

Fukuzawa and Maruyama: How to Understand Japan

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If the ideas sketched out in yesterday's lecture are roughly right, they have considerable implications for the way in which we should try to understand Japan.

As I set out for Japan in June 1990 I did not consider myself an ethnocentric westerner. The increasing sense of shock which I will describe in my encounter with Japan was not caused by moving out of the only culture I had known into something different.

It is true that I had worked a lot on European and British history and culture and I had lived in England for over forty years. Yet I had also spent over 18 months in Nepal and visited my anthropological fieldwork area there some five times, travelling through India on the way. I had been teaching anthropology at the University of Cambridge for sixteen years and had read about, taught and supervised many students working on tribal, peasant and other cultures around the world. I had absorbed many of the relativistic anthropological truths and the general sociological framework developed by the great thinkers from Montesquieu to Max Weber.

Yet it is now clear to me that I did have a number of largely unexamined assumptions which caused difficulties in understanding what I was about to encounter in Japan.



When I went to Japan, putting it rather over-simply, I thought there were only two major forms of society. There were integrated, largely oral, 'tribal' worlds, such as the ones I had read about in Africa, South America

and the Pacific, and visited in Nepal. These societies were still 'enchanted' because they did not divide off the supernatural and natural worlds, 'embedded' because their economy and society were not separated, without institutional divisions of the kinds I accepted in my western existence. These places were the core of what anthropologists had tried to understand. They were small, often peripheral, worlds struggling to retain their unseparated otherness on the fringes of larger civilizations.

After the rise of societies with writing, cities, settled agriculture, crafts, states, formal religions, the world had changed. Although the dissociations and separations were not completed until perhaps the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the great world civilizations were at least partially disenchanted, de-familized, dis-embedded. This transition was the great divide in my mind. I thought not so much in terms of 'pre' and 'post' industrial, as tribal and civilizational.

This scheme lay untested and unexamined in my mind. So what I expected to find in Japan was a civilization which was in essence totally removed from the tribal type. Whatever its form, it would be a variant on the great civilizational systems around the world. Thus while France, England, America, India or China were all very different, they were clearly within a similar order of world history, that is to say there had been a great deal of institutional separation. Even if they were not entirely 'modern', they had elements of modernity in their make-up. They had, in Durkheim's typology, moved a long way down the continuum from mechanical to organic solidarity.

I was full of certainty, confidence and unexamined assumptions about my categories. These ideas seemed to fit all of the other worlds I had encountered in more than twenty years attending seminars, teaching and writing on anthropology. I doubted whether Japan would challenge them. It was just a matter of seeing where it fit.

Yet as I wrestled to understand Japan through the 1990's I found it became more and more confusing. I felt in the position that David Hume described. 'Let an object be presented to a man of never so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects.'¹ This was a rather negative reaction, just bewilderment. I had come across a new species that could not be classified or appropriated using the familiar sociological tools which I believed would be appropriate.

Then, as I learnt to see Japan through the guidance of my friends Professor Toshiko and Kenichi Nakamura, and through the eyes of Fukuzawa and

Maruyama, I began to see a shape dimly emerging. It was of a totally different kind to that which I had expected, yet not entirely beyond comprehension. Slowly I began to realize the deep wisdom of Kurt Singer's observation that 'The Japanese are difficult to understand, not because they are complicated or strange but because they are so simple.'²



For a long time I found it impossible to see the world within the Japanese mirror, nor to understand it when I did get glimpses of it because it is not just trivially different from the west and other civilizations, but different at such a deep level that the very tools of understanding we normally use fail us.

I believe that it is not possible to understand Japan if we use the conventional sociological and philosophical models of the west. The meta-tools which sociology developed in the nineteenth century, the famous oppositions between Community and Association, Status and Contract, Feudalism and Capitalism, do not seem to help us in understanding Japan. Japan does not fit within that framework.

When anthropologists went to South America, Africa, New Guinea, South East Asia, they encountered tribal societies which did not fit within the grid of western categories. It would have been fruitless to ask if they were based on status or contract, individualism or holism, or any of the other western-derived oppositions. Instead the anthropologists tried to form a notion of the inter-connections, the relations between parts of a culture.

They came up with a basically holistic methodology. They stressed the functional interdependence of the parts and the impossibility of understanding any part except in relation to others (structural functionalism). And they looked at the structural homologies between different realms (structuralism). Their final description was placed within a comparative endeavour which, rather than merely classifying societies, saw each as a variant, different, yet in some ways a comparable entity.

The outcome of accepting Fukuzawa and Maruyama's characterization of Japan as a deeply 'non-modern' civilization, is to lead us to wonder how an anthropologist would describe it. He or she would do so on the basis of two premises. The first is holistically, that the parts are not separated, so that in order to understand any part we have to understand the whole (as opposed to the methodological individualism which helps us to understand