The Class of '07:
Post-Modern Japanese in the Global Village[#]

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the forces and character of current change in Japan and the world today. It will discuss what kind of world the graduating class of '07 is going to live in. Over a decade ago, a calamity struck the once ascendant Japanese economy. Since then, there has been a lot of stress within Japanese society. Generations of Japanese who grew up to expect growth and satisfaction in a growing economy now face uncertainty. The class of '07 will start their working lives in a country which will soon have to decide if it is going to reinvent itself. These days, national concerns are being discussed in comparitively parochial terms such as banking practices and corporate restructuring. This essay will look at the problems Japan and the class of '07 face in a post-modern world in terms of language, ritual, images and myth.

1. Introduction

This essay will employ an hypothesis: language, ritual, images and myth are inseparably related; they are the foundation of public belief and discourse. They are the composite parts of a cultural ethos.

The theory would be that current electronic technology is contributing to accelerate changes in culture so swiftly that public discourse is unable to keep up. In other words, sweeping change is running ahead of older forms which cannot reflect what millions of people are experiencing. If this situation is left in careless disregard, virtually all cultures will experience excruciating dissolution before any relief is possible.

2. Myths rituals, images and language

\# Language Research Center Contribution #2

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Myths are stories which resolve the human condition in a mysterious and infinite universe. A myth is a way of resolving and explaining questions in relation to the world we live in. Myths reflect human experience in the world of nature. By some authority, myth is a psychic and spiritual function of human society. Rituals are the the physical enactments of myths. They engage nervous systems so that our senses can be brought alive by the enactments. Images are the abstractions we take from the myths and rituals. Language is at the juncture of where the other three elements come together.

It is apparent from paleolithic evidence that myths, ritual and images are possibly as old as language itself. In traditional cultures such as Japan, myths and rituals have had continuity over large periods of time. Their change and evolution is commensurate with the changes and evolution of the language and images. There is a beautiful symmetry in this nexus; the human body is in concert with it in terms of the nervous system and energy centers. Ancient Asian thought and practice has mapped this out in terms of recorded knowledge and physical discipline such as yoga. Language and the body — the nervous system — are directly related, not as cause and effect, but rather as a holistic emanation of nature.

3. Joseph Campbell: the essential need for myths

Joseph Campbell (1904 - 1987) was an eclectic scholar of mythology and comparative religion. After a teaching career spanning nearly forty years at Sarah Lawrence College, he was intensely aware of the effects his classes were having among his students. He observed that mythology grabbed their attention in a physical and palpable way. He believed that myths offer people spiritual vitality, physical health, guidance and comfort throughout their progress in life. Myths help people to locate their spiritual centers. From his knowledge of Asian tradition, he was very aware of how the body and language were connected. For all this, Campbell should not be confused with being a mystic. He was above all a scholar and teacher; his mastery of languages and exhaustive research made him a paramount authority until the moment of his death.

In his final years, Campbell shared his career with the public in a series of interviews with journalist Bill Moyers. The essential theme was that when myth is forgotten, when ritual is abandoned, when the images collapse, anarchy, antisocial behavior and psychosis emerge. He felt that people yearned to feel truly alive.

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what we are all about, and that's what these clues [in myths] help us to find out. (Campbell, 1988)

Campbell was in despair over what is happening in the West. He argued that the Judaic-

Christian mythos is outmoded. It no longer reflects the reality of people's lives and the world they live in. Consequently, public rituals have been abandoned; the myths have been reduced to quaint stories. In the absence of an effective myth, the children are doing the best they can to make them up themselves. (Campbell, 1988) Often the results are antisocial and destructive. He pointed out that any daily newspaper was a record of the negative effects. The West is experiencing a period of pain and turmoil which is being caused by the ending of one sort of time, and the beginning of another. (Campbell, 1988).

In contrast to the West, Campbell felt that the East is alive in respect to ritual which celebrates the process of life, death and infinity. He said that this was true anywhere East of Suez. (Campbell, 1988) Ancient cultures practice rituals which still speak to the people in a significant way. Language and myth remain relevant in daily life. Campbell had an affection for Japan. He was effervescent when recalling his experiences in Kyoto.

4. Marshall McLuhan: extensions of the nervous system

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a remarkably eclectic scholar who specialized in the study of media. Although he was a social scientist, he was very interested in literature, language and image. He used every discipline and province of knowledge he felt was necessary to exploit his polemics. McLuhan became a celebrity by appearing on popular television shows, and even in movies. Colleagues were frankly suspect of his motives, and some of them would eventually try and unseat him. He was never completely accepted in academia. On the other hand, he became the darling of the '60's counter- culture. He published several remarkable books such as *The Medium is the Message* (1960) which are once again receiving attention due to the digital revolution. In retirement and suffering from ill health, his detractors began removing the luster from his career by going so far as to dismantle the institute of which he had been the charter director. Today he is no longer a household name, but his career is being vindicated by the unfolding of history.

McLuhan's biggest concern was with machines, media and human society. He insisted that every machine, even a simple one like the wheel, is an extension of the human nervous system. The integration of a machine into our lives caused a detachment of our senses — an actual loss of sensibility. He called this 'amputation'. With each new machine, there was an added amputation. With each successive new technology the process was intensified. Technological change causes pain, anguish and dislocation. A kind of sleep or torpor sweeps over us, and language atrophies. As old images recede, new ones to replace them are slow to appear.

We are the Hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar (T. S. Eliot , 1925)

New technologies create new environments in which we suffer what McLuhan called the cultural blues. While new identities are evolving for both the private and the corporate worlds there is anarchy, confusion, and despair in political and educational institutions, as well as domestic life.

Electronics is the most revolutionary and dislocating technology. It has made the global village even more of a reality than when McLuhan wrote about it.

> Today, electronics and automation make mandatory that everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if it were his hometown. The artist is the only one who does not shrink from this challenge. He exults in the novelties afforded by innovation. (McLuhan, 1968, pp. 11-12)

Thus, artists stand out among us and offer language and images when we most need them, but McLuhan noted that the West has a distinct problem. Unlike Asia, in the West artists have been sidelined as aliens and outcasts. (McLuhan, 1968)

> Not so in the Orient, where the exact reverse has been the case for centuries. ... the oriental world was never dedicated to fragmented or specialist stress in the visual sense. Art has been considered the primary mode of adjustment to the environment. (McLuhan, 1968)

It is important to understand that the global village does not imply that all humans are living in the same condition, nor are their sensibilities matching or even similar.

> Other cultures, native [First Nations/ Indian] and oriental have been developed on quite different sensory planes, for not only is each sense an unique world, but it offers unique pleasures and pains (McLuhan, 1968, p. 17)

In the fervor of the recent, so-called political correctness, these distinct variations may have been de-emphasized. Notwithstanding this oversight, we will now turn to Japan as a specific case in the global village.

5. Is there a Pox Japonica?

It is universally recognized that Japan is a culture which is distinguished by coherence, consensus, public ritual and continuity in the face of change and social evolution. A feature of the Japanese language is the abundance of inflections which reflect the relationship of speakers in role, station and age.To be Japanese is to practice countless little rituals every day, both in the public and domestic world. The country is virtually homogeneous, and it has been at peace since 1945. If any society is a candidate for exceptionally good health, it would seem that Japan is qualified.

The Meiji Revolution was a adjustment made to accommodate the modern market place and the creation of the modern state. And curiously, it also preserved the *status quo* — it preserved a way of life. Just how much of that was consciously engineered, as opposed to an accident of history, cannot be explored here. But, in contrast to Britain's industrial revolution (Polanyi, 1944), the Meiji Revolution ensured that Japanese culture continued to be anchored in an agrarian ethos, despite the burgeoning 'satanic mills'. The *tambo* and the *inaka* way of life was institutionalized. Even today, the megalopolis of Tokyo is sometimes described as a vast patchwork of interlocking villages containing familiar relationships in a timeless manner. The neighborhood, and the *furosato* (hometown) confer adhesion, inclusion and identity. In the 1990's, there was a controversy surrounding Japan's protection of domestic rice production and marketing. It was not merely a case of unalloyed commercial protectionism.

The ancient traditions of Buddhism and Confucianism lie in the core of Japanese culture. Western observers often confuse Buddhism with the Western conception of religion. And outsiders may underestimate how much it is integrated in every part of Japanese life, from birth to death. They do not feel the motivating power of these traditions in the Japanese language, nor the way they retain meaning and relevance in both national and domestic life. Prof. Nakamura Makoto has observed that during a period of Japanese economic decline, the practice of *hatsumode* has increased. The number of people visiting the nation's shrines during the first three days of the new year has increased by 66% in the last 35 years. (Nakamura, 2001) Although this may be due to difficult circumstances, it is nevertheless significant that people continue the ancient practice.

Stability and continuity of social relationships constitutes an enormous strength and resilience in Japanese culture. These days it is softening up some of the harshness of Japan's economic woes. But no one can predict what is going to happen under the stresses and strains which are increasingly being applied to the old institutions of domestic and public life. Already there is the sense of unease in respect to the disturbing events which have become part of the daily news. Japanese are sensing an increase in savagery, predatory behavior and incipient anti-social behavior. Infanticides, murder, arson, kidnappings, killings among youthful peers, the torture of animals, the emergence of cults bristling with violent and antisocial preoccupations all seem to be increasing. But it may not be the quantity which is as unnerving as much as the quality of these crimes. Acts precipitating from rage, violent desperation, rampant greed, and psychosis are in their way more disturbing than the predations of organized gangs, professional thieves and

common thugs.

6. Post-modern Japan

Post modernism is commensurate with the continuing emergence of the global village. Japan is by no means a passive importer of post-modernity. Japan is one of the creators. It was by no accident that the science fiction writer David Gibson used Japan as a location in the novel which introduced not only the idea, but the term 'cyberspace'. (Gibson, 1984) A bizarre, implausible notion only a decade ago, it is now part of the common discourse. These days the rental shelves are stacked high with copies of the movie trilogy *Matrix* — a pure cyberspace adventure and a smash hit among young Japanese.

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination expressed daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children taught mathematical concepts .... a graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding .... (Gibson, 1984)

Post modernism is the belief that direction, evolution and progress have ended in social history; instead, society is based upon the decline of absolute truths, and the rise of relativity. In practical terms it is a world in which the central industries and the ascendant technologies are no longer metal bashing and stone grinding, but rather information, innovation, know-how and services. It is a corporate world as well as a world of individual initiative. Production is portable and it usually moves to the location of trainable, available and cheaper labor. Japan is living in the reality of this world, albeit neither resigned nor adjusted to it.

The post-bubble economy has been explained to the the Japanese public as having originated from fiscal mismanagement and corporate misbehavior. But a more complete explanation would add the fact that the country is misaligned in the post-modern world. Much of the shock, the stagnation, the redefining of roles and the meaning of work needs to have some realistic meaning applied. Government policies for restructuring [*resturora*] may become moribund for the lack of a total readjustment in every corner of the society. The country literally will have to reinvent how it is going to make a living in the 21st Century.

There may be no master plan possible for these adjustments. Even successful adaption will appear more like a chaotic transformation than a rationalized restructuring. There will be no archetype, no paradigm, no master theory to connect these changes in any concerted fashion. There may simply have to be judiciously conceived *ad hoc* changes made in all sectors in order that they may survive. And if this is not chaos, it is certainly a watershed for a new national character. The current authority structure and leadership style of Japanese culture is in great

danger of being utterly obsolete.

Globalism, democracy, freedom of choice and individual initiative exact a price at the expense of top-down control of the state. To deny the former is to cripple the state as a player in the global economy. As social freedoms replace long-abiding paternalism and traditional lines of authority, a downside emerges. People are going to do what they want to do, and not all of it is attractive. The greatest solvent to the old traditional order is the electronic computer. These days, change can arrive at the speed of light, and it is distilled in the time it takes for the operator to process it in thought. At the time of writing, Japan is considerably ahead of America in broadband transfer of data.

7. The class of '07

More than a decade ago, Asian commentators reflected on the collateral damage of the Western industrial revolution. They observed the chaos, upheaval and crime in far away streets and said it was not going to happen in their precincts because of 'Asian values'. From what we have seen, one cannot blame them for thinking this way. They had a point. And, there is still room for optimism, even now in full view of something these commentators had not considered — the post-modern revolution.

The rules of 20th Century power and influence in the market place have changed. China may be reinventing capitalism at this moment. Asian countries which were nearly prostrate a few years ago may be finding a new lease on life. These countries are taking over the role of Japan in the Asian sphere. Unless it wants to retreat into devolution and isolation, Japan has no choice but to become a model of post-modernism. Fortunately, it has a well-organized, well-educated and healthy population. There is vibrant continuity and a secure national identity. We have glimpsed at some of the pitfalls and challenges listed above, the sum of which suggests that Japanese culture will have to become increasingly more motile and flexible.

The class of '07 will step into a world of intense competition where hard work will not be the deciding factor as much as the quality of the work in terms of innovation, originality and the speed at which it can be turned into something practical. It will not pay anyone in a post-modern country to sweat or bend over a desk unless they are players, and sometimes winners, in the competition. Countries which we used to think of as burdened by poverty and backwardness are turning out vast numbers of educated specialists in every field of technology. Some of these countries are already exporting this human resource to Japan. These expatriates are doing research and working as skilled technicians in Japanese corporations and institutions. The class of '07 will have to unstintingly rise to the challenge of being self-reliant as a corporate culture becomes increasingly less committed to giving them a place just because they are Japanese. They will first have to measure up to a world standard — whatever it is at the time.

The class of '07 hopefully will be leaders in a culture which is going to need a continual

reevaluation of the old as well as an understanding of the new. This will be exceedingly difficult; it is inescapable that they will be trying to know the present and predict the future through the surviving images of the past — what Marshall McLuhan called the 'rearview mirror'. But they may be better equipped to do this than any previous generation because they have grown up in the age of cyberspace. They are visually oriented and expressive on their own terms. Perhaps more than anything else, they will need to be the participants or the compositors of a national discourse in a shared public culture.

8. Conclusion: The stadium of public discourse

Language will be Japan's central issue in the near future. But it is very likely that it might be overlooked, and attention will be deflected onto something else. The need for a public discourse will become increasingly important to the nation's welfare. But, where will it occur? What form will it take?

In an article entitled *What's Happening to "Serious" Books: Changes to Japan's Shared Culture*, Yoshimi Shunya of Tokyo University has explained that despite a high literacy rate and a healthy publishing industry, public discourse has declined. There is evidence to show that people are not reading less, but they are reading fewer serious books. The young have stopped reading newspapers. The traditional forum has either collapsed or atrophied. Globalization and digitalization have created an upheaval in the Japanese publishing industry which has had a huge impact on a formerly close relationship between culture and commerce. (Yoshimi, 2001) Newspapers and TV networks are not serving as an arena for public debate.

> These mass media tend to be extremely Tokyo-centric and rely heavily for their information on the old-boy network of the Tokyo Press Club and press releases from the big corporations. They are ill equipped to provide more than the scantiest coverage of important social issues occurring on a local or regional level (Yoshimi 2001)

Yoshimi concludes his article by saying that sooner or later, the nation will have to concern itself with reading habits, as well as non-commercial ways of sustaining shared public culture.

The stadium for public discourse is already in place. The country is already wired up for Internet. Grandmothers and school children carry around mobile phone technology which a decade ago would have seemed incredible. The possibilities are abundant. How the class of '07 and others will choose to use this technology (and future replacements for it) is of course unknown. And it seems that no one is about to show them. It will be up to them.

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