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Joy Hendry. Understanding Japanese Society, 4th Edition. New York: Routledge, 2013.

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Joy Hendry's expertise as an anthropologist in Japanese culture (having conducted several field projects in Japan) has resulted in a book that attracts by its in-depth analysis. Readers are invited not only to learn about this country but also to reflect on their own views of societies other than their own. Hendry aptly states in her introduction that with the devastating earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, "for a while, everyone became an expert on Japanese society" (page), and yet, she adds, this did not reduce the difficulty of understanding the Japanese people. Throughout the book, Hendry explores specific categories of thought that contrast Japanese and Western standards and in so doing exposes the non-specialist to the anthropology of Japan by breaking through these often unexamined classifications. Importantly, Hendry expects the reader to suspend any assumptions about Japanese society and how Japanese people function.

The book begins with an analysis of smaller units (family, school, and neighborhood) and moves toward larger ones (work, entertainment, and governmental and legal systems). In addition, each chapter concludes with an extensive listing of references and suggestions for further reading as well as the titles of related novels and films. This latest edition of the work (first published in 1987) includes the discussion of some new topics, including the current recession in Japan, the rise of the new millennial cult, the Aum Shinrikyo, and the cultural success of the media franchise Pokémon as well as the immensely popular *manga* comic strips and *anime* cartoons. Despite the fact that each chapter addresses a different topic, Hendry skillfully integrates into her discussion the major principles that underlie Japanese life. As the reader navigates through the maze of Japanese cultural specifics, it is important to keep in mind that the world Japanese people know is based on an epistemology unfamiliar to Western people.

Keeping in mind the common Western perception of Japanese society as innovative yet conformist, Hendry aims to expose such perceptions and simplistic and misguided; she draws a picture of a complex culture without simplifying it or reducing it to a one-sided description. She highlights one of the best known features of Japanese society—an ability to adopt foreign ideas and adapt them wholly into an existing Japanese framework, thus giving them a specifically Japanese slant. She discusses how this process of adoption and innovation of foreign ideas leads Japanese identity to be formed by a consolidation of both X and Y. In her discussion of the influence of foreign imports on Japanese culture, Hendry recalls the influence of the Chinese in the 7th century, which brought written script, Buddhism, and some practices of Confucianism along with technology, art, and philosophy. Political affairs were also administered according to the model of Chinese bureaucracy, based on absolute rule. This emphasis on Chinese influences helps the reader gain a better sense of the amalgamation of ideas, concepts, and practices that form Japanese national identity.

Despite Japan's history of adapting and incorporating foreign ideas or practices into Japanese frameworks, there has long been a resistance to the incorporation of Western influences. During the 16th century, the first Western explorers and missionaries arrived in Japan, but the efforts of missionaries eventually became unwelcome, as Christianity came to be perceived as a threat to the Japanese social order. As such, while Chinese influences were undoubtedly significant, the efforts of Christian missionaries left a marginal impact, suggesting a significant distinction between East and West worldviews. Hendry skillfully demonstrates the intricacies of Japan's attempts to assert its national identity independent especially of Western

influences. In spite of this historical resistance to Western influence, however, the author highlights the current, increased Western influence on Japan and notes that Japan no longer aims to seclude itself entirely from the outside world or altogether avoids being a part of the "global village."

Hendry explores Japan's nationalist identity, asserting that it, too, is the result of a combination of influences. Specifically, Hendry discusses the gradual shift of power in the 11th century from the royal court to the military leaders, facilitating the development of the samurai code of ethics, which honored bravery and preparedness to die at a moment's notice and came to be seen as a central feature of Japanese character. Hendry highlights the basis of Japanese nationalistic identity as being constructed on the eclectic incorporation of Shinto mythology (taught as history in schools) and the samurai values, particularly the Confucian (or neo-Confucian) principles of loyalty and filial piety. While Hendry refrains from any direct critique of Japan's past nationalistic aspirations (which testify to the struggle for Japanese identity), the reader is reminded that this search culminated in the events of Pearl Harbor in 1941. The construction of Japanese identity was further affected by Japan's defeat in WWII. At that time, the Constitution of 1882, drawn on the basis of French and German legal models, was redrawn based on U.S. principles of democracy, "at least in theory" (page).

Perhaps most confounding to Western audiences is the concept of the Japanese self, existing as it does within a culture that emphasizes the primacy of the group. Hendry acknowledges that the Japanese concept of self has been explored by many Western authors, yet confusion remains. She posits that the main confusion arises from the tendency of Western audiences to conflate the terms "individualism" (the Western ideology that emphasizes the primacy of the individual) and "individuality" (the simple distinguishing of one individual from another). Western audiences, says Hendry, mistakenly presume that because Japanese culture is rooted not in an individualist ideology but in a collectivist one, the Japanese also lack any sense of individuality. Hendry clarifies that the Japanese do indeed value individual differences, but simply not at the expense of communal values.

In attempting to illustrate the collectivist orientation of Japanese social groups large and small, she explores the house and family system. The family system in Japan incorporates a principle that informs familial choices and actions, a principle called *ie*, an indigenous term translated as "house" but more broadly suggesting the idea of household continuity. Included in the *ie* are all living and deceased relatives, as well as those as yet unborn, and the relationships in the "house" are characterized by Confucian premises of loyalty and benevolence. The *ie* continues to be honored despite institution of a civil code imported from the West. Hendry does not romanticize the principle of *ie* and notes that there is some tension in keeping this tradition alive, particularly because of the differences in expectations between the younger and older generations, with the older generations' focus on devotion to the ancestors and the notion of being bound to a familial social identity and the younger generations' focus on individuality and the emphasis on individual prerogatives and rights. Despite such tension, Hendry reminds the reader that in Japan, the success of an individual is still often predicated upon the success of the group or family to which one belongs, a notion at which Westerners often bristle. And certainly, the principle of *ie*, with its emphasis on the responsibility of an individual to represent his or her family sharply contrasts the Western emphasis on the rights of the individual to do essentially as he or she pleases.

Another Japanese cultural principle that guides individuals' behavior relates to the clear dichotomy between the "inside" (self, family, house), which is presented as clean or pure (*soto*)

and the "outside" (world), which is presented in terms of dirtiness or impurity (*uchi*). Hendry explains that many sociocultural norms in Japan incorporate this "inside"/"outside" dichotomy. For example, she says, in order to create a space between the inside and outside self, specific forms of linguistic politeness serve to establish distance or closeness. Polite language establishes a certain distance and protects one's inner feelings from being invaded by an outsider. Hendry discusses the role of language in demonstrating degrees of respect or self-deprecation and highlights the importance of the skillful use of language, including one's ability to speak with both clarity and subtlety. From here, the author skillfully weaves in a discussion about the intricacies of the interrelation between the inner self (*tatemae* or face) and harmony. Harmony is predicated upon self-presentation and on the principle of face-saving reciprocity, which is based on the empathic understanding of what it means to feel hurt. She says that the principles of reciprocity and harmony are taught from a very young age; young people learn to empathize with the feelings of others and are taught that selfishness is an "an unrestrained state." Hendry points out that an individual's behavior is disapproved of if it stems merely from self-interest (and does not consider either the needs of others or the implications of such behavior on others). Again, this relates to the important interrelation between the inner self (*tatemae* or face) and harmony. Finally, the *tatemae-honne* distinction is the distinction between one's true feeling, desire or opinion, and an action affected by social norms. Pointing out that this distinction is connected to the principle of *ie* and *uchi/soto* differentiation as well, Hendry once again demonstrates the interrelatedness of certain Japanese principles.

The concept of hierarchy also affects the complex web of social relations in Japan and is used as a tool for bringing about the needed state of harmony. Hendry demonstrates that the Japanese concept of hierarchy, often largely misunderstood by the West, plays a mediating role between the need to ensure a harmonious society and the human inclination to act selfishly. Hierarchy is used to emphasize not only the superior social rank of particular groups of individuals (including the aged, the well off, etc.) but also the responsibility of such individuals to demonstrate benevolence toward those who are considered socially inferior (*i.e.* those who are younger, less fortunate, etc.) Hierarchy also represents one of the most significant principles of social classification. Hendry problematizes Western perceptions of the Japanese notion of hierarchy and asserts the need to acknowledge the simultaneous expression of hierarchy and equality in Japanese culture. She insists on understanding hierarchy in terms of *uchi* and *soto* as the major players that inform human actions rather than viewing hierarchy in terms of stratification, as is usually done in the Western world.

Another undertaking of considerable magnitude is Hendry's exploration of religion in Japan. She highlights the Japanese tendency to synthesize various religious ideas (Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism) and provides an engaging discussion of how Japanese people view "religion." She demonstrates that the Japanese construction of this term differs greatly from Western understanding, which is largely embedded in Christian articulation and terminology. When religion is a matter of individual faith, seen as something distinct from other spheres of life, as it is in the US, it assumes a separate domain. This is not the case for Japanese people. In Japan, religion pervades many spheres of life, yet the term "religion" is hardly ever employed; rather, religious principles are embedded into everyday life. (Indeed, in Japanese census data, religious information is collected under the heading of "education and culture"). Hendry insists that when attempting to understand Japanese religions, it is important to keep in mind that religious and secular spheres are interwoven. She notes, for example, that this religious eclecticism can be observed in Japanese commemoration of deceased members of the

ie. While funerals are performed according to the Buddhist tradition, the deceased become Shinto deities. Hendry writes: "There is an idea that ancestors eventually merge into a kind of single spiritual entity, from which souls emerge for babies who are born…". This adeptness in navigating between Buddhism and Shinto is another testimony to the Japanese ability to adopt and innovate within an existing structure; it also demonstrates a strong connection to the national past, including its mythology-based origins. (Incidentally, this ability to seamlessly integrate various strains of religious thought can be a good lesson for Westerners in terms of moving to a more pluralistic view of religion.)

In her discussion of the Japanese government and legal system, Hendry once again reminds the reader of the various influences on Japan, starting with the Chinese. She provides a well-articulated discussion of historical influences and swiftly moves the reader to her discussion of the contemporary setting. Japan's political and legal systems after WWII are modeled after Western prototypes. Quite distinctly from the West, however, the central features of Japanese principles of continuity, loyalty, reciprocity, community, and relative hierarchy penetrate Japan's political and legal structures. The principles introduced by the U.S., which were focused on sovereignty of the people, pacifism, and a respect for basic human rights, are often at odds with Japanese values. This is not to say that the Japanese political system is rife with cases of human rights abuse. Rather, Hendry simply reminds the reader of the Japanese focus on harmony and emphasis on compromise and reconciliation is often at odds with the Western presumption of individualism and the sovereignty of the people. With this reminder, Hendry's discussion of the Japanese political and legal system challenges the tendency of Western audiences to make ethnocentric evaluations of Japanese political systems. The Western perceptions of "freedom" are problematized, as Japanese people often prefer to establish and expand their *uchi* relations even at the expense of diminished personal freedom. Nonetheless, Hendry is careful not to romanticize the above mentioned principles and notes that the principle of harmony can also lead to conformism, ostracism, and exclusion. Neither does she overlook other problematic areas. For instance, she provides a discussion of Japan's nationalistic past and also notes some inherent drawbacks of Confucian principles, namely their implicit endorsement of gender inequalities. She includes a wide range of supporting examples while acknowledging the complexity of the cultural environment. The examples that Hendry uses testify to the fact that some issues have no equivalents in many Western cultures.

The strength of this book is not only in the wealth of the material and the resources it provides, including the references, but also in the ability of this author not to unduly impart her judgments. And yet Hendry helps the reader to note not only the positive attributes of Japan's values, principles, and approaches but also the areas that require a more critical assessment. The weakness of this book might be the same as its strength: The sheer volume of the information and principles discussed in this short book leaves the reader with a slightly superficial take on this complex and complicated society. Despite its short length, at only 235 pages, the work must be read slowly and carefully. Perhaps the best approach would be for the reader to identify the specific subject areas of particular interest and explore the relevant chapters and their resources with a particular diligence. However, as Hendry makes clear, the reader should keep in mind the overlapping of certain principles that are central to understanding Japan, which may require the reader ultimately to move through all of the material in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the overlapping nature of the themes explored in the text.

Overall, I found this book an engaging journey through the complexities of Japanese society. The book challenges the reader to reflect on differences and similarities between Eastern

and Western concepts, views, and patterns of behavior. As a textbook for a student with some familiarity with Japanese culture but not much in-depth knowledge, this book is indispensable, as it offers a glimpse into a wide variety of topics which can be studied in more depth, especially if supplemented by the additional readings or films listed under the references.

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