

# PUBLIC OPINION IN JAPAN

## CHANGES AND COMPARISONS

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In this article, I would like to examine Japanese national character from two perspectives. One is historical – that is to say, a look at changes over time as reflected in the *Study of Japanese National Character* from the Institute of Statistical Mathematics (Tōkei Sūri Kenkyūjo Kokuminsei Chōsa Iinkai 1961; 1970; 1975; 1982; 1992). The other is comparative, involving examination and comparison of the results of several international surveys conducted simultaneously in several countries in which respondents were asked the same questions. These surveys fall into the category of so-called ‘public opinion surveys.’ Of course, results obtained using this methodology alone will be neither exhaustive nor conclusive. If, however, they can help to shed some light on what Japanese people are thinking and feeling during the late 20th century, they are of some value.

### 1. HOW THE *STUDY OF JAPANESE NATIONAL CHARACTER* WAS CONDUCTED

Begun in 1953, the *Study of Japanese National Character* is conducted every five years. The eighth, most recent, survey was conducted in 1988. A *Study of the Japanese National Character*, Volume 5 has been published in 1992 (Tōkei Sūri Kenkyūjo Kokuminsei Chōsa Iinkai 1992). It’s quite interesting to look back historically at the reasons for launching these surveys in the first place. Prior to the first *Study*, there were those who had become weary of sermons from Americans and America-phile Japanese about what was good for the Japanese people and what they wanted; they contended that it was high time to actually survey the people and find out what they were thinking and what they really wanted. Furthermore, the United States at the time was in the throes of McCarthyism and there were serious doubts about America’s commitment to democracy.

Of course, by 1953, Japan had pretty much recovered from the disorder

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of the early postwar period and it was perhaps slowly dawning on people that the country was at a new crossroads. With the completion of the first survey, a great many books on the topic of *Nihonjinron* ('theorizing on the Japanese') appeared. This period has come to be known as the first *Nihonjinron* boom. To further set the historical stage, January 1953 marked the beginning of regular television broadcasting in Japan, so it was still a time when the majority of Japanese had never experienced television. Politically, it was the final period of the Yoshida Cabinet.

The model used in formulating the questionnaire for the first *Study of Japanese National Character* was H. Cantril's *Religious Attitudes Survey*. Five or six people were assigned to read existing literature and create a comprehensive card catalog of items relating to Japanese national character. The three thousand cards in the catalog were then organized, their content discussed, survey questions written, a pre-test conducted and approximately 30 items finally extracted for the actual survey. Aside from the core topic of Japanese national character, serious thought was also given, naturally, to attempting a comparison with responses from foreigners. But at the time, it was difficult enough to put together the survey and frame questions on Japanese national character, let alone develop a survey that would also include foreigners. Even today, this type of survey remains elusive.

In terms of question formulation, we set about trying to create situations that could happen to any Japanese. That is to say, situations in which any Japanese could easily imagine him- or herself. What we were trying to find out was what an ordinary Japanese person was thinking and feeling about certain things in his or her everyday life. In hindsight, it is difficult to say whether or not our questions 'hit home' in terms of our objectives, especially considering that the public opinion survey field was still fairly new and unexplored and we were lacking in experience. Since that first *Study*, however, we have been repeating the survey in an effort to find out whether or not we have got our meaning across in the survey questions and whether or not we had elicited the information we were looking for.

## 2. CHANGES IN THE *STUDY OF JAPANESE NATIONAL CHARACTER* THROUGH THE YEARS

Although there were questions in the first survey which were dropped because they were no longer considered suitable or because they had lost their meaning in the course of time, 21 of the original 30 items from the first survey (in some cases from the second or third surveys) managed to make it into the eighth. Since it would take up too much space to fully

duplicate the questions in the survey, these will be summarized. Although summarization may take away something from the imaginative process, we trust that the text supplied will be ample to get an accurate grasp of the question and to interpret it.

First of all, let's take a look at those points in the *Study of National Character* where big changes in public opinion were noted. Although there have been more or less regular changes in response data since the first survey, we define a 'big change' as anything over a 20%-difference in response between the first and eighth surveys. (There will be some exceptions to this rule, however.)

No. 1 on the list of 'big changes' deals with the traditional family system in Japan. In this category the Japanese appear to be changing a great deal. For instance, the number of people ascribing to the belief that "[in the absence of own children], it is necessary to adopt a child [who will continue the family line]" has diminished by 46% over the last 35 years. A majority of respondents in the first survey agreed that "children should be taught when they are young that money is the most important thing in life," while a majority reported after 1973 that they did not ascribe to such a belief. More people are of the opinion today that "if your teacher does something wrong, it's better to admit the truth to your children without changing the story."

Respondents were asked: "If you could be born again, would you rather be a man or a woman?" In the second survey, 27% of the female respondents reported that they would prefer to come back as a woman, while 64% said they would rather come back as a man. After 1968 this trend reversed, and by the eighth survey 59% reported they would prefer to come back as a woman, as opposed to 34% who would prefer to come back as a man. Given a choice of six different lifestyles, the number of respondents who chose the response, "Regardless of fame and fortune, I prefer to pursue a lifestyle that reflects my own personal taste," increased from 21% to 45%.

No. 2 on the list of changes has to do with political issues. In response to questions like whether or not the Prime Minister, as the servant of the Emperor, should continue formal worship at the Ise Shrine as was done in the prewar period, or asking about people's opinions with respect to authoritarian political trends, the number of negative responses has increased. On the other hand, interest (or level of concern) about elections is amazingly low.

On the other side of the coin, there were also areas where opinions have not changed very much in 35 years. The first of these has to do with traditional Japanese attitudes about social life such as *giri* – *ninjō* (*giri* meaning duty as stipulated by the dictates of a strict society, and *ninjō* meaning

natural human feelings). Although people even today are still rather strongly affected by *giri – ninjō*, other factors do come in. For instance, someone you are deeply indebted to is critically ill and you have the choice of either returning to your hometown to visit that person or staying at work to attend an important conference. Although the difference is small, the number of respondents who would go home for the visit is slightly larger than the number who would attend the conference. Similar responses were received in the case of a critically ill parent. In either case, about 40% would return home and about 30% would attend the conference.

On a company entrance examination, a relative [of the president] scores second place and another applicant places first. More than 70% of the respondents felt that the applicant who placed first should be hired over the relative. However, if the person in second place happens to be the son or daughter of someone to whom one is deeply indebted, roughly half of the respondents answered that they would choose the second place candidate.

Of four items: 'filial piety,' 'returning favors,' 'respect for people's rights' and 'respect for freedom' respondents were asked to pick the two which they felt were most important. Whereas 60% selected 'filial piety' in 1963, the figure increased to 71% in the eighth survey. Selections with respect to the other three items varied by around 40%. Furthermore, while around 30% of the respondents chose 'filial piety' and 'returning favors,' it was not at all uncommon that less than 20% chose 'respect for people's rights' and 'respect for freedom.'

When given a choice between "a boss who doesn't push his staff very hard but is unwilling to help out in private matters" and "a boss who works his staff very hard but is willing to help out in private matters," close to 90% of respondents invariably choose the second *ninjō* boss. Question: "If you think a thing is right, do you think you should go ahead and do it even if it is contrary to usual custom, or do you think you are less apt to make a mistake if you follow custom?" The number of respondents who answered "Go ahead" has fallen from 41% to 27%, with one third replying, "Depends on circumstances."

The second area where opinions have not changed very much has to do with modern social problems. One can't help but get a feeling that the respondents reveal a growing pessimism towards the world. Although there are fewer people who think that nationalistic sentiments are of central importance, this is a far cry from coming out in favor of individualism. Finally, the number of persons who do not support any particular political party is gradually increasing.

Let's take a look at some specific questions. Depending on when the

survey was conducted, the percentage of respondents ascribing to the pessimistic view that "As science and technology progress, we are becoming more and more dehumanized" varied between 30% and 50%. The percentage of optimistic responses to the reverse of this proposition, namely, "No matter how mechanized the world becomes, it cannot dim the richness of the human spirit" tended to be somewhat lower. The percentage of respondents reporting that they hold religious beliefs has held fairly stable at around 30%.

While the percentage of respondents who agree with the proposition, "If individuals are made happy, then and only then will Japan as a whole improve," has increased somewhat, fewer respondents tend to place top priority on the exclusive proposition of "Making Japan a better place." On the other hand, the number of respondents who believe that "Individual happiness should be the top priority" is not increasing. Among those who support a particular political party, the percentage that supports the Liberal Democratic Party has held at around 40%. Incidentally, the number of respondents reporting that "I don't support any political party" has been on the increase.

### 3. THE TIME FRAME OF THE SURVEYS AND RESPONDENT 'AGE' AND 'GENERATION' FACTORS

In this section we will attempt an analysis which correlates age group data and generational factors, such as the time a particular survey was conducted and factors relating to upbringing of respondents. Originally this study was envisaged as a panel study which would canvass the same set of respondents five years after the first survey. This would have allowed us to obtain precise data on opinion changes in the same individual. Unfortunately, however, many respondents moved and we lost track of them. We were finally forced to give up on the idea of a panel study.

As a substitute for the panel study, we gave serious thought to attempting a cohort analysis. In demographic studies, persons born within the same given time span are said to be 'cohorts.' For instance, persons born between 1924 and 1938 were between the ages of 20 and 29 when the first survey was conducted in 1953. When the second survey was conducted five years later in 1958, persons in this same group were between the ages of 25 and 34. When the third survey was conducted 10 years later in 1963, persons in this group were between the ages of 30 and 39. By the eighth survey in 1988 they were between the ages of 55 and 64. These persons are all considered to be cohorts of the same group. In this type of analysis, survey to survey changes in the responses given by persons within the

same cohort group are considered more or less tantamount to changes in individual opinion.

With the methodology described in the preceding paragraphs in place, we proceed to examine cohort data (individual opinions) and data from all respondents (national character), asking ourselves the questions: What items reflect changing opinions? What items reflect unchanging opinions? On the basis of age-specific data taken from each survey, we were able to postulate the four representative types shown in the table below.

Cohort data (Individual opinion)	Data from all respondents (National character)	
	unchanging	changing
Unchanging	Type A (Unchanging national character)	Type C (Changing depending on generation)
Changing	Type B (Changing as respondents get older)	Type D (Changing depending on times)

Table 1

In the case of Type A responses, the same statistical results come up regardless of when the survey was conducted or the age group of the respondent. In contrast to the ironclad 80% of respondents who chose the “boss who looks after his staff,” we also have items where opinion is split more or less 50/50 right down the middle. There are many items that elicit this type of response and they are difficult to specify.

In the case of Type B responses, regardless of which survey or the time frame in which it was conducted, the response pattern of respondents within a certain age group will be the same. Although statistics based on data from all respondents may not necessarily change, responses from elder persons will show definite increasing (or decreasing) trends. In other words, as respondents get older, their opinions change. A good example is the response to the query: “Do you have any personal religious faith?” Type B responses are commonly based on elemental human feelings which tend to become more pronounced with age.

In the Type C category, overall response patterns do show marked increases or decreases depending on the time frame of the survey. At the same time, however, cohort response patterns do not change. In other words, although opinions in this category do not change even as respondents get older, overall, opinions will change in response to a generational change. A good example would be ‘lifestyle.’ Type C responses are related to ideology in the broader sense and are rooted in issues involving lifestyle.

In the Type D category, overall response patterns will likewise show

marked increases or decreases depending on the time frame of the survey. Opinion changes in cohort groups will also be observed. Regardless of the age of the respondent in this category, there is a definite trend in the way opinions are changing. The Type D response is typified by the query: "Would you adopt a child of strangers into your family to continue the family line?" Answers reflect the incompatibility of the age we live in with old-fashioned virtues and traditions which developed in a completely different social and economic reality.

Types A and B display unchanging national character. Answers reflect the frank opinions of the respondents. They are emotional judgments that even education will generally not alter.

Types C and D display changing national character. Answers are less sincere and based more on intellectual than emotional judgments. Answers in this category will be different depending on education.

Types A and C display unchanging personal opinion. Answers are made against the backdrop of everyday social life. Answers in this category relate to ideology in the broad sense of the word.

Types B and D display changing personal opinion. Answers are related to individual lifestyles.

Although these typologies cannot be confirmed with any precision by the data, the author considers them meaningful. They should prove especially useful in developing a working hypothesis when examining Japanese national character in future.

#### 4. INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE SURVEYS

Next, we'll endeavor to examine Japanese national character based on an analysis of international comparative surveys. For more information on this subject I refer readers to my book entitled *Yoron chōsa ni yoru dōjidai-shi* [Period History Based on Public Opinion Surveys] (Nishihira 1987) and a book by the author and C. Condominas entitled *L'opinion des Japonais: Société – Travail – Famille à travers les sondages* (Nishihira and Condominas 1991).

Let's begin by defining more precisely what we mean by international comparative survey. First of all, the survey must be conducted in several countries. Sampling and survey methodology must be reliable and results should be representative of the opinions of targeted respondents in a particular country. Naturally, all respondents to the survey must be asked the same questions, at the same time, and under the same interviewing conditions (i.e., the same methodology applied). Furthermore, questions should be designed to elicit answers relating to people's deep-rooted

thinking and opinions rather than responses to temporary political or social issues.

In terms of international comparative surveys as defined above, Japan has not participated in very many thus far. Below I will report the results of my examination of the 290 items contained in the eight surveys described below. All surveys were conducted between 1979 and 1983.

1. **World Youth Survey.** Sponsor: Youth Policy Department of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Persons in the 18 to 24 age group. (Referred to below as 'Youth Survey.')
2. **International Children's Survey in the Year of the Child.** Sponsor: Youth Policy Department of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Children in the 10 to 15 age group and their mothers. (Reference: Index to International Public Opinion, 1983-1984. New York: Greenwood Press.)
3. **Survey on Values in 13 Countries.** Sponsor: Leisure Development Center (non-profit organization). Target group: Adults over the age of 18. (Reference: Index to International Public Opinion, 1980-1981; 1981-1982. New York: Greenwood Press.)
4. **European Value System Survey** developed by the European Value System Study Group. Sponsor (in Japan): Leisure Development Center (non-profit organization). Target group: Adults over the age of 18. (Referred to below as 'European Survey.')
5. **International Comparative Survey on Youth and the Family.** Sponsor: Youth Policy Department of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Parents of children under 15 years of age. (Reference: Questionnaire and results in English in: *Seishōnen to katei* [Youth and Family]. Tōkyō: Ōkurashō Insatsukyoku, 1982).
6. **Survey on the Life and Consciousness of Women.** Women's Affairs Group of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Women between the ages of 20 and 60. (Reference: Index to International Public Opinion, 1984-1985. New York: Greenwood Press.)
7. **Survey on the Life and Consciousness of the Elderly.** Sponsor: Elderly Policy Group of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Persons over the age of 60. (Reference: Index to International Public Opinion, 1981-1982. New York: Greenwood Press.)
8. **Annual International Survey on the Handicapped.** Sponsor: International Handicapped Affairs Group of the Prime Minister's Office. Target group: Adults over the age of 18. (Reference: Index to Inter-



national Public Opinion, 1981–1982; 1983–1984. New York: Greenwood Press.)

## 5. A COMPARISON OF SURVEY TECHNIQUES

Besides dealing with translation problems in an international survey, the problem of differences in language conventions and usage must also be addressed. For instance, Americans are more apt to use the expressions ‘very good’ and ‘very happy’ rather than just ‘good’ or ‘happy.’ It is probably due to this linguistic convention that Americans are prone to pick survey responses which include the intensive ‘very.’ This item is often the top choice in a multiple choice array. Japanese, on the other hand, are more prone to choose the answer which does not include the intensifier, i.e., they choose ‘happy’ as opposed to ‘very happy’ and ‘good’ as opposed to ‘very good.’ In answering surveys, the French and Germans are also less likely to select the top choice in a multiple choice question. This fact alone may be viewed as a certain indicator of national character.

Similarly, when asked to “Select as many answers which apply from the list below,” Americans tend to freely pick a large number of items, while Japanese will normally restrict themselves to two or three.

There are twelve questions in the Youth Survey and six in the European Survey in which the respondent is asked to select as many items as apply. Using these questions, we decided to find out the average number of responses selected by nationality. As Table 2 shows, Japanese respondents tended to select fewer items, while the Americans selected the most. Probably because they don’t want to be seen as conceited or pompous, the Japanese tend to restrict the number of responses they give on questions which relate directly to them or on questions of a formal nature. However, on questions relating to criticism of a third party or which indicate feelings of strong dislike, the Japanese are prone to select more responses than other nationalities.

	Japan	France	W. Germany	U.K.	U.S.	South Korea	China
Youth Survey 1983	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.4		
Youth Survey 1988	2.4	2.8	3.2	2.7	3.5	3.0	2.3
European Survey 1981	2.8	2.9	3.8	3.5	3.9		

*Table 2: Average number of responses selected by nationality*

Another characteristic of Japanese respondents is that they often answer “I don’t know” or “No answer.” As Table 3 shows, per question, 13% of the young Japanese surveyed responded with “No answer,” as opposed

to under 3% for their American counterparts. Furthermore, while the Japanese had an 11% “No answer” average on the European Survey, the rate for West German, British and American respondents was under 4%.

	Japan	France	W. Germany	U.K.	U.S.A.
Youth Survey 1983	12.5	5.4	9.6	7.3	2.6
European Survey 1981	11.2	7.8	3.8	3.5	3.9

Table 3: Average percentage of “No answer” responses per nationality

Particularly where a choice boils down to two clear-cut and opposing responses, when Japanese are queried as to which opinion they tend toward – even when the meaning of the question and responses is abundantly clear and the content quite simple – Japanese have a tendency to give a “No answer” response. They don’t know whether they should give a ‘formal answer’ (Japanese *tatema*, i.e., the answer expected by the person who prepared the survey) or a ‘frank answer’ (Japanese *honme*) which reflects their real opinion.

## 6. A CROSS-SECTION OF JAPANESE NATIONAL CHARACTER

In this article we will not examine individual questions from the eight international comparative surveys mentioned above. Instead, we have placed all the survey questions into six categories and attempted to compare the data from Americans, British, West Germans, French and Koreans with the ultimate objective of revealing a cross section of Japanese national character.

### 6.1 View of Life

If we look at the individual character of Japanese, we observe that although they have a strong bent to reflect and consider things carefully, they are not deeply analytical. They are practical and not overly emotional. And, if forced to categorize them, we might say that they tend to have rather somber personalities.

In terms of values based on traditional social life, it would seem quite natural that there should be differences between Japanese and Europeans. We also note considerable differences in this regard among Europeans of different nationalities. As far as new values relating to social life are concerned, the same trends can be observed among both the Japanese and the Europeans.

The Japanese tend to be rather hedonistic, remain very concerned about their economic well-being and feel that 'luck' or 'chance' are important. The degree of satisfaction with many aspects of their lives is low and at times they are known to register extreme dissatisfaction.

### *6.2 Family*

Postwar Japanese have worked hard to liberate themselves from the onus of feudalistic and/or Confucian family relationships. As a result, many of the positive aspects of traditional family life have almost completely disappeared. In this regard, family life in Europe and America is probably somewhat better.

Regardless of whether elementary school children, teenagers or adults are surveyed, they all agree that parent-child relations are at an all time low. There are fewer young people in Japan than Europe willing to sacrifice themselves for their parents. The reverse is likewise true, there are few parents willing to sacrifice themselves for their children. It's probably not exaggerating to say that the family atmosphere in Japan has become extremely cold and apathetic.

Statistically, the occurrence of juvenile crime, divorce and violent crime is still lower in Japan than in the advanced countries of Europe and North America. Nevertheless, studies would indicate that the breeding ground for these social ills exists in abundance in Japan.

### *6.3 Work*

Japanese have a lot of complaints about work and the workplace. Work-related ambitions and aspirations are definitely not very high. In spite of the fact that the life-employment system is touted as a major factor in labor-management relations in Japan, the system is less popular among Japanese young people than among their counterparts in other countries. The number of young people in favor of the rigid seniority system is also small. In cases where a difference of opinion with the boss arises, Japanese – like their American and English counterparts – do not feel they should blindly follow the boss' orders. That doesn't mean, however, that they will openly and actively oppose the boss as might be the case in continental Europe. In this situation, the Japanese worker will tend to take a wishy-washy attitude.

In their formal responses, Japanese workers agree that work should not be given priority over family concerns. However, in the opinion of this author, this data reflects the formal, socially-approved attitude (*tatemaie*) prevalent in society right now. Even though the data suggest otherwise,

in terms of actual behavior, it's safe to say that life is in fact centered on work. The enthusiasm with which work is viewed is undoubtedly bound up with individual desires for an economically prosperous life.

#### 6.4 Society and the Nation

Japanese are passive in their contacts with society. They have many prejudices about interacting with their neighbors and they take a rather severe stance toward social misconduct. Complaints about society are rapidly decreasing in Japan. Thus far Americans have tended to be more supportive of authoritarianism in their responses than Japanese. However, rather than indicating a bent towards anti-authoritarianism among the Japanese, this is probably more indicative of the Japanese preoccupation with money, material possessions and work. Interestingly, although Japanese register strong distrust in the social system and its institutions, they have a much higher level of trust in the mass media than do Europeans.

Although Americans are generally considered to be very optimistic, when it comes to the topic of war they harbor deep-seated fears. On the other hand, these fears about war are much less pronounced among Japanese and Europeans. While Americans, French and British stress freedom over equality, the concern for equality among the Japanese, Germans and Italians is much stronger. The Japanese tend to be conservative in their political ideology and to support the status quo.

Japanese and continental Europeans all seem to lack pride in their countries and display very little patriotism. This is in marked distinction to the Americans and the Koreans.

#### 6.5 Social Issues (Women, Elderly and the Handicapped)

*Women:* With respect to women's issues, there are, in general, few Japanese who feel that women's issues are neglected or that women are more severely discriminated against than in other countries. However, as individual questions are raised, it becomes apparent that Japan is a male dominated society. At the same time, it appears that Japanese women are more aware than women in other countries that their individual efforts will be crucial in improving women's social status.

When it comes to trouble at the workplace, the tendency is strong among Japanese women to simply cry themselves to sleep over the issue rather than struggle. Finally, differences in the treatment of male and female children in Japan are more pronounced than in Western Europe.

*Elderly:* It is more common in Japan than Europe for the elderly to remain employed in some form. After retirement, there are few elderly who

can hope to cover their living expenses with their small pensions, so they are obliged to work. In spite of this fact, there are few elderly who report having economic difficulties, feeling lonely or experiencing serious worries and a large number report that they are happy. However, they remain passive in the pursuit of leisure and the satisfaction they feel in their lives must be considered strictly subjective.

Wherever possible, Japanese elderly prefer to live with their children and few elderly actually live alone. Nevertheless, the present generation of young people in Japan is similar to their European and American counterparts in their lack of devotion to aging parents. When elderly persons in Europe or America experience physical or mental problems, the first person they turn to is their spouse, and the second person is their daughter. Japanese elderly will likewise turn first to their spouse and next, if they are having physical problems, to their daughter-in-law. If they are experiencing mental problems they will turn to their son, and expect very little from a son- or daughter-in-law.

When it comes to meeting friends and associating with neighbors, Japanese elderly have a hard time and they depend entirely on their children. Furthermore, as they become aware of the aging process, they develop a rather strong inferiority complex in relation to young people.

*Handicapped:* With respect to the problems of the handicapped, citizens of Tōkyō display less concern than their urban European counterparts and support for the handicapped is meager, indeed. There is an uncaring attitude about employment and marriage problems experienced by the handicapped, not to mention about birth defects. The handicapped generally have to depend on their families for support and the prevailing opinion is that social services for the handicapped are inadequate.

## 6.6 Religion

In no other country will you find as many books on religion in regular book stores as in Japan. When asked whether they consider religion important, Japanese answer positively, although the number of respondents who answer that they actually adhere to the beliefs of a particular religion is small. When comparing other items, it becomes clear that religion is not emphasized as much by Japanese as it is by Western Europeans. With respect to the nature of religious beliefs, Japanese attitudes are generally vague. Interestingly, French, Danish, Dutch and Swedish respondents were more prone to hold anti-Christian attitudes and outright deny religion than Japanese. Furthermore, there were many instances where the majority opinions of Irish and Americans about religion were in opposition to the majority opinions of Japanese and other Europeans. Japanese

generally view religion as a vehicle for commemorating their ancestors or, in some instances, as 'spiritual sustenance' for hard times.

Some readers may think that the conclusions drawn by the author are perhaps too extreme and not necessarily warranted by the data. The unconvinced are kindly requested to refer to the author's other published works cited above.

## 7. OPINIONS OF THE JAPANESE IN A BROADER GLOBAL CONTEXT

In this section, we'll examine in a more general way, how the thinking of Japanese resembles or differs from that of other national groups.

First off, let's look at average percentage differentials based on the 'main answers' taken from the Youth Surveys of 1983 and 1988 on a country by country basis. By 'main answers' here we mean the prepared answers to questions most often chosen by Japanese respondents. A 'main answer' is one chosen by over 20% of Japanese respondents.

In the two surveys under discussion, the opinions of the Americans differed most from those of the Japanese respondents, with an average differential of nearly 20%. A differential of this magnitude is definitely not a sampling error. This average differential of close to 20% displays recurring differences between the opinions of the majority of American respondents and those of the majority of Japanese respondents. The opinions of Japanese and British respondents were likewise quite different. On the other side of the coin, the thinking of West German and French respondents was closer to that of the Japanese.

The average differential between the opinions of Japanese and French, and Japanese and West Germans did not exceed 12–14%. This differential is about the same as that between the West Germans and the French (approximately 13%). Furthermore, the opinions of French and West German respondents are much closer to those of the Japanese than the Americans. The differentials between European countries ranged from 8–13%. The differentials between Japan and the various European countries were also not very large, holding at about 10%.

Although the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans share a common cultural heritage, survey results showed that these national groups held quite different opinions.

In the European Survey, as well, the differential between the opinions of Japanese and Americans, and between those of the Japanese and the Irish exceeded 20%. The opinions of Japanese respondents were closest to those of the West Germans, followed by the Dutch, the Belgians and the

Spanish, then the French and Italians, and finally the Danish and the English.

Now, let's look at which national groups and which opinions held by these national groups were similar to those of the Japanese. To accomplish this, we'll look at the average differentials between the opinions of the Japanese and other national groups by dividing the 'main answers' (from a total of 290 items contained in eight surveys) into six categories.

With respect to 'view of life,' the opinions of the Italians were found to be closest to the Japanese, followed by the French and West Germans. At the same time, the opinions of Americans and British were shown to differ from those of the Japanese by an average differential of 20%. The family and home consciousness of the British and Americans was also very different from that of the Japanese. The thinking of Japanese and Korean respondents was most similar when it came to their views on the family. Since there were very few questions relating to work, it's difficult to make any definitive statements in this category. However, it is on this subject that the Japanese and British differed most. On social and nationalistic issues the consciousness of the Japanese is radically different from that of Americans and Koreans. And, whereas Americans and Koreans are very patriotic, Japanese and Europeans tend to be very blasé on this issue.

On the issue of women's rights, there is a tremendous difference in attitude between Japanese on the one hand and Americans and Europeans on the other. What's clear is that the Japanese harbor very strong prejudices on this subject. On the issue of the elderly and their problems, opinions diverge more or less from country to country.

The issue of religion seems to be a difficult one for the non-Christian Japanese to comprehend. Aside from the Ten Commandments, Japanese and American opinions show a differential of 33%. Furthermore American and French opinions show a 30% differential and American and West German opinions a 25% differential. The religious views of the Americans and the Irish display trends radically different from those encountered among other Europeans.

On an issue by issue basis, we can conclude that the attitudes of the Japanese and continental Europeans are rather similar. As far as the Japanese and the Americans are concerned, in spite of close political and economic ties, there are big differences in the thinking of the Japanese and Americans. At the same time there is a great deal of convergence in the thinking of the Japanese and Koreans with respect to family, aging and religious issues.

Are Japanese different from other national groups? Do they hold their own 'special opinions' on things as compared to other national groups? In this section we will focus on these questions. We define a 'special opin-

ion' as reflecting a 10% or greater differential between the Japanese and all other national groups. Out of 290 responses, the Japanese displayed 'special opinions' in about 65 of them. However, what may be more revealing is the fact that in 225 (or 78%) of the responses, the thinking reflected in the answers of Japanese respondents was not very different from that of their Western European counterparts. The Americans had a total of 52 items where they displayed 'special opinions,' while the number of 'special opinions' for the French, British and West Germans was fewer than 20 items. Considering the historical and cultural relationship between the United States and Europe, the difference between the 52 'special opinions' of the Americans and the 65 'special opinions' of the Japanese may be negligible.

	Totals	Japan	U.S.A.	France	U.K.	W.Germany
View of life	38	11	3	5	2	2
Family	91	19	5	4	4	1
Work	17	2	2	1	2	0
Society	57	10	15	6	1	9
Women's issues	24	7	3	0	1	2
Elderly issues	29	5	3	0	0	-
Religion	34	11	21	3	0	0
Totals	290	65	52	19	10	14

Table 4: 'Special opinions' (number of answers)

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Japanese education is designed to inculcate social standards. Japanese are not generally educated to think on their own or to be critical. Until the end of the Second World War, accepted social standards were based on Japan's imperial system and Confucianism. Under the influence of the Occupation Forces in the postwar period, the educational emphasis shifted to Western style democracy. Consequently, the opinions of Japanese with respect to society and the state are not much different from those of citizens of the democratic countries of Western Europe. (The fact that Japanese are no longer patriotic in the sense that Americans are has to do with their denial of the brand of patriotism that was demanded of them under the prewar Imperial system. Patriotism is no longer considered as part of regular social standards.)

As far as data derived from public opinion surveys is concerned, the



Japanese people hold opinions which are models of democratic thinking. On the other hand, when it comes to the way Japanese look at individual problems, family issues or even everyday life, the considerable differences between them and Western Europeans must be recognized. Perhaps this is due to latent Confucianist thinking among the Japanese or to the fact that they have yet to redefine the position of the individual and the family in post-industrial society.

And, because Japanese are educated to espouse and maintain socially accepted views (*tatema*), when asked abstract questions which do not directly relate to their everyday lives, they are conditioned to answer in time-honored, exemplary fashion, exactly as their teachers expect them to do in the classroom. As already mentioned, Japanese education does not encourage the individual to think for him- or herself. Consequently, when asked a highly concrete question bearing some relation to everyday life, the individual may experience confusion in formulating an answer since actual experiences and feelings (*honne*) often run counter to the accepted views (*tatema*) taught in school. When faced with such a situation, Japanese usually adopt a very vague attitude. Although Japanese may have an abstract understanding of Western European democracy, they will need more time before they can begin individually applying its principles in real situations.

With all this said, in the opinion of this author, the views which Japanese hold are changing and moving in new directions. Furthermore, there is not that big of a difference between the thinking of Japanese and Western Europeans. To put it another way, the emphasis on Japanese uniqueness or differences is a deplorable effort on the part of some Japanese to satisfy their own pre-existing notions about Japanese national character. Other Japanese will be happy to know that they are not as unique as some would have them think. We have shown that, like the Europeans, the Japanese are quite different in their thinking from Americans. In fact, Japanese national character is probably no more unique than that of the separate European national groups which form the EC.

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