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CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: JAPANESE SOCIETY

Homogeneity

Japanese often think of themselves as a homogeneous society, with a strong sense of group and national identity and little or no ethnic or racial diversity. But such differences exist in Japan, as in all societies, as Harvard University professors Theodore Bestor and Helen Hardacre explain in this video series. Rather, what is perhaps most unique about Japanese society is its highly structured approach to managing and resolving these differences.

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Theodore Bestor :: One of the things that people, both Japanese and foreigners, often talk about when they think about Japan in comparison with the rest of the world, is to emphasize how unique Japan seems to be. On the one hand, Japanese like to think of their society, their culture, as having this unique identity that is sort of inaccessible to foreigners. On the other hand, foreigners, particularly Westerners — North Americans and Europeans — have always regarded Japan as this very exotic distant culture. So both sides like to see Japan as somehow outside the realm of the expected, the normal, so it has to be unique.

But, if you look at Japan in comparative perspective and look at the inner workings of Japanese society, there really isn't that much that's unique about Japan. The same kinds of social trends can be found in one form or another in almost any other industrialized society.

Perhaps what makes Japan seem unique is that the combinations of institutions — say education, religion, family, and so forth — the way that those are combined may be somewhat different from what we expect in the United States, or different from what one would expect in any particular Western European country. But the elements that make up society are more or less familiar if one pulls aside this curtain of uniqueness and starts to look at the different parts of society.

One of the ways in which Japanese think of their own society as “unique” is to emphasize the homogeneity of Japanese society, and indeed by lots of comparisons, Japan is certainly a much more homogeneous society than say the United States. There are relatively few linguistic differences between different parts of the country. In terms of social class, peoples’ lifestyles are quite similar. The degree to which rich people and poor people are differentiated from one another economically is much less than in the United States. And, it’s often said by Japanese that they are ethnically homogeneous, that there are no real foreign populations in Japan.

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