

MAKING COMMON SENSE OF

Japan

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Japan: A Strange and Wondrous Country?

Japan is a country like any other; we can understand Japan by comparing it to other industrial democracies. Over the years, most scholars, both Japanese and Western, have argued that Japan is a unique country, *sui generis*, a country unlike any other. This argument is back in vogue, as indicated by the sales of books like *The Enigma of Japanese Power* by Karl van Wolferen.² Why has the idea of Japanese uniqueness been so popular for so long? One reason is that there are a lot of things about Japan that really are different. However, there are at least two errors that lead to overemphasizing the differences: the tendency to compare Japan only to the United States and the tendency to compare Japanese reality to Western ideals instead of Western realities.

Comparing Japan and the United States

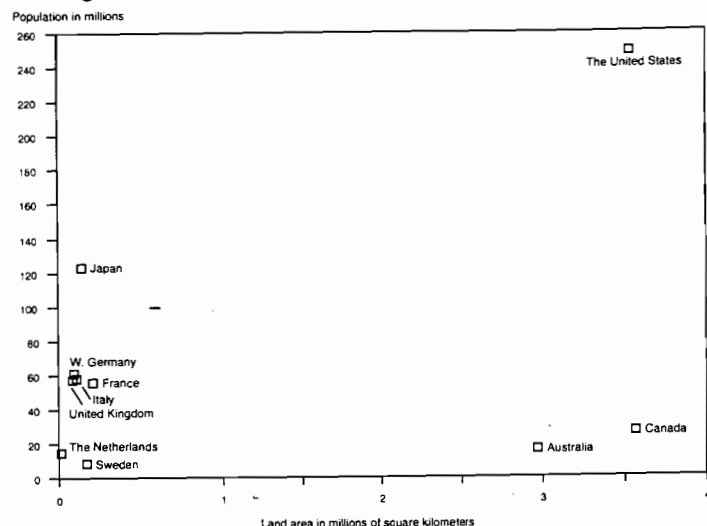
Because a special relationship has existed between Japan and the United States since the end of World War II, there has been a strong tendency to compare the two. Unfortunately, on many dimensions Japan and the United States are the two most different of all industrial democracies.³ When the differences are noted, the usual conclusion is that Japan is a strange and wondrous country. More often than not, however, the proper conclusion is that Japan is fairly normal, while the United States

is strange. In the comparative politics of industrial democracies, Japan has usually been ignored, and America has been the outlier. People who study Western Europe and North America must deal with American exceptionalism.⁴ When Japan is compared to both the United States and Western European countries, Japan and the United States appear at far ends of the spectrum, with Western European countries in between but much closer to Japan. On many dimensions, Japan would be a normal European country, but the United States is different, a country not quite like any other.

Let us begin with the simplest possible example. How large is Japan? Ask any Japanese (or any American student of Japanese studies) to describe Japan and the first phrase out of his/her mouth is likely to be, "a small island nation."⁵ The phrase has become something of a mantra, repeated by the Japanese to themselves and to foreigners at every opportunity. No matter what question one asks about Japan, the reply is likely to begin, "First, you must understand that Japan is a small island nation." The evidence for the "island nation" part of this orthodoxy is indisputable, but is Japan really small?

Let us compare ten major industrial democracies: Australia, Great Britain, Canada, France, West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany), Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. If these nations are ranked from the largest in land area to the smallest, where will Japan fall? Most students, both Japanese and American, guess next to last, ahead only of the Netherlands. Actually, Japan is just a bit smaller than France and Sweden and is significantly larger than Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. If ranked by population (or GNP for that matter), Japan is second after the United States and about twice as large as Great Britain, France, Germany, or Italy. These facts are displayed graphically in figure 1-1. If there is one country in this figure that is off the scale, it is the United States. Australia and Canada have the land area of the United States, but the United States has about twice the population of Japan and four times the population of the major European nations. Japan is small only in comparison to the United States. *Being smaller than the United States makes Japan a perfectly normal country.* The United States is in a league of its own.

Figure 1-1: Is Japan a Small Country?

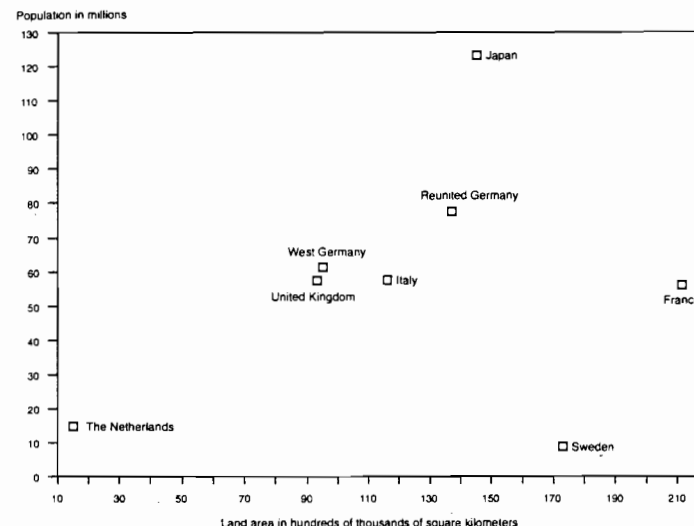


Compared to the other industrial democracies of the world, Japan is a rather large country. Delete the United States, Canada, and Australia, and figure 1-1 becomes figure 1-2. Compared to the major countries of Western Europe, Japan is a big country, roughly the size of a unified Germany.⁶ When Germany was reunited, the media were fearful about how this new "large" nation would affect the balance of power in the world. It turns out that "little" Japan is bigger than "big" Germany.

Why do the Japanese insist on describing their country as a small nation? Indeed, after hearing this demonstration in class, many Japanese students still begin their final papers or essay questions with "One must remember that Japan is a small island nation."⁷ The French, Germans, and Italians do not describe themselves as small nations. There are at least three more reasons, beyond the tendency to compare themselves to the United States, that the Japanese think of Japan as a small country: history, geographical location, and U.S.-Japan trade frictions.

I like to ask students when Japan became a small island nation. Most answer that it has been so from the beginning of

Figure 1-2: Japan as a European Country



time. Actually, only since their defeat in World War II have the Japanese described themselves as a small island nation. Until that time, they had belonged to the Japanese Empire, or Greater Japan (Dai-Nippon), and thought of themselves as one of the great powers. They were more likely to compare themselves to Western European nations than to the United States and knew they were bigger than most of those countries. Japan became a small island nation by losing the war. First, by losing the empire Japan became geographically smaller. More important was the psychological impact of losing and returning to the home islands. Great Britain, though it won the war, lost its empire after the war; they also complain of being "little" Britain.

A second reason is geographical location. When Western Europeans look at a map of their environs, they see other nations of comparable size. Japan's neighbors – China, Russia, the United States, Canada, and Australia – are immense relative to Japan. In this company Japan is geographically small, though it still has a large population and is an economic power. In terms

of the international relations of the Pacific rim, Japan is somewhat justified in thinking of itself as a small country. In particular, Japan is much smaller than its major trading partner and the focus of its foreign policy, the United States.

Often the "small island nation" refrain is meant to deflect U.S. demands for greater burden sharing in international relations. The United States stresses GNP and considers Japan an economic superpower of whom much can be expected. The Japanese stress land area, arguing that one cannot ask too much of "a small island nation." Whatever the merits of this rhetorical skirmish in the trade war, from the perspective of comparative politics, Japan is by no means a small nation. It is quite a normal size. The outlier here is not Japan, but the United States. The United States is a huge country.

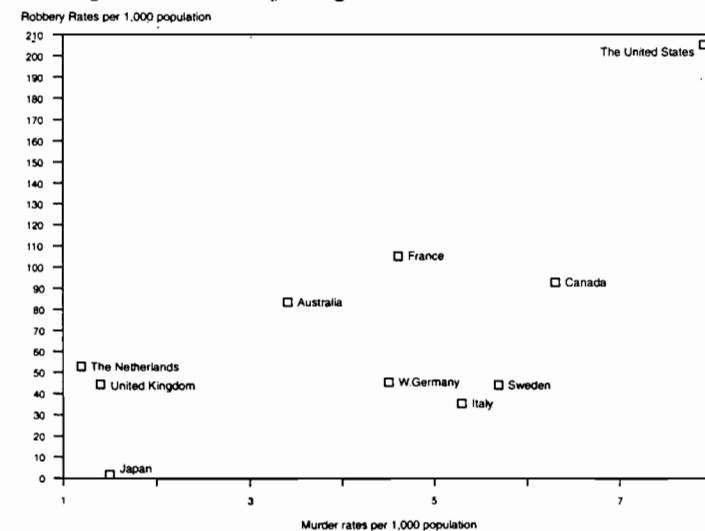
If one were to extend the "small island nation" mantra, the next adjective to be added would have to be "homogeneous." Japan is a remarkably homogeneous nation (though less so than Korea), and many Japanese leaders seem inordinately pleased with this fact.⁸ Most of the people who live in Japan are Japanese in language, culture, race, and almost any other way one can think of. However, one should also ask when Japan became a homogeneous nation. The usual response is, from the beginning of time. However, prewar Japan was an empire. While clear distinctions were maintained between the Japanese rulers and the non-Japanese ruled, many foreigners lived in Japan, and many Japanese lived abroad. The Japanese islands became ethnically homogeneous after World War II, when the Japanese living abroad were forced to return to the home islands, and many of the Koreans and Chinese living in Japan were sent back to their own countries. Moreover, prewar Japan was a class society with large gaps between rich and poor. The flat income distribution and other factors that have produced a nation of "salarymen" with very small differences among the classes are also postwar phenomena.

Another popular image of Japan is as a safe, law-abiding nation, perhaps because of its homogeneity. Often, the implication is that the Japanese are just nicer than we are. While it is currently true that Japan is a safe country, it is true primarily in contrast to the United States. Again, it is not Japan but

the United States that is the strange country. Murder and robbery rates for several industrial democracies are plotted in figure 1-3. As one might expect, Japan is one of, if not the, safest countries in the world, but the United States is by far the most dangerous of the industrial democracies. American murder rates would look even worse if the American data included attempted, as well as actual, murders. America has more actual murders per hundred thousand people than most countries have attempted murders. Japan has little violent crime, but in this it is not that different from Great Britain or the Netherlands. There is little reason to focus on the question of why Japan has so little crime. The big question is why a rich nation like the United States has so much.

If the Japanese are such a peaceful people, who raped Nanking? Who bombed Pearl Harbor? These questions confuse many younger Japanese. The image of Japanese soldiers at war violates their current self-image, because they assume that the

Figure 1-3: Comparing Rates of Violent Crime

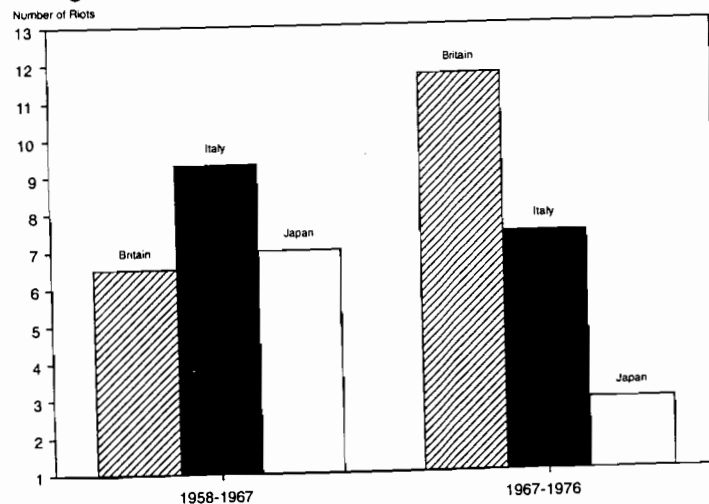


Note: Data are for 1964 except for Italy's and Britain's, which are for 1963. Murder rates are for attempted murder, except for the United States and the Netherlands, which are actual homicides.

Japanese were always as they are now, that Japanese culture is timeless. The Japanese were a violent people before World War II and for many years thereafter. They had serious crime problems, widespread police brutality, labor unrest, and even political assassinations.⁹ In fact, American textbooks on Japan written before the mid-1960s often list violence as a primary characteristic of Japanese political culture.¹⁰

Statistically at least, the Japanese became a peaceful people after 1960. In that year there were serious demonstrations against renewing the security treaty with the United States. If the acts of political violence are averaged over a period of years that includes 1960, Japan will appear to be a relatively violent country. In figure 1-4, the average number of riots per year is given for Great Britain, Italy, and Japan. Averaging these data from 1958 through 1967 makes Japan look fairly normal, a little more violent than Britain and a little less so than Italy. Averaging from 1967 through 1976, however, makes Japan look remarkably peaceful. If we use an average that starts after 1960, Japan will appear to be a nonviolent country. Of course, if we added

Figure 1-4: Average Number of Riots per Year



the United States to this figure, all three nations would look relatively peaceful.¹¹

Today Japan is a remarkably nonviolent society, but there are exceptions. The demonstrations against the construction of the new international airport at Narita involved violent and dramatic confrontations with the police and extraordinary security is still necessary around the airport.¹² Students often try to deal with these contradictions by saying that they "have a capacity for violence." Indeed, Japanese are violent at some times and in some places but not in others. Japanese are human; they are sometimes violent. List up all the countries in the world that have *not* committed atrocities in wartime. If you have any countries on your list, you need to study a bit more history. People (including the Japanese) tend to be violent in wartime.

Another suggested indication that the Japanese are just nicer than we are is that they do not sue each other. Americans use the courts more than the Japanese do. Again, this has been true primarily since the end of World War II, because "historically the Japanese have been quite litigious."¹³ It is also true only relative to the United States. "That Norway or Sweden say have lower litigation rates than Japan is beside the point; the only external point of reference that counts is the United States."¹⁴ Why are Japan and the United States different? The most common answer is that Americans like to sue and the Japanese do not. Do Americans really like to sue? Why is it that a joke made at the expense of lawyers always gets a laugh?¹⁵ Most Americans do not like courts and lawyers, do not like to sue, and think that one of the United States's biggest problems is a surplus of lawyers. Americans sue not because they like it but because in the United States there is no other way to get things done. Similarly, the Japanese reluctance to sue is not rooted in the Japanese psyche but is due to the structure of the courts, the paucity of lawyers, and the availability of more effective alternatives.¹⁶

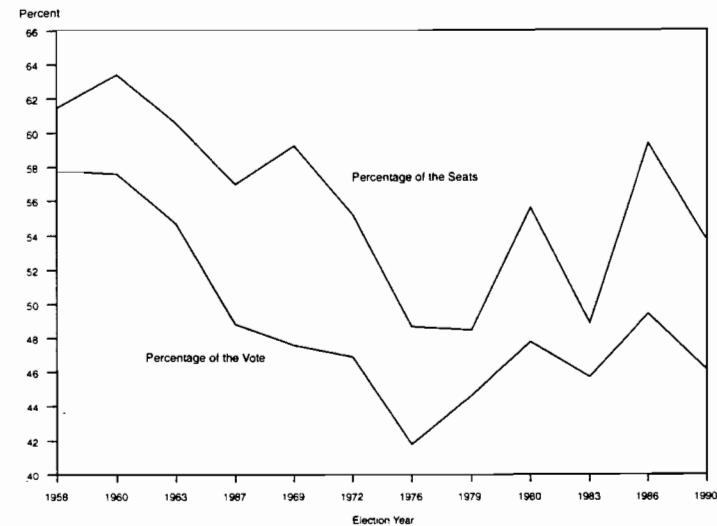
Japanese politics is often considered unique because there has been one party in power since 1955, and conservatives have ruled continuously since 1949. If the same party always wins, is Japan really a democracy? While this is a serious question, a great deal of the contrast between Japan and Western democ-

racies is exaggerated.¹⁷ First of all, Japan is a parliamentary regime without a directly elected president. If America had no president, its electoral history would look remarkably like Japan's. In the United States in the postwar period, the Republicans have controlled the House of Representatives only twice, from 1947 to 1949 and from 1953 to 1955. In Japan, the Socialists have been represented in a government only once, from 1947 through 1949. The opposition has controlled the legislature twice as often in the United States than in Japan, for four years compared to two years — hardly an impressive difference. The Reagan revolution was unable to overturn Democratic control of the lower house but was able to get a Republican majority in the Senate for six years, from 1981 to 1987. The opposition in Japan also won a majority in the upper house in 1989, and it may well hold on for six years.

The significant difference is not in what the electorate has done but in the structure of government. Controlling the lower house in Japan means controlling the national government. In local government, where the Japanese have a presidential type of system, they have regularly voted out conservative governors and mayors and elected the opposition. It is simply harder to change the majority of a legislative body than to change a directly elected chief executive. Comparing the U.S. Congress with the Japanese Diet, we find more similarities than differences.

Japan's Liberal Democratic party (LDP) does not hold the world record for longevity in office. The Swedish Socialist party (SAP) ruled from 1936 to 1976, while the LDP has been in power only since 1955. More important, the LDP came within a hair's breadth of losing in 1976, exactly when the SAP did lose. The postwar electoral results for these two parties are shown in figures 1-5 and 1-6. The first thing to note is the greater volatility of the Japanese numbers. The LDP percentage of the vote ranges from 41.8 percent in 1976 to 57.8 percent in 1958 and fluctuates widely. The SAP vote ranges from 42.7 percent in 1976 to 50.1 percent in 1968, and the trends are much smoother. The second point is the greater gap between the percentage of votes and the percentage of seats in Japan, represented by the gap between the two lines. Both parties are over-represented, as are most large parties around the world, but

Figure 1-5: Japan's LDP Since 1958



the LDP gets a bigger advantage than does the SAP. Most important, however, the evidence indicates that in 1976 Japanese voters were madder at the LDP than Swedish voters were mad at the SAP. The LDP got 42 percent of the vote, while the SAP got 43 percent. The LDP lost five percentage points, while the SAP only lost one. The LDP lost twenty-two seats, the SAP only four. The LDP managed to hold onto power because Japan's electoral system favors the largest party more than Sweden's does. The difference is not in the intentions of the voters but in the way votes are translated into seats. The 1976 elections in Japan and Sweden are most impressive in their similarity, the major difference being that the LDP was luckier. A comparison of Japan's electoral history with that of other industrial democracies indicates that there is no need to create a special category for Japan.

There are many examples of this pattern of comparing Japan only to the United States, finding that these two countries are indeed quite different, and mistakenly concluding that Japan is a strange country. For example, Japanese texts stress the

Figure 1-6: Sweden's SAP Since 1958



degree to which the country is centralized. It is, indeed, more centralized than the United States, but most of the things Japanese critics of centralization complain about are perfectly normal in Western Europe.¹⁸ Japan is often described as a country with a weak legislative branch and a strong bureaucracy. Again, Japan is a normal country, but the United States is different. The United States is virtually the only country in which the legislature still exercises many of its lawmaking functions.¹⁹ The United States is also the only major industrial democracy that does not have an institutionalized elite bureaucracy; it is the only industrial democracy with "a government of strangers."²⁰

It is not difficult to explain why the Japanese tend to compare their country exclusively to the United States. Since the end of World War II, Japan and the United States have been locked into an intense relationship. The United States occupied Japan and tutored it in democracy. It was hard to avoid taking the United States as the standard by which Japan should be judged. Both American and Japanese scholars have often failed to extend the comparison beyond the two countries. Progress

is being made slowly. Nevertheless, the basic conclusion of broader comparisons is clear: on many dimensions, Japan is similar to Western European nations, though very different from the United States. Japan and the United States are poles apart, but the strange nation is the United States more often than Japan.