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The Value Shift of Japanese Youth

Yasuhiro Yoshizaki

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Japanese postwar systems and values such as anti-militarism, democracy, diligence, hard work, and cooperation have worked effectively for achievement of an industrial and economical success during the fifty years after the total defeat and devastating destruction in the War. It is a widely accepted view that all post-war systems in Japan had been carefully designed in pursuit of effective industrial production and marketing. The education system had been controlled to produce a standardized and diligent work force. Political emphasis was placed upon encouragement of certain strategic industries; and economic policies favored large corporations rather than the consumers. Though it is analogous, to a certain extent, to the expansion of capital at the expense of underpaid workers in United States companies in the latter nineteenth century, Japanese companies paid much more attention to the welfare of their workers and guaranteed their lifetime employment. That was how the postwar Japan achieved industrial success.

But now that a half century has passed, the values as well as the system itself are going through drastic changes, recognized by only a few outside Japan and far from thoroughly recognized even in Japan by most of those participating in this new revolution.

Various aspects of the change can be observed. The Liberal Democratic Party, which had been sponsored by the main industries and supported by the majority of the population, lost administrative power in 1993 for the first time in more than three decades. Yukio Aoshima, TV talent turned politician, was elected Governor of Tokyo in 1995 without support by any of the major political parties. An equally shocking election result was the victory of Knock Yokoyama, comedian turned politician, in the 1995 gubernatorial campaign of Osaka. Nobody had predicted their victories because major political parties had cooperated and co-supported a career politician for each governorship. These incidents apparently suggest a transition of Japanese political values, and other occurrences indicate further aspects of change: the overseas evacuation of factories triggered by the evaluation of yen, bank bankruptcies, the abrupt increase of serious crimes including terrorism, the rapid decrease of birthrate, and so on.

Because the speed of change of the younger generation is the greatest, and also because their values bear the strongest impact on the future culture of Japan, this paper focuses upon the values which today’s young people are choosing not to retain. This study is primarily a presentation and analysis of the value shifts...
of Japanese youth. It is my contention that the whole system is now undergoing major transformation. In order to understand Japanese value systems, it is best to consider first how Japan underwent other major transformations in the past and on what ground such nationwide value shifts were possible.

The latest and extreme reconstruction of Japanese value system, and the entire industrial-social system, began in 1945. It began with the wholesale rejection of the old value system, including the complete shift of values from militarism to pacifism and from imperialism to democratic industrialism, as observed throughout the villages, towns, and cities of Japan. Many American soldiers who stationed in Japan immediately after the war witnessed the remarkable transformation from antagonism to friendliness and respect as teachers of new values in their former enemies.

Japanese values can easily be replaced because myriad gods, which represent various relative values, have been coexisting for millennia without one absolute God. Depending on the situation, certain values became dominant over others, and in return they yielded themselves to other sets of values when the situation changed. Unlike the absolute values of monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, relative values can be casually adopted as a means of individuals' pursuit of happiness or as the expedient policy of a politheistic nation. Theoretically speaking, values are not goals or originators of actions in Japan, where individuals' wants for happiness decide human behavior without any interference by dieties.

Another example of a thorough shift of values in Japanese history is the Meiji Restoration (1868), when imperialism and militarism replaced pacifism and virtual isolation of the Edo Period. The Tokugawa regime's success in keeping the country peaceful for two-and-a-half centuries was built on the foundations of disarmament and the values of harmony and social stability. When the powerful countries of the West threatened Japan at the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Japan abandoned pacifism and rapidly turned herself into a power-oriented nation. Meiji Japan adopted completely different sets of values, the values of military power through industrial development to challenge the economic and political power centers then dominating the world.

Whenever Japan achieved a major transformation, the people had good reason for wanting change. The Tokugawa Shogunate adopted a thorough pacifism mainly because people resented the turbulent civil strife of preceding times. After hundreds of peaceful years, however, the Tokugawas yielded their powers to the Emperor without bloodshed because they knew that people wanted more powerful leaders to avoid the threatening colonization by other countries, especially after the encounter with United States' Commodore Perry in Uraga Harbor in 1853. The new leaders established a power-oriented system centering on the Emperor. After becoming involved in the world's power strife, the Japanese increasingly experienced the misery and loss of family members which accom-
pany intensive, large-scale wars, and they finally wholeheartedly accepted the new constitution which declared the renunciation of war. The wartime shortage of food and necessities was in fact a major factor in motivating work for industrial survival and economic success.

It is commonly understood that the Japanese values of today include diligence, hard work, and cooperation in a group society, all of which have contributed to economic success. Although valid a few decades ago, the situation is very different now. In the 1980s, after economic success was achieved to an extent which surprised all the world, including the Japanese, the more affluent younger people, now in a very different cultural milieu, began searching for different purposes and goals in life. The recent shift in the value system of Japanese youth ensued.

The transformation of Japanese values can be observed in some statistical data of surveys of juvenile attitudes. The basic value of Japanese youth can perhaps be seen in sharpest and most significant delineation when contrasted with those of their counterparts in certain other countries. Attention will be focused on four categories: work, family, society, and individualism, because the first three are usually regarded as the representative values in Japan, and individualism as central in the United States. Japanese are known for being hard workers, or even notorious as overworkers. Respect for parents had been one of the primary values for Japan, where ancestor worship had been emphasized by all for the past two thousand years. Society was also a traditional value in Japan, and many individuals had withheld exercise of potential claims to greater freedom for the sake of greater harmony and peace. On the other hand, Americans consider that an individual's human rights are the prime value.

Astonishing to most educated people, including social scientists around the world, is that actuality does not at all accord with long-held, formerly valid stereotypes. Americans now hold the values of work, family, and society more highly than Japanese, and Japanese place more importance on the individual's pursuit of happiness than young Americans do. The reversal of the relative values of Japanese and American youth, which is evident in the surveys of their attitudes, makes the transformation of Japanese values undeniable.

2.1 Work

Figure 1 is extracted from the 1993 survey of college students by Ishii et. al. Among the three countries he investigated, Koreans topped the percentage of students eager to work devotedly after graduation. Second of the three in this value is not found in Japan, but the U.S. Only 10% of Japanese students answered that they regard work as one of the primary values. The United States here manifests...
almost a threefold proportion.

**Figure 1** Work as a value

![Figure 1](image)

(ishii et al. 1994: 1993 data)

Figures 2 and 3 are based on the 1993 Japanese governmental survey on the young generation of 11 countries. The informants, carefully chosen to constitute an equivalent range and distribution of counterparts, were all 18 to 24. Asked if they would like to keep their present work for many future years, 38% of American young workers answered affirmatively, versus only 28% of the Japanese. An additional 28% of Japanese answered that they may remain with their present work because of the Japanese traditional assurance of lifetime employment; but Japanese young workers are not as desirous as Americans of keeping their present work where no lifetime assurance exists. Though no significant change can be observed in the percentage of American youth during the past decade, Japanese youth seem to be in the process of losing patience with work, as Figure 3 implies: ever more Japanese are thinking of changing their work, despite the typical annual pay raises for those remaining on their present jobs.

**Figure 2** Do you plan to keep your present job?

![Figure 2](image)

(somucho 1994: 1993 data)
As for the quality of work, American youth want responsible jobs more than their Japanese counterparts (Figure 4). Figure 5 indicates an increasing proportion of those who prefer easy jobs without heavy responsibility in Japan, though the comparable rate for American youth fluctuates relatively little. The value of work which once prevailed in Japan is now less popular than in America among the young generation as far as the figures in these surveys are concerned.

2.2 Family

More conspicuous phenomena of the cultural reversal between Japan and America are observed in the values of family, especially respect for parents. According to the 1993 survey of college students by Ishii et al.
Figure 5  I would prefer easy work.

Figure 6 Respect for parents as a value

(Figure 6), Korean students respect their parents most, which is very understandable, because Confucianism, which holds "respect for parents" as one of the central values, has for many generations been a greatly emphasized part of Korean tradition. Japan also accepted Confucianism as one of its overtly apparent but also unconsciously integrated Confucian value system foundations, though less thoroughly accepted when introduced to Japan than when rapidly and thoroughly adopted upon arrival in Korea two centuries earlier. What is not readily understandable, however, is the fact that Japan, despite its very strong Confucian influence reinforced by its other traditional emphases on ancestors, especially parents, now has far fewer students who respect their parents than does America.

The credibility of Ishii et al.'s data is supported by other surveys. Takimoto et al. compared Japan, the U.S., and Australia in 1990, investigating college stu-
dents in the three countries. Figure 7 shows the result of Takimoto et al.'s research. Even in 1990 American students were more positively disposed to supporting their aged parents than were their Japanese counterparts. Figure 8 presents data more recently collected in 1993 by the Japanese government: only 23% of Japanese youth are thinking of supporting their aged parents, in contrast to 63% of Americans.

The precise question they asked was, "How do you feel about the prospect of taking care of your parents in their old age?" Showing four cards, they asked the respondents to choose from the cards the one answer that comes closest to how they feel. Card 1: "I will take care of my parents regardless of what it takes", which is labeled as "positively" in the figure. Card 2: "I will care for my parents as I am financially able to", which is shown as "possibly." Card 3: "I'd prefer to leave matters to my parents' resources and/or social security," which is omitted in the figure above, as is Card 4: "I will leave matters to my parents' resources and/or social security."

**Figure 7** Do you plan to support your aged parents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>U. S.</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positively</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Takimoto et al. 1994: 1990 data)

**Figure 8** Do you plan to support your aged parents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>U. S.</th>
<th>Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positively</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Somucho 1994: 1993 data)
The majority of 18- to 24-year-old Japanese are planning to support their parents if financially able. Notwithstanding the difficulty of earning enough money for themselves, they may eventually support their parents. Even when we take that possibility into consideration, the view of Japanese youth falls behind that of the Americans (Figure 8).

Figure 9 shows the chronological change of the valuation of parents. Those who are positive in supporting their aged parents are increasing in America, while they are decreasing conspicuously in Japan. The increase of divorce in America may partly explain the American phenomenon, because anguish, antagonism, and sorrows in broken families may prompt American youngsters to realize the importance of strong family ties.

Japanese youth, on the other hand, are losing the sense of responsibility to the family, in my interpretation, probably because of parents' over-indulgence to children, material affluence, and growing concern for private matters. Their evasion of responsibility for work discussed above (Figure 5) suggests the loss of concern in anything outside the individuals' inner world of private satisfaction.

2.3 Society

My observation of Japanese youth in daily life suggests their diminishing social responsibility and growing interest in pleasure and personal satisfaction, as verified by the governmental survey depicted in Figure 10. The actual question asked was "Which of the following comes closer to describing your feeling about the connection between your life and society? (1) The most important thing is to make my life fulfilling, (2) That alone is not enough; I also want to be of use to society." The majority of American youth are society-conscious, while as many as 60% of Japanese youngsters are thinking almost exclusively of their personal satisfaction.
lives. This is from the governmental survey. Similar statistical data are reported by Takimoto et al., who investigated college students in 1990. They compared results with 1977 data (Figure 11). The 3-point gap between the U.S. and Japan in 1977 expanded into 11 points in 1990, and the society-conscious youth in Japan are less than one-third of their American counterpart.

Figure 10 Which is more important for you?

![Figure 10](image)

Figure 11 I will dedicate my life to society.

![Figure 11](image)

Figure 12 is also derived from the 1993 governmental survey of youth aged 18 through 24. Only 11% of the Japanese young generation said that they get personal satisfaction in doing something on behalf of society, while four times as many, 45%, of Americans said so.

Figure 13 is part of the Ishii et al. study of college students in 1993. Compared with the 39% of American college students who regard "respect for elders" as a value of primary importance, the 8% of Japanese students, a fivefold
contrast, is truly remarkable. As for the value of "respect for ancestors," only 10% of Japanese students consider it a primary value, while 23% of Americans do, which almost incredibly exceeds the reverse of what most social scientists would have anticipated. Furthermore, the "well-being of others" as a social value is of far less concern in Japan than in America as a primary value among college students. It may be puzzling that Japanese college students maintain such values as "respect for elders," "respect for ancestors," and "well-being of others" much less firmly than do students in Korea and America; but these are actually just refractions of a much broader, general rejection of a broad spectrum of traditional values.

**Figure 12** When do you feel satisfied?

![Graph showing satisfaction levels](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol35/iss35/2)

**Figure 13** Values of primary importance

![Bar chart showing values of primary importance](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol35/iss35/2)
Figure 14 indicates the young citizens' feeling toward their own country. Those who answered that they would like to do something to serve their country are 58% in Japan, 72% in America, and 83% in Korea. The American youth are much more patriotic than Japanese. The gap is even greater in the "positive" answer which shows the percentage of those who said that they wouldn't mind sacrificing their own interests in order to serve their country: 37% in America; only 11% in Japan.

**Figure 14 Do you want to serve your country?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Positively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4 Individuality

Japanese youth seem to be actually growing more individualistic and self-centered than their American counterparts. According to the periodic research in Japanese values conducted by Seimei Hoken Bunka Center of Japan, part of whose 1991 data are presented in Figure 15, the Japanese tendency toward individualism and self-centeredness is most conspicuous in the younger generation. Thirty-three percent of youth aged 25 to 29 can be labeled as being self-centered in Japan, 42% of those between 20 and 24, and as many as 50%, half of all the young people from 16 to 19, are now so labeled. "Self-centeredness," or "individualism," in their analysis, is the viewpoint which includes such ideas and attitudes as: (1) I would like to make decisions without considering traditional values. (2) I would like to assert my own opinion even when I stand alone against the majority. (3) I would like to assert my own rights even when it may make trouble for others. (4) I would like to do something which attracts others' attention. (5) I would like to spend money on my hobby even when it means that I have to cut down living expenses. (6) I don't want to do anything I can't enjoy doing. (7) If I pay attention to all the rights of other people, I'll be disadvantaged. (8) My happiest moments are when I am absorbed in my hobby or play. (9) Work is only a means of earning money. (10) I don't feel like doing anything that needs
much effort or training. (11) I would like to play different roles in accordance with the situations. (12) I don't want to associate with the people whose ideas are different from mine. (13) I feel embarrassed doing things seriously (Seimei Hoken Bunka Center 1993).

Figure 15 Self-centered youth in Japan

![Figure 15](Seimei Hoken Bunka Center 1993)

Figures 16 and 17 are derived from the 1993 survey of high school students in Japan, the U.S., and Taiwan (Nihon Seishonen Kenkyusho 1994).

Those who said that they would study now for the future are 47% Japanese and 65% American. Those who said that they would rather enjoy themselves now

Figure 16 I will study now for the future.

![Figure 16](Nihon Seishonen Kenkyusho 1994: 1993 data)
than study for the future are 52% in Japan and 22% in America. Though interpretation of such data requires consideration of the different situations of the high school students, the widely accepted image of diligent, hard-working Japanese is negated by these data of their mental outlook which are acquired through the academic method of surveys, which are also supported by some other research.

The change of American values is not conspicuous, though American youth are gradually recapturing a part of traditional values such as the values of parents and family (Figure 9). Japanese youth are apparently losing the traditional values of the immediate past such as work, family, and society, probably because their hard-working parents' lives do not look at all attractive to the younger generation who live in affluence. It seems that Japanese young generation is now in a process of a major transformation, one very different from those which preceded it historically, as noted above.

My interpretation is that sometime around 1980 many Japanese, especially young people, abandoned the values of economic success and began searching for new sets of values to bring them happiness. The thirteen aspects of new values of self-interest listed above are too disparate and unintegrated to suggest that they have found any organized value system yet. Most of their values are personal, and their concerns tend to be limited to their private world. However, the individual's need for happiness is a universal foundation of human life. And today's Japanese youth are standing upon this universal foundation and seeking some new set of values which can promise them individual happiness.

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