

Behind the Miracle

Everyday Life in Japan

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The success of Japan's postwar economy has caused many in the West to form a somewhat distorted picture of the Japanese and their society. We envision a land populated almost exclusively by docile industrial workers and driven white-collar "salarymen," bound together by their unstinting loyalty to Japan, Inc.

What this picture ignores is the variety within Japanese society, a society that both sustains and is sustained by ancient cultural traditions. Anthropologist David Plath here discusses the difficulty Westerners have long had in separating images from a more complicated reality. His colleagues look at the various worlds that constitute contemporary Japan. Theodore Bestor examines the workings of the urban family firm. William Kelly explains how the highly venerated rice farmers are adapting to a changing rural economy. And Margaret Lock analyzes Japan's current debate over the health of the family.

As management specialist Peter Drucker recently observed, Japan for the past 35 years has been guided by a social, not an economic, policy. Its aim was, above all, "to protect domestic society, especially domestic employment," and, secondarily, to promote a few export-oriented industries. But economic success, demographic change, and demand from abroad for fair treatment in Japan's domestic market now force Tokyo's leaders to reconsider their policy of social protection. These articles show what is at stake.

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"Samurai Jogger," a contemporary watercolor by Masami Teraoka.

FROM *THE MIKADO* TO *GUNG HO*

IMAGINING THE JAPANESE

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by David W. Plath

Lines of neat script fill the New Year's postcard that came last January from a Japanese colleague. He reports travelling in China four times in 1989 to lecture about economic policy. "In the developing country of China," he goes on to explain, "I am repaying the help I received years ago as a graduate student in the United States. I would be grateful for your guidance."

Like Christmas in Europe and America, only more so, New Year's in Japan is a time to rejuvenate culture, society, and self. Such renewal calls for an exchange of messages among friends and acquaintances. Beneath the printed clichés of a commercial greeting card, one jots down a few words about personal activities, a micro-installment towards an autobiography. And like autobiographical writing anywhere, these words amount to a treatise on one's place amid the larger movements of society—at once a report on things that happened and a plea for things to go on happening.

My colleague's message is open to many interpretations. Perhaps—to take one possibility—he is hoping that his efforts in

China will add points to Japan's tally on the international scoresheet of aid-program altruism, even though he is aware that the Western media tend to view Japan's overseas aid projects as driven more by economic self-interest than by good will.

What matters most to my friend, however, is not that he be seen as a nationalist or an internationalist. What he wants most is to be recognized as a maturely responsible individual, which in Japan means a person who never fails to repay favors that have been bestowed upon him.

The debt he incurred as a graduate student has nothing to do with me personally: I was not his mentor. We are about the same age and became acquainted only in recent years. But as an American, I am an especially appropriate witness to his determination to repay, after 30 years, help received from Americans. Notice that he solicits my advice—though advice about what he doesn't say. The sentence is an invitation to rejuvenate our relationship, with my colleague on the receiving side. He will accept further favors, go deeper into debt. In other words, he intends to expand his capacity for mature obligations. If one wants to understand Japanese character, said Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum*

and *The Sword*, writing at the end of World War II, one has to begin with the idea that the truly mature individual knows his place within the great web of mutual human indebtedness.

All of this robust attention to the interpersonal, this Japanese concern for civility in an energetically entrepreneurial society, has been rankling the Western mind for decades—indeed, for more than a century. By the middle of the 19th century in Europe and the United States, most apostles of Progress took for granted that “ritualistic” human bonding only delayed the evolution of industrialism. It was wasteful (so much money spent on gifts) and inefficient (so much time spent using go-betweens merely to save face). Thanks to science and technology, the West was rapidly shaking off such “tyrannies of custom,” as they were called. In parts of the Old World and in most of the “timeless” Orient, however, people apparently would need our help in order to extricate themselves from such entangling human alliances.

Since the Japanese were farthest east in the Far East, it was easy to cast them in the role of the West’s logical opposite. British writers referred to Japan as Topsy-Turvy Land. (Except that they don’t walk on their heads, said one, they do everything the reverse from our way.) And yet within a generation the Japanese had outdistanced all other Asian nations and had scrambled several rungs up on the ladder of Progress. To the Western mind this was reassuring historically but confusing geographically. Japan’s experience was evidence that the route to modernity was not accidentally Western but universal. However, did this mean that Topsy-Turvy Land was antipodal—or not?

In his recent study of *Japan in the Victorian Mind* (1987), Toshio Yokoyama traces the curve of change in popular British writings about his homeland from 1850 through the 1880s. During the 1850s, citizens of the most powerful empire of the 19th century looked out figuratively from the Crystal Palace and saw Japan as “singular.” They found the Japanese to be more likable than other Asians they had met. True, the samurai seemed prickly, but the common people were “amiable,” bourgeois, actually rather familiar. Japan might be antipodal, but English writers found parallels—New Year’s there is like Christmas here, and so on—in order to render “quaint” customs and mores less exotic.

Thirty years later the grip of British imperialism had weakened under competition from new industrial powers on the European continent as well as from the United States. Japan itself would not become a rival for another 30 years. But as Yokoyama notes, “The increase in anxiety about British civilization in the minds of British writers on Japan was linked to the development of their sense of remoteness from Japan.”

To put this in my terms, the closer actual Japan drew to Britain in the shape of its modern institutions, the less edifying it became to the British mind. Even though first-hand reports on Japanese life had become plentiful by the 1880s, British writers seemed less interested in them and less inclined to cite European analogues. The British grew increasingly nostalgic about the traditional (antipodal) Japan that had been left behind and began to use it as a hammer of satire against modern British society. The year 1885 saw the pre-

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miere of what has become the most popular English operetta of all time, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. Set in the Oriental pomp and circumstance of the ancient Japanese royal court, *The Mikado* parodies the ritualism that lingers, inefficient and outmoded, in industrial England. British writers of the 1880s still spoke of Japan as "singular," Yokoyama concludes, but the emphasis had shifted to the unfamiliar, the antipodal, the "unreal."



A performer in an early staging of Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado.

One hundred years later, the citizens of the most powerful empire of the 20th century took their turn. Now it was up to Americans to reconcile antipodal and actual Japan.

Confident that the postwar Allied occupation had "demilitarized and democratized" the Japanese, Americans of the 1950s were ready to help their erstwhile foes up the next rung of the ladder of Progress. This

task would involve eliminating whatever tyrannies of custom still remained. Industrial experts such as James Abegglen discovered a reason for early postwar Japan's slow growth in productivity. Japanese factories had too many tenured workers, and everybody knows that giving a man job security turns him into a time-server. The Americans coined a term for it—the Lifetime Employment System—there being no label for the phenomenon in the Japanese lexicon. In fact, at the time, Japan's own industrial experts were more troubled by what they perceived as a rate of labor mobility that was too high, not too low.

American research by David McClelland and others in the field of motivational psychology helped reinforce the diagnosis. Americans scored high on a scale that was said to measure Need for Achievement, but low on a scale of Need for Affiliation. Our heroes had always been cowboys—and still were, it seemed. Japanese scores turned out almost the opposite. This indicated a problem for Japan, investigators said, because modernization is driven by a population that values achievement. Affiliation motives are "orthogonal," which in researcher jargon means that they run at cross purposes with achievement.

Thirty years later the argument against affiliation motives had lost its teeth. Instead of retarding Japan's economic growth, it appeared by the 1980s as though those intricate nets of human relations had been sustaining it. Perhaps affiliation was less a need, a primal urge, than a well-shaped human achievement all its own. American business schools suddenly discovered virtues in Japanese styles of management. And Japanese capitalism, unhyphenated up till then, was renamed Confucian capitalism, even though throughout the previous century the Confucian heritage had been de-

nounced as a drag on Progress. The country that our journalists of the 1950s hailed as The New Far West had begun to look Far Eastern after all by the 1980s.

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Americans of the 1980s had to wrestle with a more complicated repertoire of images than the one the British had grappled with a century earlier. Americans, for one, came to see actual Japan as a threat to their economic dominance, something the British had never seen in the actual Japan of the 19th century. To Americans, furthermore, antipodal Japan had fragmented into a collage of images, some suggesting a feudal past full of samurai and shoguns, others evoking a postmodern future filled with robots and workaholics. All of these images appeared in social commentary on American life, but there was little *Mikado*-like spoofing.

In American popular culture, for example, the centennial of the *Mikado* saw the release of the slapstick film *Gung Ho*, directed by Ron Howard and starring Michael Keaton. On the surface, the goats of the story are Japanese auto executives, but they seem to be little more than stand-ins for managers from anywhere, as seen through the eyes of men on the shop floor.

Gung Ho takes place not in the ancient Japanese royal court but in the modern American rust belt, in an antiquated cathedral of once-proud U.S. engineering, an automobile assembly plant. The Japanese managers have come to make the plant efficient once again by imposing their brand of teamwork upon the natives. The managers win—but only by losing. The assembly line

hums once more only after the managers stand aside and let the workers return to their American style of country-boy teamwork, which Detroit's managers had earlier suppressed in their own misguided search for excellence.

The point of *Gung Ho* is that today's tyranny of custom has less to do with culture than with social class. Japanese or American, the yuppie managers have lost touch with the laid-back, localized world of ordinary men, who need to achieve and affiliate on their own terms. The title of the movie says it all: "Gung-ho" is a Chinese phrase for enthusiastic teamwork—a phrase imported into the American vernacular by U.S. Marines who fought alongside Chinese troops against the Japanese enemy in World War II.

The film skewers Japanese managers for misjudging the American gung-ho spirit, a mistake their fathers made during the war. But it indirectly makes the same charge against U.S. executives. The bosses in *Gung Ho* wear company uniforms, not military ones, and the setting is peacetime. The scenario, nevertheless, is familiar to anyone who has sampled one major genre of Hollywood films about the U.S. military. I am thinking of movies in which uptight, rank-proud officers (especially careerists from the military academies) personify a ruling caste whose privileges and powers are not easy to justify in a classless America. G.I. Joe—Bill Bendix, Gary Cooper—shuffles and draws and works in unorthodox ways, but he accomplishes the mission while the officers around him blunder.

Less than flattered by the way it has been depicted in popular productions such as *Gung Ho*, the American managerial class has tended to present another story. It is a story that thrusts actual Japan out towards the antipodes. Emphasis is put on presumed Japanese differences, as evidence of how far Japan deviates from the orthodox

way of running an industrial society. Japan's "low" rates of job turnover are often cited by way of example. In fact, labor mobility in Japan during recent decades has been about the same as in virtually all other industrial nations—the exception being the United States. The "high" American rate, not the "low" Japanese one, is singular.

Intellectual authority for this new version of antipodal Japan is currently being drawn from the works of "revisionist" Japan-watchers such as James Fallows in the United States and Karel van Wolferen in Europe. Their premise is that Japan has evolved into a species of industrial nation-state fundamentally unlike any other. Hence we must revise the nice-guy assumption that Japan can be dealt with like other countries that play by "our" rules.

While this revisionism does not represent a crude return to racist thinking (the differences are said to be cultural, not racial), it does offer ammunition to Japan-bashers, and it is being widely parroted by op-ed cartoonists and sensation-seeking reporters. Worse yet, it encourages among Americans an undeserved complacency and smugness about their own society. A review of van Wolferen's recent book, *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, in the *Christian Science Monitor* concluded with this dubi-

ous piece of wisdom: "In economics and in politics, we would all be better off if Japan became more like the United States, and not vice-versa."

It is difficult to gauge how widely the American populace shares the revisionist stance. It blurs into a broader current of image-work that has been underway for a generation, creating a new antipodal Japan that I call Jawpen. Fabricated by the wagging of American jaws and the scratching of American pens, Jawpen is a chilling high-tech society of the future, a society that sharply contrasts with the folksy warmth of America's imagined Lake Wobegon past. Jawpen looks like Japan, with the same efficient factories and schools, the same safe streets. But it is made in America, assembled from imported Japanese parts, and styled for our domestic market of ideas.

Above all, it is a rhetorical device that interest groups in the United States employ in their battles not just over trade policy but over the very nature of American domestic life and social institutions—and over who shall define what they are to be. Jawpen becomes what we variously need Japan to be at the moment: a model to emulate when we lament the state of our schools, an unfair player to castigate when we lament the loss of jobs.

East meets West uneasily in Ron Howard's Gung Ho, a comic film about a Japanese take-over of an American auto firm. Here the character played by Michael Keaton argues with his new Japanese boss.



During the 1970s, for example, U.S. management blamed declining productivity on its employees: people deficient in the kind of loyalty and dedication evident in Jawpen. U.S. labor responded in kind, noting that Jawpenese executives had no segregated lunchrooms or toilets, and enjoyed only a fraction of the pay and perks of their American counterparts. Both sides were happy to shift the blame during the 1980s to American teachers and students and *their* lagging productivity. Not being politically mobilized, fifth-graders are now taking the rap.

The trade-war atmosphere that has prevailed for 20 years has encouraged Americans to make the same error about actual Japan that an earlier generation of Americans made during the war. In *War Without Mercy* (1986), his study of the images Japanese and Americans formed of each other during the Pacific conflict, John Dower explains the dual misconceptions: "It was not that the Japanese people were, in actuality, homogeneous and harmonious, devoid of individuality and thoroughly subordinated to the group, but rather that the Japanese ruling groups were constantly exhorting them to become so. Indeed, the government deemed it necessary to draft and propagate a rigid orthodoxy of this sort precisely because the ruling classes were convinced that a great many Japanese did not cherish the more traditional virtues of loyalty What the vast majority of Westerners believed the Japanese to be coincided with what the Japanese ruling elites hoped they would become."

Perhaps the most self-deceiving feature in our fable of Jawpen is the vision of a society in which the corporate-career lifestyle not only holds the high ground but has

triumphed. It is a world where alternative ways of living barely survive (homogeneous Jawpen) or, if they do, need not be taken seriously (harmonious Jawpen). In Jawpen everybody either is on the yuppie fast-track or is scrambling to get on it. And there is no widening gap of unequal opportunity.

That, of course, is no more the reality of most people in actual Japan—the kinds of people you will meet in the essays that follow—than it is of most people in the actual United States. Ordinary Japanese would like to believe that the distance between rich and poor, between fast-track and laid-back, is not so great in their society as it is in America. But they know that the gap exists in their own society, and they fear it may be widening.

The ordinary Japanese in the essays that follow are less enthralled by the fable of Jawpen than Americans seem to be. These merchants, farmers, and housewives do not need the sophisticated critics of post-modernism to tell them that a high-tech, commodified atmosphere is constricting the potential for human diversity everywhere. In their little daily engagements with the large institutions that dominate their world, they are working to preserve niches of variety and civility—to sustain a refuge where they can, like my economist colleague, renew autobiographical confidence at New Year's and reach past parochialism into the more intimidating global arena. We would do well to curb revisionist impulses to erect new intellectual trade barriers. By listening carefully to actual Japanese as they conduct their own domestic discourse on the meanings of modernity, we may come to a better understanding of our own.