

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF JAPANESE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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I. HOW THE OVERSEAS JAPANESE ARE VIEWED

JAPAN'S ECONOMIC activities in Southeast Asia have rapidly expanded over the last several years as an outcome of Japan's economic growth. At the same time the notorious term, "economic animals" came onto the scene. This epithet also became a heated issue in journalism in Japan. A number of criticisms appeared of Japanese activities overseas and some of this self-criticism was directed at Japanese people at home as well as abroad regarding their attitudes toward Southeast Asian peoples. The critics insist that we Japanese should be friendly and behave nicely to other Asian peoples and also aid in the development of their countries. These discussions, however, have been rather simplistic and tend to make it simply a matter of mental attitude. They have not analyzed the question of why Japanese have been called "economic animals." They simply explain that Japanese are too aggressive in business dealings, without considering the fact that others are equally aggressive in business but are not accused like the Japanese.

I have been interested in contacts between peoples of different cultures as an anthropologist, and willingly took an opportunity last fall to make a survey of this problem in connection with a project of the Institute of Developing Economies. I spent two months in Malaysia, Singapore and India, visiting mostly joint venture companies which had Japanese staff members. I was particularly interested in observing actual interactions between Japanese and the local people. As a result of my survey I was able to collect very interesting data on how Japanese were viewed in these countries. The findings concerning the Japanese were equally interesting. In brief, Japanese opinions on local people were, to my surprise, rather poor and stereotyped, exposing their ignorance and lack of penetrating observations. In general, they were not interested in knowing the local people and their culture. This very fact seems to be closely related to the local accusations against the Japanese.

Many locals with whom I came in contact insisted that Japanese should be better prepared for their jobs abroad. In their eyes Japanese were not qualified enough to be stationed overseas. Indeed, the following items were always pointed out by those to whom I talked: (1) Japanese are not able to communicate with them because of their inability to speak the local language or the lingua franca. (2) They do not have enough knowledge of the local people, their customs and history. (3) Partly because of (1) and (2), Japanese do not mix with the local people where they are stationed. For example, the following is an opinion

presented to me by a local, high ranking businessman in Malaysia:

The trouble is that the Japanese don't mix with us. I think this is because of the language barrier. Among the Japanese who came here, very few can speak English. I think you should send more people here who can speak the language of the country, or at least English, so that it is easier for them to do their job and to do their work; to make it easier for them to understand the feelings of the people in the country. . . . I think you must have an orientation course for the Japanese when they come here. You should have six months like the Americans who come here. And they should be given an intensive course in the language. They are frequently too busy with themselves and the problems of competing with Europeans, and thus overlook these basic problems. The British send very trained men and you should do the same.

The British are colonialists—we hate them as a colonial power. But as persons and individuals and in the manner in which they deal with people they are really good. They receive training and know how to mix with the people. They know the local religions and customs. They never disturb, and this is the thing. You see, when they come here, they don't want to show that they are the master. They are humble, and get the respect of the people. They don't show their superiority. In contrast to the British, the Japanese who come here have an inferiority complex. That's the trouble. I think this is partly due to the language. Further they do not know the British system here. They must learn this. (The Chairman of the largest joint venture with Japanese steel industry in Malaysia, and also an active leading politician.)

It is important for us to realize that we are compared with other people, particularly with well-experienced Western businessmen. The local people with their past experience of many foreign contacts possess a much more sophisticated view than that of the Japanese whose comparison is always simply between "we" and the locals. Indeed I rarely came across any Japanese who was aware of British or American methods of business dealings or management practices. In this regard, the opinion of a leading lawyer and politician in Malaysia, who acts as a consultant of various international ventures is relevant.

I won't say Japanese are not good in negotiations. It's a matter of communication, really. If you negotiate in English, you can always turn the subject into some sort of a joke and then the whole thing fizzles out; you do not address the problem. Everything becomes light-hearted. I think a good many Japanese negotiators are purely hard, hardened businessmen—negotiators. Not negotiators in the real sense. Businessman . . . facts, facts, facts, you know. They are not so, shall we say, at ease. On occasions it has happened that we're discussing things in English and suddenly, you know, the Japanese talk to themselves in Japanese, and then they come back and say, "we'll have to get instructions from Japan." Well, of course, we like to stop there. They are just getting to the problem itself. Anyway, very much like the Germans, you know. We have also advised Germans. Maybe again because they do not speak the language that, you know, is the common lingua that we speak. Germans are slightly better, if you put it in that category, and because they can, we can sort of put it in a light-hearted form and they can take it. Now, maybe as I said, with the Japanese there is this failure of communication. I find that a lot of these British or American negotiators, are very jovial fellows. They know what they want, but their talk is in a sort of a friendly mood . . . you really don't feel that you are strangers. Because, you know, it's easy to communicate.

But the moment you use an interpreter or speak in a language that you're not terribly familiar with, I think that this is where the difficulty starts. In terms of negotiations, the other side must stand rigid, may be puffing a cigarette. . . . I must say, there have been quite a few Japanese negotiators that I've seen who have a very good command of English and they can appreciate these jokes. . . .

When the British send a negotiator, they are what you can call gentlemen. And this is sometimes where we are taken aback. I suppose maybe because we like people who are polite. Maybe that's our nature, I don't know. The moment you are confronted with people who behave a little abnormally from us, then we say, "now who are these people?"

The British approach is not so abrupt, so direct, so blunt. You know, this British gentleman's way . . . every thing so . . . "after you" sort of procedure. But not so much with the Americans. The Americans . . . of course there are very fine negotiators who spend time negotiating all around the world for our concessions. So they are, of course, trained people. They have got, what do they call it, the first rule of negotiating: Never give up, that sort of thing. Their approach is slightly different and the British way is the more polished. The Americans . . . it's simply the way that they talk . . . the way they talk among themselves. The language is not the same refined language that the British gentleman would use. The British always pick the right man, the right temperament. You know, this is important. They watch with whom you will talk. They even study the fellow's interests; what sort of whiskey he drinks. All these things are at the finger-tips of the negotiators. So they know exactly what the man likes and what the man doesn't like. They make a special effort to do that.

I think what is required in the Japanese case is to have a slightly better selection of personnel sent overseas. To me it's important that if you go to another country you must really try to understand how the other country is going to react. If you're going to put your ideas to them, you have to put your ideas in small doses so that it is acceptable. Firstly, that you are accepted. Once you are accepted, then it's easy for you to push your ideas too. But the moment you have a barrier then I think you're no good as a negotiator.

The above statements represent the views on Japanese by thoughtful and sophisticated top men in Malaysia. They point out that the weakness of overseas Japanese is the lack of training and the wrong selection of personnel. In contrast with these rather polite and objective views (partly because they themselves have not had close and long contacts with Japanese), those obtained in Singapore included more severe criticisms of Japanese. The population of Singapore consists mainly of Chinese descendants who are culturally and historically closer to Japanese, and in particular have had unfortunate experiences during the war. The following remarks were made by a Deputy Director of the largest joint venture with Japan's ship industry in Singapore, and who had also worked under the Japanese during the war. He stressed that Japanese have not changed much since the war. His remarks represent the views of many local people there; some of them were presented in more severe terms and with a touch of hostility towards Japanese.

Japanese have been living in a very insular country where they don't have much contact with the outside world. The greatest drawback is that they are not familiar with other peoples; they haven't much knowledge of overseas people. I think one of the biggest barriers is language, and secondly, social customs. Thirdly, they are

not very sociable with the local people; they tend to be inward looking, grouping together among themselves. Fourthly, they are not very open. They tend to hide their actual feelings. Japanese are quite reluctant to impart their knowledge to people, to their partners, to give away what they know. Therefore, I should say, they are nationalistic and patriotic. I think this characteristic is very well known among local people, and in Malaysia and Indonesia.

What I do feel strongly is that they don't express their opinions very clearly; they speak in few words. In a meeting they don't speak out so much. Sometimes we have doubts. We have to use reduction. What is in the back of their minds? What did they actually mean to say? Another thing is that they never decide by themselves. It is always a group decision. They work in a team, not like we Chinese; we are more individualistic. These group decisions normally go back to the head office and are not decided here.

Personal relations are also different from us. Between Japanese, you have that traditional obedience, you know, to the superior. They never answer back. But it is not so with our local people. We are more independent, and more democratic in a sense. Sometimes there is a certain amount of conflict. Suppose if a junior doesn't want to take orders from a Japanese senior, after a few times he may use his hands against the junior. These sorts of things happen occasionally. So we have to give them warnings all the time, and explain to the Japanese that this is not a custom.

I don't mind telling you, for instance, we have been in operation for seven or eight years. Now when we want to promote our local person to a certain key post we find that there is a lot of resistance from Japanese managers. They don't want the key positions to be held by local people. There are a number of capable people but they feel frustrated that they are not given promotion. They say, "not sufficient experience," or "not enough long years of maturity." They think the years which he has served are not enough, and that why he is not promoted. I think that this is a crucial problem. Are all Japanese companies like that?

I have a feeling now that Southeast Asians, Indonesians, Malaysians, Singaporeans are against the Japanese coming. There is always that feeling. You are coming to do things for your own advantage, not to help the underdeveloped. I feel like this; the Japanese say "we are bringing money here, and you must listen to me. You buy this. . . ."

The Chairman of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Singapore also shares the same view, and said the following:

I don't say Japanese are aggressive, but they are really hard-headed. Everything is business, nothing else. We don't have any exchange of culture or any similar activity between Japan and Singapore.

From what I can see now, the Japanese are just like the Europeans or like the Americans. They come here just to make money, not to make friends. But a Japanese as a person is a nice person. They are polite, very obliging people. But I think it's something . . . a policy from the government, or from their companies that send them here, I don't know. We want them to come here to make not only money but to make friends. Because we are looking to Japan as a leader of the East in the future.

The above remarks are only a handful of examples which I collected during the 60 days of the survey. There are also hundreds of similar statements criticizing Japanese in various publications. However, those presented here can be taken as fairly representative. Any remarks about other peoples should be taken

carefully because such remarks always reflect the particular speaker's social status and personality. Sometimes an accusation against other people will include the speaker's personal frustration, and also reflect his limited scope of activities and experiences. Some remarks which I heard presented an extremely distorted image of Japanese because of the speaker's unfortunate personal experience. But this situation can be found in any national group, and not just in the case of Japanese. In this sense, I regard these examples as quoted above to be worthy of note and to be shared by many local peoples. Also they agree with my observations, although my interpretations of Japanese behavior are not the same.

Having given these pictures of overseas Japanese, I would like to make clear what is behind the scene. I do not intend to defend Japanese, but I do wish Japanese to be understood by other peoples, so that they will not develop hostile feelings because of their misunderstandings of the Japanese. At the same time, we Japanese should know thoroughly the causes of our weakness in contacts with other peoples, and should try to make improvements in the future. I would like to present the main issue of this essay in two aspects: One is the analysis of Japanese behavior toward other peoples, in relation to their knowledge of other peoples and cultures. Second, the social habits of Japanese which expose their weaknesses when they deal with other peoples.

II. JAPANESE KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PEOPLES

When a man has grown up in a homogeneous society where one hardly has an opportunity to have normal contact with men from other cultures, his knowledge of other peoples is acquired through books and various kinds of mass media, not through his own observation of, and experience with, other peoples. Without direct contacts, images of other peoples are idealized on the basis of his own framework. Before a Japanese meets any other people, he possesses a fairly well established ready-made image of the people, and he tends to stick with this image even when he actually faces the people. Therefore, the image that they have of the local people where they are stationed is rather simple and old fashioned, and in the case of Southeast Asia the image is underdeveloped or distorted by the unfortunate historical experiences of colonialism. They are hardly familiar with the social structure and culture of the society, since not only they have not had an opportunity to study it, but also they are not oriented toward such study. In this regard, the school curriculum they had was rather poor, nor do they make any effort to learn individually, although they do come across fragmented information through journals and television. They simply believe that to acquire such knowledge is the business of others.

Indeed, wherever a Japanese community abroad exists, there is always one man whom the community regards as knowledgeable about the people and country, and they usually suggest that a visitor like me would want to meet such a man. Such a man is usually not unlike a school teacher who teaches the history of a country which he has never visited. Often this "local expert" is a manager of

a bank or business firm. This kind of man has a curious self-confidence as a result of being regarded as the most knowledgeable man in his community. Many local Japanese share his knowledge. He is glad to tell visitors the history of the country in a 19th century fashion with an out-dated theory, and speaks about interesting local customs which he has happened to see during his stay in the country, adding his own interpretation about them. He is devoid of a social-scientific approach. There is a wide gap between his knowledge and his behavior in daily life: His knowledge does not help him in his daily dealings with local people.

I find here one of the characteristics of Japanese intellectuals who have obtained imported knowledge, from China in the old days and from the West in modern times but continue to practice Japanese ways. This is linked to the practice of Japanese scholars who hardly ever create a constructive theory out of their own empirical data. Instead, they are professionals who apply an imported ready-made theory to the data in front of them. This Japanese intellectual tradition also hinders overseas Japanese from reorganizing their mistaken presuppositions. In general, they lack curiosity and penetrating observation, which are essential requirements when one faces other cultures. Not only are they not interested in local people, but they also are not used to making an objective observation and analysis of the people in front of them.

Such a defect is easily observable even among their own people. Their analysis and presentation of the third person is rather poor. What information A gets from B concerning a third person (X) is what kind of a relationship B has with X, and what kind of person he himself is, not X is. Japanese are generally much more interested in the *relationship* between Ego and the third person, rather than the third person himself. His remarks on X are, therefore, subjective. This basic attitude is applied to the local people where they are stationed. Their remarks about the local people normally carry an emotional tone, such as how he likes or dislikes them. Some of them were quite keen indeed to tell me how intimate they were with, how they liked or how much they were liked by a local man.

Owing to a cultural gap, coupled by his subjective approach, what he believes is often at odds with what the local men think. Indeed, I often came across cases in which the Japanese staff was not aware of how much the local was frustrated or dissatisfied with the Japanese ways. It is tragic to see that the Japanese, although full of good will and sincere at his work, is regarded as a misfit by the local staff. Many Japanese who are keen to establish a closer relationship with locals believe that they will get the same reaction from the local staff as from the Japanese staff. And it takes several years of experience to realize that they are not successful in that way.

The reason for them sticking to the ready-made image can also be attributed to self-defence in the face of culture shock. One should imagine how strong the culture shock is for a man who has come out of his homeland for the first in his life. Not only the scenery changes, but also the entire rhythm of life, including the reactions of people. This culture shock makes him stick to his own way,

which is the only way he can pull himself out of a state of disorganization. Thus, a Japanese will become more Japanese, thereby divorcing himself from the reality before him.

Since the image of other people is ingrained in his own system, it never occurs to him that other people might have an entirely different system, although he is aware of their different outlook and customs. It is not their habit to think that there are totally different systems from their own. Even after my lecture at the Japanese Chamber of Commerce at Singapore, a couple of Japanese businessmen asked me if they could force the Japanese system on the locals. Most of them believed that their own system (Japanese) was the best, so that it should also be applied to the locals. They do not think of different systems in a relative way. The successful economic development of Japan in comparison with that of other Asian countries has made them believe that they are more advanced in systems. This attitude regrettably blinds Japanese from seeing differences between Japanese and locals. At home they never had to accommodate or to adjust themselves to systems other than their own.

Normally it takes several years for a Japanese to recognize that there are *other* systems which are different from their own. It is difficult to convince them by mere talk; only their own experiences can teach them. Most Japanese stationed abroad have only one or two years' experience overseas. Those with over five years experience are rather rare. Therefore, the majority of Japanese are amateurs in dealing with other people; they are unqualified in dealing with those from other cultures.

The worst situation is created when these unqualified people form a dominant voice among the overseas Japanese community. In fact, those who have several years' experience and have close contacts with the local people are the minority in a Japanese overseas community. The Japanese attitude created through such an atmosphere certainly becomes the image of Japanese people in the minds of the locals. Unfortunately this is the case found in most Asian countries. Even those who stayed abroad several years will indulge themselves in this level without opening their eyes for their own new discoveries. They indulge in their "Japanese mood" which could never be shared by the locals. They form an island of Japanese culture without any exchange or interaction with local culture. The contacts with the locals naturally become minimal—only business dealings; thus they become notorious "economic animals."

III. JAPANESE SOCIAL HABITS

A Japanese man, whether he resides in a rural or urban community, has a set of persons with whom he has constant dealings and whom he regards as most important. They are people connected through one's daily work: They are co-villagers in the rural setting, and co-workers in the urban setting. His close friends are mostly found among them. He may have relatives and other friends and acquaintances elsewhere, but they stand at a secondary place in comparison

with his co-workers. For a Japanese, to share a common work place or a common experience is the basis for the development of a close personal relationship. In the course of life one may change his work place one after another, so that he may have different sets of co-workers, even if he works in the same organization. In such a case, the co-workers at his earlier stage (a couple of years after employment) have a vital influence for his life long affiliation, in comparison with those who become his co-workers afterwards. Every Japanese will cherish the friendship with those people with whom he became acquainted at his comparatively early stage. It is because of this that Japanese tend to remain in the same organization as exemplified so well by the life-time employment system.

An odd feeling is held by Japanese in general against a man who has changed his job at middle age, implying a kind of suspicion that something might have been wrong between him and his previous co-workers because of his maladjustment, and that he might not be successful with other people either. In such a social atmosphere, a man all the more tends to remain where he was affiliated in his earlier stage. The recent increase in the frequency of job changes among Japanese is found mostly during their earlier stage, say within their twenties.

By middle age a man has been able to create a circle of men with whom he has a close relationship. It is like the relationship that a man establishes with his family. Once such a relationship has been established his life becomes fairly stable, he finds all the necessary requirements for his social life so that he hardly needs the help of others. As time goes on, such a relationship will be further cultivated, although there will be frictions and quarrels. Those who are involved in such a relationship come to know each other so intimately that no clear expression of one's self is required. The pattern of their interaction becomes delicate and requires various sensitive manners, not necessarily employing vocal communications.

Since most of the Japanese pass their life in his way, techniques of self-presentation and vocal communications are less developed. Thus the majority of Japanese are not prepared to deal with men other than their own group.

This is the basic reason why Japanese people do not mix with local people when they are stationed overseas. Also, it is the same reason that they are not good in speaking English or other languages. They do not pay much attention to developing various means of vocal expressions. Here, I wish to recall the statement made earlier by the Chinese Deputy Director that Japanese don't express their opinions very clearly. "Some times we do have doubts. What is in the back of their mind? What did they actually mean to say?" This is indeed a very good description of Japanese. However, such Japanese behavior can be easily mistaken as something done intentionally. In fact, it is not. One should realize how poor Japanese are in vocal communication, and probably this is doubled by their inability to speak English or Chinese. Certainly it is the fault of the Japanese since they should know that only vocal communication is dependable in communication with people from different cultures. They should

recognize that the expense is high for the lack of this realization. This is one of the aspects where the Japanese lose their battle in culture contacts. It is indeed a difficult point for Japanese: It may be easy to give them English language training, but not so easy to inculcate a habit of vocal communication at such a level as the Chinese.

Japanese do not mix or talk well even with their own people, to say nothing of their social interaction with non-Japanese. If they do have contact with strangers (people outside than their own group), they conduct it in a kind of business-like fashion, as when they speak with shop keepers, or taxi drivers. Thus, they differentiate their manners into two distinguishable categories: Their own people and strangers. Foreigners or local people where they are stationed are placed in the category of the latter. And a stranger will seldom become one of their own group since, their personal relationships are formed in their twenties. This social habit make it all the more difficult for Japanese to mix with others.

A further difficulty for a stranger trying to create a close relationship is that the close relationship for the Japanese is always expressed in a group form and not by networks that bind individuals into a one to one relationship. A stranger has to be accepted not only by an individual but by one's group members, who are reluctant to accept others who have not shared the same experience with them as full members. A stranger may be accepted as a peripheral or low status member of the group but not as an equal.

This social mechanism makes it very difficult to establish a normal personal relationship with foreigners. Every society has a mechanism to exclude others but in most societies ways are normally more complex and elaborated than that of the Japanese. The exclusiveness of Japanese is due to this simple social mechanism not because Japanese are exclusive by their nature. It is simply because Japanese group affiliation always gives utmost precedence to one particular affiliation, which at a glance looks as if Japanese have only one group affiliation. In other societies, one may have equally important affiliations to more than two different kinds of groups, so that the exclusiveness of each group is mitigated. If one could have equally important affiliations to more than two groups, one would be easily able to have the third. In such a system, an individual can play his role more freely, since an individual is not a fish in a pond, but is placed at a nodal point in a complicated network.

In other words, if one has a network relationship to A and B who are in different groups, he is able to add C easily. One's relationship to C may be different in kind from that of A or B, but he is able to have an equally close relationship with C. When a social system or group affiliation is more complicated, it provides an allowance to include the third person.

On the other hand, the simplicity of the Japanese system also forces the third person to be included regardless of his personal wish. One of the best examples of this is the heavy social pressure of a local Japanese community towards a Japanese stationed there. As I mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of Japanese group formation is to share experiences or "to be together." The fact

of being in the same place (local city or town) demands that individuals form a community. This applies only to Japanese and not to locals because Japanese experiences are peculiar to themselves although individual Japanese differ in degree and expression of the effects; the same event would not affect the locals in the same way.

One of the distinguishable characteristics of Japanese as indicated in the previous discussion, is the strong attachment to Japanese culture, as indicated by the fact that their companions are always found among the local Japanese where they are stationed. Further analysis of such a Japanese behavior pattern reveals that it is not because of mere "Japaneseness," it is more correct to say that it is the habit of strong one-way affiliation. As a matter of fact, in Southeast Asia there are many cases where an individual Japanese has become one of locals divorced from his own people. There are some Japanese who have remained in the country after having married local women and establishing businesses in the local community. These Japanese usually sever their relationships with their own people: In a sociological sense they become non-Japanese. At the same time, Japanese friends tend to sever their relationships with them. They think that these Japanese have become fishes of another pond. In this sense, the degree of localization of a Japanese is extremely high, which is quite different from the case of Chinese or Indian people who wherever they may go, and no matter how long they may stay, maintain strong networks with their own people.

In comparison with these people, the nature of the sociological relationship for Japanese is quite different. The function and strength of Japanese personal ties depends to a great extent on the situation in which individuals are placed. The maintenance of a close relationship requires tangible and constant dealings. Therefore, a set of persons who meet frequently develops a group feeling and takes on a kind of exclusive character. One's affiliation to a group naturally becomes singular.

This is why it is not easy for a Japanese man who is overseas to have equally close relations with members of the local Japanese community and also the local people who belong to entirely different groups. It can be only done by those who are quite sophisticated and outward looking and who at the same time have already acquired the firm confidence of their Japanese colleagues. Otherwise, one is too busy cultivating friendship with members of his own community to establish a closer relation with locals who are outside the group. If a man who looks for closer relationship with locals is not a fully accepted member of Japanese community, he goes to the locals and the relationship with his own people tends to become weaker—such men normally try to keep themselves outside of the local Japanese community.

Indeed, for a Japanese, it requires special talent and techniques to cross freely the boundary between the local Japanese community and others. It should be remembered that even in their homeland, they hardly ever cross the boundary of their own group. Intercommunications between groups are done mainly through top members of the groups. It is not the business of ordinary men.

Indeed, I have found that there seems to be no trouble in intercommunication on the top level between Japanese and locals. I do not think it is easy to change the behavior pattern as well as the mentality of ordinary Japanese (to make them mix with locals). As some local critics have noted, it would be better and harmless for the locals if the Japanese remain by themselves, unless they are well trained and experienced in overseas dealings. In order to improve the reputation of the Japanese-overseas, the only way seems to be to send well selected men not amateurs in terms of overseas experience.

At the same time, I wish to make it clear that if Japanese seem to be exclusive in the eyes of local people, it is not because of Japanese ethnocentrism or positive prejudice against other peoples, but rather their social habits which inhibit and discourage them from coming out from their own group.