INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:
THE U.S.-JAPAN CULTURAL STUDIES (I)

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(A Comparative Study: the Method of Reaching Agreement in Japan and the United States)

Part 1: A Review of Historical Elements Which Have Shaped Japanese Communication Forms Regarding the Decision Making Process

PREFACE

The author is deeply indebted to the Department of Foreign Languages of Sapporo University (his alma mater) which allowed him to devote his time and energy to teaching and to the research for intercultural studies. The author should like to express his gratitude to Prof. Suganuma, the Chairman of the Foreign Language Department, Prof. Matsuda, the head of English Language Section, Prof. Robert Kluttz, and other faculty members of SPU.

The author's graduate work at the Master's level was in intercultural communication, and his doctroral work was in cross-cultural communication and intercultural education. He also served as a member of the Executive Board of the Oregon Japan Center for several years to assist a large number of American students who studied at the International Division of Waseda University. His work with many American colleagues and students has provided him with fresh perspectives on intercultural communication: the U.S.-Japan cultural studies.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades or so, many social scientists have frequently indicated that we are living in an age of transition and flux where we are experiencing problems due to the exhaustion of world-wide resources, food shortages, the thrust of nuclear holocaust, and other pressing issues. This has created an age of anxiety and danger, and at the same time one of great challenge. Whether one is persuated by Toffler's Future Shock (other works written by futurologists) or draws comparison between the present and the past, it is quite obvious that society and its components or what sociologists term "social fiber" have changed. To put it more straightforwardly, societies of the world are cutting away from old moorings and entering into new historic dimensions.

In looking into the world of international affairs, particulary into U.S.-Japan relations, one can envision this drift into new areas. There is also evidence of psychologically fragile partnership between the two countries; evidence of strains and a slow

deterioration of amicable relations. One cause could be the competition for global resources and another cause might be attributed to the competition for economy and security interests, however, these are doubtless due to a combination of complex and vexing factors—including the problem of communication (rather than communications) in this new period of forced interaction.

Because of the advances in electronics, communications technology, and transportation systems, the importance of physical distance is diminishing. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily make it possible to decrease psychological proximity and the sharing of meanings upon which communication depends. Condon also corroborates this:

> We have beheld the wondrous spectacle of our own planet earth
> hanging blue in space. Through satellite communications we see people
> and events in far-off lands with an immediacy belying their distance.
> Yet, the devices designed to facilitate the process of communication
> do not always lead to better understanding among men... (1).

Many people hold a view that bringing more representatives of nations (or cultures) together more frequently, by whatever means, will inevitably result in a greater understanding of each other's personalities and problems and hence a greater chance for all to live together in peace and prosperity. But where is the proof?

Authorities in the field of speech cnmmunication have reported the opposite viewpoints. Barnlund, for example, remarks that frequent interaction does not improve intercultural relations and understandings. It is his belief that merely being together or speaking together without any understanding of the process of communication can lead to the old adage, "familiarity breeds contempt", as well as misunderstanding (2).

Barna also states, "Professionals in the field of speech communication are likely to take a different view. Being fully aware of the complexities of interpersonal interaction, even within cultural groups, they know better than to equate contact with communication" (3).

U.S.-Japan relations have been in existence for more than one hundred eighty years and have included massive interchanges in the fields of cultural arts, business, economics, education, and others, including intense interaction after World War II. There is still paucity of "real" communication between the two countries. This is substantiated by Reischauer, a former Ambassador to Tokyo and a professor at Harvard, when he said, "Our communication is extremely poor. Communication between the two societies is always a problem..." (4). Rosovsky, a world renowned economist has also addressed the issue, "We have traded and fought wars; we have visited each other in ever larger numbers; we have studied one another with growing intensity; and yet conversations...have not become noticeably easier" (5).

As communication between the two countries increases, misunderstandings lead to friction and conflict will likely multiply. A major cause of these misunderstandings could be the basic unbridgeable differences in the styles of communication and

assumptions about communication between Japanese and Americans. This can be clarified by mentioning several cases of misunderstanding that have taken place in recent years in government and business between the two nations.

Primary among these in the seventies were the Nixon Shocks pertaining to U.S. rapproachment with mainland China without prior consultation with Japan, textile issues, Soybean issues, and other talks regarding automobile trade. In all of the aforementioned examples, sides were taken in that the Japanese thought that they were reaching agreement on one point, whereas the U.S. felt that the Japanese were transmitting something vague or completely different. The former Ambassador, Sawaki, who was stationed in New York, gave evidence:

> ...there was deep concern in both countries about 'communications gap' between us. It was widely recognized on both sides of the Pacific that trade, monetary and other issues which ought to have been resulted quickly through candid negotiation and mutual compromise were instead dragged out—to our mutual discomfort—because of inadequete communication, lapses in sensitivity, and actual misunderstandings on both sides (6).

There was another example with regard to President Nixon's statement about the textile negotiations. His talks with former Prime Minister Sato turned out to be unsuccessful in terms of communication despite the note of great success reported in the Weekly Presidential Document. The article read as follows:

> We have just concluded a series of meetings in which the Prime Minister and I have had a far-ranging and very comprehensive discussions of a number of issues. I think it can be safely said that this is the most comprehensive discussion which has ever taken place between the Prime Minister of Japan and the President of the United States... We have found that on many major issues we have substantial agreement... (7).

In response to the Nixon statement, Prime minister Sato remarked:

> (During the two-day summit talks with the President in San Clemente), I am confident these meetings have contributed the strengthen the unshakeable relationships of mutual trust and interdependence between the peoples of the United States and Japan (8).

Despite these feelings of confidence, the final results were that, because of a paucity of understanding, both sides became at odds and what speech communication specialists term "critical incidents" occured. As Curtis, a political scientist at Columbia, mentioned, "The public has often heard of the increasing strain in U.S.-Japanese relations, particularly since the discord on the textile negotiations between the two countries" (9).

In looking at the early 1980's, constant difficulties in communicating with each other have still been reported. The most recent examples are the shocks: (1) resulted in the resignation of Foreign Minister Ito over the use of the term "alliance" in the

Reagan-Suzuki communique,* and (2) delivered by Dr. Reischauer from the other side of the Pacific in respect to the word "introduce"—the policy of possesing, making or introducing nuclear weapons on Japan's soil. According to him, the policy of the decision was made under a secret, verbal agreement between the two government (10 & 11). These two coincidences of shocks not only touched off political storm but created another strain in U.S.-Japan relations. From the experience of the writer who has lived in the United States for quite some time and gains some knowledge of the U.S. system and even knowledge of the Japanese system, major overall communication problems are apparent on each side—all these easily translate themselves into a public furor and politics as well.

Brief Rationale

It is essential for the continued amelioration of U.S.-Japan relations to recognize and understand how the Japanese patterns of communication work and how these communication behaviors themselves might keep arguments from being reached when in negotiation with American counterparts, for they are based upon diametrically different cultural norms.

While during the past several years, several researchers have presented writings which were made up of the communication behaviors of the Japanese and Americans, most of these have been simple descriptions and have been written for businesspersons, tourists, educators and students, and others. They have dealt primarily with "How to behave while in Japan or America" or "information on cultural peculiarities on the basis of one's subjective views or observations" type.** Their suggesions may be helpful to an extent, but if one goes beyond a superficial, ethnocentric, and often inaccurate understanding of a difference and achieve a deeper recognition and understanding of not only how, but why Japanese communication styles differ from American styles, more research needs to be undertaken.

Analysts and experts investigating this problem should examine the following questions: Are disagreements due to actual or perceptual differences in concepts or attitudes? What misunderstandings and adverse feelings are due to the communication process itself? Since the field of inter-cultural communication is very broad and requires a multidisciplinary approach, the questions such as those need to be posed and probed by other researchers and applied to many instances in the future. This investigation will be limited to the two national groups—the Japanese and Americans and in the area of interpersonal and small group decision-making.

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* While Secretary of State Heig told the news conference that the tense negotiation between Prime Minister Suzuki and president Reagan was a highly successful one, Prime Minister Suzuki expressed some dissatisfaction with the way in which the U.S.-Japan joint communique was issued. The summit meeting was not successful in terms of interpersonal intercultural communication (in human terms).

** Two good examples are: (1) Haward Van Zandt's book "How to Negotiate in Japan" published by Harvard Business Review, (2) "People of Japan (Building Bridges of Understanding)" published at BYU Language Research Center. See the References (12 & 13).

Statement of Objectives

The main objectives of this research are to: (1) describe and investigate the the differing methods used by Japanese and Americans in reaching agreement in small group deliberations; (2) find out the depth of commitment and personal involvement with these methods by tracing back to historical beginnings; and (3) draw implications from (1) and (2) as to probability of success of current problem solving deliberations involving members of both groups.

The purpose of this section is to discover in a summary fashion the emerging cultural influences which have shaped and changed Japanese communication forms with particular reference to reaching agreement (consensus).

(Part 1)

A Review of Historical Elements Which Have Shaped Japanese Communication Forms Regarding the Decision Making Process

In an attempt to find the root of Japanese communication forms, a review of Japan's past and an understanding of the type of land the inhabitants live in is essential.

Many historians including Hall, Sansom, Lu, and others are in general agreement that the earliest known phase of Japanese history begins with the neolithic cultural period. Over eons of time, the archipelago's present mass of approximately one hundred forty thousand square miles came into being, so mountainous that only fifteen percent of its surface could support human habitation. This scarcity of arable land was to affect deeply the people who were to settle this land chain in that it enforces closeness, cooperative living, and the path Japanese have taken.

Not only scientists but physical anthropologists hypothesize that those early settlers started drifting in across land bridges to the mainland. Collectively, they began to form the neolithic culture (14). It was not until millenniums later that culture as we know it began to make its appearance in Japan. By this time, about seven thousand B.C. the land bridges were no longer in existence and Japan had been completely isolated from outside human influence for tens of thousands of years. It was for this reason that "the islands of Japan were reached relatively late by the higher civilization of the Old World..." (15). Our knowledge of those early inhabitants derives largely from the ware they left behind and also from their grave mounds.

The neolithic culture gave way in the beginning of the Christian era to a new group of people called the Yayoi. It was presumably the Yayoi people who initiated the creation of Japanese culture as we know it today. These early settlers brought with them wet rice cultivation and a strong tie with their fellows on the Asian mainland.

By the third and second centuries, Yayoi people had established semiunified states controlling virtually all of Japan. A basic knowledge of this early cultural group is crucial in understanding the later development of communication forms and culture

in Japan from two standpoints.

The first standpoint is that the identification of a native Japanese culture by the cultivation of rice and cultural norms that must go with it (16). The second is the connection with the more advanced mainland cultures of Korea and China and their continental interaction with those people throughout the next several centuries. Wet rice cultivation, the gift of the Yayoi people to Japan, required sedentary or permanent communities with a large measure of concord between the individuals in the community. Conflict in this type of community was extremely detrimental both to the existence of the community and to the individuals in the community.

In such a society, an individual who asserts him/herself hurts the feelings of others and thereby does harm to him/herself by interfering with the normal cooperative relationships existing between groups. The important criteria for judging actions as well as behavior was whether they were right or best for the group. Additionally, the concept of territoriality leading to the concept of family and we-group identification began to emerge. The early Japanese learned to adjust themselves to this type of familial society and also created emotional expressions suitable to life in it. Thus began the principle of heteronomy which was held in connection with what Doi terms "Amae" psychology as core personality characteristics of today's Japanese people (17).

The Japanese have learned to place a special significance to the human nexus and group solidarity in that manner with relative disregard to the individuality. All of these cultural phenomena stemmed from the nature of wet rice cultivation and were (have been) evident throughout the wet rice cultivation zones of Eastern Asia. These norms were, for the most part, ecologically essential for the survival of the group.

The second primary reason that the Yayoi is vital in today's context is that they provided a close contact with the people of the Korean Peninsula and through them with the people of China leading to close identify with these people. Through this largely friendly association came the advanced ideas of the great Chinese state which enabled early Yayoi people to advance their political system far more quickly than otherwise might have happened. This cultural input from Sinitic civilization to the West enabled early Yayoi people to develop at a noticeably faster degree than any other comparable wet rice cultivation society (18). Much of the cultural elements in the Japanese society which are regarded as native elements rather than imported elements are derived from the Yayoi culture.

While early Japan (Yayoi and Tomb periods) was an agricultural, endogamic and matriarchial society, as time went on the Japanese became the eager students of Asian civilization. Japan began to receive cultural inputs from several different areas, notably China through Korea since not only the Byzantine empire and Greece, but India were in contact with China by means of the overland route historically known as the silk road.

These influences peaked in the sixth and seventh centuries particularly with the introduction of the Northern Buddhism and Confucianism, although their influences

were felt much earlier (19).

The impact of these foreign systems stimulated the Japanese people to accept them, but not before adapting them to fit native Japanese culture. Therefore, while they had foreign origins, they bècame uniquely (in the Japanese sense of the term) Japanese in practice. These philosophic systems exerted a strong influence on the people and made changes in the communication system in government. In the final analysis, communication systems in the business sphere and throughout the whole of society were no less affected.

The first major noticeable change was the development of a patriarchial basis in society from the original matriarchial basis. Another major change was the increasingly hierarchical basis of society as these changes took place. The glue that cemented this change to a hierarchical system was Confucianim which had developed under the great Han Dynasty. The early Confucianism (not Neo-Confucianism) institutionalized basically multi-level society that was made up of superiors and inferiors. The Japanese gave a new twist in that the lower level took care of the upper level, and watched after its interests and needs "whereas in China where Confucianism developed the reverse was true" (20).*

Thus, a somewhat unique system of interpersonal communication developed which has served Japan through the centuries. This system when viewed from the outside was vertical in terms of social stratification with orders being passed down from the top and implemented at the bottom without question. In fact, the flow of communication was not downward, just the opposite. An order was initiated at the lower levels and a subsequent decision formalizing this action made at the top. Orders might originate at the top but were modified and converted at the bottom.

In other words, "consensus which was introduced from the Tang government system into Japan in 645 A.D." manifested the various levels of a decision making body (22). The question arises as to how decisions were made at the lower level. The opening article of the Constitution initiated by Prince Shootoku gives an example:

> ....it calls for harmony among different classes in a community... It contains the idea of compromise of reaching agreement on what the ordinary principle, called Li, demands in any case under dispute (23).

In this connection, Nakamura also goes so far as to point out that "(Prince Shotoku proclaimed)...people should not merely follow or obey but discussion should be carried on in the atmosphere of concord and harmony. So one might attain right views" (24).

Whether the origin of this consensus pattern of decision making was based upon Buddhist and Confucian elements is a matter of great concern to historians. Tsunoda of Columbia University is an example of one who has maintained that the origin might spring from some elements found in Buddhism. At any rate the early Con-

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* Legge gives a better idea of the general picuture. He states that according to the great Confucian scholar Mencius, "Great men have their propper business...Some labor with their minds, and some labor with their strength. Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with strength are governed by others (in ancient China)" (21).

fucianism adopted by Shotoku is considered to be somewhat contradictory to the Buddhist principle. This is because the people at the bottom were taking care of those on a higher level, the upper level could not very well force demanding or unacceptable decisions on them. Also, should this type of order be carried out, it could damage potentially those at the top by alienating their subordinates on whom they relied.

Additionally, due to the acceptance of Confucian and Buddhist principles, concord, responsibility, and hierarchy (in terms of situational ethics) were stressed. A horizontal and hierarchical class system came into being which emphasized the superiority of one class over another and formalized intergroup relations into an elaborate etiquette and rituals. Consensus was the only way the group could function under these circumstances and maintained its outward institutionalized forms.

Another element to consider is that of change within society. As Japanese society evolved and transformed in response to the aforementioned foreign stimuli, consensus turned out to be an effective way to cope with change.

During the feudal period, the emergence of a feudalistic military regime came to the surface, and as a consequence downward vertical type of communication became apparent. One way communication from leaders to subordinates lacking consensus was initiated by powerful military leaders. Thus, the more absolute feudal system was applied and a system of despotism reigned (25). In these dark ages Japan enhanced the formal dichotomy of superiors and inferiors (the Japanese sense of the term), and introduced the ethics of the warrior code and their absolute control of the society. There was little change during the next several centuries. The Rinzai and Soto zen sects, now became widespread. The Rinzai sect, in particular, played a extremely significant role in encouraging non-verbal communication. The high value placed upon non-verbal communication held a strong impact on the Japanese mind which continues to the present (26). The Tokugawa period provided a transition in society's base. It shifted from a warrior based feudalistic society into a mercantile society. However, again the influence of the traditional horizontal method of thinking on the part of merchants was strong. The eventual result was the downfall of the strong feudalistic basis of society and the tremendous rise in the importance and influence of the merchant class. This in turn, resulted in the re-emergence of consensus, and reflowering of (figuratively speaking) communication from its basically despotical basis into a more consensual basis with some major exceptions.

During the Tokugawa regime, Neo-Confucianism was manipulated by the Shogunate for the purpose of military discipline (as in the case of the way of warrior and class structure). A rigid and strongly hierarchically organized society in terms of class stratification was stressed. Each knew where one had to fall in his or her own class and the social hierarchy was clear and thought to be age, occupation, family status, wealth, position in family and marital status. It was largely through this system that behavior for each position was strictly controlled. Thus, self-effacement, for example,

began to be regarded as a virtue. One was socially expected to do this. Expressing one's own emotions and feelings and thought too overtly was (has been) considered to be bad taste (27).*

During the following Meiji Restoration, a money clique began to develop a method of decision-making by consensus called "Ringi". This was emphasized to considerable degree in government agencies and in large Japanese corporations. The emergence of this money clique and Ringi climaxed in the Meiji period. Therefore, the basic factor leading to the Meiji Restoration was the rise of a merchantile class, not the introduction of foreign ships as many historians believe (28).

The rise of what may be termed the democratization of Japan following World War II changed many outward forms of society. Nonetheless, basic philosophies underlying Japanese society still permeated the people. The result of this pattern of modernization (not Westernization) was evidently felt in the Japanese communication system in government and private industries where return to a basically pre-feudal system occured. On the one hand, Japan made strides in terms of technology and industry and opened her eyes and interests to the outside world. On the other hand, events such as the victory over China in the late ninteenth century led to the nationalism and militarism which preoccupied Japan. During the Taisho period, Japan again made an abrupt about face and readopted feudalistic communication patterns for the lack of a better term (29).

Following the disaster of the Pacific war, Japan, as a re-actor (not an actor), concentrated on rebirth in politics, economics, education, and so on. While during the occupation period the power of authoritarianism and paternalism weakened owing to the development of democratization in the Japanese sense of the term. Democracy was imposed on Japan from outside, although it does appear to have been genuinely accepted, it was reinforced by two conditions, one external, one internal (30).

In the business community in particular, a new range of communication systems concerning management was introduced through the CCS (Civil Communication of the United States), MTP (Management Training Program) and others. In addition, case studies and group discussions introduced from the United States were applied in Japanese industrial corporations (25 & 31). Japan adopted almost entirely some of the American systems in that respect. Nevertheless, the co-existence of Eastern traditions and Western practices in decision making in government and, of course, in the business community has lingered on to the present day.

Summary

Japan and the Japanese people have taken many paths to self-fulfillment in the world today. However, the basic communication forms which developed in the Yayoi

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* Tokugawa preferred that the Japanese should give primary obedience to their rulers. The code of warrier ethics had a particular emphasis on loyalty, conformity, obedience, and self-effacement (suppresion of one's own inner feeling and emotions which hinders fulfillment of duty). Further, fulfillment of one's obligation received the utmost emphasis.

period are still valid for the most part today. From the Yayoi period to the present, a span of some two thousand years, communication forms regarding consensus developed through various influences upon Japanese. These forms (styles) can be termed either foreign or native depending upon whether they emerged according to the unique ecological circumstances of Japan or were brought from China, Korea and other parts of Asia, and modified in Japan. Taken as a whole, they form Japanese culture and Japanese forms of communication with regard to consensus.

5/30/'81

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