THE POST-1945 ANTHROPOLOGY OF JAPAN

In general, it can be stated that the sociological approach is especially dangerous in fostering oversimplifications, when sociologists attempt to analyse social reality in terms of a dichotomy.

W.F. Wertheim (1964: 954)

1

Two binary and theory of the anthropology of Japan have increasingly attracted attention in recent years. In this essay I shall discuss one set of recent studies of this subject, with reference to the theories and models that have been developed in the anthropology of Japan and an assessment of their adequacy as explanations and descriptions of Japanese reality, considered against the background of their past and current histories and their paradigmatic and social constitutions and contents. The analysis which I shall be examining was completed over the past five years by two students of Japan who work in Australia, Y. Sugimoto and B.E. Moorer, respectively a sociologist and a scholar.

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function (shakutsu), along with the separation of warriors and peasants (heiwa hantei) in the period of the civil wars (sengoku jidai) (1467-1558).

It would not be difficult to add further arguments and cases, but I now wish to turn rather to other issues in the work of Sugimoto and Moeur, namely their classifications and qualifications and the role they ascribe to anthropological studies of Japan.

II

Y. Sugimoto and R.F. Moeur have been engaged in the study of models and theories about Japan over the past five years, publishing their findings in articles and monographs in English, Japanese and German. Their main concern is with the type of model or conception discussed above and usually referred to as Nihonjirou, or 'theories of the Japanese'. They have launched a large international programme of research for the comparative study of Japanese society, its progress is reported in Dialogue, a publication established for the purpose. For the present, a brief monograph published in 1981 and adapted from earlier publications dating from 1979 and 1980 can be considered as containing a succinct summary of their most important findings and ideas up to this point (Sugimoto and Moeur 1981).

To state the central idea first, the authors consider the dominant models or theories now current to be ideological rather than scholarly, and stress the need to develop new and alternative models. They reject an approach centred on Japan alone and advocate the application of cross-cultural or universal models of analysis and explanation called 'convergence' models, foremost among which they designate the 'conflict model'. As the authors (1981: 17) see it:

All of this seems to be moving us toward a major reappraisal which may result in some new models for understanding Japanese society. Though it is too early to forecast the new image, it seems likely that, as with sociology which is itself multidimensional, the holistic image of Japan will be replaced not simply by another similarly restricting image, but perhaps by several competing images. For this reason, the next decade will be exciting for those studying Japanese society. Such a scenario will also underline the need of those dealing with Japan for up-to-date information, not the hackneyed cliches of 'the old Japan hand' who peddle Japanalia.

It is clear that Sugimoto and Moeur see little merit in an approach which is focused upon the study of Japan as one particular culture or field of ethnological enquiry and do not regard such an orientation as conducive to understanding that society. It is one of my aims to defend an anthropological point of view, which is basically no less comparative, and indeed to agree with the need for it, for inter-disciplinary work and a variety of approaches and fields. I feel stimulated to respond to Moeur and Sugimoto's publications, as the authors put much of the blame on anthropology for the dominance of what they consider a deficient
The dominant model is labelled (1981: 3) 'The Great Tradition: Images of Consensus and Homogeneity'. It is in a picture of Japanese society which leads one to believe that it is exceptionally well integrated and that, to a degree greater than that to be found in other similar industrialized societies, the Japanese are group-oriented and regulated by norms placing a great value on consensus and on loyalty to 'the group'. Responsibility for the creation and dissemination of 'the great tradition' model is placed, first of all, upon 'the anthropological heritage', sketched in a lengthy passage (ibid.) in which it is said to consist largely of Ruth Benedict's influence and limitations. In addition, three other factors are held accountable for the creation, spread and dominance of 'consensus models' (ibid.: 5-7): 'the American setting', 'the Japanese literature', and 'the relationship to ideology'.

With regard to 'the American setting', the core of the argument (ibid.: 5-6) is that, in the 1960s, the Americans tried to fit Japan into a structural-functional model of modernization. This pronouncement is followed by a characterisation of the models in use in the 1970s (ibid.: 6):

With Japan's 'modernization' accomplished or recognized, the next wave of writings... gave rise to the notion of 'Japan, Incorporated' and other portrayals of society coordinated or orchestrated 'economic animals'.

As for the next factor, 'the Japanese literature', it is pointed out that in Japan there is a large literature emphasizing Japanese uniqueness, known as Watanabe. This literature began to appear widely in the mid-1960s, and Sugimoto and Mozer argue (ibid.) that it bolstered the position of the consensus-oriented theorists. It has a broad national-character approach and has attained an ideological significance both in Japan and abroad. It can be linked to pre-war Japan and some of the concepts popular at that time, such as yamato damashii (Japanese spirit) and shidenshi (theories of climate).

Reviewing the literature classified as 'the great tradition', Sugimoto and Mozer note the over-riding orientation towards group and consensus models. They argue (ibid.: 8) that...

The work of world and industrial relations to one place where these kinds of forms have been most readily associated with concrete examples... The world of work is also an area where the debate on convergence and divergence has been most vigorous and where there seems to be the most difficulty in bridging differences in disciplines, with anthropologists tending to argue for the consensus model and Japanese uniqueness... and sociologists attempting to fit Japan into a more universal framework...

Apart from what they describe as the dominant model, Sugimoto and Mozer also point to the existence of a competing model of Japanese society, called 'The Little Tradition: Images of Conflict in Japanese Society' (ibid.: 8-9). The images thus far available, however, recount only particular conflicts and do not amount to a comprehensive or systematic view of Japanese society. As a result, those who wish to have an overview of Japanese society are obliged in the main to turn for inspiration to studies that emphasize consensus.

If consensus models seem to dominate the English-language literature, conflict
models are more pronounced in the Japanese literature. 'There is a solid Marxist
socialist tradition in Japanese scholarship on Japanese society,' they write (ibid.: 8),
'but the small drizzle which comes out in English through AMPO, Ronin or
the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars does not match it either in volume or in
creative diversity.' Sugimoto and Moser (ibid.: 11) stress that a revision of the
consensus model is in order, for three reasons:

First, empirical observation, it can be argued, does not support the holistic view of
Japanese society. Second, the methodology of these emphasizing the uniqueness
of Japanese society is seen as having major weaknesses. Third, from the perspective of
a sociology of knowledge, the ideological use of the consensus-oriented view of
Japanese society also make it unattractive.

Regarding the empirical sources of the doubt they refer to, studies do exist on
conflict in Japanese society, showing conflict to be part of every period in
Japanese history (ibid.: 11-12). The methodological shortcomings in the work of
those who are said to promote holistic images of Japan are seen as particularly
severe (ibid.: 12-15) and are discussed under five headings. The first charge is
'anecdotalism' and 'exemplarism' — that is, the provision of only arbitrarily chosen
examples. The second charge is 'linguistic reductionism' — that is, the reliance on
identifying words unique to the Japanese language. One such method is the
attribution of kotsuza (proverbs and wise sayings); another is based on the
assumption that words or expressions which possess nuances that are difficult to
translate represent special features of the Japanese national character. Again, the
method appears to be 'exemplarist' in character. The third accusation is 'elusiveness
intuitiveness', meaning that the 'uniformity theorists' have a tendency to argue
that only the Japanese, together with a few select foreigners, are able to
understand Japan at all. Sugimoto and Moser (ibid.: 14) especially deplore the
use of the term 'Japanology', because to them the word suggests knowledge
accessible only to initiated. The fourth methodological shortcoming of consensus
theory is their tendency to view the West in a mono-ethnic manner, for the
purpose of contrasting it with a supposedly homogeneous Japan. The fifth charge
is 'the comparison of non-parallel universes.' Thus, for example (ibid.: 15), one
cannot compare (i) employment practices for regular employees in Japan's
largest firms, which employ less than thirty per cent of the Japanese labour force
in the private sector, with (ii) average practices for the entire American labour
force in the private sector, the issue at the Japanese end of the comparison being,
of course, the system of lifetime employment and seniority wages. How this task
should be correctly handled, therefore, is formulated as follows (ibid.):

'The very first methodological task in comparative research is the delineation of the
relevant sub-populations in each society to be compared. This allows the research
to align universes in terms of such stratification variables as age, occupation, level of
education, sex and social class.

Anthropologists have shown the dangers of comparing seemingly similar
universes in cross-cultural studies, though whether Sugimoto and Moser's
proposals (1983) for a 'multi-cultural' approach will enable these and other
difficulties to be overcome in practice remains to be seen.

Sugimoto and Moser (1981: 16-19) end their discussion with a number of
recommendations designed to improve studies of Japanese society. The new
directions they suggest are: (1) the recognition of variation in Japanese
behaviour, culture and society; (2) the recognition of conflict; (3) the need for
new models, in particular conflict models; and (4) cooperative research.

It is obviously hard to disagree in principle with any proposal which would
improve the perception and understanding of Japan, yet I find difficulty with the
programme suggested and with the appended recommendations. On the one
hand, I would not rely so totally on the social sciences as they propose, nor, on
the other hand, do I share their low view (ibid.: 19) of Japanology and Japanese
studies:

Gimmicks, we suspect, will remain as the major trademark of those interested in
'Japanology', but they will be viewed with caution by those interested in promoting
Japanese studies that are firmly rooted in the social sciences.

The 'social sciences' appear somewhat over-rated at a source of inspiration and
orientation for the anthropological study of Japan; whereas Japanology is in my
experience a rich field, highly graded and far from being an antiquated or
'gimmick-laden' pursuit. Attention is well directed upon it, as indeed upon the
humanities and letters at large.

III

The critical questions raised by Moser and Sugimoto can be concisely stated,
and I make use of a formulation by J. Galtung. Galtung's subject is the
intellectual and academic worlds that exist at present in a number of national
and cultural forms and contexts; his description is equally valid for the student of
Japan (Galtung 1981: 81; original italics and notes omitted):

What is it that intellectuals do? I think it is fair to refer to their task as
descriptive and explanatory, that is, describing what reality is like and trying to understand
it. In the typical methodology text-book language it would be referred to as data
collection, data processing and data analysis on the one hand, and theory formulation
on the other. As we know, either of these may condition the other.

But intellectual activity, of course, goes beyond this. There is the dimension of
paradigm analysis, of looking into the foundations of what one does, of exploring
the limitations of one's own intellectual enterprise. One may say that this is, in a
certain way, exactly what this essay is about. And here is one very simple little
point: it is all too easy for each one of us to see the subjective limitations of any one
particular colleague. We can see them because we can compare with other
colleagues.

At issue are descriptions, explanations, theories of knowledge, epistemology and
the sociology of knowledge. Contrary to Sugimoto and Moser, I take them to be
less simple, and constituted of finer categories and gradations, not so easily
brought in accordance with empirical realities, and in need of finer historical
perspective. Without the proper precision, the discussion remains at the level of stereotypes.

Every researcher everywhere inevitably has preconceived notions. Invisible at the time, they emerge later through comments, discussion and criticism, throughout other studies and comparisons. Such, at least, is the experience of many; consider for example the following remarks by the historian G.K. Goodman, in looking back over his previous work (1983: 166):

Back in the more remote immediate postwar decade, in the wake of our enthusiasm for the seeming wonders of Occupation reforms, many of us, then eager-budding Japanologists, framed our research in terms of the quest for ‘basic decadence’ in ‘old’ Japan as well as for ‘reasonable’ (to us Jeffersonian American) explanations for the attributed persistence of the ‘ministers of modernization’, whose triumphs we touted. I was one of those almost useless types, and the Polityama approach that I took to my subject matter in The Design Impact or Japan (Leiden: L. Brill 1967) is damning testimony with which I still have to live.

What a surprise it is, then, nearly three decades later to discover that there are still researchers who are trying to find and to extol Japanese heterodoxy and dissident movements, and, in this instance, to suggest that shūsia (private academies), of some eight or ten very different types were perhaps at the root of all. If Masuzuka in the second half of the eighteenth century had an ‘open and progressive atmosphere’- as reflected in the social mix of Motomi Norinaga’s Suzu no Ya, are we perhaps supposed to conjure up a Tokugawa version of the New School for Social Research?

In a similar vein, we can treat the observations of the anthropologist S. Scheinah, reflecting on his fieldwork in Japan (1979: 244):

As an Indian, the most important problem I faced in my fieldwork, particularly when I began to study the class structure, was the absence of caste. Not that I went to Japan without any knowledge about its social structure; in fact, I did not expect to find caste in Japan, except for the numerically small Eta, the samurai.

What I refer to is the strong impression we carry of things which may be contrary to our surface intellectual perceptions. While I did not expect to find caste, I thought I would discover something similar to caste. When I did not find anything like that, I felt as though the ground under my feet had been removed. It took some time for me to realize that I was reading too much of my Indianness into Japanese society. At the same time, I also became aware that I would not face headway with my work without bringing my Indianness into continuous comparison with everything I studied. This operated at the conscious as well as the unconscious level. In fact, I could not carry on with interviews with villagers without asking me at some point during the interview, ‘How is it in India?’ Such occasions threw up facts or ideas which were similar to things Indian or in sharp contrast. In this way I not only learnt about Japan but my understanding of my own society became sharper, which incidentally also proved to the usefulness of the comparative method in studying societies.

In the course of a discussion on recent studies of Chinese and comparative Chinese-Western intellectual history, J. Ching (1984: 473, 482) remarks that in her field, the student is well advised to start with human beings in their diversity rather than with abstract theory. This viewpoint is contained in her call for ‘trans-cultural sensibilities’.

I have thus far noted various limitations in the approach and orientation of Muir and Sugimoto. To these I would add here the weaknesses resulting from their failure to recognize culture. The approach that I would favour is one that is holistic, interpretative, comparative, humanistic, historical and open, albeit sharpened by a keen anthropological and theory of knowledge. I do not attack the illusion that anthropologists cultivate diversity for its own sake, but I would rather side with Geertz (1983: 154, 183-2), when he argues that:

...ethnography is an attempt not to extol diversity but to take it seriously as itself an object of analytic description and interpretative reflection; it welds the processes of self-knowledge, other-perception, other-understanding that identifies, or very nearly, sorting out what we are and sorting out whom we are among.

The anthropology of Japan is not so uniform and unchanging, as Sugimoto and Muir would have it, work by American, European and Japanese anthropologists attest to this. From studies of the development of-- in this case primarily American—anthropology (Wolf 1969, Hatch 1986, Ortner 1984), one is tempted to believe that Sugimoto and Muir’s stress upon conflict orientation is as much to be accounted for by its dominance in the social sciences in the 1970s as by an exclusive superiority or inherent appropriateness to Japan.

Nor can the comparative methods be used and advocated be taken for granted. There are ample studies that demonstrate the empirical weaknesses that so often invalidate the bold ideal or theorem when comparison is all too wide and shallow. As for global comparisons, I find the work of A. Kappasamo and R. Needham offers useful perspectives and method. Findings from general anthropology are not to be neglected by anthropologists who study Japan. Needham’s insights into dual sovereignty (1984a) sheds light, for instance, on the institution of the Insha and the divorce of secular and sacred authority (and cf. also Yoshida’s paper in this volume). Kappasamo’s studies of ritual (1979) are analytically clear and rich in insight and can be used for the study of ritual in Japan. Comparison on a regional, thematic and interdisciplinary basis should also receive attention, as testified by the work of de Vos and Sato (1984), a good recent example of the combination. Finally, M. Tuck’s (1986) study of the Japanese and ‘cosmopolitan’ medicine in Kyoto and elsewhere in Japan shows these two to exist largely apart from each other. It seems that one cannot take a medical system out of context any more than an industrial or any other system.

In sum, Sugimoto and Muir’s presentation of the anthropology of Japan and their account of its ‘methodological shortcomings’ is both inadequate and misleading, while the ‘new directions’ proposed are hardly new. I share their aims and ambitions, but not their choice of instruments. I would rather venture the opinion that much of what they are looking for and recommend can indeed already be found in the anthropology of Japan, East Asian area studies and ‘Japanology’ or Japanese studies.

One more word about ‘Japanology’ and ‘Japanese Studies’—and by implication about the relationship between the anthropology of Japan and other
disciplines and fields of Japanese studies. One can take the two as identical and regard ‘Japanology’ as the earlier and ‘Japanese Studies’ as the subsequent development in the research of Japan. I do not find it fruitful to argue over the word, but my appreciation of Japanology is a different one. I do not share the derivative image and opinion that Sugimoto and Moser present.

The value of Japanology or Japanese Studies is amply demonstrated by the research and publications produced by members of bodies such as the European Association for Japanese Studies and its national chapters and centres, the Japan Anthropology Workshop (JAWS), established at the conference in Oxford at which many of the papers in the present volume were first presented, and corresponding organisations and centres in North America, Asia and elsewhere (see, for example, Sofie 1986). It seems quite unreasonable to level the accusation against anthropological studies in particular of having created then disseminated the stereotypes of Japan which rule public, popular and academic minds. These appear in any case to be not so much the work and influence of anthropologists as of publicists, journalists and the like, as studies such as those by Lehnmann (1978, 1984) have indicated. More (1986) names academics among the instigators and perpetuators of stereotypical images and conceptions, but it is perhaps significant that anthropologists do not feature among them. More’s remarks are not entirely out of place, but on the other hand this fact does not warrant the emphasis placed by Moser and Sugimoto on the use of stereotypes instead of the ethnographic realities in the research papers and critical discussions they refer to.

In fairness, however, it should be added that Moser and Sugimoto’s project is potentially extensive, wide and penetrating to the point where it would involve multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural and multi-paradigmatic contributions. This would lead to finer conceptual, methodological and empirical modes through which precision in presentation and findings could be enhanced. At the same time it would also prevent the domination of the field by a single orientation, approach or discipline. Some of this, in fact, is already discernible in the studies which appear as the Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre of the University of Melbourne, under the editorship of J.V. Neustupnov and Y. Sugimoto, now joined (with number five) by G. McCormack.

Finally, of course, mention must be made of the anthropology of Japan undertaken by Japanese anthropologists as it is promoted by Japanese institutions. Prominent among the institutions are the Ethnological Foundation of Japan, the Folklore Society of Japan, the National Museum of Ethnology, the Union of Nine Learned Societies, the Anthropological Society of the University of Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan University and other universities, and the Japanese Studies Centre of the Japanese Foundation. For useful surveys of Japanese anthropology see the overview by Sofie (1981), Ishida’s investigation (1986) of Western and Japanese orientations as applied to the study of Japan.

Nakane’s comments (1970, 1974) on the anthropological study of Japan, and Kanzawa’s analysis (1979) of trends in American studies of Japan, newer reports and studies are available (e.g. Umesao, Buri and Krueger 1984) or in preparation. In the work of Japanese anthropologists, comparative perspectives and the interchange with American and European anthropology are beginning to offer an important new platform for discussion and research, such as in the work on religion by Fos (1984) and Yoshida (1984). The outlook for the future is promising as the field continues to grow.

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**PART I**

**DIMENSIONS OF THE JAPANESE WORLD-VIEW:**

**TIME AND SPACE**