

# Have the Japanese Changed?

## —An Analysis of Recent Opinion Polls—

By Sakimori Kon

Japanese love to theorize about themselves. Without wishing to add to the corpus of nationalistic commentary that has periodically been in vogue in the postwar period, I would like to highlight one national trait: a deep-rooted sensitivity to trends, to the current of the times.<sup>(1)</sup> One manifestation of this is Japanese politicians' frequent use of phrases like *jinshin no doko* (the trend of popular sentiment) or *jinshin ga umu* (the people are weary). The word *jinshin* refers to an *esprit de corps* that the individual will resist with great difficulty.

This trait was strikingly evident during the transition from the government of Prime Minister Eisaku Sato to that of Kakuei Tanaka in 1972. Sato had committed no grave errors in domestic or foreign policy; indeed, he had negotiated the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, a major diplomatic triumph. His main political rivals being dead, he had no noteworthy opponents. Yet the mass media would often call for a change of government using the expression "the people are tired." Calls for his resignation mounted until they were heard the length and breadth of the nation, and Sato eventually stepped down after eight years in office.

The transition did not take place without a political fight. The succession was contested by Kakuei Tanaka and Takeo Fukuda, two leading members of Sato's faction of the Liberal-Democratic Party who, though not of the same political stature as Sato, had steadily built up their political strength. The point is that a prime minister was forced to step down without any visible loss of his power base. To non-Japanese, phenomena of this sort border on the incomprehensible.

When Japanese sense a current *nagare* (prevailing trend), they adapt to it. This is one of the basic principles of life in Japan. But it is far from simply "going along with the crowd," in which the power principle is inherent. The concept of "current," on the other hand, is a principle—and a force—in its own right.

### Satisfaction with the status quo

In this context, I would like to discuss several significant changes that have appeared in modern Japanese attitudes and behavior, as revealed in recent opinion polls.

In the fifth Survey of National Life-Style Preferences conducted by the Economic Planning Agency in June 1984, 64.2% of those questioned responded that they are satisfied overall with their present lives, an 8.5% increase over the previous survey held in 1981.<sup>(2)</sup> Some 70.3% said they were well off, while a scant 4.1% declared themselves badly off. A sizable 40.6% described themselves as "extremely well off," 4.8% more than in the previous survey.

Roughly parallel results were obtained by the Asahi Shimbun in its seventh Periodic National Attitude Survey, conducted on December 5-6, 1984.<sup>(3)</sup> Thirty-three percent of respondents replied that life had become more difficult, 59% reported no change, and 7% claimed that life had become easier.

Growing support for the status quo also shows up in political attitudes. Forty-eight of those questioned in the Asahi poll just cited were dissatisfied with present-day politics, the first Asahi poll to show less than 50%. Responses of "satisfied" or "largely satisfied" reached all-time highs of 10% and 31% respectively.

This satisfaction is reflected in support for political parties. In a nationwide opinion poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun on March 13-14, 1985, support for the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party stood at 55%, topping 50% for the fifth survey in a row since the end of 1983.<sup>(4)</sup> The growing conservatism of political attitudes is especially apparent among the young, who have traditionally reacted most sensitively to political issues. The campus disputes and student movements that racked universities throughout the country at the end of the 1960s have subsided into insignificance. A 1978 survey conducted by the Japan Broad-

casting Corporation showed only 2% of students interested in the student movement.<sup>(5)</sup>

So it seems that the global wave of conservatism has washed over Japan. The Liberal-Democratic Party, having learned the lessons of the national campaign against revising the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which split the country in 1960, subsequently steered clear of radical measures like amending the Constitution and focused on economics—with great success. The opposition parties could not argue with the proposition that living standards be improved. By the time the automatic extension of the Security Treaty came round in 1970, there was no major opposition, apart from that of the new left, and that too faded rapidly in the 1970s. No major issues divide public opinion today.

Nonetheless, pollution and other environmental problems have spawned a variety of civic movements aimed at improving the quality of life.<sup>(6)</sup> Since campaigns often produce the sort of participants who are prepared to go to jail for their beliefs, they are often incompatible with traditional political techniques of negotiation and compromise.<sup>(7)</sup>

There has been a great deal of hoopla in the media about potential new alliances between political parties. But now that the Socialist Party of Japan is moving toward democratic socialism on the Western European model, it is very unlikely that the political picture will change drastically, even if the Liberal-Democratic Party does have to form coalition governments.

### Fear of change and loss of direction

Despite overall satisfaction, the status quo is not always well defined nor is it immutable. The radical transformation of Japanese life wrought by rapid economic growth in the 1960s was halted by the 1973 oil "shock" but resumed in the 1980s with the advances in high technology.

Rapid change is bringing uncertainty and a loss of direction. Throughout the modern era, Japanese have sought their models overseas. For many, Western Europe and the United States have been the primary models. Even anti-establishment groups sought models in the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), although the attractions of socialism rapidly evaporated as people became aware of the Soviets' pragmatic socialism and power politics, the Chinese cultural revolution and its subsequent total negation, and the "frozen republic" of North Korea.

With the second largest gross national product in the Free World, Japan has attained its century-old dream, albeit perhaps only partially, of overtaking the West. But the moment the dream was achieved, the country was cast adrift on uncharted seas. Where there once was a model, now there is none, and no home-grown model has appeared.

The uncertainty is exacerbated by fears of nuclear war and mixed feelings about today's rapid technological progress. The A-bomb experience, and the grass-roots anti-nuclear movements of Western Europe have had an appreciable impact on Japanese attitudes. Destruction of the environment, too, has made people less apt to place unqualified trust in science. In the Asahi Shimbun's seventh Periodic National Attitude Poll, the proportion responding that they felt insecure about scientific progress rose to 60% from 50% in 1978. Public approval of nuclear power plants—which supply 20% of Japan's electricity—plunged from 62% in 1979 to 47% in 1984, while opposition climbed from 21% to 32%. Interest in, and desire to use, new electric media remained flat at 30%.

Resistance to technology—and nuclear power in particular—is tied to concerns

about environmental degradation. According to the Asahi's survey, 42% responded that the amount of trees and other greenery around them is declining (compared with 45% in 1981). Moreover, a solid 49% are prepared to accept a little inconvenience in order to protect the natural environment, significantly more than the 44% who declared they were not. This may be a sign of an incipient change in life-style.

## Emphasis on spiritual values?

The Asahi also found in its survey that 12% of people stressed the importance of a full material life, while 81% preferred to emphasize a life that is spiritually fulfilling. However, this result cannot be taken entirely at face value, for Japanese society has traditionally, in theory at least, favored spiritual values over the material. The multimillionaire business leader who lives a life of ascetic frugality is much applauded. Although Japanese are much more affluent than they were just after World War II, it is questionable whether they are better off spiritually, or whether their spiritual values have changed. It is quite possible that many who stressed the importance of a spiritually fulfilling life were thereby expressing a feeling that this had been lost. (The mass media are filled with dismal stories of human failings.) When Japanese speak of spiritual fulfillment, they mean not just sensual or intellectual richness, but a richness in their relations with others.

## Is the family important?

Many observers have noted an emphasis on private life in the postwar period. In the Asahi survey, 40% responded that their families were the most important aspect of their lives, surpassing health (36%) for the

first time.<sup>(9)</sup> Throughout the historical era, and probably even earlier for all we know, the family has been the basic group in which people conduct their lives. The closest human relationships exist within the family, so countless problems—love, hatred, conflicts—arise all the time. The ballyhoo about the "crisis of the family" in modern Japan<sup>(10)</sup> is an indication that there are few other serious social issues. Politically and economically, Japanese society is relatively stable. If the "crisis" really exists, the values manifested in responses that the family is most important might reasonably be regarded as a reflection of this crisis.

I would therefore like to consider the modern Japanese family in the light of four issues: divorce, working women, the changing face of childhood, and care for the elderly.

It is clear from a number of surveys that divorces have been on the rise over the past few years.<sup>(11)</sup> A rising divorce rate does not automatically indicate a crisis in the Japanese family system, since it is still possible that people who dismantle one family may form another.<sup>(12)</sup> Commentators often stress the relative stability of the Japanese family, pointing to the fact that the divorce rate has not yet reached U.S. or European levels, but doubts have been cast on this reasoning in recent years.<sup>(13)</sup> What has been happening is an ongoing "latent breakdown" of the family: households that at first sight appear no different from any other, with no members missing and no overt rifts, cease to function as families.<sup>(14)</sup> Chronic marital discord, school phobia, and violence in the home are all symptoms of latent family breakdown.

Detailed study of the dynamics of divorce must be left to the future. One can point, however, to rising self-assertion by women as a cause. More young women are saying in effect, "If you don't love me, I want a



Japanese youth sport a radical appearance, but once they enter a company, they move along smoothly with the corporate current.

divorce." More women in late middle-age are striking out on their own.<sup>(15)</sup> And more divorces are due to marital infidelity by women. All this runs counter to the belief in the family altar and the myth of motherhood, and is no doubt a manifestation of women's assertion of their rights. Once awakened, their new awareness is unlikely to wane. More divorces are doubtless to come.

Women are torn between the demands of work and the home. The majority of young women now hold jobs, but their desire to marry and social pressures for them to do so are far stronger than for men. The general pattern is for women to marry, continue working for a while, give birth to a child, and become a full-time homemaker. Then, after a much shorter child-raising period than in the past, they reenter the work force.

Japanese women do not yet appear to have the maturity to balance job and home. If women pursue the belief that their interests lie outside the home—a notion central to modern Japan's singles' culture—then a real breakdown of the family is in the cards.

Japanese society has undergone radical change since the decade of rapid economic growth in the 1960s. So too has Japanese youth. As Western scholars have pointed out, the concepts of youth and childhood are far from universal in human history.<sup>(17)</sup> In the late 1970s, adults often lamented that they no longer understood modern youth and children. These voices result from a fundamental change in young people: the emergence of childish adults and grown-up children.<sup>(18)</sup> If the nuclear family fails to deal with this change, it will literally become a family in name only.

Japan is rapidly becoming an elderly society. In 1920, 5.3% of the population was aged over 65, and remained at about 5% until 1955. By 1983 the figure had nearly doubled to 9.8%. By the 2000 it will surpass 15%, matching the present levels of the grayest European societies. By 2015, the percentage should exceed 21%.

The sharp growth of the elderly population has been causing a host of problems in employment, social welfare, medical care, and other areas. Particularly noteworthy is a growing tendency to cast the elderly aside as useless even though respect for the aged is in theory a social virtue; modern society has respect only for newness and change. The frictions that arise over the elderly in the home are more than just generational conflicts, and the tendency to discard those who cannot accept or keep up with change will increase. In computer-related work, it is reported that in some cases workers cease to be productive once they reach their 30s.

## The Japanese life cycle

Opinion surveys indicate that many Japanese want to lead relaxed lives in which they can pursue their interests. Over 90% of the population believe they are members of the middle class. Will Japanese expand their

welfare services and lead unhurried lives that conform to their interests? It does not look as if things will be quite that easy.

For a start, Japan is not as wealthy as the Western industrial countries. Its GNP may be the second biggest in the Free World, but per-capita income has remained in about 15th or 16th place. Except for consumer durables, prices of food and other necessities are relatively high. Land and housing prices are exorbitant.<sup>(19)</sup> Despite a strong longing for leisure and home life, Japanese still need to work harder to bring their living standard up to that in the West.

Many Japanese political and business leaders like to cite the lessons of the failure(?) of Western welfare societies. Ryuzo Sejima, one of the brains behind Prime Minister Nakasone, claims that societies lose their vigor if the unemployed are able to live at ordinary, or above ordinary, standards. One of the main aims of the current administrative and fiscal reforms seems to be to avoid the drawbacks of the advanced welfare societies of the West.<sup>(20)</sup>

Notwithstanding the overwhelming number of people who claim to be middle class, the gaps between classes—or rather consumption classes—are growing.<sup>(21)</sup> The gaps may widen further and competition to get into good schools may heat up owing to the correlation between education, a major factor in determining social class, and income group.

Circumstances do not permit Japanese to lead the unbustled lives that many would like to. The middle-income countries are catching up economically and international competition to remain at the technological leading-edge is intensifying.

Having run the gauntlet of examinations at primary school and junior and senior high schools, Japanese college students do not study a great deal. But this does not mean that they don't work once they join a company. The Japanese have not lost their adaptability to their surroundings. In that respect, their mores are intact. ●

### Notes:

- (1) Jiro Kamishima, *Jiba no Seijigaku—Seiji o Ugokasu Mono* (Political science of magnetic fields: What makes politics work?), Iwanami, 1982
- (2) Economic Planning Agency, ed., *White Paper on National Life, 1984: Toward Relaxation and Stability in 80-year Lifespans*, Ministry of Finance Printing Bureau, 1984
- (3) *Asahi Shimbun*, January 3, 1985. This is supported by the Prime Minister's Office Public Relations Office in its 1984 *Opinion Survey on National Life*: in response to the question "Has your living standard improved, deteriorated, or remained the same, since the same time last year?" 66% said that it had remained the same, 9% that it had improved, and 23% that it had deteriorated.
- (4) *Asahi Shimbun*, March 16, 1985
- (5) Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) Public Opinion Research Division, *Nihonjin no Shokugyo-kan* (Japanese views of work), Nippon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1979. This survey used multiple responses.

- (6) Sakimori Kon, "Taishu-undo" (Mass movements) in Jiro Kamishima, ed., *Gendai Nihon no Seiji Kozo* (Political structure of modern Japan), Horitsubunka-sha, 1985
- (7) At the Socialist Party of Japan convention in January this year, an executive committee proposal that the party tolerate nuclear power stations met with strong opposition from low-level party activists.
- (8) Kim Won-Jo, *Todo no Kyowakoku—Kitachosen Genmetsu Kiko* (The frozen republic—record of a disillusioned journey in North Korea), Aki Shobo, 1984
- (9) In the Institute of Statistical Mathematics's Seventh Nationwide Survey for *A Study of the Japanese National Character*, the greatest number of respondents (31%) said their families were the most important thing, followed by "life and health" (21%). If the 9% who responded "children" are included in the total, some 40% regard their families as the most important. The respondents were free to write their own answers. In the *Asahi Shimbun* survey, respondents chose from cards printed with the responses family, health, work, money, property, friends, hobbies and recreation, religion, fame and position, other and no response.
- (10) Juvenile suicides, delinquency, and violence in the home and at school are frequently taken up in the press. As a result there has been a flood of books and articles in the past few years concerning the family.
- (11) The Ministry of Health and Welfare estimates that in 1983 there were 171,000 divorces, and increase of 14,000 from the previous year. The divorce rate per 1,000 population has risen from 1.39 to 1.50. The divorce rate has risen continuously since 1964.
- (12) However, remarriage rates for women are lower in Japan than in the West.
- (13) Japan Institute of Life Insurance, ed. Supervised by Tsuneo Yamane, *Yureugoku Gendai Kazoku* (The changing modern family), Nippon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1984
- (14) *Ibid.*
- (15) In 1976, housewives became the largest occupational group of missing persons. In 1981 the number of missing housewives rose by 2,000 to over 12,000. *Asahi Shimbun Arts and Sciences Department, Kazoku: Nani ga Yande Irunoka* (The family: What's gone wrong?), *Asahi Shimbun-sha*, 1984
- (16) For details on Japan's singles culture, see Jiro Kamishima, *Nihonjin no Kekkō-kan—Kekkō-kan no Hensen* (Japanese views of marriage), Kodansha, 1977
- (17) Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*; Kenneth Keniston, *Young Radicals*
- (18) Sakimori Kon, "Wakamono no Shometsu" (Vanishing youth), *Kokugo Tsushin* (Japanese Language Newsletter), November 1984
- (19) Consumer credit outstanding per capita is \$751 in Japan, compared with \$642 in the United States. Ninety-five percent of consumer credit outstanding in Japan is housing loans. In the United States the figure is only 30%. Masako Ozawa, "Maku Akeru 'Kaiso Shohi Jidai'—Churyu Genso no Hokai to Taishu Shohi Jidai no Shuen" (The dawning "age of class-based consumption"—the collapse of the middle class dream and the end of the age of mass consumption), *Chogin Chosa Geppo* (Monthly Research Bulletin of the Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan), No.222, July 1984
- (20) Gerald L. Curtis and Masumi Ishikawa, *Doken Kokka Nippon* (Japan: the land where construction is king), Kobunsha, 1984
- (21) Masako Ozawa, op. cit.