

Groping for an Identity

By Jun Eto

Recent years have seen a flood of books, both in Japan and overseas, seeking to "explain" the Japanese character. It is almost as though scholars had discovered some rare species of animal and were attempting to document its quirks and theorizing why this strange beast acts as it does. One theory contrasts Japanese society's vertical nature with the horizontal society of the West. Yet another attributes to the Japanese people some special ability to work well on a small scale under pressure, with the corresponding warning that things quickly get out of hand if Japanese are given free rein or start thinking big. Interesting though these theories are, they seem to be going to greater and greater lengths to explain what sets the Japanese apart from the rest of humanity. And in emphasizing the differences, the total effect of all of this theorizing is to suggest that Japanese are almost a separate classification—sub- or super-human, take your choice.

Japanese are also guilty of this separatist proclivity in viewing other peoples. We refer to foreigners as *gaijin*, a word which literally means "outsider" but carries connotations of "alien" or "not human as we know it." The older word, *ijin*, meant "someone who is different," and could also be interpreted as "different from people as we know them." The very language includes built-in discrimination between Japanese and "others," with the assumption that Japanese set the human norm and that these "others" are outside of it.

Not surprisingly, a common complaint from foreigners living in Japan is the difficulty of breaking into Japanese society. The Japanese are very kind and solicitous toward foreigners but keep them at arm's length. Foreigners lament, for instance, that they are rarely invited to a Japanese home. And should a foreigner work to master the language, customs, and manners of Japan, his or her only

reward is to be branded a *henna gaijin*, an oddity who does not conform to the *gaijin* stereotype.

Both Westerners and Japanese exhibit this tendency to deny the other's humanity, and this naturally induces untenable generalizations in comparative cultural studies. These same stereotypes also influence government policymakers, generating a situation prone to emotionalism. The reason Japan will not open its doors to increased imports of beef, citrus, or tobacco products is because the



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Japanese are not normal people. It therefore follows that the only way to remove this non-tariff barrier is to force a human society on Japan.

The incomprehensible Japanese language (which does not even use a Western alphabet!) reinforces the sense of strangeness and difference. At a time of global recession, it is easy for otherwise rational people to be caught up in the heat of emotionalism and to charge that the Japanese language is somehow a non-tariff barrier which needs to be dismantled. Surely it is time we realized the grave dangers and futility implicit in such thinking.

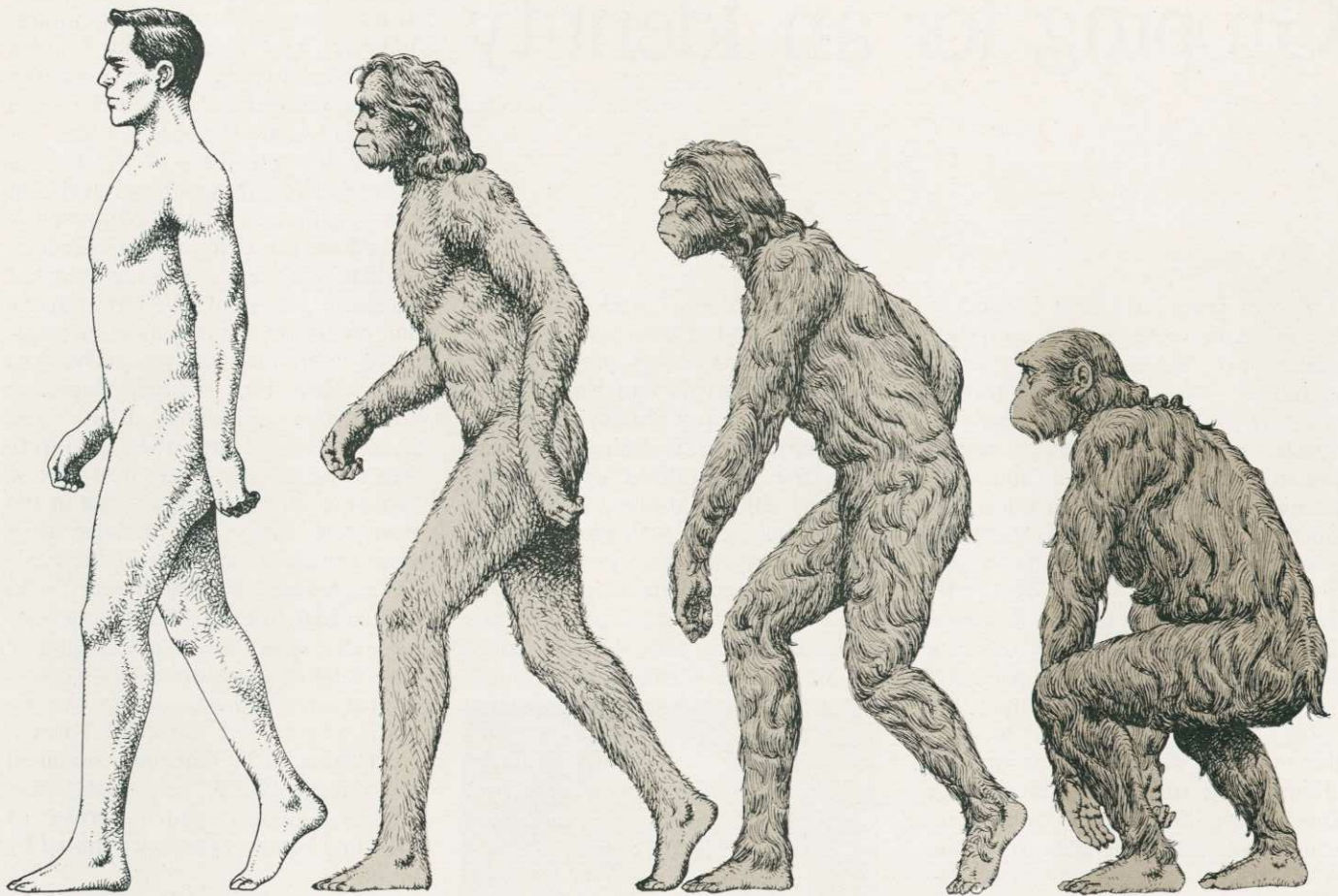
Since ancient times, the Japanese have felt a deep affinity for China and Chinese culture, respecting Chi-

nese civilization and adopting many of its elements into our own culture. Japanese have been reading Chinese literature, writing Chinese poetry, and studying the classics for over a thousand years. We consider the Chinese fellow members of the human race, and feel it is only natural that our sentiments and philosophies should be mutually comprehensible. Similarly, modern Japan has featured extensive study of Western culture and civilization as Japanese attempted to internalize and adopt Western ideas. The 19th century Japanese poets who translated Keats and Shelley, and the later poets who were thus inspired to develop a new style of Japanese verse were interested in the Romantic poets not because they were British but because of the vitality expressed by these writers who happened to live in a different country.

Later, after the Russo-Japanese war, Russian literature began to exert a profound influence upon the literati. The respect accorded Tolstoy, Dostoevski, and Chekhov stemmed from a profound sense that these Russian literary giants wrote of the same human experience shared by all men.

Though cultures are set apart by different languages, customs, and mores, humanity is surely bonded by shared emotions and values which transcend these differences. The difficulties of the present age—including trade friction and global instability—have brought out an all-too-human suspiciousness and defensiveness among the peoples of the world. Yet it is precisely because of this that common directions must be found to solve our current problems and to satisfy sometimes conflicting interests.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Kissinger once said that of all the nations he has visited, the one he least understood was Japan; and he seemed to suggest that the problems between the U.S. and Japan are caused in large part by Japanese "inscrutability." Such inscrutability appears to have two sides to it. One side is in the eye of the beholder. Japan is the only Asian nation to achieve a position of economic strength within the international community. Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore have happily joined the ranks of the newly industrialized countries, and there are numerous developing nations in Asia on the verge of rapid



growth, but the fact remains that Japan is the only Asian nation able to exert a significant influence on the world economy. It is thus only natural that the conflicts of interests between the Western nations and Japan should loom large and that there should be growing irritation in the West with the Japanese way of doing things. In essence, Western commentators find themselves unable to understand Japan's economic success and are irritated that it demands their understanding.

The other side of Japan's inscrutability lies within Japan itself. The Japanese are not really so difficult to understand, but the Japanese themselves are uncertain of their national identity. Since the end of the war, the Japanese have been unsure of who they are and where they are going. The shock of defeat was a major factor in bringing about this situation, but even more important was the suddenness with which the Japanese people were compelled to discard old values and to take up new ones. Overnight the occupation forces were tell-

ing the Japanese that everything that they had ever done was wrong and that salvation was possible only in slavish imitation of their betters. At the time the Japanese meekly attempted to absorb these new values, but later, as the postwar economy began to recover, doubts developed as to the truth of this teaching.

However, as exemplified in their obsession with explaining the Japanese psyche to the rest of the world, the Japanese have not yet regained the psychological confidence to match their economic strength. Few other nations suffer such a dichotomy between what they are and what they see themselves to be. Thus this Japanese inscrutability which baffled even such an astute observer as Henry Kissinger is in part a legacy of Japan's relations with its adversaries and conquerors of decades ago.

Values have been at the heart of this confusion, but surely it is possible to draw upon the lessons of the past and to discover common values which transcend differences of race and culture. Western values have

tended to dominate "the civilized world" since the 18th century, and while I would not want to deny the enormous contribution those values have made to human progress, Western values alone are inadequate to a truly global civilization. Rather, it is time to seriously reexamine the many and various human values from all parts of the world and to see if, at the beginning of this New Year, we cannot achieve an integrated system of universal values that all peoples can be comfortable with in the many New Years to come. ●

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