

# The Japan Myth Reconsidered

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**T**he image of Japan today is ambiguous. On the one hand there is the rather threatening image of the samurai country that turned out to be, for some mysterious reason, an economic giant; on the other there is the attractive model of the superindustrial society that has successfully solved many of the difficult social problems still being faced elsewhere. The former is a popular view, promoted by the media, widely held in business circles, and often supported even by governments; the latter is an opinion recently articulated by some Western experts who advocate learning from Japanese institutions for the purpose of remolding their own societies.

In Asia, the "Japanese threat" has been interpreted in various ways. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese officials talked much about the potential threat of "revived Japanese militarism," while in Southeast Asia, Thai students and Malaysian intellectuals are warning of ruthless exploitation of natural resources by Japanese companies. In South Korea, those opposing the dictatorial regime have been criticizing Japanese and American support of the military government as an indirect threat to their basic human rights. There is everywhere in Asia a sense of alarm concerning Japanese economic domination coexisting with an expectation of Japanese help for local industrial development.

In North America and in Europe, the "Japanese threat" is the massive invasion of industrial products into the home markets and into other areas where, traditionally, Western products once prevailed. Hence the trade conflicts between the West and Japan, which in turn have enhanced the popular image of aggressive Japan, the country of samurai armed with modern technology.

Against this oversimplification, some experts have offered a more sophisticated view, explaining the mechanism that supposedly brought about the coun-

try's "economic miracle," and presenting the case as a model for other industrialized societies. These experts emphasize the close relationship between government and business, "lifelong employment," the process of collective decision-making, loyalty of the employees to the company, trade-union collaboration with management, political stability and social order, and the educational system that operates beautifully to supply industry with a horde of disciplined laborers. Those holding this view tend to exaggerate the positive aspects, because they are arguing against the widely accepted negative clichés about Japan.

But are the "positive" aspects really positive? And for whom? Even if they are, is it realistic to treat them separately from their negative components?

Let us first consider the structure of Japanese society as a whole, what this structure means for an individual Japanese, and, finally, the direction this country is likely to take in the future.

**J**apanese society today, as before, is characterized by competitive groupism. Groupism, a high degree of integration of each member into the group, implies the member's strong loyalty, primarily for the group and secondarily for the leader. If the group's interests clash with the leader's personal concerns, the group prevails and either replaces the leader or deprives him of his decision-making power. If the group's interests clash with the personal concerns of a member, the member, in principle, sacrifices those concerns, however vital they may be to him. Groupism offers a strong feeling of togetherness and a sense of security for the individual in the event of a crisis. These groups are typically goal-oriented, competing with other groups for the same goal, working with maximum efficiency, assigning the most competent persons to the key positions. Hence there is also a competition among members inside the group. Qualification for key positions includes not only professional ability, but also, and perhaps more often, the ability to maintain the "harmony" of the group, in other words, the ability to get along smoothly with others. Either way, the intragroup competition strongly motivates each member to work hard. It could be argued that Japan is distinguished from the individualistic West by its groupism, and from the status-oriented, static communities still widely prevailing in the Third World by its goal-orientation, competition, and resulting dynamism.

This competitive groupism has been and still is perpetuated by the educational system. In a country where more than half the students go on to colleges and universities, high school education is geared to university entrance examinations. Students are encouraged to compete, and are technically trained in the single skill of getting higher marks than others in examinations, without being asked to develop intellectual initiative. There are winners and losers, but all re-

spect the same rules, all aim at the same target, and few can afford to reflect on the ultimate validity of either. This educational system, largely under the control of the increasingly centralized power of the government, thus supplies to Japanese employers each year a host of well-disciplined young laborers, prepared to work hard and ready to be integrated into any community without questioning the structure and goals of that community, be it government bureaucracy or a private company.

Although the educational system perpetuates competitive groupism, it did not create it. Competitive, goal-oriented groupism is deeply rooted in the country's cultural tradition. The popular story of the Forty-seven Samurai is a good illustration. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a high official of the shogunate humiliated a feudal lord who was serving in the castle of the shogun. The lord lost his temper, drew his sword, and tried to kill the official, succeeding only in giving him a slight injury. As the drawing of a sword was strictly forbidden in the castle, the lord was sentenced to death, while the official remained unpunished. Two years later, the group of forty-seven<sup>1</sup> retainers of the executed lord made a surprise attack on the well-guarded residence of the official and succeeded in killing him in revenge. Although all were ordered by the government to die by *suppuku*, the loyalty of these samurai was highly praised by their contemporaries. A series of plays, for the puppet theater and for Kabuki—and, more recently, for film—have been produced on the theme of this tale of revenge. The theme was popular before and after the Meiji restoration, before and after the Pacific War: great social changes have not affected its popularity. What is striking about the story is the extraordinary contrast between the elaborate means by which the group achieved its purpose, and the triviality of the purpose itself. Were they devoted to a cause? Yes. Had they ever examined the cause? Never. Even outside the Kabuki theater, the “Forty-seven Samurai syndrome,” may serve to explain many phenomena in modern Japan, their merits and limitations alike.

For a business enterprise, the goal is simple and clear: maximum profit. Here the system works with efficient organization, a disciplined labor force, trade unions that cooperate with management, a government that intervenes on behalf of industry, and last but not least, politicosocial stability that creates a predictable market situation, minimizing the risk of business ventures. In consequence, Japan continues, despite its limited natural resources, to expend its share in the overseas market, develop high-level technology, maintain a high growth rate, and hold down inflation and unemployment—even after the “oil shock” and

<sup>1</sup> There were forty-seven in the mid-eighteenth-century play *Kanadenon Chushingura*, forty-six samurai in history, because one of the group dropped out before the surprise attack. But this is not the point here.

subsequent depressive trends in the rest of the world. All this has provoked ambivalent reactions in the West: protectionism against Japanese exports together with arguments in favor of the "Japanese model." Protectionism may work for the Western industries temporarily and to a certain degree, but it will probably not work in the long run. And it will only make competition against Japanese goods that much harder in the overseas markets beyond Western control.

As for applying the "Japanese model," there are two difficulties. First, the merits and the demerits are intermingled. Second, a model that works in the Japanese cultural context is not necessarily compatible with radically different cultures.

Japan's economic dynamism contrasts sharply with its political stasis. Political goals, unlike those of business, are never clearly defined. "National interests," for example, are defined differently by different people. Political entities are expected to be efficient not only in reaching a given goal, but also in evaluating and setting goals. It is important to know both what to do and how to do it. Where Japan's organizational system is highly efficient in developing means when the ends are fixed, her political decision-making is virtually immobile. The choice of words—political immobility or political stability—may be a matter of taste. One thing, however, is certain: Japan's economic success has made her increasingly antidemocratic.

Since the end of the Occupation the ruling elites have so strengthened their position that a democratic transfer of power to an opposition party has become virtually inconceivable. The triumvirate of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), business, and government bureaucracy is the system under which the country is managed; even in the unlikely event that an opposition party or coalition gained a parliamentary majority and formed a cabinet, it would still not have gained the full power to rule, and would soon be shown to be helpless. The situation of the opposition somewhat resembles that of a union inside a vast corporation. It makes demands and sometimes gains concessions, but it cannot take power without fundamentally altering the system itself. So, year after year, the governing managerial elites pass power back and forth among themselves, all the time increasing and centralizing their control over people's lives; corporate control over workers, police control over citizens, and the Education Ministry's control over the children.

**W**hat have the last two decades of economic growth within this increasingly antidemocratic political context brought to the individual Japanese? All recent public opinion polls have indicated the relative satisfaction of most of the population. There are many reasons for this.

First, rapidly growing industry has provided better food, better clothing, and an abundance of gadgets. Having started with a very low standard of living in the 1950s, a great majority of the people now naturally consider themselves reasonably well off.

Second, postwar egalitarianism, which is not only compatible with but enforced by traditional groupism, has worked to minimize visible differences between the rich and the poor. Most employees live in small apartments, but their employers don't live in such luxury either; their homes are far more modest than those of their Western counterparts. The same can be said of income, as well as cultural background. A clerk and the president of his company may have graduated from the same school, speak with the same accent, play golf, and watch baseball on television.

Third, groupism provides security for the individual. The "lifelong employment" system eliminates the possibility of being fired. An individual rarely finds himself alone in a hostile society: family, relatives, even old classmates may help out in case of serious trouble. And the streets are safe at night, a fact that is related to the mentality nurtured by groupism and reinforced, of course, by the house-by-house surveillance system of the omnipresent police force.

Fourth, economic prosperity has depoliticized the population, making them politically passive, fostering a desire for the status quo, diverting their attention from social problems to new gadgets. This is, of course, enforced by advertising, the commercialization of information, and intended and unintended political manipulation. The average individual in Japanese society cannot easily formulate his dissatisfactions.

Yet some do protest. Rapid industrial development in densely populated Japan has polluted the air and water to such a degree that some regions have become almost uninhabitable, and many people have suffered and even died from disease caused by chemical wastes from the factories. Hence protest movements begun in the 1970s by victims, ecologists, and residents of the affected and potentially affected areas continue today. These movements have sometimes succeeded in stopping the construction of an airport, a high-speed railway, a freeway.

The misery in the midst of the affluent society, however, is not only for the inhabitants of polluted regions, but also for all those integrated into the system as minorities: old people, invalids, retarded children, working women (not literally a minority, but severely discriminated against in the employment system), people of the *burakumir* ("discriminated villages"), and Korean residents. These groups are at best neglected and at worst directly threatened by the society, and many of them, especially the *burakumin*, have organized protests and self-protection movements.

Another afflicted group is the high school students, who, as noted above, suffer under an educational system that is totally and exclusively geared to the

university entrance examinations. The universities are organized in a status hierarchy, with the University of Tokyo at the pinnacle. Graduation from one of the top universities is the main avenue to power. Parents and teachers often exert such strong pressure on young students, and so eagerly expect their success in examinations, that if they once fail to enter a certain university they will take the same test again and again each year until they finally succeed, though they could easily have gotten into another university at once. Every year the newspapers report several cases of high school students who commit suicide after failing in entrance examinations, and a few more cases of students who murdered their parents, or tried to, after having been chastised for such failures. Protest against the system by students themselves so far hardly exists. Their desire to resist the pressure sometimes expresses itself in the act of dropping out of the school system altogether. But the overwhelming majority of young people finish high school (which is not compulsory in Japan) and more than half of those proceed on to universities. This means that at one time in their youth almost all educated Japanese have played the same game. It is no wonder that intellectual initiative and independence of mind have become rare qualities.

After the long years of education, a young Japanese is next subjected to strong pressure from his employer to become integrated into the community by conforming to the norms of the company. As mentioned above, the community-company provides the security for individual employees. (It is interesting that college students use the expression "to go out into society" when they mean "to find employment in a company.") At the same time it demands conformity. Regardless of their professional specialization, all employees must belong to the trade union—the union that typically cooperates with management and reinforces the sense of togetherness. Employees are expected to wear the same kind of clothes and ties as others, to adopt the most popular hobbies, to take off exactly the same number of days (usually fewer than five) in the summer holiday, to have the same political opinions and to vote for the same conservative party as others, especially their superiors.

If one doesn't conform, what happens? At first, nothing drastic. But a gentle, gradual process of psychological ostracization will follow. The nonconformist will not be fired, probably not even removed to another position (although that may happen). Instead, he will find his place of work increasingly uncomfortable, depressing, eventually almost intolerable. And the possibility of promotion will be closed.

So conformism is dictated by the individual's self-interest. Inside the company there are no dissidents. All participate equally in the company's collective decisions, but no one has freedom of expression of political opinion, nor even of personal aesthetic taste. (I remember when I was in Manhattan, whenever I saw from a distance two men side by side wearing the same clothes, I al-

ways knew that they were either New York police or Japanese trading company employees.)

If democracy has something to do with minority rights, and if forced conformism is democratic, then there is no democracy at all inside the community-company in which the average Japanese spends a great deal of his time. What, following work, is waiting at home? Family and TV. And the TV only reinforces the status quo. Of course there is the vote—but what is one day of democracy out of hundreds of days of nondemocracy?”

Even the higher rate of consumption doesn't necessarily mean a greater amount of money for each household. On the one hand, much of this new consumption takes place indirectly under the control of the company, in the form of company-sponsored housing, vacation tours, company golfing expeditions, drinking parties, and the like. On the other hand, the combined power of advertising and conformism lure and persuade the people to buy more than they can afford—mortgages and credit make them spend even their future earnings. Most individual consumers, to be sure, regard themselves as reasonably well-off, but at the same time also feel that they are forced to work for money that is never sufficient.

**T**he postwar history of Japan can be divided into two periods: (1) 1945–1960, the period of economic recovery from the damage of the war, during which the national purpose was summed up in the motto “peace and democracy”; and (2) 1960–1980, the period of rapid industrial expansion, during which the national purpose was depoliticized and expressed in the mottoes “double the national income” and “economic growth first.”

At the end of the Pacific War, the Japanese government bureaucracy was still working. But industry was paralyzed, cities were in ruin, and political parties and trade unions hardly existed. Under these conditions, the Occupation policy operated through the Japanese bureaucratic machine to attain three goals: demilitarization, democratization, and sufficient economic recovery to make the country self-sustaining. The Imperial Army was totally disbanded, and Japan's security was guaranteed under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The new constitution imposed by the Occupation, and the revised legal system as a whole, emphasized for the first time in Japanese history two basic values: fundamental human rights and egalitarianism. Political parties and trade unions were reactivated. Economic recovery began with American aid.

Then the Korean War broke out. Operating from military bases in Japan, America shifted the priority of the Occupation policy from demilitarization and democratization to industrial recovery and rearmament. Japanese business did

not fail to profit from the war in Korea; some say that war procurements provided the take off for Japan's economic recovery. But the whole nation resisted American pressure for rearmament, and the Yoshida government made a partial compromise by creating a small body of armed guards, called first the Police Reserves, then the Self-Defense Forces.

By the end of the Occupation and in the subsequent decade, Japan emerged with the latest equipment in its factories and a GNP that had already surpassed the prewar level. Business was more than recovered; bureaucracy, far from being damaged, was strengthened by the Occupation; political parties still staggered behind, enjoying, however, their formal importance in the parliamentary system. Japan in 1960 was being governed by a powerful establishment consisting of the government bureaucracy, big business, and the conservative party. The popular sentiments for peace, the antimilitaristic and antinuclear feeling, were strong enough to foreclose the open promotion of heavy rearmament by the reactionary government. As for democracy, Japanese society, through the first period of the postwar era, went further in the direction of egalitarianism—a process that had been started before, first by the Meiji reform (“all Japanese are equal as subjects of the sacred Emperor”), then by the war effort (“all men and women are equally to serve the country”). Egalitarianism was applied to arable lands (land reform), family heritage (the revised civil code), education (mass higher education), TV sets and automobiles (mass consumption). All organizations—universities, administrative offices, trade companies—became much less hierarchical than before. The internal structure of the group changed greatly, from vertical (*tate*) to horizontal (*yoko*), but the importance of belonging to the group didn't change at all.

What really evolved in Japanese society after the war was a new intragroup structure. While absolute loyalty to the superior was no longer typical, what did not change—proving the continuity of long tradition—was groupism itself, in the sense that the group interest always prevails over the individual member's interests, ideals, or principles. The idea of human rights, particularly those of the minority, was not traditionally Japanese, and neither the people in general nor the powerful in particular were converted to it. Groupism is perfectly compatible with egalitarianism but incompatible with rigorous respect for human rights, particularly those concerning the minority, the dissidents, the ostracized. The Japanese word *henjin*, meaning literally “a person different from others,” is considered pejorative.

In 1960 the Ikeda government, successor to the Kishi government (which had been brought down by the popular movement against the ratification of the Revised Security Treaty), used all its available cards—renewed industrial equipment, strength of the politicoeconomic establishment, egalitarian social structure, and the traditional value of groupism—to embark on a “double the income”



policy. Here the second period of postwar Japanese history began. In the next two decades, Japan pursued economic growth as its national purpose—working hard, polluting the environment, destroying historical sites, obliterating the traditional beauty of town and countryside, extracting natural resources from the Third World, pushing massive exports into the international markets. Today the goal of growth has largely been achieved. The country is now economically powerful. And the people, depoliticized, apparently subscribe to the status quo, and are consequently more governable than before.

Concerning the future, two questions may be posed. Is it possible for Japan to continue on in the same way? And how should Japan's economic power be used?

The answer to the first question is clearly no. Many factors support this conclusion: limited supplies of natural resources and a growing awareness of their limitation, particularly in the Third World; mounting trade conflicts with North America and Europe, important markets for Japanese exports; and significant political changes that could produce violent reactions against Japanese economic domination, as has already occurred during the Iranian revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war, and in anti-Japanese demonstrations that occur whenever the Japanese premier tours Southeast Asia. These dangers to Japan's overseas investment and, what is more, to her oil supplies, may be multiplied almost endlessly. She is also subject to other feelings of uneasiness, already manifested in the U.N. General Assembly, about the widening gap in living standards between the few developed countries and the rest of the world (the so-called North-South division).

If the answer to the first question is negative, and Japan will not be able to have economic growth as its national purpose for the future, what could the new national purpose be? Two mutually exclusive goals for the coming decades are conceivable: remilitarization, and advancement of democracy (to be accomplished by centralizing power, developing respect for the rights of minorities, and working to narrow the gap between the North and South). Both choices imply considerable expenditure. Let us briefly examine each.

Currently pressing for a higher military budget are the Self-Defense Forces, the leaders of the Japanese arms industry, elements within the conservative parties, and Washington.

In the short run, the sole obstacle to remilitarization is popular sentiment. The depoliticization of the majority of the people over the last twenty years has not been unconditional. After reaching its peak in 1960, postwar antimilitarism had gradually petered out, but it has not disappeared. On the whole, the people accept the status quo, which means that they accept not only the existence of the Self-Defense Force, but also its steady, gradual growth. But any *sudden* growth in the military would tend to repoliticize the people, probably resulting in a

strong resurgence of antimilitarism.<sup>2</sup> Any serious scheme of rearmament would have to impose itself either through a violent confrontation with the opposing majority or through a long process of manipulating the popular will.

In the former case, the regime would emerge from the confrontation with a much more oppressive and authoritarian character than before, which likely would mean the destruction of postwar democracy. (This is not mere speculation. It is known that the strategic plans for such an operation—involving some military units to fight abroad in violation of the constitution, and others in the cities to put down the inevitable popular protests—have been worked out in detail by the Self-Defense Forces).

In the latter case, a success in changing the antimilitaristic feeling would inevitably mean rising nationalism and a changed attitude toward nuclear arms, because antimilitaristic and antinuclear feeling are inseparable in popular sentiment. This nationalism would likely be oriented toward an independent defense policy, which in turn would generate arguments for nuclear armament.

The U.S. government certainly would not welcome the idea of nuclear bombs in Japanese hands. But if the “more arms for Japan” policy succeeds, things will take their inevitable course, and it will be too late for even the United States to stop it. Thus, in the long run, Japan will be armed by conventional and nuclear arms; the strain on the economy will be formidable; the tension between Japan and America will increase, as will that between Japan and Asia. Japan will again emerge as a garrison state, this time armed not only with conventional weapons, but also with nuclear devices.

Of course, there is an alternative, at least theoretically. Through it was natural enough, after the devastation of the war, for the nation to put all its energy into economic recovery, today the economy is more than strong enough to support a shift of attention to other things, in particular, to politics. Internationally, Japan could use its economic strength to work toward narrowing the gap between the North and the South, thus helping to create a world in which general disarmament would be feasible. But such a project will never be undertaken, except hypocritically, until Japan itself is first redemocratized from within. Where might such a democratization movement begin? Possibly with the veterans of the popular movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, many of whom haven't really changed their political views. These people are scattered throughout various occupations, and might conceivably act as a catalyst for the reactivation of the citizens' movement.

<sup>2</sup> The latest public opinion poll, taken by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on January 23–25, 1981, shows more than half the respondents opposed to a higher budget for the Self-Defense Forces; more than 70 percent opposed revision of article 9 of the constitution, which forbids armed forces.

Another important source of change is the various local movements that are continually cropping up around the country, especially outside the big cities. These movements, which typically arise in opposition to pollution, to land confiscation, to the construction of airports, freeways, or nuclear power plants, quickly find themselves confronting the full power of Japan, Inc., an experience that often converts them from local interest groups into national movements for democratic decentralization. All the power and organizational skill of the country's governing elites has failed to prevent these local movements from arising and continuing. If anything, their number is increasing.

These movements, though various in character and quality, have one conviction in common. They all hold something to be of higher value than national economic growth, and they all insist that it is they, the local people, rather than the central authorities, who have the right to choose. In this sense they are pointing toward a different direction in Japan's development: toward the decentralization of political and economic power, the recognition of underprivileged minorities, and an environment favorable to a richly democratic political life.