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Consensus

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.

Theodore Bestor :: Consensus is a well known part of Japanese social relationships. It seems, to an outsider at least, as if everything in Japan is decided by this sense of harmony and this sense that everybody has to agree. And there are all kinds of trivial examples that you can come up with, like if you watch a group of Japanese businessmen sitting down for lunch, it's likely that everybody around the table will order more or less the same dish, and people point to that and say: "A-ha! this is a harmonious society; everything has to be equal."

And indeed, Japanese talk a lot about how to preserve this sense of equality. One of the ways in which they do this is by making sure that any decision that affects a group as a whole is at least going to be circulated around and discussed amongst all its members. So indeed, Japanese organizations do often appear to have a much higher degree of consensus about policies, about aims, about aspirations, than would be true in an equivalent American group.

On the other hand, it doesn't mean that Japanese inherently agree with one another, or that there isn't conflict in society, but rather that conflict is managed within the group, and conflict is negotiated against other demands of personal interaction, personal social relationships. And eventually the goal is to, through conflict and through very carefully managed conflict, to come up with some kind of unified position that everybody can agree with.