

# The Japan MYSTIQUE

*The Japan debate in Australia has become a national obsession. Policy-makers see Japan as a model. Others see it as a threat. Yoshio Sugimoto argues that neither camp is looking at the real Japan.*

**T**he Australian public appears to be increasingly embroiled in what may be called the Japanisation debate. In the area of management, Australian employers and managers are debating the possible adaptability of the Japanese model to the Australian context. In recent years the Australian educational system has introduced more competition and regimentation, which Education Minister Dawkins and other education reformers claim as the essential ingredients to ameliorate the level of Australian technology in the way the Japanese have.

When Paul Keating attributes rising housing costs to the Australian reluctance to adapt to high density housing, his comparison is with the Japanese model where the concentrated style of living is supposed to contribute to the efficiency of the economic system. The Australian tourism industry has increasingly promoted the Japanese pattern of leisure and recreational activities which are commercially organised in separation from everyday family life.

The 'learn-from-Japan' trend is also evident overseas. In the United States, Harvard sociologist Ezra Vogel published a best-selling volume entitled *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*. Other English best-sellers include such titles as *Zen and Creative Management*, *The Art of Japanese Management* and *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*. In Singapore, the government has enthusiastically introduced the Japanese-style police box system and enterprise unionism. In Malaysia, the 'Look East' program is a national policy.

On the Japanese side, a sense of euphoria pervades the nation as a result of its economic success, technological development and improved status in the international hierarchy. It is now fashionable among young Japanese social scientists to define Japan as a postmodern society trailblazing ahead of most Western societies. The concept of postmodern society has not been coherently defined, and there is little agreement as to its ingredients. In comparison with the established theories on transformation from the pre-modern period to the modern stage, conjectures on the arrival of the postmodern phase are in a state of flux. To begin with, the postmodernism debate was not a Japanese invention but another cerebral commodity imported to Japan from the Western intellectual community.



Graphic: Andrew Ireland

The Western polemic has been associated with such names as Bataille, Baudrillard, Castoriadis, Deleuze, Derrida, Guattari, Heller, Lacan and Lyotard; but, as an imported argument, the Japanese version has a peculiarly Japanese slant. Emphasis is most conspicuous on three aspects in the Japanese context: the information revolution, consumerism and the blurring of boundaries among social groups.

One version emphasises the advent of the 'information revolution'; a sudden mutation of the system where the transfer of information has replaced the transfer of manufactured goods as the defining feature of Japanese society. Kogawa Tetsuo, a leading media critic in Japan, argues that contemporary Japan is shifting from monetary capitalism to information capitalism. The Japanese are now supposed to live in the most advanced information environment dominated by such electronic devices as car

telephones, vending machines for food and tickets, satellite and cable television networks, compact disk stereos, fax machines and word processors. With Japanese electronics companies dominating both international and domestic markets, Japanese lifestyles are increasingly automated, their social relations are influenced by electronic media and their mass culture presents itself through the medium of electronic devices.

There is much evidence to suggest that the information revolution has indeed taken place; and high-tech manufacturing and the knowledge-intensive industry have come to occupy the central position in the Japanese workforce. Research has predicted that employees working in communication, entertainment, publication, education, medicine and other information industries will constitute a quarter to a third of Japan's total labour force around the turn of the century. Therefore it appears reasonable to

conceptualise a new industrial classification - the quaternary industry - specialising in the transfer of information and knowledge, which will branch off from the conventional tertiary industry (such as retail, wholesale, real estate and transport) specialising in the transfer of manufactured goods.

Another version of the postmodern view of Japan stresses a fundamental change of economic motives from production orientation to consumerism. Sociologist Takatoshi Imada, for example, maintains that what drives the postmodernist Japanese is not the 'deprivation motive' with which people work to free themselves from economic hardship, but rather the 'differentiation motive' which prompts them to purchase luxury goods and services that would give them a sense of being different and distinguished from other people. In this sense, Japan has allegedly gone beyond the most advanced state of Western-style development, such as David Riesman's "other-directed" type society and Walt Rostow's "high consumer society", in which consumer conformism has dominated. In postmodern Japan, it is argued, consumer preference is diversified, and the distribution market is 'segmentalised' in such a way that a wide range of individual consumer choices can be met. Thus, the argument goes, Japan's commercial market cannot ignore and, in fact, must calculate carefully, spenders' specific predilections for high-brand commodities, lavish services and extravagant entertainment. Consumer conformity in modern Japan has been transformed into consumer diversity in postmodern Japan.

The third version accentuates the disappearance of confrontations of a dichotomous nature. The two sharply divided camps of confrontation between the Right and the Left, capitalism and socialism, and conservatives and progressives have disappeared in favour of the hybrid of finely fragmented groups with changing orientations and memberships. According to the research institute of a leading advertising agency, Hakuhodo, even the conventional dichotomies between the private and the public, the centre and the periphery, the old and the young, the professionals and the amateurs, males and females, and the normal and the abnormal are all disappearing; and Japan is observing what they call the "non-boundary phenomena" of an unprecedented scale. In this environment, as one of the leading postmodernists, Akira Asada, argues "play", "game" and "style" take the place of the "meta-narratives" of the modern times, the requirements to pursue true knowledge for the progress of society, to work and succeed in the corporate world, or to organise a revolutionary movement to fight against the injustice of the existing order. With these imperatives failing to be the concern of the postmodern generation, dichotomous con-

flicts are supposed to disappear from postmodern Japan. The proponents of postmodernist theories in Japan list some guideposts to postmodern society which include a wide spectrum of symbols: playfulness, gaming, escape, tentativeness, anarchy and schizophrenic differentiation - in contradistinction from rigidity, calculation, loyalty, fixity, hierarchy and paranoid integration of modern society. How plausible is this as a depiction of trends in Japanese society? One useful guide is to make a quick survey of five key institutional areas of Japanese society: orientation to work, education, philosophy, family structure and status of minority groups.

First of all, in the sphere of work, a transition from modern society to postmodern society is supposed to be accompanied by a fundamental change from the production-oriented work ethic to the quality-of-life orientation which does not define employment work as the primary

life-purpose of human existence. It is difficult to regard Japan as postmodern in this regard. The number of total working hours per annum, which is the crucial index of the work ethic, is much higher in Japan than in most Western societies. The Japanese level is about 2,100 hours in comparison with 1,930 for the United States, 1,650 or less for West Germany, France and Australia. According to the survey conducted by the Ministry of Labour at the end of 1987, employees enjoying the privilege of working five days a week constitute only 28.5% of the total labour force, and only 7.3% of all firms conforms to this

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practice. Although Japanese workers are entitled to paid annual leave of twenty days, they have only about eight days off on the average, using less than half of their entitlement. Overtime per worker has increased by about 50% from 127 hours per annum in 1975 to 188 hours in 1988.

Workers now tend to build overtime payments into their household budgets to cover housing mortgage and education costs and thereby compel themselves to work beyond normal working hours. According to the study conducted in 1988 by Sohyo, the Japan Federation of Labour Unions, two out of five employees engage in the so-called 'service overtime' without receiving overtime allowances. In recent years, a term *karoshi* which literally means excessive work deaths, has been coined and gained currency because of the increasing number of employees who have fallen victim to Japanese work practices. Overall, there is little indication at present that Japanese workers are freed from the modernist work ethic and are assuming the postmodernist quality-of-life orientation. Again, in education the postmodernist style of learning assumes permissive choice-oriented guidance as distinguished from stern authoritarian training which characterises modernist education. Yet, the Japanese educational system displays an exactly opposite trend. The widespread practice of

corporal punishment in schools provides an example. While it is prohibited by law, a large number of teachers resort to physical violence to control pupils, occasionally inflicting serious injuries. Teachers can get away with exercising such illegal acts of violence because a large section of parents appear to support this style of disciplinary action. The national survey on human rights conducted by the Prime Minister's Office in 1988 revealed that 32% of respondents regarded it as an acceptable practice. Another area of national controversy is the extensive application of detailed school regulations to pupils. These rules include a range of trivial restrictions as to the length and colour of hair, the mode of dress as well as the size and type of school bags and shoes. In opposition to the postmodernist paradigm, Japanese education today is characterised by stringency, rigidity and regimentation.

The third area of metamorphosis from modern to postmodern society supposedly consists of the collapse of the ideal of nuclear family structure. Cohabitation without formal marriage, single mothers and fathers, and the increased divorce rate all form the landscape of postmodern lifestyles. In this respect, too, the Japanese pattern shows little sign of rapid transformation. The family registration system as well as the resident registration card system have served as powerful deterrents to the diversification of family structure, because papers associated with these systems are required on such crucial occasions as school enrolments and job applications.

Those women who wish to retain their own surname after marriage encounter much legal difficulty as well as community opposition. While abortion is legal, the use of the contraceptive pill is prohibited by law. Marriage ceremonies and functions have increased enormously and, according to the survey of the Sanwa Bank in 1986, the total costs associated with marriage service and honeymooning are on the average more than \$A70,000, to which parents contribute about 40%. The divorce rate has increased a little, but remains low in comparison with most Western societies. The conventional values associated with the modern nuclear family system seem to be alive and thriving in Japan today. A cross-national comparative study conducted by an American research institute, the Population Crisis Commission, to measure the status of women in 99 countries in terms of five variables (health, marriage and children, education, employment and social equality) found that Japan ranked 34th, lowest among industrialised countries, and on a par with Cuba and Argentina.

Finally, minority rights should figure predominantly in the projected postmodern social structure in which multiculturalism, equal opportunity and affirmative action make up the legitimate vocabulary of society. Here again, Japanese society appears to resist tendencies in this direction. The Alien Registration Law requires long-term foreign residents to be fingerprinted at the municipal office of their residence. They include 700,000 Koreans, an overwhelming majority of whom are second- and third-generation residents whose native language is Japanese. They are barred from holding teaching positions in government schools and assuming chairs and other posts of authority in public universities. The total number of Indochinese



refugees who have settled in Japan amounts to only about 6,200. The notion of Japanese society being unique in its racial homogeneity and purity is firmly entrenched at the grassroots level, and it has often been used as a popular explanation of Japan's economic success. The occasional comments made by political leaders on the alleged racial superiority of the Japanese are hardly isolated cases.

The catalogue of these specific tendencies casts much doubt on the proposition that Japanese society qualifies as a postmodern society. To the extent that the features which characterise modern rather than postmodern society do dominate in Japan, it could probably better be described as neo-modern society. The popularity of postmodernist writings, then, is attributable precisely to the scarcity of postmodern features rather than their abundance and as such represents the aspirations rather than realities of contemporary Japan. Unless Japan undergoes quantum transformations in socio-cultural software as distinguished from techno-economic hardware, one can perhaps only speak of the coming of post-industrial society, but not of that of postmodern society.

Since postmodern orientations have emerged in reaction to modernity, some of them display the appearance of

sharing many pre-modern features which modern societies presumably left behind. The alleged dearth of individualistic self-orientations in Japan which are the hallmark of modernity gives the nation a facade of being non-modern and therefore somehow postmodern. Some of the Western postmodernists who believe that Western societies have lost humane, mystical, collectivist culture in the process of industrialisation and modernisation find in Japan exotic attraction and enchantment influenced by this facade. Thus, they frequently muddle their postmodern aspirations with pre-modern Japan's zen, tea ceremonies, flower arrangements, noh and kabuki. Similarly, some postmodern ecologists and animal liberationists in the West flirt with the supposed Oriental tradition of living in harmony with nature. It may well be the case, as Ronald Dore's 1988 work *Taking Japan Seriously* implies, that postmodernisation does not necessarily require a modern society having been firmly established, and a society may well be able to move from a pre-modern phase to a postmodern stage. Nevertheless, one has to look seriously at Nozamu Kawamura's observation on this point when he likens Japan to a long-distance runner in an athletic stadium, racing ahead of a group of others as an apparent winner but who is, in fact, one lap behind.

In short, advocates of the Japanese model in Australia should examine carefully not only the economic benefits but also the social costs which are associated with it. When Australians adopt the Japanese model, they must caution themselves against its possible consequences because while it may lead to the improvement of production and consumption measured in monetary terms, it may not necessarily raise the standard of living measured in terms of the quality of life, and could worsen it. The postmodernism debate raises a much broader question about Western analyses of Japan, the degree to which the structural arrangements of non-Western capitalism are transferable to Western societies, and the extent to which the Western models of advanced capitalism apply to rapidly expanding capitalist systems of Asia. Three observations are in order.

Firstly, in the current climate of ambivalence of Western nations toward Japan, analysts are often tempted to fall into either a Japan-admiring camp or a Japan-bashing camp, and to portray Japanese society in simplistic black-and-white terms. Yet, inasmuch as Japan is a multifaceted, complex society, one would perhaps have to start with a kind of 'trade-off' model which focusses upon the ways in which both desirable and undesirable elements are interlinked. To the extent that Japanese society is an integrated system, its observers would be required to examine the processes in which one set of parts relies on many others to enable the total configuration of Japanese society to function. Pattern A may be an outcome of Pattern B, which may in turn be a consequence of Pattern C. From this perspective, every institutional sphere contains Janus-faced arrangements.

In work, for example, the permanent employment system is regarded as a scheme which provides job stability, company loyalty and job commitment. In exchange, however, most workers in this category find it difficult to

disobey company orders which, at times, impose serious sacrifices on them. When asked to transfer to a firm or a branch office distant from their location of residence, one out of four married employees is estimated to have little choice but to live away from their own families as the so-called company bachelors. In community life, low crime rates in cities are closely related to the costs of criminal activities: harsh prison conditions, merciless methods used to force suspects to confess and the penetration of police into private lives of citizens. In exchange for the close surveillance of shopping and entertainment areas, yakuza, Japanese mafia groups, subject shops and stores to their control in the name of ensuring the safety and security of the areas.

With these dimensions of trade-off crisscrossing in the Japanese social system, a simplistic argument about importing a particular element of that system into Australia or any other country requires careful analysis; as long as that element is dependent on the operation of other elements, transplantation would be ineffective unless a total package is imported, and the learn-from-Japan campaigners should be aware that good things would come with bad things in this process, and vice versa.

Secondly, there is every indication that the Japanese pattern of development may represent the prototype of social formation of rapidly developing capitalism in Asia, particularly that in South Korea and Taiwan and to some extent in Singapore and Malaysia. These societies appear to share several attributes: a high degree of centralisation of power, virtual one-party control of governments over decades, power of public bureaucracy to intervene into the activities of the private sector, widespread violations of individual human rights, enterprise unionism as a means to regulate labour, discipline-oriented regimented education, and so forth. These properties, once finely tuned and blended, have conceivably contributed to the swift advancement of Asian capitalism. While debate over 'Confucian capitalism' has borne little fruit because of its obsession with cultural variables, it would perhaps prove useful to examine the patterns of sharp authority relations which newly emerging industrial economies of Asia maintain in common. Following the Japanese archetype, these economies appear to be attaining measurable levels of industrialism and even post-industrialism without firmly establishing social arrangements and value orientations of modern society, not to mention postmodern society.

Thirdly, the Japan phenomena pose a wide range of questions about the ethnocentric nature of Western analysis. Specifically, the theories of bureaucracy as developed in the Western sociological tradition are highly 'culture-bound'. Large bureaucratic corporations in Japan tend to give priority to such paternalistic arrangements as company housing, company leisure facilities and company excursions. At the level of personal interaction, an elaborate system of arrangements also operates to enable superiors to put subordinates off their guard. In corporations, supervisors spend an enormous amount of time paying personal attention to employees under their charge beyond the call of job specifications. They entertain subordinates in pubs, bars, restaurants and clubs after working

hours, serve as a formal go-between in their wedding ceremonies, listen to the personal problems of their families and even attend the funerals of their grandparents. None of these activities are formally required, yet managers in Japanese firms could not retain their position without them; the expectation is that their subordinates are, in return, willing to spend their time for work and to commit themselves to it beyond the call of their job specifications. This inordinate exchange of expressive resources between superiors and subordinates characterises Japan's bureaucratic organisations. National time-series surveys have consistently shown that "a supervisor who is overly demanding at work but is willing to listen to personal problems and is concerned with the welfare of workers" is preferred to "one who is not so strict on the job but leaves the worker alone and does not involve himself with their personal matters".

These qualities of Japanese bureaucratic organisation contradict the key thesis of the Western theories of bureaucracy that its most efficient mode is a legal-rational one. From Max Weber to Robert Merton, sociologists of modern bureaucratic organisations have long argued that its operation must be governed by universalistic law and formal criteria, and must transcend interactions and subjective factors. This is one of the reasons why nepotism is regarded as dysfunctional to formal organisation in the Western model of bureaucracy. The Japanese model, however, points to the possibility that the legal-rational approach may not be the only avenue to achieve bureaucratic efficiency; the exact opposite, which the Japanese pattern represents, may be another possible path.

To address the problem of possible bias built into theories of modernisation and modernity, three solutions seem to be possible. The first is a Eurocentric solution that is based on the so-called convergence theory. According to this position, all industrial societies become increasingly akin to each other in structural arrangements and value orientations which are observed in Euro-American societies. In showing patterns incompatible with these societies, Japan is simply lagging behind in institutional and orientational areas despite her indisputable technological advance and will catch up over time. This position shares the Orientalist assumption of which Edward Said and others have accused Western social science scholarship.

The second possible solution is a Japonocentric approach. Dore's reverse convergence thesis presents the most sophisticated formulation of this position. According to his argument, industrialised societies are converging on a set of patterns observed not only in Euro-American societies but also in Japan. On the one hand, this approach has some healthy theoretical implications. Most sociological concepts are assumed to be culturally universal but it can be argued that they were initially culturally-specific concepts of Euro-American societies which became culturally universal because of the cultural hegemony of Western nations. In this sense, one should not lose sight of the extent to which much Western theory contains elements of cultural imperialism.

On the one hand, this position leaves room for Japan's cultural imperialism in the name of cultural relativism. Explanations emphasising the allegedly unique aspects of Japanese society have been used as a convenient negotiating tactic by Japanese in their dealings with people overseas. The Japanese are made to appear inscrutable, since decisions seem to be made by some distinctive process which foreigners cannot understand. Some Japanese negotiators suggest that it is contrary to the commonly accepted doctrine of 'cultural relativism' to expect the Japanese to behave in a way predictable to the foreigner. Such views of Japanese society create a mystique behind which it is easy to parry the approaches of foreign negotiators.

The third solution is to postulate a multi-linear model of social change. According to this formulation, the Euro-American type is simply one of many modes of modernisation. The Japanese model appears to represent another type into which a good number of late-comers to industrialisation may fall. This is not to belittle the economic, financial and technological challenges to the advanced Western economies from the Japanese model. But it might help to remove some of the simplistic assumptions and the Japanese 'mystique' which currently lurk behind the polarised positions in the current "Japan debate".

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