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Noriatsu Matsui

The World of the Japanese Mind

Conformity and *Seken*

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Preface

After experiencing the period of so-called "Three Lost Decades," Japan is facing a critical juncture in its society. Since the early 1990s, Japan has suffered from severe sluggishness in various aspects of its society. Both the 1986–1991 bubble economy and its subsequent burst were caused by government policy failures. Specifically, Japanese government officials and policymakers are blamed for their irresponsible no-policy in generating the bubble and their misguided intervention in treating the aftermath.

Faced with a shrinking population and the sense of being trapped in a blind alley, Japan needs an appropriate guiding light for structural reform of its society. Makeshift measures such as one-time cash handouts to households in the name of child subsidies or to small businesses in the form of hardship assistance will not be effective in bringing about structural change.

It is important for anyone who interacts with Japanese people to have a good understanding of the underlying psychological and social foundations of the rigid inflexibility observed in Japan's political and socio-economic systems.

The purpose of this book is to examine conformity in Japan. Conformity to stereotypes is a major psychological cause of conflict in the political world. While conformity pressures give social groups and institutions coherence, positive in-group feelings can counteract out-group hostility or negligence.

Although the contemporary Japanese word for "society", *shakai* has a history of 140 years, it does not include the concept of respecting the individual. Instead, it refers mainly to social frameworks and institutional aspects. In contrast, the traditional Japanese term for "society", primarily *seken* (the world) which has been in use for 1,400 years, encompasses the human relationships of the group members.

This book argues that there is no concept of an independent and self-reliant individual in Japan, because neither traditional nor contemporary Japanese vocabularies for society embrace the responsible autonomous individual.

This book hypothesizes that Japanese people do not conceive of a "society" as such, but only a *seken.* Society is an assembly composed of independent and self-reliant individuals working together, while *seken* is a world of human relations governed by the unwritten rules and regulations.

Society is a group of disciplined individuals who can make decisions for themselves based on humanity, morality and rigorous calculation of costs and benefits for the good of the whole as well as individual. In contrast, Japan's *seken* is a world in which people are bound by various relationships and shackles, such as blood kinship, marital kinship, village, town, city, or prefecture of origin, school, university, work place, hobby, or residential management. A sense of belonging is the key factor that binds people in *seken.*

Examining phenomena such as low worker engagement, *karoshi* (death by overwork), high middle-age male suicide rates, bullying in school and at workplace, sex discrimination, hereditary members in the Diet, and failure to provide adequate protection for whistleblowers, this book reveals a common structure in Japanese minds: lack of respect for individuality, and the traditional and narrow sense of the world, *seken.*

Chapter 1 discusses recent phenomena caused by *seken* in Japan. Comparisons of the Japanese concepts between society and *seken* are made for clarification.

Chapter 2 investigates where and when the concept of *seken* originated. Referring to some literary works since 6th century, AD, this book investigates the origin of the idea of the world, *seken* in Japan.

In Chap. 3, we will explore the three pillars of *seken*: ambiguous words in Japanese, sense of belonging, and the "air", representing the unwritten rules and order, which together support *seken*, the platform. The platform generates conformity. This book presents a new model, Hand-Carved Tripod (HCT) Model of conformity, that shows the mechanism in which conformity pressures are generated and exercised over the people's mind.

Chapter 4 through 6 illustrates how conformity works in the areas of politics and public administration, business and labor, and education. By shedding light on conformity pressure felt by people from *seken* in its basic structure (Chap. 3) and in various areas (Chaps. 4 to 6), we will support the hypothesis that there is no society but *seken* in Japan. If this hypothesis is proven, it implies that the modern democratic system in Japan is shallow in its social institution.

The last two chapters discuss the factors needed to strengthen the respectability of individuals and to enhance Japanese social systems that are facing an incredible shrinking future.

Chapter 7 discusses the Capability Approach to establishing a new social institution in Japan that respects autonomous individuals. Capability concept that Harvard economist and philosopher Amartya Sen proposed would be appropriate for Japan to redirect its society toward respecting individuals for a better future. A leadership model, Zenger & Folkman's Tent Floor model, is introduced here.

Chapter 8 discusses a new structure for rebuilding society, the Spiral Staircase Structure for Japan, along with qualities of social institutions that are important in a new age: mobility, diversity, and competition with cooperation.

This volume examines the minds and behavior of the Japanese people. It will be beneficial to scholars and graduate students as well as business people who want to understand the workings of conformity in Japan, as viewed through social psychology, Japanese culture, and especially social influence and group dynamics

related to Japanese social institutions. The book analyzes the structure and characteristics of conformity in Japan, providing many cases of contemporary social events and happenings.

Richmond, IN, USA Noriatsu Matsui
February 2024

Contents

1 What is *Seken*: Conformity within Society 1
1.1 Recent Phenomena in Japanese *Seken* (The World) 1
1.1.1 Law of Equal Employment Opportunity for Men and Women 2
1.1.2 Discrimination Against Female Applicants to Medical Schools 7
1.1.3 Temporary Benefits and Special Allowances: Not Effective 8
1.1.4 Why Doesn't a Whistleblower Protection System Work in Japan? 11
1.2 *Seken* and Society: Definitions 14
1.3 Comparison Between *Seken* and Society 16
1.3.1 *Seken* as "360-Degree Folding Fan" 16
1.3.2 Society Compared with *Seken* 18
References 20

2 The Roles and Functions of *Seken*: Platform of Conformity 21
2.1 Concept of *Seken*: Origins 21
2.1.1 From "Man'yoshu" 22
2.1.2 "A Protruding Nail Will Be Hammered Down" 25
2.1.3 "Red Light, No Fear When All Go Together" 29
2.1.4 "It is Better to Be Under a Big Tree" 30
2.1.5 "Society" in Japan? 33
2.2 No Civil Revolution in Japanese History 35
2.2.1 Choshu Five at Meiji Restoration 36
2.2.2 Reformations After Post-War Period 37
Reference 39

3 Ambiguous Language, Belonging, and Air: Hand-Carved Tripod (HCT) Model of Conformity 41
3.1 Vague Words, Catch Phrases, and Slogans: Falsehoods Everyone Knows 41

3.1.1 Slogans 43
3.1.2 Ambiguous Words 43
3.2 "Uncertain", "Unclear," then Later on "I Wonder Why" 45
3.3 Conformity: Pressure Generated in *Seken*, That is Supported by the Tripod 47
3.3.1 Sense of Belonging 47
3.3.2 Conformity Pressure 50
3.3.3 Hand-Carved Tripod (HCT) Model: Structure of Conformity 55
References 57

4 Conformity in Politics and Public Administration 59
4.1 Low Voter Turn-out Among the Youth 60
4.1.1 Why Low Voter Turn-out in Public Elections 60
4.2 Bureaucrats and Hereditary Diet Members 63
4.2.1 Bureaucrats' Descending from Heaven 63
4.2.2 Hereditary Members in the Diet: Family Business? 65
4.3 Human Rights, Citizenship and Respectability Politics 68
4.3.1 Human Rights and Citizenship 68
4.3.2 Nagoya Penitentiary and Nagoya Bureau of the Immigration Services Agency 70
Reference 72

5 Conformity in Business and Labor 73
5.1 Where Do Workers Get Satisfaction? 73
5.1.1 Getting a Job for Appearances? 73
5.1.2 "Are You Enjoying Today's Work?" 75
5.1.3 Japan: Low "Worker Engagement" Country 76
5.2 Work Anomalies 79
5.2.1 Karoshi: Why Can't It Be Eradicated? 79
5.2.2 "Trouble in Human Relations at Work": Major Reason for Middle-aged Men's Suicide 81
5.2.3 "Work Reform" 84
5.2.4 "Base-Up" Method for Salary Increase 84
5.2.5 "Apology Press Conference" 85

6 Conformity in Education 89
6.1 Hard Work on Study Versus Active Learning 89
6.1.1 *"Ministry-Of-Education English" Brings About English-Abhorrer Students* 91
6.1.2 Supporting Active Learning 94
6.2 Without Money and Encouragement, Only Bullying 95
6.2.1 *"Scholarship" in Japan: Loans in Reality* 95
6.2.2 "Educational Considerations" 96
6.2.3 Why Can't School Bullying Be Eradicated? 97
Reference 98

7 Strong Independent Individual 99
7.1 Respect the Dignity of Individuals Based on Capability and New Leadership 99
7.1.1 Individual Capability 100
7.1.2 New Leadership 102
7.2 Name the Capability to Be Free from Conforming Pressure: Prospects, Communication, and Alternatives for Individuals 106
7.2.1 Prospects 106
7.2.2 Communication 107
7.2.3 Alternatives for Individual to Choose from 107
7.2.4 Department of Statistics and Data Science 108
Reference 109

8 Toward Modern Democratic Society in Japan 111
8.1 What is Needed for an Active and Engaged Society 111
8.2 Mobility, Diversity, and Competition with Cooperativeness for Organization 115
8.2.1 Mobility 115
8.2.2 Diversity 116
8.2.3 Competition and Cooperativeness 117
8.3 Society: Spiral Staircase Structure 118
8.3.1 Society: Spiral Staircase 118
8.3.2 Individual Capability, Rather Than Standard Deviation as Index 119
8.3.3 School Should Teach Science and Truth 120

References 123

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List of Figures

Fig. 3.1 Hand-carved tripod (three in one and one in three) 56
Fig. 3.2 *Seken*, supported by the hand-carved tripod 57
Fig. 7.1 Zenger & Folkman's tent floor model of leadership 103
Fig. 8.1 Matrix chart for warm society 119