

rhetoric more seriously will some of us find ourselves turning perversely anti-intellectual. "Nothing in the annals of Japan before 1868," writes Wilson, "prepared those who thought in historical terms for the divorce of time from history that accompanied the Meiji Restoration" (p. 25). *Merci, monsieur*. And "the indigenous provenance of the premise did not soften the blow to continuity struck when the central myth of Japan's history had to end, if it were to be used" (p. 26). Sometimes, we could use more old favorite explanatory schemes.

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**The Creative Edge: Emerging Individualism in Japan**

Miyanaga Kuniko  
New Brunswick, NJ: Tansaction Publishers,  
1991. 137pp.

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*Reviewed by John Gano, Tokyo*

IN *THE CREATIVE EDGE*, Miyanaga presents a dream, some interesting life-stories, and a jumbled assortment of idiosyncratic concepts and tenuous inferences. The book begins with an ingenuous renunciation of the author's claim to scholarly objectivity: "This book grew out of my conviction that if ever there were a time when individualism could spread actively in Japan, it would be now." It wraps up its unsurprising conclusion in the second sentence, "My research...confirmed my personal feeling" (p. xv). While this dream of the dawn of Japan's "active individualist movement" is refreshingly candid, it does shift the burden of critical analysis and evaluation from the author to her readers.

Miyanaga addresses a fascinating question: is Japanese society becoming more individualistic? She notes that traditional Japan was not a monolithic "groupist" society but tolerated individualistic elements at

its fringes. She also cites interesting interviews with four contemporary Japanese fashion designers and over a dozen manager-entrepreneurs of smaller firms which might reveal a surprising degree of independence and individualism to readers not in contact with these milieu.

The author's dream is that the rising importance of design in the manufacturing process will force the Japanese "mainstream/core/large corporate/Ritual Man" to become more accepting of the "fringe/peripheral/small and intermediate business/Individualist" and thus build a new Japan that imports more foreign goods and boosts domestic economic growth, as well as being more tolerant and humane. There would be little to criticize if the book stopped at this. However, it has been encouraged to much grander ambitions, with disappointing results.

The fundamental failing of this book is that it makes no significant contribution to knowledge. The author clearly wishes that individualism is growing in Japan, but the only empirical evidence she cites is a dozen-odd interviews with rather likely individualists. The fact that the author interviews four fashion-designers (including some who have held Paris shows) and find them to be individualistic is hardly surprising. But it is ludicrous for her to then attempt to generalize from these four cases to the 710,000 small and intermediate-sized Japanese businesses. The reviewer discovered that one *konyaku*-processor in Fujioka has created orange-flavored *konyaku*-snacks for children! But this does not answer the question of how many *konyaku*-processors in Gunma Prefecture are becoming motivated to work by the desire for individual artistic self-expression. How much more tenuous to generalize about all Japanese small and intermediate-sized enterprises.

Although this book lacks conceptual clarity, some sifting reveals a basic scenario

that can be reframed by the following five assertions:

1. Traditional Japanese society had feudal groupist “cores” and individualistic roles for “dropouts” on the “periphery.”
2. Modernization through centralization encouraged the group while Westernization strengthened the legal and economic potential for the individual.
3. The two camps persist today with Core corporate culture expounded by scholars of the “modern culture of technology” such as Chie Nakane, and “the active individualist movement” of which “the first champions ....were those who led the fashion industry in the 1970’s.”
4. The coexistence of the “core-groupist” and “periphery-individualist” spheres is being replaced by a Hegelian dialectic struggle between them as individualist entrepreneurs evolve “from subculture to antithesis” (p. 49).
5. Finally, there is no doubt about which side wears the white hats and will win in the end as “individualism and independence have high potential both domestically and externally ...[and] The position of individualistic entrepreneurs is much stronger today than it appears on the surface of Japanese society” (p. 25).

It is unfortunate that the credibility of this historical-interpretive scenario is shot through with the idiosyncrasy of Miyana-ga’s concepts. Having defined individualists as “peripheral” characters in Japan’s groupist society, she then maintains that the entire younger generation (*shinjinrui*) of Japanese (hardly a fringe) is more individualistic than that of its parents, because, “the emphasis of their social orientation has shifted from the work ethic to family life, and from loyalty to the task group to that of loyalty to their own private groups” (p. xvi). It does not appear to matter that this mass of

younger Japanese are simply as conformist to their generation’s groupist norms as the older generation of Japanese is to theirs; the *shinjinrui*’s smaller-group orientation qualifies them as demi-heroes, the “passive individualists.” Could it be that “passive individualists” are just being individualists together? After elaborating the dichotomy of “active individualists” versus “passive individualists,” the author then insists that “active passivity” [*sic*] is an inalienable Japanese cultural trait (p. 95). Following a 1988 quotation from Kyong-Dong Kim that “modernization of latecomer societies should be seen as a dialectical process,” the author asserts two paragraphs later that, “to date, this perception of development has not been articulated as a dialectical theory” (p. 3).

These self-contradictions become torturous when the author firmly maintains on one page that “the cohesion of a homogeneous Japanese group is the result of controlled social process, not a spontaneous manifestation of innate “Japaneseness,” and yet on the facing page firmly maintains that “the individual member of a [Japanese] group projects his deep emotional conviction in group homogeneity into Japan as a nation. This projection has been crucial to the formation of a sense of Japanese nationalism” (pp. 16–17). The reader wants to cry out: Which view do you hold? Top-down formation by the controlling state or bottom-up projection from Japanese nature? Surely not another confused concept such as “natural controledness”? The tragic end of the author’s intellectual waffling occurs in the conclusion where Miyana-ga backs off from her book’s main assertion of a dialectical struggle between the individualist periphery and the groupist core and equivocates, “the relationship of individualistic entrepreneurs to the mainstream society may be seen as either complementary or as dialectical” (p. 129).

These criticisms of Miyana-ga’s book are not directed to her work alone. This is just

one example of the subjective Japanese scholarly rumination that so often is mistakenly published as a work that meets international academic standards. Foreign readers who have no image of Japan beyond the stereotype industrial monolith may be interested by this book's stories of individualistic Japanese, but those who accept its concepts or conclusions would be dreaming.

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### Japanese Social Organization

Takeie Sugiyama Lebra, ed.  
Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press,  
1992. Paper. n.p.

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*Reviewed by Robert L. Ramseyer,  
Hiroshima*

*JAPANESE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION* is a collection of seven chapters by seven scholars whose academic credentials in anthropology or sociology are impressive. I picked up this volume for review with a sense of anticipation.

In the first chapter Theodore C. Bestor reports on his observation of a Tokyo neighborhood, showing how people in this community invent "tradition" and then use that tradition as an authority to bolster their own positions. The concrete example with which he deals is the autumn festival of the local Shinto shrine. "Thus by accentuating the traditional—most dramatically but not exclusively through the festival—local events serve to imbue Miyamoto-cho and those vying for standing and control with the legitimacy that tradition so amply bestows" (p. 44).

Takeie Sugiyama Lebra, editor of this collection, contributed the second chapter. After a lengthy opening section in which she shows that the former nobility (*kuge kazoku*) tended to cluster in certain Tokyo neighborhoods and associated mostly with

each other, she goes on to show that the spatial layout of their homes was directly related to hierarchical relationships among household members. That is, members were limited to certain areas according to their status. She further relates this to what she calls the "dyad," the fact that the holder of symbolic prestige (formal status) and the person who had decision-making power were two different people. Since a correlation between the arrangement of living space and status relationships of household members is common in a great many societies, I could not help wondering why Lebra saw this as an interesting or significant topic for further research.

In chapter three, Mary C. Brinton uses published statistics from Japan and the U.S. to compare the life courses of women in these two countries. She focuses on education, employment and marriage and finds that Japanese women have less room for independent, individual decision-making than do women in the United States. Specifically, Japanese women leave school, enter and leave employment, and marry at more nearly the same age than do American women. Her thesis is "that contrasts between the structure of the life course in Japan and the United States reflect differences in the structure of basic social institutions in the two cultural settings" (p. 80). She concludes, "Japanese women's life course transitions are characterized by irreversibility, age-incongruity, and low variance in timing across individuals" (p. 100). One might have thought this self-evident.

In chapter four, Diana Bethel reports on a study of a home for the elderly in Hokkaido. At any given time it has 75–80 residents who live 3 to 4 to a room if they are single. Couples are given smaller private rooms. She finds that residents, who could feel themselves victimized in a society where children are traditionally supposed to care for their elderly parents, form a new society within the institution, which then gives