

Discussion on Contemporary Japanese Culture and Social Consciousness

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Abstract: *Japan embarked on a period of rapid economic development after the 1950s. This was primarily attributed to a confluence of various internal and external factors, which instilled a shared economic consciousness among different societal strata, thereby facilitating economic recovery. These factors include traditional cultural awareness and Western economic liberalism. Alongside the emergence of new economic structures and the growth of free-market entities, terms like "middle class" and "centrism" gained prominence as societal mainstream ideals. However, as income disparities widened in later years, a new intellectual trend characterized by "disparity awareness" and the "misalignment concept" began to take shape. This paper delves into the cultural manifestations and social consciousness that evolved in Japanese society during different phases of economic development.*

Keywords: *Japanese culture; Middle class; Centrism; Cultural consensus*

1. Introduction

In the 1950s, as Japan reflected on its past mistakes, the United States initiated the Korean War. Leveraging its geographical advantage and with support from the United States, Japan's economic entities rapidly developed, its industrial system was swiftly rebuilt, and the manufacturing sector, particularly in machinery and equipment, experienced rapid growth. As the "Japan-U.S. alliance" strengthened, by the early 1960s, grassroots movements against the U.S. and protests emerged within Japanese society, leading to years of political turmoil. By the mid-1960s, Japan entered a period of political stability. With the Japanese government's strategy of "economic nationalism," Japan entered two decades of high-speed economic growth, becoming the world's second-largest economy. With rapid economic development, Japan's social structure underwent significant changes. Pursuits of a high standard of living, a desire for high-quality cultural consumption, and the fusion of science, technology, and social culture became two fundamental pillars supporting the transformation of Japanese society. The general improvement in citizens' education, the rapid development of the education sector, and close exchanges with foreign countries, particularly Europe and the United States, led to an increasing number of Japanese youth choosing to study abroad in these countries. By the mid-1980s, a wave of studying abroad even swept through Japan, and the "returnee" population, with their high qualifications and backgrounds, became a significant force in Japan's social structural transformation, driving Japan's economic development and cultural consciousness shift into the late 20th and early 21st centuries [1].

2. Reevaluating Traditional Culture from a Rational Perspective

Since the late 1960s, as Japan entered a period of political stability and rapid economic growth, accompanying changes in its social structure and an accelerated democratization process, Japan led Asia in completing its modernization. All of these developments were closely related to various internal and external factors in Japanese society. Japanese progressive intellectuals and elite classes, while contemplating these internal and external factors, began to reexamine traditional culture from a rational perspective. They placed greater emphasis on integrating modern science, carefully considering which aspects of traditional culture should be promoted and which should be discarded, taking into account social backgrounds, religious thought, and historical perspectives [2].

After Japan entered the era of rapid economic growth, emerging economies like the "Four Asian Tigers" experienced rapid growth as well. Some scholars argued that these emerging Asian economies, being part of the traditional cultural sphere of Asia, shared certain historical backgrounds and cultural

environments, suggesting that the "traditional cultural sphere" contributed to their economic revival. However, it's worth noting that most Asian countries and regions have been influenced by traditional Chinese culture, and the rapid economic development of the "Four Asian Tigers" is just one example. It cannot be universally explained from a perspective of commonality. Therefore, the relationship between the traditional cultural sphere and rapid economic development should be reconsidered from a rational standpoint. In 1994, the National University of Singapore conducted specialized research on the relationship between "emerging economic entities" and the "traditional cultural sphere." They categorized 26 classifying criteria into six aspects: politics, economics, culture, religion, history, and international factors, all of which had an impact on the development of emerging economic entities led by Japan since the 1960s. Their findings revealed that modern theories originating from Western Europe, socialist theories led by the former Soviet Union, American "Rooseveltism," as well as astronomy-based "cosmology" and "systems theory," couldn't explain the fundamental reasons behind the rapid economic development of emerging Asian economies. In fact, some extreme economists even considered modern economic theories widely practiced in Europe and America as "heretical." The sustained economic development vitality of emerging Asian economies was fundamentally linked to their subordinate position within the "traditional cultural sphere," characterized by features like social reformism and cultural rejuvenation rooted in ancient Chinese religions and schools of thought, the use of pictographic characters as distinctive cultural symbols, the preservation of traditional ethical systems and adherence to moral standards. The spirit of practical learning and empiricism also constituted indispensable components of this cultural consciousness [3]. Hence, the traditional cultural sphere encouraged Japan, with its intellectual groups composed of "returnees" and the elite class, to maintain a traditional ethical consciousness. The "spirit of practical learning," "empiricism," and a "pragmatic attitude" were all essential elements of this intellectual group's consciousness. In contemporary times, driven by scientific theories and technological systems primarily from Europe and America, the emerging intellectual groups possess a more scientific rationality, enabling them to reevaluate traditional culture from a rational perspective.

It's worth careful consideration that the cultural consciousness brought about by the traditional cultural sphere does not necessarily imply a direct connection to the sustained economic prosperity in Asia. When addressing the relationship between "traditional culture" and "sustained economic prosperity," some Japanese scholars still hold reservations. For instance, Shuichi Kato pointed out, "Specifically discussing a proportional relationship between the 'Confucian cultural sphere' and 'sustained economic prosperity,' Vietnam stands as a counterexample. It's evident that Vietnam still lingers in an economic slump and hasn't entered a phase of economic boom." He presented two key viewpoints: first, besides traditional cultural factors, there are different social conditions induced by geographical location and ideological factors. Second, the "Asian cultural sphere" possesses a common cultural consciousness, but its impact can vary depending on the different "superstructures" and "political consciousness" it encounters regionally. He further noted that the predominant consciousness within the "Asian cultural sphere" is Confucian thought, which promotes the ideas of "inherent goodness" and "benevolent governance." However, these principles do not apply effectively in a flourishing economic context in Japan. He said, "Japan's labor-management relations are characterized by strong restraint and exploitation. Even from a socialist perspective, it doesn't lead to effective distribution based on labor. 'Inherent goodness' and 'benevolent governance' are insufficient to prompt employers to release their hold on workers for the sake of productivity, nor do they sustain workers' enthusiasm for work or facilitate the establishment of good interpersonal relationships that would inspire workers' self-motivation. Nevertheless, 'benevolent governance' and 'inherent goodness' are indirectly and practically relevant to sustained economic prosperity, even if not explored from the perspective of labor-management relations" [4].

In summary, the traditional cultural sphere, especially Confucian culture, has indirectly influenced Japan's unique values, playing a guiding role in Japan's continuous 20-year economic boom. Japan transformed Confucianism's loyalty to the monarch into "benevolence" toward others, becoming a common consensus among the new intellectual groups, influencing both enterprises and collectives. Most convincingly, from the post-war economic recovery to modernization, Japanese citizens no longer measure individual values solely by loyalty to the emperor. They have demonstrated great harmony in the nation's new business establishment and industrial development, even when confronted with the looming pressure of the "U.S.-Japan Security Alliance." Japanese citizens continue to opt for relatively peaceful resolutions, maintaining a relatively stable social and political environment [5]. Following the spirit of "benevolence," enterprises in the late 1960s began establishing corporate cultures characterized by diversity and inclusivity, emphasizing "harmonious coexistence." This approach allowed companies to maintain a stable development trajectory by accommodating differences, thereby avoiding futile

internal conflicts. These are important roles played by the "traditional cultural sphere" and have indirectly become significant driving forces for enterprise development and economic growth [6].

3. Emergence of Free-market Entities and "Centrism"

From the post-war strategy of "Economic Nationalism" and nearly two decades of rapid economic growth in Japan, the Japanese government drew inspiration from the Confucian-based concept of "Zhongyong", meaning "moderation" or "centrism" in English. This concept was adapted to suit Japan's own social structure and economic conditions, leading to the development of the idea of "Zhongwei", which can be translated as "mediocrity" or "middle position". Learning from Western social models, Japan established a social welfare system that involved imposing heavy taxes on the wealthy and corporations, ensuring the welfare of the general population, and minimizing economic income disparities among citizens to avoid exacerbating social conflicts caused by wealth gaps. This social system rapidly expanded the size of the middle class, primarily consisting of white-collar workers, high-level professionals, and government employees. Consequently, there was a corresponding shift in the societal development pattern. At the end of the 20th century, a survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs revealed that the "middle class" accounted for 90% of Japan's total population. Over 100 million people expressed satisfaction with their material and cultural living conditions, leading some Japanese demographers to coin the term "One Hundred Million Middle Class." Corresponding to the growth of the "middle class," the concept of "centrism" began to emerge [7].

With the rapid expansion of the economy, the growth of free-market entities, and Japan's status as a rapidly developing economy, a "middle-class society" emerged with the "middle class" as the predominant social group. Given that the middle-class population occupies an "intermediate" position in various aspects such as culture, consumption, lifestyle, and enjoyment, Japan's societal structure is often referred to as a "middle-class society." Compared to Western developed countries, Japan's middle class is larger in scale, with more individuals straddling the boundary between the "lower class" and the "upper class." This middle class leans more towards "centrism." In other words, Japan's per capita income gap is lower, and wealth disparities are not as pronounced, resulting in a more widespread set of values among individuals within the same social class. This reflects Japan's societal structure's inclination towards the "middle," with a social system situated between capitalism and socialism. Japan is a constitutional monarchy led by the Emperor, and its social system leans toward a "middle-layered" structure. The prevailing spiritual values are centered around the Emperor as the symbolic figurehead, and the belief system exhibits typical characteristics of "middle-layering" [8].

However, the concept of the "One Hundred Million Middle Class" as a measure of Japan's economic development is clearly a hierarchical "cultural concept." Regardless of whether present-day Japan actually has "One Hundred Million Middle Class," the key lies in how one defines the concept of the "middle class." An important factor in this definition is the issue of per capita GDP and per capita income. In academia, the definition of the middle class involves individuals who have satisfied basic "physiological" and "safety" needs and have reasonably fulfilled the intermediate "emotional and esteem" needs but have not yet achieved the pursuit of higher-level "self-actualization needs." The fundamental unit of the middle class is considered to be the "middle-class family." According to this definition, when considering basic consumption standards like housing, transportation, and entertainment expenses, a three-person American family with an annual income of \$100,000 is considered the starting level of a middle-class family. Considering the technological level and modernization of the United States, as an economic powerhouse in Asia, Japan would require a minimum annual income of around \$70,000 for a three-person household, or approximately \$24,000 per capita, to be considered the starting level of a middle-class family. In reality, during the same period, there were not even close to one hundred million people in Japan who met the standard of an annual per capita income of \$24,000. Therefore, the argument of "One Hundred Million Middle Class" is too absolute. It's worth noting that after experiencing rapid economic development, Japan saw a more widespread emergence of free-market entities in both individual and collective forms. This led to a more "centrist" perspective among the middle class in terms of the three key factors determining class: economic, political, and cultural aspects. Simultaneously, as the middle class, which emerged as the predominant class during Japan's high-speed economic development, was influenced by "centrism," it exhibited a more pronounced conservatism. This argument is more about promoting the "de-structuring of class," allowing the middle-class group with "centrist" consciousness to return to a humanistic and rational perspective, approaching the social phenomenon of the "middle class" and "centrism" with more dialectical thinking [8].

In fact, as the economy continues to grow rapidly, the middle class will continue to expand. There will be an increasing number of individuals employed by conglomerates and economic entities who enjoy high welfare benefits. These emerging groups will have relatively stable careers and steady economic incomes. They will receive equalized consumption and education, resulting in smaller income disparities between groups and individuals, and a diminishing hierarchy in ideological beliefs. As the education, consumption, and lifestyle trends towards "centrism," individuals within the same socioeconomic stratum will exhibit a more balanced psychological disposition. There will be a lack of extreme ideologies, and life consciousness and behaviors will tend to be similar. These individuals in the "middle" will place greater emphasis on realizing their self-worth in terms of material wealth and spiritual culture. They will no longer pay significant attention to societal life or national issues, as their sense of purpose in life will be built on the dual standards of spiritual enjoyment and material life. They will be less inclined to invest more enthusiasm in value rationality and humanistic care. As a result, there will be a significant change in overall social and cultural consciousness, and the concept of "equality for all," derived from "centrism," will become the prevailing value attribution for these "new middle-class individuals" and will evolve into a new form of "centrism" [9].

4. Income Disparities and "Misalignmentism"

Entering the 21st century, the Japanese economy entered a period of slow growth, especially after the outbreak of the 2008 U.S. subprime mortgage crisis. Japan's economy experienced a downturn, with setbacks in the manufacturing industry, cultural industry, and finance sector. Numerous businesses went bankrupt, resulting in a significant increase in unemployment and intense competition in the job market. Many entrepreneurs transferred their assets abroad, ordinary workers lost job opportunities, and long-term stable employees were laid off. A large portion of the middle-class population faced unemployment crises, exacerbating income disparities. In 2009, the number of non-regular employees in Japanese companies increased significantly, far exceeding the number of regular employees. These non-regular employees received much lower salaries than regular employees while performing high-intensity labor. Even after completing specific company projects, they would often be dismissed. This phenomenon gave rise to the "new poor" in Japanese society.

The emergence of "new poor" individuals in Japan following the economic crisis resulted in a significant increase in their numbers. These people found themselves living in poverty due to a lack of job opportunities, which severely affected their consumption levels. For many, even affording basic necessities like food became a challenge. Furthermore, faced with high housing prices and rents, some "new poor" individuals had to resort to staying in places like internet cafes, bars, and, in some cases, even became accustomed to homelessness. The rising unemployment rate and the declining purchasing power of ordinary workers meant that basic living standards were no longer guaranteed. This situation led to feelings of anxiety, fear, and disillusionment among many individuals, with some even developing psychological disorders [10].

On the political front, the emergence of the "new poor" brought about a noticeable shift in the ideologies of certain political parties in Japan. Some political parties began to focus more on the political rights and interests of the unemployed and low-income individuals during times of economic downturn. They established organizations like "Poverty Research Associations" to explore solutions to the problem of "new poverty." Some democratic politicians in Japan believed that during times of economic turmoil, the former "middle-class" individuals who had become unemployed or low-income earners were experiencing a "misalignment" in their political consciousness. They argued that this shift in class status resulted in a "misalignment" of political consciousness among these former middle-class individuals. Some democratic politicians actively advocated for providing reasonable protection for non-regular employees, emphasizing the responsibility of the government and businesses to uphold their legitimate rights and interests. This political call had a significant impact on Japanese society, especially in an environment of economic recession, mass layoffs by companies, and high unemployment rates. In this context, the political consciousness of the middle class, now unemployed, shifted from class assimilation to political alignment. The pursuit of basic livelihood security became the common goal for these individuals during this period. On the cultural front, there was an increase in the production of manga, literature, and films related to the "new poor." Japanese writers, in particular, turned to themes related to "temporary workers" and "low-income individuals" as subjects for their works following the economic downturn. These works reflected the wealth disparity in society. However, they primarily depicted the hardships and loss of life purpose experienced by low-income individuals under the backdrop of economic recession. While these cultural works did not provide in-depth societal revelations and criticisms, they captured the attention of readers. As a result, they led

to a boom in manga, anime, and film adaptations. Some scholars interpreted this phenomenon, stating that "young people are facing tremendous work pressure in a harsh environment, especially with high unemployment rates. Their inherent 'middle-class' characteristics no longer exist, and any sense of class superiority has disappeared. These literary works depicting the lives of lower-class laborers have significant appeal." In simpler terms, labor literature resonated with the "new poor," creating a strong emotional connection.

One could say that after the economic downturn, Japan witnessed the emergence of a new social paradigm characterized by significant wealth disparity, persistent high unemployment rates, the erosion of the "middle class," and the breakdown of the "middle ground" consciousness. This gave rise to a phenomenon known as "displacementism," where a substantial population of "newly impoverished" individuals became a prevalent social reality. Japan's culture and societal consciousness became trapped in a state of contradiction between "affluence" and "poverty."

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the rapid rise of Japanese economy in the 1960s and 1980s and the upsurge of studying in the West became an opportunity for the transformation of contemporary Japanese culture and social consciousness. Japanese culture is deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture circle, especially by Confucianism, which has indirect and practical effect on its continuous economic fever. This directly led to the emergence of the "middle class" and the prevalence of "neutralism". However, due to the economic depression after the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, the huge gap between the rich and the poor has become a new social form in Japan. The unemployment rate remains high, the "middle class" and the "middle class" are disintegrated, the "neutralism" consciousness collapses, the "dislocation doctrine" comes into being, the "new poor" becomes a common social phenomenon, and the Japanese culture and social consciousness fall into the contradiction between "rich" and "poor". Therefore, the change of culture and social consciousness is always closely related to the stage of economic development and the traditional culture at the bottom. In addition, the geographical position also has a non-negligible influence on it. In the increasingly close trend of economic globalization, the economies of all countries are at the juncture of both opportunities and risks. Any change in factors will have a radiation impact on cultural and social consciousness from point to surface. Therefore, how to further explore the changes in cultural and social consciousness in the complex economic development dynamics is a topic that we need to focus on in the future.

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