

JAPANESE VALUES

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Overview

Japanese values are hardly static and timeless, and they represent the intersection of many influences, both native and foreign. This is true of any nation and people. Yet there has been a strong tendency among the Japanese people and their leaders—and among foreigners, as well—to regard certain core values and ideals as unchanging and unique. Many of these relate to the nation's mythic roots, the beliefs and practices of the Shinto faith, and the figure of the Emperor as ruler, patriarch, and deity. The exploitation and manipulation by those in power of these key signifiers of a distinctive Japanese identity have indelibly marked the nation's history. Moreover, much has been made of the aristocratic culture of the Heian era and the samurai culture of the medieval period—and their 'yin-yang' complementarity—as a defining civilizational paradigm and a source of iconic representation. In sum, the role of values in the formation of a Japanese national identity is a complex, highly subjective, and politically-charged topic.

Backdrop

Japan's roots as a nation can be traced to the amalgam of nativist Shinto belief and the array of civilizational borrowings from China, a process that began nearly two thousand years ago. However, what we now regard as 'Japanese values' and 'Japanese identity' largely derive from the Tokugawa period. In establishing its seclusion policy (*sakoku*), the Shogunate in effect cordoned off the nation from contact with the outside world and thus reinforced what has been termed the 'island nation complex' (*shimaguni konjō*). The rise of so-called Nativist Studies (*kokugaku*) in the final century of Tokugawa rule served to elevate the figure of the Emperor and the Shinto divinities (*kami*) as touchstones of a shared identity. At the same time, the nation's rulers promoted the values of hierarchy, obedience, family harmony, and conformity in an effort to consolidate their power and create a compliant citizenry. These values have Confucianist origins, but they became conflated with the so-called 'warrior code' of *bushidō*.

Meiji Japan, the Empire, and National Identity

In their mission to create a modern nation built on what would be regarded as 'traditional' values, the Meiji leaders—many of them erstwhile samurai who had received the classic Confucian education—essentially retooled late-Tokugawa nationalist ideology. The Emperor was made the centerpiece of a state-sponsored Shinto faith, and a dogma of Japanese spiritual uniqueness—*kokutai*—was promoted in schools and public media. Evoking the Confucian virtues of harmony and social cohesion, the nation itself was conceived as a 'family state' (*kazoku kokka*), with the Emperor as paterfamilias and the citizenry as dutiful subjects of his benevolent authority. This collective identity and its constellation of values stood in opposition to the Western ethos of individualism and personal autonomy, which became integrated into the modern educational curriculum and public media. Early 20th-century writers, artists, and intellectuals struggled with the conundrum of 'Japanese selfhood' and its simultaneous embrace of collectivism and individualism.

As a corrective to—and reaction against—the onslaught of modern, urban civilization, many traditionalist voices emerged. A key figure is Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), who embarked on what amounts to a quest for the primordial Japanese soul. Believing that it resided in the Japanese heartland (*urusato*), among ordinary people, and that it was channeled through local legend and lore, Yanagita set out to record and collect folk tales—a mission of cultural preservation that ushered in a new field of Japanese ethnological studies (*minzokugaku*).

The rising tide of imperialism and militarism in the 1930s entailed the dissemination of a state-sponsored nationalist dogma that would help create a nation of warriors for whom self-sacrifice would be their sworn duty. State Shinto, with the divine Emperor at its core, was central to this identity formation. The Meiji *kokutai* ideology was widely promulgated; individualism and egoism were rejected, as was Western-style modern civilization itself, and a sense of Japanese spiritual invincibility was widely promoted.

The rest, as they say, is history. How, then, was Japan to reconstruct its national identity in the face of a defeat that effectively erased the imperial center and its essentialist myths—not to mention the nation's material infrastructure and the shattered lives of its people?

Re-Valuing Postwar Japan

The Allied Occupation (1945-52) in effect aimed at reprogramming a Japanese citizenry subject to decades of state-sponsored imperialist propaganda and dogma. The postwar constitution (1947), modeled upon egalitarian values and civil liberties, provided a blueprint for a people challenged with reconstructing their society and core identity. Gender equality was stipulated and eventually written into the law, although its implementation would prove difficult. The gradual rebuilding of the nation— in particular, the impressive economic strides of the 1960s and beyond— inspired a resurgence of native pride and assertions of uniqueness and superiority. What amounted to *kokutai* ideology minus its imperialist and militarist component came to be known as *Nihonjinron*— ‘discourses of Japanese uniqueness.’

The resurgence of nativist thought and ideology may be said chiefly to reflect the nation’s rising GNP and trade surplus, but it also reflects certain social and cultural realities. *Nihonjinron* proponents stressed the uniqueness of the Japanese language itself, which was said to embody an ineffable cultural essence referred to as *kotodama*. A distinctive Japanese social psychology— which posited a strong collective identity and a hierarchical social structure based on reciprocity and mutuality— was posited by Takeo Doi and Chie Nakane in the 1970s. Their work, and that of others who would hold forth on Japan’s unique societal attributes, is predicated on the core qualities of harmony, empathy, and ego-denial— *wa*, in the Japanese shorthand.

Other uniqueness claims would strain credulity— for instance, the Japanese brain was argued to function in a manner that distinguished it from other brains. Japanese snow was said to have qualities that distinguished it from foreign snow. And when the author Kawabata Yasunari was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1968, he referred, in his Nobel address, to the spirit of Zen as the foundation of Japanese culture.

The proliferation of *Nihonjinron* discourse in the 1970s and 1980s— especially its more preposterous claims— invited a strong revisionist response among foreign observers who objected to its egregious, even mindless, reductionism. In their rejection of the Japanese ‘*wa* myth,’ Karel van Wolferen and Patrick Smith have portrayed modern Japan as an aberrant, dysfunctional, and leaderless nation and the Japanese people as lonely, infantilized, passive victims of what amounts to an Orwellian dystopia.

The prominence of *Nihonjinron* is in part a marketing phenomenon, insofar as its products are destined for bookstores and other media outlets. One cannot assume that all Japanese routinely accept the various uniqueness claims, or that the claims can be taken at face value. What is more, there has long been a foreign market eager to consume iconic images of a timeless, exotic Japanese culture. And the Japanese government has a stake in this as well. Through organizations such as the Japan Foundation and the *Nichibunken* Center for Japanese Cultural Studies, Japanese traditionalism and ‘uniqueness-ism’ are promoted for both domestic *and* foreign consumption. Moreover, the nation’s tourist economy has an even stronger interest in marketing ‘traditional Japan’— the cultural meccas of Kyoto and Nara, rural towns known for traditional crafts and thatched-roof cottages, local museums and folklore centers, and the like. Here the myth of *urusato*— the timeless Japanese village— is reified thanks to modern transportation networks and the profit motive.

From the perspective of social science, identity formation is studied as a product of family interaction, early childhood socialization, public education, and the media. In particular, the maternal role in this process has long been emphasized, together with the quality of the preschool experience. With the advent of the Meiji era, Japan’s education ministry had a vested interest in constructing a ‘character-building’ curriculum that aimed at inculcating core values such as cooperation and effort. In recent years, though, the impact of economic and social malaise and the ebb and flow of global trends and internet ‘cocooning’ has eroded the once-vaunted notion of a uniform Japanese esprit. At the same time, ultra-conservative political factions continue to promote a sense of timeless Japanese virtue and blame the nation’s ills on foreigners.

In the final analysis, the matter of Japanese values and identity remains highly subjective and contingent upon a host of historical, political, and socio-economic factors. But the significance of a Shinto-based collective identity— comparable to the place of Hinduism in Indian society and its nationalist political agenda— must be recognized.

Readings

Benedict, Ruth, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Houghton Mifflin, 1946)

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time* (Princeton, 1993)

Rosenberger, Nancy (ed.), *Japanese Sense of Self* (Cambridge, 1995)

Smith, Patrick, *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (Vintage, 1997)

Wolferen, Karel Van, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (Knopf, 1989)

Yoshino, Kosaku, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (Routledge, 1995)

Discussion Questions and Topics

Is there anything ‘uniquely unique’ about Japan’s purported uniqueness? How would you construct an argument to support such a claim, in view of the ubiquity of ‘uniqueness-ism’ across the ethnic and national spectrum?

What objective, empirical criteria might go into a definition of uniqueness? Or should we recognize the subjectivity and contingency underlying this very contentious topic?

Is there a case to be made for some combination of Japan’s insularity, its village origins, Shinto beliefs, and Confucian values as the basis for a collective identity that has survived to the present day?

How do the attitudes and biases of foreigners who view Japan figure into their assessment of the Japanese and their identity? Give thought to the multiplicity and complexity of such perspectives.

Political, economic, and educational institutions— in conjunction with the public media— are actively involved in promoting ‘identity,’ for a variety of purposes. How are we to assess the nature and impact of their respective ‘missions’? How might Japan be compared with other developed nations— especially its East-Asian neighbors— in this regard?

Excerpt from the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo*, 1890)

Know ye, Our Subjects: Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue. Our subjects, ever united in loyalty and filial piety, have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire [*kokutai*], and herein also lies the source of Our education. (Cited in Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, p. 248)