

'Dimensions' or 'Dimension' of Japanese Society?

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REVIEW ESSAY

KENNETH HENSHALL states in the preface of his 1999 book *Dimensions of Japanese Society* that his aim is 'to present a fair and balanced account of Japanese society... that recognizes both diversity and uniformity, both harmony and conflict, both the particular and the universal'.¹ Written at a time when most academics had long since discarded the *nihonjinron* style of writing as an over-simplified, artificial construct of national identity in favour of more sophisticated frameworks such as variation-conflict models, it would appear that Henshall is attempting to locate his work somewhere between the two as the next 'logical' development in Japanese studies. Not only does he fail in this attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of such an approach to present a 'balanced' interpretation, but more fundamentally, he unintentionally exposes the futility of engaging structures that have long since past their use-by-date.²

Henshall's discourse is predicated upon his argument that both the one-dimensional *Nihonjinron* literature of the 1970s and 1980s (that tended to present Japan's success in terms of uniqueness and superiority), and the more recent works of the late 1980s and 1990s (that have focused on diversity, conflict and the universal aspects of Japanese society), are too extreme and thus incapable of presenting a 'balanced' understanding of 'the Japanese'.³ But it would seem that he believes one is more extreme than the other, for although he condemns the oversimplified manifestations of *nihonjinron*, he then proceeds to essentialise what it means to be Japanese. He argues that it is not necessary to 'throw the baby out with the bath water'⁴ in rejecting the *nihonjinron* approach as it is illogical to cast away defining characteristics in the process of getting rid of the unwanted elements of exaggeration and gross generalizations.

While acknowledging that the needs and feelings of the Japanese are universal, he contends that it is the degree to which they have been elaborated within Japanese society that makes the Japanese different. For example, in referring to Japan as a 'group-oriented society', Henshall states that 'though the nature of this 'groupism' is yet another exaggeration, it is true that in the main the Japanese do seem to prefer to belong to a group rather than be freewheeling individuals And more so than westerners they seem to be uncomfortable on their own'.⁵ Such sweeping generalizations beg the question of how can they serve any purpose other than to further entrench existing stereotypes of what it means to be 'Japanese'? Is there any empirical evidence to show that 'the Japanese' value or belong to more groups than are extant in other societies? Surely, attachment to an ever-changing cross-section of

'groups' is fundamental to all cultures/societies and there is nothing inherently 'unique' about this behaviour. The broad scope of the subject matter covered in Henshall's book is indicative of the underpinnings of his thesis. On the surface it tilts towards a post-modernist inclusive approach, in that it not only deals with 'mainstream' society, but also with those on the margins - the usual 'suspects' such as the Koreans, the Okinawans and Burakumin etc.; and also the hitherto unexplored categories of the elderly, the sick, and the mentally and physically disabled as 'outsiders'. However, it becomes apparent that this broad schematic is there to serve the more important function of demonstrating the overriding distinctiveness with which 'the Japanese' understand and order their world, rather than exploring the dynamics of these groups within society. In this respect, Henshall's 'inclusiveness' turns out to be conditional, in that it is only viewed from a 'top-down' or one-way perspective that denies agency to, and between, these sub-groups that are represented more in terms of what they 'lack' than by what they contribute. All thought and behaviour is filtered through a binary classification of pure-impure to provide what he sees as an explanatory key to understanding 'the Japanese'. What ever 'falls below the normal standard', including the people on the margins, is considered 'impure'; and this differentiation is seen as the rationale for behaviour. For example, 'sickness as impurity explains the shortage of doctors, or the long hospitalization of the elderly patient in order to keep the home clean.'⁶

Henshall claims to want to open up Japan and the Japanese to western observers so as to be more understandable in universal terms, but not at the expense of 'watering down' the cultural characteristics that differentiate them from 'the west'. His pronouncement that 'it is patently inappropriate to say that there is nothing Japanese about Japan'⁷ appears to be the *sine qua non* of his argument. But it is also the crux of the problem with his approach. From an analytical perspective, it is a meaningless statement - the same could be said about the French, the Germans, the English, etc. - and be equally irrelevant. Such culturally-laden terms obfuscate the dynamic processes involved in the continual negotiations within a society and across societies of what constitutes 'cultural' identity.⁸ Matthew Allen states in his review of Henshall's book that 'there is an inference here that 'their' ['the Japanese'] internal differences can be reduced to background noise.'⁹ Indeed, Henshall's functionalist lens tends to view 'the Japanese' as a single unit of study, that can only be understood by interpreting its component parts as contributing to the stability or requirements of the total system; that the reason 'the Japanese' think and behave in the way that they do is because of the purpose that behaviour serves in maintaining some sort of structural 'equilibrium'.¹⁰ The implication is that 'the Japanese' have a heightened sense of these functional implications and they, either explicitly or implicitly, 'know their place' in the hierarchically structured society. Although he would deny it, it almost seems as if the author would ultimately prefer to keep 'the Japanese' as a more-or-less rigidly bound 'other' because they will somehow lose their value as subject matter if the cultural stereotype is deconstructed to lay bare the functional 'myth' of what it means to be 'Japanese'.

Recent works by historians such as Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Norma Field and Yoshio Sugimoto are less inclined to engage the concept of essentialising 'Japaneseness'. Unlike Henshall, Morris-Suzuki contends that 'balance' in understanding is achieved through the multiple histories and traditions of Japanese

people that change over time and space. It is important to look at the dynamic interactions between and within each different strata of society not only from the top-down but also from the bottom up so as to articulate the disparate motivations, agencies and outcomes. From this perspective, it is possible to have multiple readings of what it means to be Japanese that give voice to the different individuals' different interpretations.¹¹ Indeed, Morris-Suzuki believes that it is necessary to 'turn the spotlight onto the notion of 'culture' itself, forcing us to reconsider the soothing images of homogeneity and harmony which the word conveys [that there needs to be] a recognition of the difference which has always existed within the category "Japanese".'¹²

Yoshio Sugimoto also promotes the idea of difference. He focuses on the multicultural nature of Japanese society that includes not only different ethnicities, but more broadly identifiable 'subcultural diversity'.¹³ His argument is that 'Japan does not differ fundamentally from other countries in its internal variation and stratification ... subcultures do proliferate on a number of non-racial dimensions, such as region, age, occupation, education, and so forth;'¹⁴ and 'what is needed is a framework which not only recognizes those subcultures but also accounts for the political, economic and social relations between the sub groupings which produce these subcultures.'¹⁵ Sugimoto wants to shift the focus away from the stereotypical view of Japanese society that he believes is manifested and controlled by the dominant subculture, the 'university-educated salaryman',¹⁶ and bring to the foreground the multiplicity of subcultural groups that operate largely outside of this elite sector.

Norma Field's *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* is in many ways the most sophisticated of the approaches under discussion. An obvious difference is that it is written as a personal account of her encounters in Japan, in 1998-99, with three individuals who had, and were continuing to stand up for what they believed in the face of strong societal pressure to desist. Their accounts are juxtaposed with the daily routine of the author's mother and grandmother that represents their reality of being Japanese. The burning of the national flag by the Okinawan supermarket owner; the determination of the Christian middle-aged widow of a self-defence force member, killed in a car accident, to fight the appropriation of his remains as a minor deity in accordance with Shinto tradition; and the mayor of Nagasaki who publicly acknowledged that the dying Emperor Hirohito was responsible for Japan's World War Two experiences, are powerfully expressed, not only as the stories themselves, but as a means of conveying that Japanese people have the same desires and resentments as people in all societies; that they are not an alien 'other', but rather are living under a system of control that Sugimoto refers to as 'friendly authoritarianism'.¹⁷

Field conveys many of the same constraints in Japanese society as Henshall does in his book, such as notions of 'harmony' and 'social responsibility', but without the essentialist cultural overtones. By showing human agency at the point of interaction with these constraints, Field exposes the complexity of meanings that are able to be negotiated from within the pervasive system of structural controls. Not surprisingly, she believes that it is time to move beyond the limiting frameworks that effectively 'create a vise' not only on the Japanese people, but people the world over; that it is counterproductive and essentialising to assert that 'being Japanese means

having Japanese blood means being a citizen of the nation-state called Japan means feeling Japanese.¹⁸ Rather than reducing the complexity of people's lives into a 'rigid singularity' Field believes that, by making transparent the states' systems of control and the groups whose interests are best served by maintaining the *status quo*, it will be possible to move 'beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and the close horizons of economic interest, where we can ask, what are the conditions conducive to just and meaningful lives for human beings at the end of the twentieth century?'¹⁹

Reading the above works (including Henshall's) brings to mind Ludmilla Jordanova's contention that 'historians stand firmly in the present as mediators between past and future it is fitting that historians come to see their field as helping to create *understandings and identities that are future-orientated*.'²⁰ (my italics). This raises the question of relevance in studying 'the Japanese' as a unit of study at a time when such artificial constructs of 'cultural identity' are being questioned as to their validity. Rather, Field believes that the challenge for historians is to 'delineate the obstacles confronting us both in specific societies and in their relationship to each other.'²¹ This approach is predicated upon the notion that we are all members of the human race; that there is more to be gained through cross-'cultural' comparison for a better understanding of ourselves, whoever we may be; and that by alienating the 'other' as separate from 'us' limits our ability to recognize all of the different ways in which human groups-societies have adapted to the process of 'living' through time and space. From this perspective, it is more valuable to acknowledge the full range of motives and consequences inherent in multiple responses, rather than be content with particularist accounts that have no currency in the present, other than for political purposes.

This brings us back to Henshall's approach to Japanese studies as manifested in his *Dimensions* book. Although he says that the Japanese are not unique, he portrays them as being sufficiently different from the rest of us so as they can only be understood by viewing them through the 'Henshall lens'. That this lens tends to have an essentialist tint does not seem to bother him. Indeed, he appears to believe that it is sufficient to modify, or make less absolute, the cultural traits he observes by 'relativising' them with an essentialised 'west'. Consequently, despite his claims to the contrary, Henshall's book effectively presents a single 'dimension' of Japanese society, in that it ultimately attributes the thoughts and behaviours across all of his identified layers within that society to the, if not 'unique', then very different ways in which 'the Japanese' understand their world. He seems determined to cling to his outdated approach that tends to obscure the dynamic processes of both inter- and intra- 'group' variation and conflict, and deny individuals their own reality of meanings; unlike Morris-Suzuki, Sugimoto and Field, who argue for frameworks that include the possibility of 'other', not as 'the other' but as an integral part of the Japanese whole, and indeed the global whole. It would seem that what is needed for a more 'balanced' understanding of 'the Japanese' is a more dynamic framework that gives agency to the multiple 'dimensions' of Japanese society.

NOTES

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- ¹ Kenneth Henshall, *Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins and Mainstream*, London, 1999, p.x.
- ² Matthew Allen, 'Book Review: "Dimensions of Japanese Society"', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 12, no.3, December 2001, p.396.
- ³ Kenneth Henshall, p. xv.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.175.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.147.
- ⁶ Takie Sugiyama Lebra, 'Book Review: Kenneth Henshall's "Dimensions of Japanese Society"', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 59, no.4, November 2000, p.1020.
- ⁷ Kenneth Henshall, p.181.
- ⁸ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: feminism, nature and difference*, New York, 1989, p.xii.
- ⁹ Matthew Allen, p.396.
- ¹⁰ Charlotte Seymour-Smith, *MacMillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, London, 1986, p.126.
- ¹¹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time Space Nation*, New York, 1998, p.6.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.208.
- ¹³ Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Cambridge, 1997, p.6.
- ¹⁴ Yoshio Sugimoto, p.5.
- ¹⁵ Yoshio Sugimoto and Ross Mouer, *Nihonjinron at the End of the Twentieth Century: A Multicultural Perspective*, Bundoora, 1995, p.24.
- ¹⁶ Patricia G. Steinhoff, 'Book Review: Yoshio Sugimoto's "Introduction to Japanese Society"', *Japan Quarterly*, 45, no.1, January-March, 1998, p.97.
- ¹⁷ Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, p.245.
- ¹⁸ Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End*, New York, 1993, p.278.
- ¹⁹ Norma Field, p.279.
- ²⁰ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London, 2000, p.206.
- ²¹ Norma Field, p.279.