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Beyond Cultural Dependency:
A Japanese Case

By

Youichi Ito
Beyond Cultural Dependency: 
A Japanese Case

ITO YOUICHI
Keio University, Tokyo
JAPAN

INTRODUCTION

Recent statistics on international information flows into and out of Japan show that Japan has become a major exporter of information. This is especially conspicuous in news flow and popular culture. Nowadays, Japan exports twice as many television programs as it imports. Japan exports three times more television programs to Western Europe than it imports from Europe. There are only three countries in the world who the Japanese mass media cover more than their media cover Japan: the United States, the Soviet Union and China. With all other countries, news flow is either imbalanced in favor of Japan or balanced.

Recent public opinion polls indicate that the Japanese general public is now very self-confident. They have many things of which they can be proud. A 'Japanese cultural identity crisis' has not been taken up seriously in recent Japanese academic journals, opinion magazines or quality newspapers. On the contrary, Japanese intellectuals are criticizing 'arrogant' Japanese businessmen and government officials who tend to impose the 'Japanese way' outside Japan. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for present-day Japanese to feel that they have an identity crisis.

The situations before the 1920s and soon after World War II were completely different. Japan at both of those times was a poor Asian country. Japanese intellectuals suffered from identity problems and an inferiority complex. Japan
in the late 19th century to the early 20th century shared many characteristics with present-day Third World countries. Japan is not necessarily an exception. Most countries in the world have experienced ups and downs in their histories.

Despite that, dependency theories and cultural imperialism theories assume as if the statuses of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ nations are not interchangeable. Japanese experiences indicate that this assumption is wrong. The essence of the world system is competition, and peripheral countries may rise up to become central countries and central countries may drop to become peripheral countries as a result of competition. Japan is a good example in modern times. Japan was a peripheral country before the 1920s. It was a central country between the two world wars, dropped to peripheral status as a result of World War II, and revived to become a central country in the early 1970s.

In Japan, the issues of an identity crisis and an inferiority complex always became important when Japan was in the periphery. Neither issue has been important when Japan was in the center. In other words, the degree of a cultural identity crisis and an inferiority complex has a high negative correlation with military, technology and economic strength. Some people may think that if a non-Western country like Japan becomes ‘Westernized’, that country may develop an identity problem. Actually, however, Japanese experiences indicate that a strong economy and superior technology tend to resolve rather than cause cultural identity problems. In present-day Japan, the strong economy and superior technology are key components of the Japanese cultural identity held by the Japanese public and intellectuals.

What has been described in this introduction are the facts that actually occurred in modern Japan. How can we theoretically organize these facts from a social scientific viewpoint?

International Information Flow

Dependency theorists and cultural imperialism theorists dichotomize the world in terms of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, the exploiter and the exploited, and assume that these statuses are virtually fixed. What makes these statuses fixed is the mechanism by which ‘center’ exploits ‘periphery’. I admit that there are many differences among nations in terms of military, economic and political strength. In my view, however, the difference is more continuous than discontinuous and nations’ positions are more in flux than fixed. What makes the statuses in flux is competition. In other words, a nation presently belonging to the center
may drop to the periphery in the near future and a nation belonging to the periphery at present may rise up to the center in the near future. Dependency theorists and cultural imperialism theorists claim that information flows from the center to the periphery, but I would claim that information flows from high-ranking countries to low-ranking countries. There may be some countries which are not at all concerned about these international rankings. However, there are several rankings with which most major countries, if not all the countries in the world, must be concerned.

Since ancient times, military strength has been one of the areas that most nations (or tribes) had to be concerned with. If a nation (or tribe) was threatened militarily by another nation (or tribe), there was no choice for the threatened nation but to build an equally strong or superior military organization. Otherwise, that nation (or tribe) would be conquered, destroyed, or colonized by the stronger nation (or tribe).

By the medieval age at the latest, political and military leaders knew that a strong economy was a major prerequisite for a strong military. When Japan started its modernization in 1868, its slogan was 'a prosperous economy and strong military'. A strong economy is important for political leaders not only for its military implications but also for public welfare, political stability, cultural activities, technological development, and for almost everything.

Technology has also long been regarded as an important item that political leaders cannot help but being concerned with because of its military and economic implications. Superior technology is a prerequisite for a strong military and strong economy.

Thus, in their military, economy and technology, most nations in the world cannot help competing with each other because inferiority in these areas could result in subordination, colonization or conquest by other nations. Those areas in which most nations in the world cannot help competing with each other may be called 'competitive areas'. In those competitive areas international standards to rank nations are devised and most nations make efforts to climb up the ladders of international ranking.

International information flows have much to do with these international rankings and the efforts of nations to increase their strength because:

1. In its efforts to climb up the ladder of international ranking in a competitive area, every nation tends to learn from and imitate the countries which occupy higher positions in the international ranking.

2. Every nation needs information about its competitors or rivals and the countries which can be potential threats. Surveillance is needed for such countries.
These two propositions explain the flow of information regarding politics, the military, the economy and technology, i.e. news reporting and data flow. They, however, do not seem to explain international flows of entertainment.

Many studies indicate that entertainment products are produced, sold and bought in international markets just like other industrial goods. Therefore, the factors determining international competitiveness of entertainment products are very similar to those of other industrial goods, i.e. cost, quality and taste. That is why prosperous economic powers with large domestic markets (which are necessary for cost reduction), abundant human resources in the entertainment business (which are necessary for high quality and good taste) and efficient export organizations such as specialized trading companies occupy large shares in the export market of entertainment products.

During the past twenty or thirty years, Japan has advanced remarkably in international rankings in its military, economy and technology through international competition. That is why the amount of news reporting going out of Japan drastically increased, thus improving the balance remarkably during the past two or three decades. Japan has become a prosperous economic power with a large domestic market for entertainment products, abundant human resources in the entertainment business and efficient export organizations. Therefore, Japan's export of entertainment products has also remarkably increased during the past two or three decades and has become a net exporter of popular culture (As for detailed statistics, See Ito, forthcoming [a]).

Cultural Change and Cultural Identity

In the previous section the 'competitive area' was discussed as an important concept to understand the mechanism of international information flow, especially news flow. On the other hand, there exist elements in human civilization where nations usually do not compete with each other. Religion, language, custom, ways of living and doing things, values, arts, and political and legal systems are such examples. In these areas there is only a difference, and no international rank orders exist.

When Japan started its modernization in the mid-19th century, one of the well-known slogans was "wakon yohua (Japanese mind and Western knowledge)." This, in our context, meant the introduction of Western methods and systems in competitive areas such as the military, economy and technology, but maintenance of traditional ways in non-competitive areas. Actually, however, this distinction was not easy to make.
Cultures of more advanced countries (in competitive areas) influence cultures of less advanced countries through the following two mechanisms:

(1) Methods and systems in competitive areas represent cultural characteristics in non-competitive areas. Therefore, it has often been argued that it is impossible to introduce foreign methods (in competitive areas) without introducing their background culture (in non-competitive areas). For example, it has often been argued in the West and non-West that modernization is impossible without total acceptance of Western civilization. In extreme cases, it was argued that non-Western societies must be Christianized, their languages must be changed to English or French, or written scripts must be Romanized at least. Japanese modernization proved that these extreme claims were all wrong. At the same time, we cannot deny that Japan, despite the slogan mentioned above, could not separate 'knowledge' and 'mind' as clearly as they expected. Japan incorporated Western cultural characteristics in non-competitive areas together with methods and systems in competitive areas. The same can happen when Western countries import a Japanese method or system such as the 'Japanese management'.

(2) News and entertainment products flow from advanced countries to less advanced countries through the mechanisms discussed in the previous section. Therefore, repetition of information about cultures of advanced countries cannot help influencing cultures of less advanced countries.

In addition, there are cases in which the cultures of less advanced countries are influenced by their advancement in competitive areas or participation in international competition. For example, if a society decides to join competition in competitive areas, people will become conscious of efficiency, time and hard work. These cultural changes are not necessarily a result of influence from advanced countries but a result of the society’s participation in international competition. For these three mechanisms, it is possible to argue that participation in international competition in competitive areas cannot help bringing cultural change in non-competitive areas.

The cultural identity problem is considered to occur when cultural change is so drastic as to destroy the sense of continuity. When people cannot explain what they are doing or plan to do by what they have been doing, they tend to have a cultural identity problem. This problem tends to occur more easily when the cultural change is forced by foreign powers through conquest, colonization or under other similar situations. At the same time, however, it should be noted that an essence of the cultural identity problem is an inferiority complex. By analyzing writings by a Japanese novelist, Natsume Soseki, who lived from the late 19th century through the early 20th century, I have suggested that the cultural identity problem occurs (1) when a nation’s power or strength
is inferior in various ways, (2) when there are not many things to be proud of, and (3) when its past was or is being forgotten (Ito, forthcoming [a]).

Present-day Japan does not have the first two problems any more. Japan at present is undoubtedly one of the world’s major powers in many fields. Present-day Japanese people have many things to be proud of. According to a recent public opinion survey, they are proud of their diligence (25%), science and technology (17%), beautiful natural surroundings (14%), economic prosperity (13%), sophisticated culture (9%), and progressiveness (2%) (Okamoto, 1985: 236).1

The third question, whether or not Japan has lost its link with its past, has been reflected in two intellectual movements. An ideological movement called Nihonshugi (Japanism) emerged in the early 1930s. In this movement, Western concepts and theories were rejected and theories using traditional concepts were proposed to explain the modern Japanese social, political and economic systems. The Japanese social, political and economic systems at that time were explained in terms of the traditional family system, ethics and customs based on Shintoism and Confucianism. However, this movement became fanatic, with nationalism reflecting the social and intellectual atmosphere of that time. After defeat in the war, the social theories based on this ‘Japanism’ were repudiated by most people.

In the late 1960s, however, a new intellectual movement called nihonjin ron (studies of Japanese people and culture) emerged. It was a very long and thorough intellectual movement involving journalists, social critics, academics, political and business leaders, leftists, conservatives and even foreign Japanologists. Social theories proposed in this new movement shared the same motivation as those in the prewar ‘Japanism’, i.e. to relate modern Japan with traditional Japan.

Japan’s industrial and technological success was first related to its unique social, economic, and political systems and practices. The Japanese perfectionistic pursuit of quality in industrial products was related to its traditional craftsmanship. A Korean scholar characterized Japanese technology as the ‘technology of miniaturization’ and related modern Japanese electronic products to the philosophy behind the Japanese garden, bonsai, hakoniwa (miniature landscape) and other traditional fine arts (Lee, 1982).2 With other authors, aspects of Japanese psychology and behavior were explained in terms of amae (inclination to dependency) (Doi, 1971), kanjin-shugi (contextualism) (Hamaguchi, 1982), or saijin-shugi (inter-individualism). The Japanese social structure was explained in terms of tate shakai (vertical society) (Nakane, 1967), or ie shakai (clan society). (Murakami, Kumon & Sato, 1979). The so-called ‘Japanese management’ was
explained in terms of all these characteristics inherent in Japanese traditional social structure, beliefs, and customs regarding human relations, groups, and social organizations. The analysis of the Japanese mass media system by a Korean scholar entitled "Vertical Integration of Mass Media in Japan" (Chang, 1981) was apparently inspired by these social theories. After discussing cultural change of Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Ishige (1987) concluded that what happened in modern Japan can be better characterized as 'Japanization' of imported Western civilization rather than 'Westernization' of Japan. He claimed that cultural change of modern Japan was the incorporation of Western civilization into Japanese civilization, therefore, continuity was never lost.3)

As discussed in Ito (forthcoming (b)) there exist serious arguments and conflicts among the three major schools of social thought in Japan, the Western dominant paradigm school, critical or neo-Marxist school and what may be called the 'indigenous school' that is closely related to *nihonjin ron*. As pointed out by many opponents of the 'indigenous school', there may be some nationalistic 'myths' in those indigenous social theories. Despite that, or because of that, these theories are widely supported by political, business and intellectual leaders, especially those outside academia. Therefore, those 'indigenous' theories have increasing influence, especially on policy-making and public opinion formation.

The Japanese experiences described above indicate that social theories intended to bridge the past and present are devised and provided to the intellectual market as the country becomes successful in competitive areas. Japan is not an exception. There are many social theories in the West which explained their success in competitive areas by uniquely Western cultural characteristics (in non-competitive areas). For example, Max Weber referred to, among many other things, the structure of Western classical music as having something to do with modern economy and technology (Max Weber, 1947). Hoselitz (1964) gave perspective representation in Western paintings, Lyn White (19--) gave a Christian view of nature and Max Weber (1930) gave Protestantism as factors for economic and technological success in the West.

Another lesson drawn from Japanese experiences is that the cultural identity problem is more strongly influenced by the present than the past, its origin or its history. Take the relationship between Western Europe and Japan in recent years as an example. There is much evidence which suggests that it is Europeans rather than Japanese who feel culturally threatened by the other despite the fact that many of the reasons of Japanese strength originate in Europe. When British Ford tried to introduce the so-called 'Japanese manage-
ment' system. British automobile workers went on strike. One of their slogans was "We are not Nips" (Sankei Shimbun, 17 February 1988: 3). However, the Thacher Administration did not show any sympathy for the claims of the labor union. In relation to Japanese direct investment in the United States, an American union leader reportedly said, "We will sing the company song and run at athletic meetings if they give us jobs." In a country where this kind of news appears frequently on newspapers or television, cultural identity problems do not occur.

Policy Implications

I have sometimes been criticized for advocating a naive open-door, laissez-faire policy without understanding real and serious problems in Third World countries. However, there are some misunderstandings in this criticism. I do advocate joining international competition in competitive areas under a basically open-door system. I suggested this based on the Japanese experiences that information imbalances and cultural identity problems would be naturally resolved as the nation climbs up the ladders of international rankings in competitive areas. However, I have never disapproved of protective or promotional policies in non-competitive areas. As described in previous sections of this paper, if a nation joins international competition in competitive areas under the open-door system, foreign influence increases not only in competitive areas but also in non-competitive areas. In smaller or developing countries that have not yet reached a stage where information imbalances and cultural identity problems are resolved automatically, some protective measures in non-competitive areas are justified to the extent that they would not harm their efforts in competitive areas.

Many people claim that the present world system is so unfair and disadvantageous to Third World countries that it is unrealistic to assume free competition between First and Third Worlds. Compared with the 1920s or 1930s, however, the world system has become much more fair and it can be made even more fair in the future. Moreover, as already is practiced, developing countries may be given specially advantageous treatment in trade and other types of competition. At the same time, leaders of developing countries should make more efforts to establish fair competition systems within their own societies. In most Third World countries social mobility is lower than in advanced countries due to a lack of fair competition systems. Children in Third World countries are given less chance to move up chiefly because of their own unfair
domestic system. Many Third World leaders who blame world systems enjoy privileges in their own countries based on rigid monopolistic systems.

The Pacific region, especially the East Asian region, is now enjoying high economic growth. In my view, four major reasons for this high growth are: (1) long peace in this region, (2) relative political stability, (3) prevalence of an open-door policy, and (4) healthy competition among nations. Many countries in this region have contributed to create and sustain these four conditions.

First, we must appreciate China for its drastic policy change in the early 1970s. China's policy change contributed to the creation of all the four conditions mentioned above. In the early 1970s China denounced that seclusion policy called the Cultural Revolution that brought China nothing but destruction and stagnation. China's normalization with the United States and Japan have greatly contributed to peace in this region. In Southeast Asia people say: "As long as the United States, China and Japan enjoy a good relationship, this region is safe." The friendly relations between these three powers is a crucial factor for peace in the Asia and Pacific region.

It is true that some countries in this region still have some problems with political stability. Compared with other developing regions, however, the situation seems to be better. China stopped supporting communist Guerrillas in Southeast Asia and proclaimed that it would not support North Korea if it attacks South Korea first. This policy contributed to the stabilization of the governments in this region, making it possible for them to concentrate on economic development.

The 'open door policy' has often been identified with a new colonialism. Many critical scholars claimed that if developing countries allow multi-national corporations (MNCs) to operate in their countries, MNCs will dominate the national economy, exploit people, destroy local culture, bribe local politicians, and virtually colonize the whole country. When Premier Lee Kuwang-Yu of Singapore started an open-door policy in the early 1970s, he was harshly criticized by his enemies for selling out Singapore to foreign capitalists. Now, however, per capita income of Singapore is the second highest in Asia following Japan, and many Southeast Asian countries are imitating Singapore's open-door policy. In contrast, Burma, which used to be called a prosperous country in Southeast Asia, dropped to one of the poorest nations in Asia after more than two decades of seclusion policies. China's current open-door policy also encourages smaller nations in this region to adopt open-door policies.

When Japan started modernization in the mid-19th century, the gap between Japan and the West was much less than that between the present First and Third Worlds. That is one of the reasons why Japan could catch up by doing
everything by themselves. Nowadays, however, the gap is so great that it might not be a good idea to imitate the Japanese policies of the past. To open the market and accept foreign direct investment is a quick way to get capital, advanced technologies and managerial know-how. As a result of devastating experiences in World War II, human morals have advanced and imperialism was denounced. Therefore, to associate foreign investment with colonialism or imperialism is becoming anachronistic. If government policies are initiated to control MNCs and to negotiate with the MNCs' governments, the danger of new colonialism can be avoided. MNCs should be able to be used for the benefit of the recipient nations. At the same time, it is important that capital exporting countries make sure that direct investment in developing countries benefits local economies, especially on the mass level.

Until a few centuries ago, Chinese and Koreans used to look down upon Japanese as barbarians. Chinese and Koreans have long thought that they taught and gave their civilizations to the Japanese. Therefore, Japan's rapid industrialization and Japan's invasion of them were great shocks and an unbearable humiliation for them. They naturally thought that they could do what the Japanese could do, and have worked hard to catch up with Japan. One of the most repeated slogans among Koreans has been keuk il (overcome Japan).

In old times Chinese used to look down upon not only Japanese but also Koreans as barbarians. It is easy to imagine that proud Chinese cannot stand being left behind Japanese and Koreans. Nowadays, China takes almost anything that contributes to economic development. It is a part of Teng Shao Ping's philosophy:

I don't care whether the cat is black or white. The cat that catches rats is a good cat.

This implies that he does not care whether a policy is socialistic or capitalistic. Any policy that contributes to economic development is a good policy. Steady development of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia have stimulated Malays, Thais, Indonesians, and Philipinos, making them also join interracial and international competition. These competitive energies, when channeled appropriately, contribute a great deal to the development of the region.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Japan, during the past twenty years, changed its position from an informa-
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In 205 nation importer to an information exporter in news reporting and popular culture. Japan was a peripheral country before the 1920s, became one of the center countries between the two world wars, dropped to a peripheral country after World War II, but revived again as a center country after the 1970s. What causes such change? It is nothing but international competition. There are areas in which most nations cannot help competing with each other for survival, independence, political stability, and public welfare. These areas are called 'competitive areas'. The military, the economy and technology are typical competitive areas. In competitive areas international rankings are devised and most nations make efforts to climb up the ladders of ranking. Information flows from high ranking countries to low ranking countries. As a country climbs up the ladders of ranking, just as Japan did during the past twenty years, more information flows out of the country, making the country an information exporter.

Cultural identity problems occur not only because of excessive inflow of information but also because of a lack of strength, self-confidence and things to be proud of. Therefore, as a country climbs up the ladders of international ranking, cultural identity problems tend to become less serious and eventually disappear. The degree of cultural identity problems is more strongly influenced by the present than by the past, its origin or its history.

While the purpose of social theory is to describe how the world is organized and functions, it is a purpose of policy to use theoretical knowledge for national benefit. If the world is organized and functions as described in this paper, it is more sensible for a nation to abolish unfair monopolistic systems and establish fair competition systems within their own countries, participate in international competition and make strenuous efforts to climb up the ladders of international ranking in competitive areas. If low-ranking countries adopt open-door policies, the inflow of culture and information from high-ranking countries will inevitably increase. Some of them are necessary for effective advancement and to win in international competition. However, if the influence of foreign cultures reaches a point at which it endangers the integrity and consistency in non-competitive areas such as language, religion, customs, and the arts, protective cultural policies may be justified to the extent that they do not harm national efforts in competitive areas. Theories must be simple, but policies may be complicated with many variations depending on the size and stage of development of the country.

Finally, Japan has often been ignored by social theorists as an 'embarrassing exception' because Japanese experiences cannot be explained by their theories. However, I believe that Asian New Industrialized Economies (NIEs), Korea above all, will eventually prove that the Japanese case is not the only excep-
tion in modern history.

FOOTNOTES

1) Some Westerners appear to be uneasy about Japan’s pride in ‘Western’ science and technology, its economic prosperity made possible by ‘Western capitalism’, and its social stability made possible by ‘Western’ democracy. But on this point, there are differences of perception between Japanese and Westerners. Most Japanese unreservedly admit that the present Japanese parliamentary democracy system is basically Western and is based on a tradition which was previously unknown in Japan. They will also admit that modern science in Japan is very much (even if not completely) Western. As for the technology and economy of Japan, Japanese believe that there is no essential or philosophical discontinuity between traditional Japan and modern Japan. They believe that the difference is only in terms of stages of development. In traditional Japan there were slow but steady technological and economic developments in agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, trading, and banking. This may be one of the reasons why Japan is strong economically and technologically but not as strong in science.

2) Fujitsu, the largest computer company in Japan, uses this idea for its advertising. Fujitsu’s recent advertisement which features a beautiful picture of bonsai states as follows:

HOW JAPAN’S LARGEST COMPUTER COMPANY PUT A FOREST IN A FLOWERPOT

Miniaturization is more than a hobby in Japan. For hundreds of years it has been necessity. Since the 12th century, gardeners have brought natural beauty into teeming cities through the art of bonsai, growing living trees in miniature. Tended carefully, a tiny forest in a planter, called yose-ue, may grow for centuries.

The same people who put forests in flowerpots have good reasons for making other large things very small. In electronics, we know miniaturization brings faster speeds, lower costs, higher reliability, and more functionality in a smaller space. In communications, it also brings the future closer.

Now Fujitsu has created the world’s first general purpose ISDN processor on a single chip. Capable of sending or receiving voices, images and data at speeds up to 384 kbps, this tiny chip is the heart of new Fujitsu ISDN terminals. No bigger than fingernail, it contains over 9,800 gates and does the work of over 100 conventional integrated circuits ... (ITU Telecommunication Journal, 54 (10), 1987, back cover).

3) However, there are a considerable number of Japanese who resent the Westernization of Japanese units of measurement of length, weight, space, etc. the ways of writing names and addresses (when written in Roman letters), and especially the convention of adding commas to large numbers. Many Japanese feel that they have been inconvenienced as a result of the Westernization of standards, and protests and complaints appear from time to time on newspapers and magazines. See, for example, a newspaper article by Honda (1980) sensational title ‘Prevailing Colonial Culture: Possible Loss of National Pride’ or Nakada’s article (1982) entitled ‘Nonsense of Writing Japanese Addresses in the Western Way’.

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