RADBOUD MOLIJN

私の日本観

(Watashi no Nippon kan)

My personal
reflections on Japan

2016

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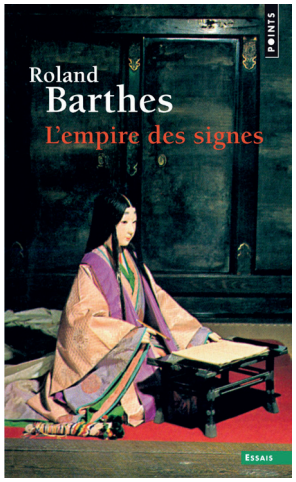
reflections on Japan

On the occasion of the conferral of the
Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette
June 21, 2016



PROLOGUE

"*If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also, though in no way claiming to represent or analyse reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse) – isolate somewhere in the world (far away) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.*"

The first book that I read on Japan was that by the French philosopher Roland Barthes who had visited Japan in the 1960's and published his book *l'Empire des Signes* or: *The Empire of Signs* in 1970. In 1977 I decided to go to Japan and after a two-week voyage by Siberian railway and taking then a boat behind an icebreaker from Nakhodka, I arrived in Yokohama in February 1978.

I have been "in Japan" since.

Let me make a strong statement: Japan is the most *other* country in the world. And that raises the question: with what other country can we compare Japan to? Any European country?
When it comes to design - sometimes – with Italy.
Work ethos – sometimes - with Germany.

Isolation and insularity: sometimes with England; also when it comes to queuing up.
The role of the government? Perhaps - and sometimes: with France.
Language? Perhaps with Finnish and Hungarian (also when it comes to suicide rates).

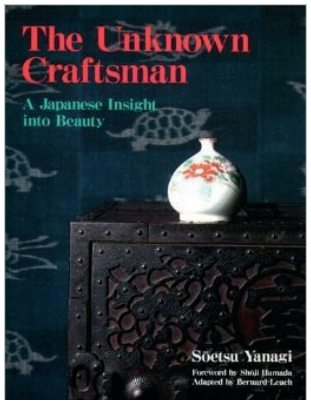
Or can we compare Japan with the United States?
When it comes to the determination of doing business: yes.
When it comes to individualism: no way.

Then perhaps with countries in Asia?
China? When it comes to doing business: no.
Business drive: perhaps with South Korea.
Or: can we compare the organisational structure of society with China and / or South Korea? Perhaps in earlier times but not now.

Sometimes I think: it is all a matter of language and, perhaps, it is the school system, very directive and focused at "unity" and "group" (and therefore providing less room for the development of an individual identity.) Perhaps the Japanese language does possess fewer tools for a person to develop an individual identity. But: is that really true? It is a fact that for us, westerners, identity is very much related to individuality. To distinguish yourself from others: that is different in Japan, perhaps. Or it is perhaps on a different level. And / or: with a different intensity.

But whatever makes Japan different from other countries: it is not one single feature and it isn't a simple combination of several features either.

Perhaps we have to accept that "other" or "different" is not a matter of trying to understand, but rather accepting that people, cultures and business practices can be very different. Leaving your comfort zone behind you makes you understand that fundamentally people are the same everywhere. That has been my true "aha-Erlebnis", my "satori".



1. PHILOSOPHY VS. CRAFTMANSHIP

Japan does not have many what we would call "big thinkers". Or better: the type of thinkers that we call philosophers, asking questions about our "being", focusing at resolving existential questions about the human condition, developing big, large discourses about the essence of man and these philosophies are often abstract and based upon mathematical principles. There is no Aristotle, Zeno, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant or Nietzsche in Japan; not even an equivalent of Confucius. Japanese philosophers had a more pragmatic approach when being confronted with Buddhism and the often-devious Chinese explanation. Their question was rather: "What can we do with it?"

Yet, I cannot imagine a highly developed country that is able to function without the energy of, or better, the contemplation of a philosophy. What then replaces the philosophies that we know in our western culture?

My answer: craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is for me not only a physical object that is made by a craftsman, a *meister*, it also can be intangible: a logistic system, a specific service, a ritual and even an elaborated train schedule. Craftsmanship, or "the pursuit of the ultimate *meisterschaft*". It is the replacement or, because replacement sounds inferior, the equivalent of what we consider a philosophy. It is this full commitment, without any reserve, to manufacturing a product, a car part, a service, a schedule, a quantitative analysis that generates a spiritual experience, no less than that of a philosopher in his Eureka moment. The subject (the maker) identifies himself with the object that he manufactures, develops, or analyses.

The Japanese art collector and writer Soetsu Yanagi founded in 1936 the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum, *Nihon Mingeikan* in Tokyo. It is a museum that displays a collection of everyday utensils of ceramics, lacquer ware, textile, carpentry and iron forgings. In 1972, eleven years after Yanagi's death, the English ceramist Bernard Leach published *The Unknown Craftsman*, a collection of essays and articles by Yanagi. One of Yanagi's findings was that many of the most beautiful utensils were manufactured by unknown craftsmen, not signed, no trace of the maker's identity. Why? These "objects born, not made" did not have any pretentions, but were the result of a full identification of the maker with the object that he was making. Moreover, explained Yanagi, these beautiful and very accomplished objects were often the result of a spiritual journey by the maker to make the most perfect product possible.

And there is no reason to assume that the identification of the maker with his creation cannot be found in 21st century products, be it with the deep indigo of Japanese blue jeans, the world's most perfect melon, or in the finishing of a Lexus.

Subject and object: they are much less separated in Japan than in our western culture.

2. TO BE OR NOT TO BE

"How do you translate in Japanese "to be or not to be", I ask the brothers Yamamoto Gaku, Kei and Sen, three of Japan's best well-kown actors. The answer is a big sigh. "Good question, the most current translation is *ikirubeki ka shinubeki ka.*" "But that has a different meaning", I reply. ""To live or to die"" misses the point, the essence of the question."
Here a number of translations:

- 生きるべきか、死ぬべきか、それが問題だ。
  Ikiru beki ka, shinu beki ka, sore ga mondai da
  Should I live or should I die. That is the problem.

- 生きてとどまるか、消えてなくなるか、それが問題だ。
  Ikite todomaru ka, kiete nakunaru ka, sore ga mondai da
  To stop living or to disappear and die. That is the problem.

- このままでいいのか、行かないのか、それが問題だ。
  Konomama de ii noka, ikanai noka, sore ga mondai da
  Just like this is fine? Or not? That is the problem.

- やる、やらぬ、それが問題だ。
  Yaru, yaranu, sore ga mondai da
  To do it, not to do it. That is the problem.

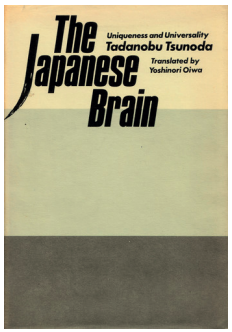
- 生か死か、それが奇問だ。
  Sei ka shi ka, sore ga kimon da
  Life or death. That is the tricky question.

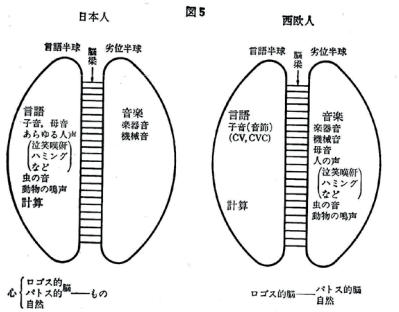
- どっちなのだ、さーそれが奇問！
  Dochi nanoda, saaa sore ga kimon
  Which is it? Aaah that is the tricky question!

Remarkable this struggle by Japanese theatre makers, directors, translators and actors alike, to define the essence of Hamlet's question. The word "to be", a key concept in our European culture, does not exist in Japanese. What does that mean? Is it because this concept "to be", "esse" in Latin, is so evident that you don't need a word for it? Is it a word, or a concept that isn't subject for reflection?

Then the word "I". In English just one letter, written with a capital. "I" symbolizes your identity. In Japanese the word "I" does exist: there are even quite a few words for it (watashi, watakushi, uchi, ore, ware, boku, kochira) but they are not often used in conversation. Is thinking from the perspective of "I" replaced by thinking from the group?

"To be", "I": how do we look at a society where such words, important for us, do not exist?





3. NIHONJINRON

No country exists without its own cultural identity. It is the common denominator in which its population recognises itself. Whatever elements make up cultural identity, language is an important factor.

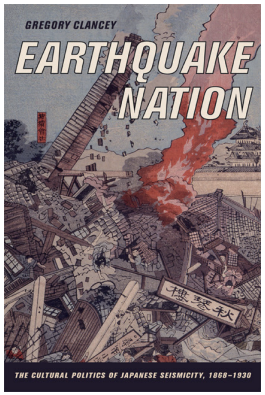
Tadanobu Tsunoda (1926 – 2008), professor at Tokyo Dental and Medical University made a very simple statement: the Japanese are Japanese because they speak Japanese. The Japanese language, claimed Tsunoda, differs from other languages because it is a vowel language and simply stated: this causes a different functionality of the left and right hemispheres. Japanese brains hear music through the left hemisphere, and this is the opposite for western brains. I have been one of Tsunoda's many test persons and I had some doubts about the objectivity and the set-up of his research, but this is not what I would like to state here. What is of interest is the *Nihonjinron*, the ever-continuing odyssey by the Japanese to define their own identity. What is it that makes Japan different from other cultures? According to Professor Tsunoda it is not the genes, but it is the language that provides the Japanese their identity.

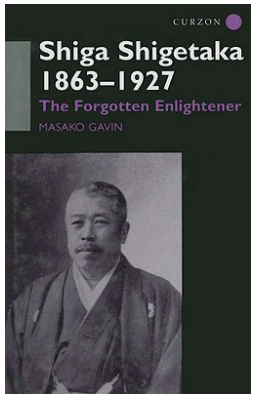
In his book *Bending Adversity* former Financial Times Tokyo correspondent David Pilling cites the conservative Japanese author and mathematician Masahiko Fujiwara. Fujiwara wrote only half-jokingly in a popular 2005 book that the Japanese should stop trying to learn English altogether as this would help preserve a barrier between their own exceptional culture and the rest of the world. He told that when non-English-speaking Japanese went abroad, they preserved the mystique of a profound culture beyond the grasp of foreigners to understand. As soon as they spoke in English, he said, the illusion was broken and foreigners realized the Japanese had nothing to say.

Shintaro Ishihara, novelist, actor, conservative politician and until 2012 governor of Tokyo, claimed that it did not serve any purpose to teach Japanese children English from an early stage. "Why should children learn English at primary school? Because of globalisation? *So what?* Children should first learn to speak their own language and understand their own national culture."

The fact is that the Japanese have the lowest score in Asia when it comes to their English speaking capabilities. And fact is that Japanese is a very different language, in structure, grammar, precision. Japanese sentences are long and often the last word in a sentence is the verb, including the confirmation or denial. That is why "reading the air", the effort to try to understand what point the speaker would like to make, is so strongly developed in Japan. The famous Japanese *tanka* poet Yamanoue no Okura (660-733) claimed that Japan "is the country where the spirit of the language prospers", where the literal meaning is subordinate to intuition and emotion. That requires a close experience in a specific environment and that results in a very own identity that cannot be shared easily.

You will find abstract theories less in Japan. If I were to be the PR advisor of Japan, my advise would be simple: "Japan, don't talk, just show!" My second advise would be: learn to speak English as early as possible.





4. MAN AND LAND

Apart from the language, the physical characteristics of a country are an important part of its cultural identity. The Meiji period (1868 – 1912), when Japan started it spectacular modernization, was also a time when many Japanese began to ponder the broader question of how their country's natural features and landscape shaped what was assumed to be its unique culture.

In 1894 the Japanese geographer and journalist Shigetaka Shiga published his most famous book *Nihon Fukeiron*, "*On the Japanese landscape*", in which he eulogized the natural beauty of Japan, the moderate climate with its four distinctive seasons, the rivers, its animals, its plants. Shiga's vision of landscape was a grandiose beauty embedded in the natural world that moved away from established Confucian aesthetic conceptions of moral goodness.

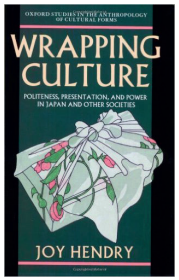
All these natural elements helped to shape, claimed Shiga, the unique Japanese character, the *kokusui*. He compared Japan with England and referred to the English naturalist John Lubbock who praised the scenic beauty of his own country. "Surely, nothing can compare to the beauty of British scenery (as admired by Lubbock). However, there is not even one volcanic mountain in the United Kingdom. Japan has all the beautiful scenery that Lubbock expressed, and above all: it has volcanic mountains, kings of the scenery between heaven and earth, everywhere in Japan, much superior!"

On March 11, 2011, the day of the Great Tohoku Earthquake and tsunami in Northeast Japan I was in the centre of Tokyo. Back in Amsterdam I asked myself what is true of Shiga's idea that volcano's and earthquakes are of big influence on the character of the Japanese. "In The Netherlands", I thought, "we live in a country partly created by ourselves. When there is the threat of a flooding, we counter that with higher dikes and more space for the water. In Japan you can prepare for the effects of an earthquake by building earthquake resistant structures, but the location and moment of each earthquake and tsunami are always unexpected."

Three years before Shiga published his book and 37 years after Japan opened up to the world, the Great Nobi Earthquake took place, 1891. There were thousands of dead and many buildings collapsed - in particular those designed by western architects and engineers. Most of the traditionally built Japanese houses and buildings remained intact. The Nobi Earthquake had a huge impact on the thinking in Japan about the import and use of western technologies - and even on western ideology. The science-historian Gregory Clancey wrote in his book *Earthquake Nation* that in the twenty years before 1891 most of the western engineers in Japan advised to build in bricks and stone, often referring to the old European cities and even Greek and Roman temples that had withstood thousands of years. The Japanese however understood after the Great Nobi Earthquake that they lived in a country with frequent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and flooding caused by typhoons. All these elements, they realized, contributed to Japan's cultural and national identity.

Thirty seconds after the beginning of the four minute earthquake on March 11, 2011 I stood in the middle of Tokyo, in Kayabacho in the middle of the street. With an earthquake the danger comes from above, not from below. And there, with the ground shaking I watched hundreds of Japanese office workers coming down via the emergency stairs, very disciplined, quiet, well prepared, everybody waiting for his or her turn, the order of the group above self-survival and accepting the disaster that was at hand.

Respect.



5. JAPANESE TIME

How do the Japanese differ from the Chinese? Their relation to time. Chinese are individualists living in the "here and now", while their rulers (emperors, philosophers, party bosses) claim that their "Middle Kingdom" is for eternity and that all political, economic and social developments have to be seen in a long term context.

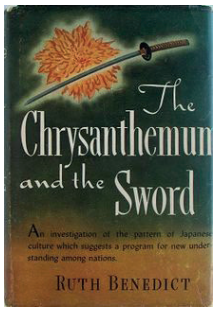
Japanese are no individualists. They know their position is based upon hierarchy: identity as a result of the place in the picking order (bureaucracy, company, department, function). Dynamics is Mass x Velocity. "Japanese time" is determined above all by the Japanese dynamics: when the mass is the company (the organisation au lieu of the individual), it is easy to understand that Japanese dynamics are perhaps not high but steady, consistent and predictable.

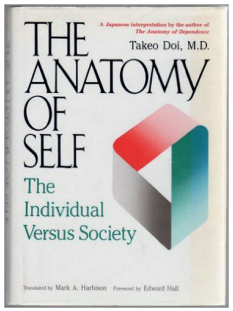
"The Japanese have a keen sense of the unfolding or unwrapping of time" and this is well described by Joy Hendry in her book *Wrapping Culture*. "People familiar with Japan are well aware of the contrast between the breakneck pace maintained by the Japanese factory worker on the one hand, and the unhurried contemplation to be observed in Japanese gardens or the agonizingly slow tempo of a Noh play on the other." What Hendry emphasizes, however, is the meticulous, resolute way in which the Japanese segment time. This segmentation does not follow the Western pattern, where tasks are assigned in a logical sequence aimed at maximum efficiency and speed in implementation. The Japanese are more concerned not with how long something takes to happen, but with how time is divided up in the interests of properness, courtesy and tradition.

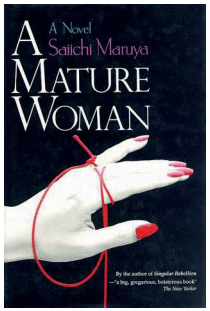
Then something different, time related. I read a study by a researcher of Tokyo University explaining why Japanese people are very strict when it comes to "arriving on time". In the years during and after World War I, when the industrialisation in Japan took off, there was a worldwide lack of iron to manufacture rails and rolling stock. As a result the Japanese had to be extremely efficient with the available materials, resulting in the circle lines in the municipal areas. Also in entering and exiting the trains in a minimum of time. Everybody (engineers, machinists, train guards, passengers) was told that there were twenty seconds to get out and ten seconds to get into the train. And it is true: there is no country on earth where trains are as punctual as in Japan. "It is as if there is, since the first decades of the 20th century, a large clock hanging above Japan that overpowers every excuse to not arrive in time."

Surely there is another reason why not arriving in time is just not done in Japan. It creates an obligation of the latecomer vis-à-vis the other party. If he or she waits a minute, 15 minutes, even an hour, that time could have been spent on other activities. There is nothing so awkward as being indebted to someone.

Time as one of the basic elements of society.







6. THE DEBT SOCIETY

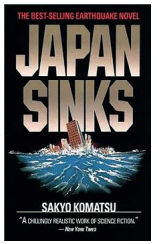
If you have the time and zest to read an anthropological study on the Japanese society, read *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by the American anthropologist and author Ruth Benedict. Although she had never visited Japan, she was asked by the American Ministry of War in 1942 to write a study on the Japanese society and the behaviour of the Japanese: they were not understandable for the Americans (off and on the battlefield). It is like 16th and 17th century Dutch cartographers such as Blaeu and Hondius who mapped the world without having travelled far away.

If you want to read a study on the Japanese society seen from the perspective of a Japanese individual vis-à-vis the Japanese society: read *The Anatomy of Self: The Individual Versus Society (*1986) by Takeo Doi. Doi, psycho-analyst and psychiatrist, lived and worked for some years in the United States and describes in his famous book a number of concepts like *Amae* ("indulgent dependency"), *Omote* and *Ura* (explicit and implicit), and *Honne* and *Tatemae* (true feelings and face to the world) that are fundamental to the way a Japanese individual relates to society.

However, if you want to understand better the structure of the Japanese society without reading an anthropological or psycho-analytical study, read the outstanding novel *A Mature Woman (Onna Zakkari)* by Saiichi Maruya. The book pictures the inner workings of a major Japanese newspaper and the life of one of its key-journalists: an independent woman, divorced, mother and ambitious. It elucidates the gift-giving character of the Japanese society: each favour is to be compensated with a little something, a present, a gift, money or even an idea.

When the lover of the journalist asks a favour from the secretary of the ruling party, this government official tells him that he is not ready to grant a favour for nothing in return. "But I am a poor professor", says the lover of the journalist, "I have a second-hand car, a cheap watch and I cannot offer you any amount that has any meaning for you." "It does not have to be money or an object, it also can be information, or a special idea", says the politician. "It is my philosophy of life. I don't like to say 'no' to someone who asks me a favour, but I am not ready to do something for nothing. That is a bad idea, for both parties."

One of the cohesive elements of the Japanese society is this continuous exchange of gifts, on all levels of society, from small presents and money (discrete in an envelop) to returning favours; contrary to what the 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his Tractatus: the reward can be found in the deed itself.



EPILOGUE

How to appreciate another society?
Perhaps only when (you imagine that) this society has disappeared.

Nihon Chinbotsu, or: *Japan Sinks* is a detective and disaster novel from 1973 by thriller-author Sakyo Komatsu. The Japanese government wonders why every week a specific Shinkansen rail track subsides. At the same time a small island far away from Tokyo has suddenly disappeared. A deep research is started. Geologists around the world become concerned about Japan. One predicts that the country will sink within 40 years; a Japanese geoscientist doubts the prediction, starts his calculations and realizes Japan will sink in 338.54 days (note the accuracy!) instead of the original 40-year estimate. It becomes clear that the Japanese archipelago has been moving inexorably toward an unseen force in the Japan Trench. Now landslides, volcano eruptions and earthquakes are all over Japan and the Japanese government organizes urgency meetings with the United Nations and all countries in the world to save its 127 million inhabitants. Old accounts are settled. The Chinese are ready to accept Japanese citizens, but only the doctors and engineers. The Americans accept a number of Japanese, Canada is generous. By the end of this story most of the Japanese population find a new homeland in America, Brazil, Europe, Australia, etc.

Reading this book my question was: how will the world remember Japan 75 years after most of the Japanese will have assimilated and integrated in their new societies?

My best guess: as a highly developed society that is no better or worse than ours, but at the same time a society based upon different concepts, including the role of the individual vis-à-vis society, with a different psychology, another concept of "I", another perception of time, a very different language and all that results out of this. It will be remembered as a country that re-introduced craftsmanship into the industrial process and as a country that pairs intense scenic beauty with extremely unstable seismic conditions. As a country for great friendships.

But above all: Japan as a country that offers us a mirror and forces us, or at least me, to profound self-reflection.

Radboud Molijn
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