governmental or prefectural orders (Hara et al. 2020), and this consensus among business owners also comes from the Japanese communitarian culture (Watanabe and Yabu 2020, 16; Itagaki 2020, 188). In addition, based on their empirical study, Watanabe and Yabu (2020) argue that Japanese self-restraint has been possible because citizens considered and studied the information that is available on the spread of the virus, and as a result refrained from going out. Hence, making correct and accurate information available is also essential in this context. Alternately, the study presented by Katafuchi, Kurita and Managi (2020) statistically shows the role of stigma for effective self-restraint as well as the fear of infection. This finding is in accordance with the theory of Fox (1997, 572) about the formation and maintenance of Confucian civil virtues, which are principally based on social sanction, or the shame in being seen as a lawbreaker and irresponsible member of a community.

The technique of “name and shame” has been seen frequently in the Japanese mass media. During COVID-19, this strategy was used not only by the media and press, but by Social Network Services (SNS), such as Facebook (Itagaki 2020, 188–89; Sakakibara and Ozono 2020). Moreover, the presence of the so-called self-restraint police (*jishuku keisatsu* 自粛警察) is the representative phenomenon of extreme, excessive and harmful self-control among Japanese citizens (Ichi-hara 2020, 4). These self-restraint police were ordinary individuals who undertook



voluntary private tracking of those who apparently do not behave as people as they should have done, by not following the self-restraint norm. The self-restraint police caused considerable harassment and many false accusations, with actions such as making annoying phone calls to those who left their homes unnecessarily, making harmful accusative posts on SNS about restaurants and shops that stayed open despite risk of infection, insults directed toward travellers in cars from other prefectures, and so forth (Katafuchi, Kurita and Managi 2020, 3). There were cases of *pachinko* salons that chose to not obey the government's request for self-restraint, but eventually they had to close their doors due to the unofficial punishment given by the self-restraint police who published the names of their businesses on a website (Itagaki 2020, 189). The Japanese thus grew afraid of the self-restraint police and the eyes of society (*seken* 世間) (Yamazaki 2021). These are the negative consequences of extreme self-restraint and social sanction which communitarian practices encompass.

On the other hand, the Japanese practice of self-restraint leaves us with other issues to consider. The first is that this custom encourages the Japanese government and its politicians to be irresponsible. Indeed, as we have observed, Japan has repeatedly overcome numerous disasters based on the strength voluntary civil initiatives (Wakui 2020, 317). Nishi (2020, 331) warns of the dangers in depending on the good practice of Japanese citizens to control themselves, because then Japanese politics remains thoughtless and without strong leadership. According to an analysis by the US-based Morning Consult data intelligence company, the former Prime Minister Abe, who was in office immediately prior to Prime Minister Suga, actually saw a continued decrease of popularity during the epidemic, while other major political leaders of countries like the UK, Germany, Canada, Australia, France and even the United States (under President Trump) saw a marked rise in their popularity (Morning Consult 2020; Sato 2021). The same trend is presented by the Toluna-Blackbox Index of Global Crisis Perceptions, which ranks Japan and its coronavirus response as the lowest among 23 surveyed countries (Blackbox 2020). Apparently, the rise in the approval ratings of most leaders can be attributed to the “Rally-Round-the-Flag” effect to get through a crisis (Sato 2021). However, this phenomenon does not occur in Japan, which suggests that the sluggish politics and perceived impotence of democracy in Japan is worrisome (Ogasawara 2020).

Another issue is the lack of consideration for diversity in society, which is too often overshadowed by the communitarian culture. This was already warned about during the recovery stage of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (Yamanaka 2018), and the circumstances underlying the coronavirus pandemic reveals the necessity of individualized attention once again. This is because although the image of

Japan as a monoethnic society is widespread, incidents of discrimination towards minority groups such as Ainu, Burakumin, Okinawan, Zainich Koreans and foreigners confirm that Japan is not a socially, culturally, ethnically homogenous nation (Lie 2001). For example, Giammaria (2020) criticizes the discriminatory orders produced by local governments to control the service sector, especially the entertainment business for adults in the pleasure zones, and Nishi (2020) points out the lack of care for the vulnerable population, such as physically and mentally disabled persons and their families. Inequality and discriminatory treatment of foreigners are serious issues. In this context, and a considerable number of foreign students and researchers, as well as foreign workers, suffered from not being able to enter Japan to continue their academic and professional careers (Osumi 2020; Dooley 2020). In short, in the context of COVID-19, foreigners, persons with disabilities and workers in unwelcomed sectors were shown once again as not considered to be full members of Japanese society.

All these criticisms of the self-restraint norm and communitarian practices have driven some people to think about the necessity of legal and forceful restrictions instead of depending on the good will of citizens. Nishihara et al. (2020) studies the opinions of Japanese university students who had been voluntarily controlling their behaviour in accordance with the self-restraint atmosphere, yet their findings reveal that 60% of their samples expressed a strong desire for the use of a forced lockdown in order to increase their sense of self-efficiency. Since some child daycare centres were asked to temporarily close (Noda, Yoshizono and Kawaguchi 2021), many parents with small children also wanted the government to issue a legal lockdown to that their work places would also close or change to working from home, and thus help them deal with the issue of childcare (Nakai 2021). Certainly, for citizens it is much easier and more secure to have certain criteria for “what is permitted” and “what is not permitted” determined politically and judicially (Takaku 2020). This is also true for the business sector, because it is more comfortable and easier if the government orders all shops and restaurants to close, so that managers do not have to informally negotiate about what to do with their employees, clients, business partners and shareholders (Itagaki 2020, 191). By the same token, it is also appropriate to receive an official and governmental command of business closure when it comes to the grant application of emergency state support (*ibid.*, 192–96). In this sense, the forced lockdown exercised by other countries have advantages as far as official administrative processes are concerned.

Finally, the harassment and attacks carried out by self-restraint police to those suspected of lacking self-control can cause an atmosphere of extreme intolerance, while tolerance is essential for the diversity and respect of all human beings in

society (Uno and Kajitani 2020, 41). In this way, Japan moved into a new stage of “language pandemic” of not being able to speak whatever against the communitarian behaviour (Ogasawara 2020). It is undeniable that thanks to its communitarian culture Japan went through the COVID-19 pandemic in a peculiar way without compromising the legal freedom of its citizens. Yet we should never forget that the communitarian culture itself lead to the military regime and fanaticism that provoked the Second World War (Tanaka 2020), and this is why we want to open the discussion on obtaining an adequate balance between communitarianism and individualism.

### **Search for the Proper Balance between Individualism and Communitarianism**

The present circumstances and the policies taken to control the COVID-19 pandemic inspired us to reconsider how difficult it is to locate a fair balance between an individual’s freedom and the whole society’s common good. Paradoxically, at this moment those Western countries with a tradition of human rights are choosing policies that limit the freedom of their citizens. In contrast, Japan which belongs to the communitarian or soft authoritarian tradition, is depending on the good will of its people, which does not involve political or judicial control. Therefore, it seems in this context that Japan respects the freedom of its citizens more than those countries with forceful lockdown legislation (Uno and Kanjiti 2020), although other issues such as insufficient test numbers and slow vaccination cannot be excluded from a discussion of this. As we found in this work, some of the success seen in Japan is indebted to the practice of self-restraint fostered by the Japanese communitarian culture which helped to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, if we evaluate the universal applicability of the communitarian model of self-restraint to overcome a crisis or disaster, the conclusion is unsure, because each country has its particular culture, and each culture needs a different and adequate governmental system to support it. In fact, Watanabe and Yabu (2020, 19) state that the relevance of the self-restraint strategy cannot be generalized, as it probably will not work in the US or Europe, and, importantly, it will not even function in Japan at different moments and on different occasions in the future if the country’s communitarian culture fades, because culture never stops developing.

Even so, the COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken by different countries have left us with the opportunity to re-examine not only the way to cope with the threats of pandemics and disasters, but also the complex relationship between

individuals and the community, or between nations and citizens if we widen the point of view, no matter whether situated in the West or East (Uno and Kajitani 2020, 39). Facing the uncertainty provoked by a novel and unknown virus, nobody has a precise answer about in what way we should behave to protect others and ourselves from the pandemic, except some tips like washing hands, not touching one's face, staying home when feeling sick, etc. Nevertheless, we should never stop questioning what the state's power is and where its limit lies, so that it does not overwhelm our liberty and the rights that we have as humans. Even then, as we have observed from the case of Japan and its self-restraint tactic, to depend totally on the voluntary good will of community members in the name of the common good may be too unstable and fragile. In addition, in the same way it can also violate individual rights, as shown by the example of the self-restraint police. Alternatively, perhaps putting emphasis on the universality of human rights itself might be a Western-biased view, as some anthropologists already warned with the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Merry 2003). It will never be enough to emphasize once more that there is no exact solution to this matter, because this is a long and never-ending debate in human society regarding the balance between an individual's freedom and the common good. Having said that, and as Uno and Kajitani note (2020, 45), it is probably safe to say that the present COVID-19 situation leads us to reconsider the supposed rightfulness of Western philosophy based on modernity, and encourages us to advance the dialogue between East and West to fill the gap between the development of Western individualism and the relative immaturity of Eastern communitarianism.

## Conclusion

This article explored the origin and development of communitarianism, the disaster culture and the concept of self-restraint in Japan. Despite the considerable similarities in certain ideas between Western and Asian communitarianism, the Asian societies tend to favour social harmony and community welfare, which are achieved by informal negotiations and social sanctions, whereas Western societies strive for liberty and individual rights, and therefore judicial systems are developed to protect them. In this context, the Japanese practice of self-restraint is unique, because it was developed as a means to deal with the challenges of nature in Japan, without depending on the intervention of governmental power. At the time of writing Japan was still fighting against the COVID-19 crisis using the self-restraint strategy. So far this tactic has worked to moderate the spread of infection, as well as prevent the government from imposing too much on the private lives of citizens. Nonetheless, to protect an individual's rights is a complicated and delicate issue as we learned

from the case of the self-restraint police, because those who enforce the social norm do not always come from the public sphere represented by the government or state power, but in fact mostly appear from the private domain. After all, the essence of this dilemma is the proper relationship between individuals and their communities. We do not intend to present an absolute answer to this immense and profound theme, rather what is vital for us at this moment is to never stop questioning the right balance between individualism and communitarianism.

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