

## Foreword

This issue of *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* focuses on Japan, but also contains articles on modern Chinese literature and on Hong Kong's industrialization experiences. While the issue as a whole does not have a common theme, the articles on Japan do. They all deal with the issue of 'the outsider' in Japanese society, and give us a more nuanced picture of Japanese society than we are normally confronted with. These articles invite us to reflect on the standard presentation of Japan as a homogeneous society. In this foreword I shall problematize the way Japan has been presented by Western as well as Japanese authors. By doing so, I also hope to give the reader a broader context in which these articles on Japan can be more fruitfully understood.

Until recently it was quite normal to find in many works on Japan routine statements pertaining to the homogeneity and absence of class-consciousness in Japanese society. Some have argued for the *unique* uniqueness of Japanese society, be it positive or negative uniqueness, often concluding that Japanese society compared to other societies is more group-oriented, places more emphasis on consensus and harmony, and values group membership more highly.

Polls showing that 90 per cent of the Japanese feel that they belong to the middle class seem to support the premise that Japanese society places greater value on homogeneity and harmony than do most Western countries. The Japanese are regularly seen as a nationally defined group of people sharing the same values and orientations, the same organizational principles, for example the group model and *ie*-organization,<sup>1</sup> or the same psychological traits such as an inclination towards *amae*,<sup>2</sup> harmony, formality or circumspection, to name but a few. Even analyses not subscribing to the 'Japan as uniquely unique' dictum have often tended to treat Japanese society as one homogeneous group with no significant internal variations, that is to say, the level of generalization may be very high indeed.

Since the Second World War the understanding of Japan has undergone temporal fluctuations and has oscillated between negative and positive interpretations of Japan's image. Towards the end of the Second World War and during the 1950s Japan was mostly described as a backward, hierarchical and exotic society badly in need of modernization. Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) is one such example. The underlying assumption was that Japanese society was understood to be a whole composed of homogeneous individuals and usually a set of common denominators would be identified. This type of analysis tended to portray Japanese society as monolithic and unique.

The approach changed somewhat during the 1960s when modernization theory recast Japan as a successful case of modernization without revolutionary disruptions or major social dislocations. Japan was lauded as a non-communist model for development in Asia in particular. In the late 1960s the approach became more particularistic in reaction to the universalistic modernization theory and attention shifted to what set the Japanese apart, mainly from the Americans, but from other modernized Western countries as well. Japan was seen to be endowed with certain unique, culturally determined traits. The supposed uniqueness of Japanese social organization, psychology and interpersonal relations became the centre of attention: books by Doi Takeo introduced the allegedly unique Japanese concept of *amae* (*The Anatomy of Dependence*, 1973); Nakane Chie published books on the *ie* and Japanese society as vertically structured (*Tate shakai no ningen kankei* [Interpersonal Relationships in a Vertically Structured Society, 1967]; *Japanese Society*, 1970; *Tate shakai no rikigaku* [Dynamics of a Vertically Structured Society, 1978]); and Edwin Reischauer (*The Japanese*, 1977) maintained that the Japanese with their group-orientation differed fundamentally from the individualistic Westerners. At the same time, the Japanese economy began to prosper and the general mood was one of growing confidence in the Japanese way of doing things on the part of both Japanese and Western writers.

This resulted in various 'learn-from-Japan' waves from the end of the 1970s until about the end of the 1980s, when economic crisis rendered the argument based on Japan's success less powerful. In the 'learn-from-Japan' literature, it was argued that Western countries should imitate successful Japanese practices in management, industrial relations and education programmes. This view was propagated particularly by American observers; E. Vogel's *Japan as Number One* (1979) is probably the most famous example. Vogel attributes minimal human alienation in the rapid industrialization process to Japan's special group-orientation, which allegedly served to strengthen kinship ties and group-sponsored social mobility. These Japanese practices, though unique to that culture, were also seen as transferable to other cultures and in that sense transcultural.

From the mid-1980s and continuing well into the 1990s, we see a wave of revisionism, where the Japanese social and political system is viewed in a much more critical light than previously. The national bureaucracy was attacked in, for example, C. Johnson's *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982) and K. Wolfenren's *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (1990), where it is maintained that the leadership's lack of accountability is making the Japanese citizen unhappy and confused and as a result disinclined to participate in the political process. Intensified trade frictions and the rise of Japan-bashing are both phenomena that encourage revisionist writings, mainly concerned with how to contain the influence of Japan and how to make its social system more compatible with Western societies. Ironically, revisionists with their attention to Japanese peculiarities have been strong advocates of increased awareness of Japan, its language, history as well as its political and economic structures and behaviour.

In broader terms, it can be said that approaches since the Second World War have fluctuated between the particularistic and the universalistic and that the overall evaluation of Japanese society has swung between positive and negative.

One common factor though in all these approaches is the lack of attention to internal variation in Japanese society, as Sugimoto Yoshio states in his book *An Introduction to Japanese Society*

(1997) as well as in many of his other works, notably with Ross Mouer. The overriding focus on the homogeneity of Japanese society he attributes to the early studies like Benedict's, which unfortunately led to the limited outlook of many later studies in terms of attention to internal variation. As Sugimoto argues, there is no reason to assume that Japan is in fact more homogeneous or egalitarian than other societies. Seen from the point of view of the percentage of minority groups in the population, for example, Japan is placed in the middle group alongside countries like the Netherlands, Germany and Lebanon – hardly nations we would normally characterize for their 'homogeneity'. Among countries that have smaller proportions of minority groups than Japan, he mentions Portugal, Austria, Bangladesh and Denmark, while among those with a higher proportion than Japan, we find China, Sweden, Cambodia and Egypt.

As far as class distinction is concerned, Sugimoto demonstrates that there is no difficulty involved in using classic Marxist class categories (capitalist, middle class, working class) to analyse Japanese society using occupation as the dividing principle.

There is demonstrably no valid reason then for assuming that Japan is more homogeneous or egalitarian than most countries. Indeed, it seems that the main reason for such an assumption lies in the long-standing tendency to overlook variety in the writings on Japanese society. This issue of the *Copenhagen Journal* provides the reader with some insights into a few selected examples of the heterogeneity of Japanese society.

The articles deal with different aspects of marginality in Japan. Marginality here is understood as covering activities that are not accepted openly by mainstream society, i.e. personal traits or behaviour that are considered deviant, that one would attempt to hide or distance oneself from, at least in public. The identification of something as marginal implies the existence of a 'norm' or a 'centre'. This norm, however, is described in many different ways depending on which, perhaps marginalized, group or person is describing it. In a sense this means that any marginalized group or individual can be seen as part of the norm by other marginalized groups or individuals or in diffe-

rent contexts. It thus becomes a highly relational and context-dependent term. This will be evident in the articles in this issue. A reflection of the relational nature of 'marginality' is the introduction of a term like 'fashionable marginality' in the article by Gunhild Borggreen. Marginality does not necessarily equal 'discrimination' or low social status, though most of the groups that one may initially think of when the term is used (*burakumin*, homosexuals, the homeless, etc.) are in many cases also discriminated against by society at large.

Expression of marginality in some cases is enjoyed or even praised by the majority society and thus can be said to occupy a place, or perhaps more correctly a niche, in 'the centre'. The 'norm' thus contains various groups that in some instances may be considered 'marginal'. One could perhaps even go so far as to say that the norm or the majority society is nothing more than a cluster of groups, each in its own manner 'marginal' or peculiar while also in some respects 'normal'. While this viewpoint may seem to the reader to be a banal statement of the obvious, its reiteration in this space does have a particular relevance for the Western studies of Japanese culture and society, which have hitherto tended to focus on homogeneity at the expense of variety.

Finally, let me express the hope that the reader will find in this issue of the *Copenhagen Journal* an interesting and thought-provoking mix of perspectives and points of views.

Marie Roesgaard  
Department of Asian Studies  
University of Copenhagen

<sup>1</sup> *Ie* literally means 'house'. In this context it should be translated as 'household'.

<sup>2</sup> Equivalent to Freud's term '*liebkosen*', it signifies other-directed dependence, expectation of love from the other as illustrated by the ideal relationship between a child and its mother.