

Towards Global Standard :

The Impact of Globalization on Japanese Culture At Political and Societal Levels*

Shugo Minagawa

It is said that the globalization process is not a single all-conquering and homogenizing force, driven by the systemic logic of capitalism or Western cultural imperialism. Globalization does not overwhelm nation-states and destroy cultural differences based on ethnicity or some kind of local cultural affiliation (see Held, 1995 and Holton, 1998). This paper simply attempts to trace some of the changes that have been taking place in Japan's domestic political and social culture in the process of globalization, while leaving aside the question of normative issues posed by that process. We may be able to see in these changes global and local values coming to terms with each other in a Japanese cultural setting. My analysis runs on the supposition that political and cultural boundaries are being simultaneously permeated and re-established, transcended and reinvented by complex processes of social change.

In the mid-nineteenth century, and especially since the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan has been constantly exposed to external movements, be they westernization, modernization, internationalization, or globalization. There has been incessant debate in the past over how far it is possible to transplant the institutions and practices of one culture into the environment of another. What has proved a surprise to Japanese has been the argument that cultural influences can move in more than one direction (see Vogel, 1979). The assumption of unilateral cultural transfer is evident in the fact that Japan has scarcely had a foreign policy whereas the United States has had too much of one.

After the end of the Cold War, marketization, democratization, humanization have become major agenda all around the globe except perhaps in the United States and the EU countries. These agenda have been associated with the process of nation rebuilding, i.e., institutionalizing political, economic and social systems, and re-establishing a national identity, particularly in the case of former socialist countries. Many observers including myself have attempted to see how viable and stable these countries are in terms of the way they seek to achieve these ends. It may be true that even in democratic countries, we are confronted with the perpetual problem of combining effective democratic control with efficient government. Given the nature of the political system we have, our

interests would naturally be about the extent of a democratic polity's contribution to political integration, political education for political actors and the general public at large, and most importantly, to the mobilization of the public for promoting transition.

Japan has been, officially speaking, engaging in these agenda ever since the end of the WW II. Yet, in the minds of the bureaucrats and businessmen the ideas of a mobilization system are maintained by way of rejecting competition and maintaining the so-called iron triangle structure the ruling coalition has kept in store. The bureaucracy-led policy-making process has made Japan epitomized (as Mikhail Gorbachev is once said to have called it) "an example of a successful socialist state." Countless public works projects, free medical care for the elderly and pension benefits policies carried out by the LDP dominant government, for instance, have facilitated comfortable relations between bureaucrats, politicians and businesses, despite numerous incidents of corruption. The iron triangle structure supported the persistence of these policies in the vote-gathering and fund-raising systems, as well. The once rigid system of mobilization has started to fall apart, however, due largely to the burst of the bubble economy; foreign pressure to deregulate; the intensification of global competition and the collapse of the LDP-dominant political system.

Pluralistic tendencies at the political level started with the introduction of the reformed Lower House election system (single-seat constituencies) coupled with demands for transparency in political funds initiated under the non-LDP Hosokawa administration of 1993. Factionalism is as old as the LDP, which monopolized power for 38 years from 1955 to 1993, and factional power struggles can be considered a permanent feature of LDP politics. Factional strife was also encouraged in part by the electoral system of medium-size districts. The advent of a new election system has made the election revolve around the party rather than its factions. Factions can no longer raise large sums of money and expend the funds on the election of its legislative members. As a result, the party leadership has gained a little more influence over personnel and financial affairs, although the factions still have some say in the distribution of Cabinet and party posts.

The current coalition government came into power in April 2001 headed by LDP leader Junichiro Koizumi. He was elected then as the LDP presidency largely on the basis of increased support from the rank and file members of the LDP across the nation, among whom Koizumi's plans for economic reforms proved popular, rather than on the size of his affiliated faction. By and large, members of the LDP hoped to cash in on Koizumi's high public approval ratings (then about 80%) in the forthcoming elections.

Koizumi took various steps to get rid of faction-oriented rules and practices, not only in the area of policymaking but also in the selection of Cabinet ministers and party executives. The regulation concerning political donations to factions was strengthened by the establishment of subsidies provided by the government to political parties. Its influence, however, coupled with the sluggish economy, is declining at an accelerated pace. In July this year, former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto resigned as head of a powerful faction when a scandal broke over a shady 100-million-yen political donation to his faction. The interesting aftermath of that episode is that since Hashimoto's resignation, no one has volunteered to assume leadership of the faction. Formerly, any LDP politician who aspired to become prime minister would make a bid for factional leadership. Such a practice may now be a thing of the past. It is also doubtful that the LDP factions are still functioning as arenas for bargaining for political spoils.

As far as the promised economic reforms are concerned, contrary to public expectations, the Koizumi-led LDP coalition government has so far compromised with opposing forces within the LDP on all of the plans for structural reform, such as privatization of public highway corporations and postal services. The LDP's political style is so deeply ingrained in the system that the fate of Koizumi government has always been unpredictable. Since 1993, Japan has had as many as 6 prime ministers. Koizumi, who has never headed a faction and was never interested in raising funds, has been in power for nearly two and a half years and may serve another three. This in itself indicates a profound change in Japanese political culture.

Clientelist activities were also prevalent in Japanese government bureaucracy, particularly in such powerful ministries as the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (existed until administrative reform of 2000). Despite a generally held view of political clientelism as dysfunctional in a political system, patron-client networks expanded the bureaucracy's capacity for policy innovation, hence enhancing the bureaucracy's adaptability to a changing environment. The author has observed elsewhere (see Minagawa, 1985) that the causation of clientelism operating within the Japanese government bureaucracy appeared to be closely linked with political and functional motivations, as well as cultural factors. In Japan, especially, clientelism appeared to be grounded in the culturally deep-rooted behavioural particularities of individuals. Clientelist activities in Japanese bureaucracy are now slowly subsiding due largely to the bureaucracy's loss of political clout as a result of the liberalization of the market, deregulation of government controls over trade and industry, and the removal of traditional trade practices. Japanese society in general may well be in the midst of a transition from a *Gemeinschaft*-like society (informal alignments based on interpersonal commitments) to a *Gesellschaft*-like society (voluntary and rational

association).

If one regards globalization as a long-term process of diffusion across borders and boundaries, moving outward from multiple sources and centers, then, even while admitting the key role of Western sources of global change in recent centuries, the multifaceted nature of globalization processes has intensified over the past 100 years. Among other things, it appears now to have aspirations for a single harmonious global order, giving increasing attention to such global issues as development, the economy, human rights, humanitarian concerns, and the environment. This has been the case primarily since the end of the Cold War and its bipolarity as the world (international system) has become more fluid and uncertain.

It would be interesting to draw our attention to the questions of global humanitarian concerns to which Japanese government has made considerable contribution so far. Although its allocations to the 50-year-old Official Development Assistance (ODA) program have diminished due to a swelling budget deficit, Japan still provided 816.9 billion yen (\$7.7 billion) in the fiscal 2004 budget (down more than 30% from the peak amount in fiscal 1997). For its ODA programs, NGOs are crucial for gaining public understanding and support. NGOs provide a channel through which people can lend a hand directly to international cooperation activities. NGOs' mobility and flexibility are vital in providing grassroots-level assistance and emergency humanitarian relief. Today, more than 4000 Japanese NGOs are engaged in international cooperation activities. First emerging in the 1960s, NGOs increased in number and quality in the late 70s and early 80s (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs homepage). In the Chubu area itself where this author lives, about 45 internationally active new NGOs have been created since 1995. Each NGO is supposed to be assisted by about 500 people on average for the purposes of either fund-raising or physically helping people.

The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) Program is a government program that invites Japanese youth with certain technical skills to assist in the economic and social development of developing countries while living and working together with the local people. The JOCV program, originally designated as "volunteer activities," is now required to be more efficient than ever as an important element of ODA. Currently, outcomes of JOCV program are highlighted and evaluation of them is drawing the attention of the Japanese public. When Japan exceeded the USA in its ODA amount in the late 80's, the number of recipient countries of JOCV rapidly increased. As of January 2004, no less than 2,621 volunteers (of which 54% are women) are overseas in 69 countries (among a total of the 77 countries that Japan has executed Agreements with to dispatch JOCV). The average age of the volunteers is 27 years old. Since its foundation in 1965, a total of 26,093 volunteers have

been dispatched to 80 nations (July 31, 2003).

In addition, there now seems to be many young Japanese, most of whom are female, working abroad as volunteer aid workers. One might wonder what motivates them to engage in global philanthropic activities. One could perhaps conjecture the reasons for such social movement as follows:

1. A willingness to shift their interests from material interests to more general ones. Although the recession has made chances of material success or professional satisfaction few, Japanese youth have shifted their priorities from acquisition of material goods to personal development (having vs. being)
2. A willingness to find the possibility of self-realization abroad rather than in Japan where hiring practices still discriminate against women.
3. A willingness to engage in peace activities that taps deep-rooted psychological and social norms that regard competition as a vice and cooperation as a virtue, coupled with the enforcement of peace education since the end of WW2.
4. A willingness to make a commitment of their own free will to global society rather than to normative commitments to the community where they “traditionally” belong.

Be that as it may, it is interesting to illustrate here the complex public attitudes towards such overseas volunteer activities. In April 2004, three Japanese nationals, including a female aid worker, were taken in hostage at near Fallujah in Iraq. Their captors threatened to burn them to death unless Japan pulled its Self-Defense Forces out of Iraq. Although the Japanese government did not give in to the armed insurgents’ demands, the three were eventually freed. However, while in captivity, the hostages, in particular a female aid worker and their families drew sharp public criticism in Japan, for having put themselves in harm's way after being warned to get out of Iraq. They were harshly criticized for causing trouble and cumbersome grief for the government.

“The three need to reflect on their reckless act of entering Iraq in defiance of the government's warning about deteriorating security conditions there. Their imprudence invited a situation that could seriously undermine the government's foreign policy as well as the Self-Defence Forces humanitarian mission in Iraq ”(2004/04/16, *The Nihon Keizai Shimbun*)

Similar leading articles appeared in almost all the major Japanese newspapers. It is not unusual for victims of crime in Japan to become targets of the media, which tend to accentuate their faults. The

government also placed the blame for the hostages' plight squarely on the hostages' own shoulders to counter any public criticism over the deployment of the Ground Self-Defense Force troops to southern Iraq. It appears that criticism of the captives reflected a lack of public understanding and was tantamount to slander toward overseas volunteer activities by individuals or NGOs. Some members of the public were indeed unsympathetic; the hostages' relatives received countless harassing telephone calls while their kin were still in danger. One could even view the criticism directed at the hostages as a reflection of a certain public distrust in Japan of civic activism. More importantly, the fact remains that there exists no global body to guarantee the safety of philanthropic activities in hazardous areas.

The size of this paper does not permit us to comprehensively examine the impact of globalization on Japanese culture. However, even sketchy observations of on-going changes in Japanese culture indicate that globalization is not a unitary process or system. Its processes may falter as much as they advance. As the Japanese economy has matured and internationalized, pluralistic tendencies have appeared, growing slowly in every corner of society that has undergone changes amid advancing globalization, rapid aging and declining birthrates. For the moment, at least, one can observe that by and large Japanese culture has become in appearance more transparent and versatile at political and societal levels. The stereotypical view of the contemporary Japanese political system is of a basically repressive, unresponsive, militaristic or technocratic system. A close analysis of various aspects of the political system may indeed indicate that such picture is one-sided, and hence distorted. A number of observers insist that decisions are not being made solely by bureaucrats or an anonymous system, but through multiple networks composed of bureaucrats, politicians, and sometimes even members or representatives of various pressure groups, including some oppositional ones (see, for instance, Muramatsu and Kraus, 1984). In this process, the predominant part played by some bureaucratic sectors has now shifted or is starting to shift to various groups of politicians. The first wave signaling the breakdown of internetwork relations within the LDP occurred in June 1993; and the second wave appears to have occurred under the Koizumi administration.

Although in terms of overall occupational status women continue to be discriminated against, women's participation in social and cultural activities seems to have changed considerably due perhaps to the increase in women's levels of education. Some even have had the courage to say that the female side of society has become extremely diversified, while the male side, trapped by inertia and peer pressure, has grown more homogeneous (see Iwao, 1991). Newly created space for women as we have witnessed above generates strong ambivalence towards the existing social order. Yet, at the same time such space provides arenas where such ambivalence may be accepted without

challenging the mainstream hegemonic institutional arrangements (see Sanger 1993).

It is said that the Japanese response to protest or oppositional movements is characterized by a combination of great flexibility in the extension of networks and consultations and weakness and ineffectiveness from more principled, ideological, potentially confrontational stances (see Eisenstadt, 1996). Many public demands and social movements have often been couched in a rhetoric of communal solidarity and harmony. The essence of the Japanese style of conflict management represents a strong desire to avoid direct conflict. As long as globalization remains a volatile nature, and not a set of ideas that strongly influence the way people behave, and as long as globalization does not harm the crux of the system, it will be incorporated, albeit with resistance, into central social and political frameworks in Japan. While key players such as nation-states, NGOs and civic groups continue to commit themselves into global political and cultural activities, though wishful thinking, they may consequently create and expand a space where these participants can share certain values.

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