CONFERENCE PAPER

The Challenge of Cultural Perspective in Studying Japan: Understanding 'the other'

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INTRODUCTION

Societies and cultures can be explained from the perspectives of the 'insider' or the 'outsider'. Both perspectives have implications for educators working with students in the study of their own and other societies. In studying Asian societies, Australian students can tend to use only their own value systems to interpret these societies. This could be argued to be culturally inappropriate and educationally unsound.

This article will discuss the complex issues and challenges of studying other societies from their perspectives, as well as one's own, and the difficult ethical dilemmas of cultural relativism which result.

Examples will be drawn from a comparative approach to Japanese and Australian societies.

THE OBJECTIVES OF STUDIES OF CULTURES AND SOCIETIES

The notion of education for citizenship has been a longstanding traditional objective of social education curricula. In recent decades the concept of citizenship education has been allied with the concept of cultural literacy as a primary objective of education in general, and a role of social education in particular. With the increasing globalisation of the many phenomena in the contemporary world, the further notion of 'intercultural literacy' has been added to the debate over educational objectives and outcomes. Although the concepts of cultural literacy and intercultural literacy can be defined in diverse ways, there would seem to be little doubt that effective social education courses are crucial to the achievement of desirable outcomes in these important areas of literacy (Muller, 1993). Essential content in the achievement of these outcomes includes the study of one's own culture and society, and those of others.

In recognition of this essential element of social education objectives, 'culture' is one of the five conceptual strands of the Statement on Studies of Society and Environment for Australian Schools and the accompanying Studies of Society and Environment: A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools (Australian Education Council, 1994a; Australian Education Council, 1994b). It is important to link the Statement's analysis of 'culture' (pp. 15-16) to the 'values' statement which occurs earlier, where a core value under the broader objective of achieving social justice is considered to be 'empathy with people of different cultures and societies' (Australian Education Council, 1994a, p. 5). 'Empathy' is one of a range of attitudinal objectives which are widely used in educational policy and curriculum documents, but all too often the meaning of such objectives is not subsequently exposed to detailed analysis in a way which enables the educator to work towards achievement of these objectives through appropriate pedagogical strategies. It would seem to me that mismatches between the policy rhetoric and the educational realities often revolve around this concept of 'empathy', including misinterpretations of what the concept actually means.

'Empathy' cannot be effectively analysed without reference to the associated concepts such as 'the self' and 'the other', and the way in which these concepts are theorised in the psychological, post-modern and post-colonial sociological literatures. No matter how well educated or informed or tolerant an individual may be, there is an innate tendency for that individual to interpret 'the other' in terms of the idiosyncratic assemblage of attitudes, values, perceptions, biases and perspectives that constitute 'the self'. However, this is not what is meant by the concept of 'empathy'. Reference to even such a generalised source of information as The Macquarie Dictionary clearly indicates that empathy is the 'mental entering into the spirit or feeling of a person or thing', and that it involves 'appreciative perception or understanding' (p. 580). Therefore empathy is not genuinely achieved unless in coming to terms with the world of 'the other' one suspends the world of 'the self' and attempts to understand and appreciate the world of 'the other' from the perspective of 'the other'. (Hence an accurate concept of empathy has
probably been achieved and popularised through the cliché of ‘walking in the other person’s shoes’.) Because of the reality constructing power of the individual’s ideosyncratic assemblage indicated above, this would imply that in order to achieve genuine empathy with ‘the other’ one must at least temporarily suspend the reality of ‘the self’. That is, in order to know the world of ‘the other’ one must ‘other’ (that is, render problematic) the world of the known. Because of the (temporary) paradigmatic shifts that this implies, it can be a difficult thing to achieve at the personal level, let alone being structured into studies of other cultures and societies in the classroom.

Cultural perspectives

‘Cultural perspective’ is a concept of central concern to anthropologists, and an issue on which lively anthropological debates occur. In the anthropological analysis of cultures and societies, the perspectives of the culture and society held by the participants is known as the *emic perspective* and that held by outsiders (frequently anthropologists) is called the *etic perspective* (Evans, 1993). Evans defines the emic perspective as a ‘statement made from the point of view of a social actor giving either their world-view or their opinion about a particular feature of the world’ (Evans, 1993, p. 19). He explains the etic perspective as one that ‘observes the behaviour of individuals or groups, and in sense compares what actors say they do or believe with what they actually do. … The etic is an outsider’s point of view’ (Evans, 1993, pp. 19–20). Traditionally, anthropological studies have been done from the etic perspective (the Western anthropological scholar living with and researching the traditional tribal society, for example), but increasingly emic anthropological studies are being undertaken as well (the Japanese anthropologist studying family structures— in particular, Japanese communities for example). The anthropological debate involves the relative strengths of the emic and the etic anthropological approaches. The emic perspective is considered to have the strength of deep cultural and linguistic knowledge, but the weakness of the subjectivities that result from being a member of the culture. Conversely, the strength of the etic perspective is considered to be the potential for ‘cultural objectivity’ that results from being an outsider, and the main weakness is the inevitable superficiality of the knowledge of the culture and its language that results from the outsider status (Evans, 1993).

However, given the sorts of connotations of the concept of ‘empathy’ analysed above, the critically important question in educational studies of one’s own and other cultures would seem to me not to be whether ‘cultural objectivity’ is a strength or a weakness, but rather, if there is in fact any such thing. It seems possible to argue that ‘cultural objectivity’ does not exist since the emic or insider perspective is subjective because it is determined by the norms, values and beliefs of the stakeholder’s society, and the etic or outsider perspective is equally subjective in that the outsider will tend to use the norms, values and beliefs of her/his society to study the society of ‘the other’. In short, in all that we do, we are both the beneficiaries and the victims of our own primary socialisation processes and, despite the potential for enormous diversity within particular cultural sites, these primary socialisation contexts are in general terms culturally specific.

It is in this area of cultural perspective that, in my view, the single greatest challenge for the Australian student of Asian societies occurs. Essentially the problem is that Australian students (and their teachers) are immersed in Western paradigmatic views of the contemporary world and also of the past, wherein the assumption is that in some way these Western paradigms are somehow ‘natural’ and possibly ‘superior’, and to the extent that the student is even aware of alternative ‘oriental’ paradigms, these are somehow ‘exotic’, and possibly ‘inferior’. Indeed, this state of affairs is a central component of Edward Said’s seminal work on Orientalism wherein he asserts that the Orient is essentially a Western socio-cultural construct used by the West, first in colonial times, but also ongoingly, to define this geographical region in order to dominate it (Said, 1978). These beliefs are based on the perceived technological and cultural superiority of the West, as evidenced through the success over the last three centuries of both colonialism and the technological superiority achieved by the original industrial revolution. Moreover, the derivation of dominant Western paradigms is also based upon the secular humanism of the Enlightenment and the importance placed upon the autonomy and ‘freedom’ of the individual as a core value of liberalism. These influences of perceived technological, military and economic superiority of the West, and the belief in humanism and liberalism as somehow natural, coincided with an adaptation of the ideas of Charles Darwin on biological evolution to give rise to the phenomenon of ‘social Darwinism’, which usually manifested itself as ‘White, European social Darwinism’. These assumptions are erratically based upon a very short-term interpretation of history in that they ignore the enormous achievements of earlier epochs in Asian civilisations, show no understanding of the sophistication and complexity of long-standing ‘Asian’ belief systems and values, and are seriously under challenge at this time as a result of the quite profound technological, economic and social achievements of certain Asian societies in recent decades. Indeed, considered analysis of these latter achievements clearly indicates that it is a bad time to be a white, social Darwinist, as any evidence of Western technological and economic ‘superiority’ rapidly evaporates.

However, in my view, white, social Darwinism lives on in subtle and often unconscious forms in the area of values and belief systems in ways that are not necessarily intended to be racist, but could certainly be construed to be so by those who do not share these values and beliefs. This is the area where my task in this article becomes an extremely difficult one for several reasons, which include the following:
The meanings and discourses of such concepts as 'social justice', 'equity', 'freedom', 'human rights', 'democracy', 'integrity', 'ethics', etc. are so much taken for granted by most of us as common sense and shared, that it is sometimes very difficult for us to be sensitive to the extent to which the particular versions of these conceptual meanings that we share are Western social constructs. For example, 'social justice' will mean quite diametrically opposed things to members of societies in which group cohesion and harmony is more important than individual rights and freedoms, and where a sense of one's proper place in a well-ordered hierarchy is more important than notions of egalitarianism. Perhaps more seriously, dogmatic advocacy of one of these alternatives for members of some other society can be construed as nothing short of cultural imperialism.

There are many values and belief systems in Asia, some of which have wide applicability (such as Confucianism), and others of which are unique to specific societies (such as the Japanese concept of 'onsen'), which are either very difficult for the Western mind to comprehend or do not have any comparable manifestation in Western societies.

There are many examples of where these cultural differences are so overt that it may be difficult to avoid making moral judgments about the differences, especially if in terms of our value systems these differences seem to be an affront to human dignity and human life itself. The fundamental problem always faced by those prepared to accept cultural relativism is whether this has in all cases to translate into moral relativism as well (Evans, p. 10).

Conversely, the habit of making moral judgments about other societies can help blind the stakeholder to the evils within his own society. The latter point is one frequently made by Asian citizens when they perceive their societies to be under attack from the West.

The fact that there are individuals and groups in many Asian societies who are seeking social change in their values which accords to Western values (Asian feminists, for example) is often cited as evidence that Western conceptions of 'the good society' will slowly occur in these societies as they modernise. (The notion here is that modernisation leads to Westernisation, and that a broad process of cultural convergence is occurring as an adjunct of modernisation). This Western interpretation of such trends has to be counterpoised by the Asian perception of these processes as indicative of social breakdown and associated moral decay of Asian traditional belief systems.

There is not an extensive literature at this time to remind us of the extent to which some of our taken-for-granted concepts are Western constructs and to assist the reader to come to terms with what are the Asian manifestations of, or variations in these concepts, although the series of monographs being published jointly by the Asia–Australia Institute at the University of New South Wales and the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia is timely in this regard.

Given the complexity and contentiousness of these above difficulties, it may be helpful to illustrate the dilemmas of cultural perspective in the study of other cultures through some specific examples of challenges faced by Australian students in their study of Japanese society, and in so doing explore at a more concrete level the relativities and subjectivities of the emic and etic perspectives.

**Australians studying Japan: Understanding ‘the other’**

Western societies have sustained a high level of interest in Japan and Japanese society for many centuries, and the quite remarkable series of events which have constituted the story of modern Japan emanating from the Meiji Restoration of 1868 through until the present have sustained unprecedented Western interest in, concern about, and analysis of Japan and its people. Twentieth century etic or outsider perspectives of Japan have ranged over the whole gamut of what De Souza terms ‘romantic’, ‘repugnant’ and ‘realistic’ stereotypes (De Souza, 1992). Hence these outsider perceptions of Japan have ranged from ‘romantic’ notions of the land of shrines, the cherry blossom, the geisha, and the tea ceremony, through ‘repugnant’ notions of the Japanese as military fanatics capable of acts of extreme cruelty and atrocity in war, to a more contemporary stereotype of Japan as an economic and technological juggernaut which has staged one of the most amazing and phoenix-like of economic miracles that the world has ever seen.

It is from the time of the rise of the militarists in the 1930s through to the present that the most significant serious outsider studies of Japanese society have been undertaken, often as an attempt to understand and interpret the apparent enigmas and paradoxes of the social, military and economic behaviour of the Japanese. In other words, some of the now classic etic studies of Japan were in response to perceptions of Japan as an economic or military threat to the West—perceptions which, incidentally, were not without basis or evidence. For example, Ruth Benedict’s classic study of Japanese society The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (Benedict, 1946a), was in response to a range of Japanese military behaviours in World War II which were seen from a Western perspective as fanatical and bizarre, and Benedict insightfully demonstrated how many of these behaviours and
others of a more general nature were perfectly understandable in terms of the existing Japanese world view, with its associated norms, beliefs and values. Subsequently the period from the 1970s to the present has seen the emergence of an enormous literature on the characteristics of Japanese society, economy, business practices and political institutions as the West, and especially the United States, struggles to compete with the economic phenomenon of 'Japan Incorporated'. Important though this literature is for the serious student of Japanese society, it does suffer from all the limitations of the outsider's perspective explored earlier in this paper and there is a need to consider how the Japanese themselves may present an emic or insider's account of the same phenomenon explored in the etic literature.

Despite the ongoing challenges of cultural perspective, it may be of some value to demonstrate some quite specific examples of Japanese social structures and characteristics, core values and behaviours, and then to attempt to explore ways in which the Western etic and the Japanese emic perspectives and perceptions of these same phenomena may differ. In undertaking this exercise it needs to be acknowledged that generalisations about any society can be dangerous, and can lead to stereotypes which are either 'romantic' or 'repugnant' rather then being 'realistic' (De Souza, 1992). However, Japan is one of the most multicultural societies in the world, and the Western observer is frequently tempted to describe Japan in terms of distinctiveness and uniqueness. Indeed, the Japanese also have this highly distinctive and 'essentialist' view of themselves, and the term in Japanese for this national self-perception is nihonjinron. Nevertheless, in undertaking the analysis which follows, I would wish to acknowledge both the considerable diversity and plurality within the characteristics under discussion (Reischauer, 1977), and the reality that these characteristics are subject to continual but slow change over time (Buckley, 1990).

Out of the enormous range of characteristics of Japanese society, I have selected the following two for discussion, as they are generally considered in the literature (both emic and etic) to be the most important Japanese social attributes, and they are certainly suitable for analysis and evaluation from both the perspective of a Japanese and a Western values base. The characteristics are a strict conformity to complex patterns of hierarchy, and group orientation rather than Western style individualism.

1. Hierarchy

A very broadly-based Asian concept of the 'good society' is one in which there is a clearly defined and generally accepted hierarchical structure in which one knows and accepts 'one's proper place' in that hierarchy, and where one behaves according to that accepted place. It is generally asserted that contemporary Japanese society is one of the most overtly hierarchical of all societies, and the emic analyst Nakane uses as her central thesis the proposition that Japan is a vertical rather than a horizontal society, and that once this is understood, most other aspects of Japanese society can be comprehended in terms of this vertical arrangement (Nakane, 1970).

The traditional historical explorations of this hierarchical structure usually draw attention to the long period of feudalism and the relatively recent abandonment by the Japanese of this social system, as well as the earlier Japanese borrowing and adaptation of Chinese Confucian values (Benedict, 1946a; Reischauer, 1977; Reischauer & Craig, 1979). In these earlier times one's position in the hierarchy was determined at the macro level by inherited ascribed social class and status (daimyio, samurai, peasant, merchant, etc.) and at the micro level by such variables as age, gender, position in the family structure, and so on.

In contemporary Japan, the hierarchy is based more upon the elaborate structures of a meritocracy, which is determined largely by performance in the highly competitive education system, as well as considerations of seniority within and across occupational structures and, of course, age and gender. The characteristics of this meritocracy have caused Buckley to conclude that Japanese society is in fact like the metaphor of an 'escalator' in that if one has successfully negotiated oneself onto that escalator, one's progress upwards on that escalator is virtually assured on the basis of age-determined seniority. However Buckley feels that this principal escalator is reserved for males and that there is a second and lesser, but similarly operating escalator, for females (Buckley, 1990).

The core values which hold together this social fabric include the feudal and Confucian values of 'honour' and 'respect'. Indeed, writers such as Hendry and Reischauer have independently argued the importance of the traditional extended family system of the is as the source of these core values and have indicated the ways in which the values of the is expand into wider social structures as well (Hendry, 1993; Reischauer, 1977, p. 129).

These core values are manifested through such social behaviours as the importance of showing appropriate respect and deference, and associated strict protocols and formalities, for each set of social circumstances. An important component of all Japanese protocol and social behaviour involves courtesy towards others, including the reserved and temperate expression of one's innermost thoughts — and this is a behavioural expectation of all Japanese no matter what their status in the hierarchy may be. This expectation emanates from the crucial Japanese behavioural dichotomy of tatame and bonne. Tatame is 'the correct face'.
which one shows to the world', while **honno** is 'the inner feeling or intent which is hidden from the world' (Hendry, 1993). This dichotomy is learnt very early in infancy and childhood as the young are socialised into a highly differentiated view of the world which distinguishes the outside world or ***soto*** from the world of the home or ***uchi***, and these are then expanded to the **sennin** and the **bunmei** which Hendry considers, despite Japanese modernisation and attendant social change, remain crucial core attributes if one is to understand the Japanese psyche and social behaviour (Hendry, 1993, pp. 352–54).

At the level of observable social behaviour, the Japanese sense of hierarchy has given rise to such social phenomena as:

- the perception by the Japanese of their superiority in the hierarchy of the Asian region;
- the mystical aura surrounding the person and status of the Emperor;
- the pecking order of Japanese universities and schools;
- a status hierarchy between various private corporations, and between and within elements of the government bureaucracy;
- the status of the members of a Japanese work-site based rigidly on a seniority system determined primarily by years of service;
- the importance of showing the appropriate level of respect or deference to superiors and inferiors through the protocols of bowing and the complex hierarchy system built into the Japanese language;
- the importance of having a son, and the place of the eldest son in the family structure;
- the clearly defined and generally 'unequal' roles of women in Japanese society; and
- the elements of hierarchy within the female component of the population as well.

All of the above structural characteristics and classifications of social reality based upon hierarchy link to each other and contribute to the ultimate Japanese conception of the 'good society' as one in which there is harmony and order. However there are other Japanese social characteristics apart from the complex system of hierarchy which contribute to the ultimate goals of harmony and order, and perhaps the other main contributor is the extremely powerful Japanese focus and orientation towards groups and group behaviour as a primary source of their sense of self-identity.

2. **Group Orientation**

The Japanese are much more likely than Westerners to operate in groups, or at least to see themselves as operating in this way (Reischauer, 1977, p. 127). There is little or no tradition in Japan of the Western style individualism that derives from the Western ideology of liberalism. Buckley considers that Japan is one of the most 'group oriented' societies on earth and that this group focus operates at a large number of different scales and levels (Buckley, 1990). Consequently Buckley considers Japan is somewhat divorced from other societies, and that Japanese group orientation can best be represented diagrammatically as a series of concentric circles where the largest circle is Japan and each subsequent smaller circle represents other important groups such as the company, the school, the neighbourhood, the family, etc., and that the focus within each of these circles is inwards rather than outwards (Buckley, 1990). It is important to acknowledge that the differences between the Japanese and most Western societies in this regard are not a stark dichotomy, but a question of relativities. Reischauer is at pains to stress that there are ways in which the Japanese do express individuality (he devotes a whole chapter to Individuality as well as to The Group in his analysis of Japanese society), and of course, Western self-identity is always constructed in the context of various levels of group membership, but he is nevertheless of the opinion that 'no difference is more significant between Japanese and Americans, or Westerners in general, than the greater Japanese tendency to emphasise the group, somewhat at the expense of the individual' (Reischauer, 1977, p. 127).

Indeed, from an emic perspective, the leading Japanese social analyst, political leader and now speaker of the Diet, Takeo Doi, has made the crucial ingredient of her study of Japanese society the sense of dependence in human relationships which results from the strong Japanese group orientation (Doi, 1973).

There are a number of Japanese values which strongly define and reinforce the complex and powerful patterns of group membership which permeate Japanese society. A major element of the contributing values to group functioning in Japan involves Japanese conceptions of good and evil. Whereas Western notions of good and evil tend to be strongly linked to the Judeo-Christian notions of individual sin and guilt, in Japan the most important notions associated with good and evil are those of 'face' and 'shame', both of which are group-referenced concepts. For the Japanese, maintaining face involves doing so within the context of the different groups of which one is a member, and should this fail for whatever reason, the shame which is felt occurs within the context of having shamed the group, or having let the group down. A second, and uniquely Japanese value, which strongly determines group functioning is the concept of 'on'. It is a concept which defies literal translation into English, but it has connotations of 'benevolence', and of 'mutual obligation', which result from the incurring of 'social debt' and the need to repay that 'social debt' (Benedict, 1946b, Chapters 5 and 6; Reischauer, 1977, p. 141). This Japanese core value has an all-pervasive and powerful influence on how the Japanese view the world, and manifests itself especially in group behaviour and group dynamics. In all aspects of their daily lives the Japanese incur 'on' as a result of their interactions with other Japanese. By simply being alive, Japanese incur the benevolence of 'on' from the Emperor, from one's family, from one's friends, etc., and must strive to repay the 'debt' incurred by this 'on'. In terms of attempted repayment of this obligation there are those who could never be fully repaid.
(to the Emperor, to Japan, to one's parents, to one's ancestors, for example), and this type of repayment of 'on' is designated as giri. Other categories of repayment of the 'on', designated as giri, must be repaid in exact equivalence and failure to do so creates loss of face and feelings of shame (Benedict, 1946b, p. 116).

Examples of this include the reciprocation of formal gifts, favours, contributions to work, etc., and they operate across the hierarchy. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of giri, partly because of the contribution which this phenomenon makes to Japanese corporate and industrial productivity, is the 'on' which employers incur towards their employees, and the 'on' which employees incur towards their employers. Although it is impossible to do justice to the complexities of 'on' in the Japanese system of values in an article of this nature, the point which needs to be understood is the way in which 'on' determines and cements Japanese group relationships and behaviours in a way for which there is no equivalent in the West.

At the level of observable social behaviour, the Japanese orientation to the group has given rise to such phenomena as:

- distinctive forms of Japanese nationalism (and at times ultranationalism focused around the Emperor and nibunjinron or being Japanese);
- enormous dedication to the work group, and benefits derived from membership of that work group;
- group consensus decision making (including an aversion to ever actually directly disagreeing with others);
- group-oriented national festival days such as 'adult day' and shichi-ge-zen;
- group holidays and group photographs to record the events of the holiday; and so on.

Indeed, it is the sorts of uniquely Japanese versions of these phenomena which are an element of the Western fascination with Japan.

In the above two sections I have struggled to present an 'objective' review of what are generally regarded as the two key Japanese social characteristics — a strong tendency towards hierarchical relationships, and a strong sense of group orientation.

However, as indicated earlier, 'cultural objectivity' probably does not exist and I would also wish to acknowledge the highly etic nature of the literature on which I have drawn, and further concede that my observations made while in Japan were obviously from the outsider's perspective. Moreover, for reasons of brevity I have not explored the interactive nature of the phenomena of hierarchy and group orientation, so it should be pointed out that the group orientation occurs within the context of the well defined hierarchy and vice versa.

 Perspectives on hierarchy and group orientation

For the purposes of this analysis, the issue now becomes that of interpretation of these phenomena, and consideration of the question of from what perspectives these interpretations should be undertaken. For example, is Japan a 'good society', and whose values and perspectives should the Australian student of Japanese society use to make this and other sorts of assessments of Japan? I would like to now illustrate the enormous differences in the evaluation of some of the above characteristics when viewed from the insider (Japanese) and outsider (Western) cultural perspectives.

At least at the levels of rhetoric and belief in what constitutes the 'ideal society', most Australians have problems with hierarchy. Although this cannot be traced in detail here, Australians in general at least pay lip service to the myth of Australia as an egalitarian society, partly as a rejection of the hierarchical structures of the parent British society, partly as a result of the legend creating nineteenth century colonial bush experience, partly as a result of radical social policy experimentation post-Federation, and partly as a result of important initiatives against race, ethnic and gender 'discrimination' in the last two decades or so. (In short, Australia mythologises itself, amongst other things, as being both the land of the 'fair go' and of the 'tall poppy syndrome'.) Of particular importance in recent decades in Australia has been an enormous focus upon 'social justice', 'equity', 'affirmative action', and other initiatives which are based in part on the fundamental principle of liberalism which focuses upon the rights and freedoms of the individual rather than on the group, with the result being a range of policy and legislative initiatives against existing 'unequal' relationships.

What, then, is the Australian student with her/his Australian 'cultural baggage' to make of Japan?

A possible Western etic interpretation of the evidence which employs a liberal/individualistic assemblage of cultural values may well view Japanese society as a 'repressive society' in which both the hierarchy and the focus on the group deprive citizens of their individualism, where freedom is stifled by enormous pressures to conform, where individuals will not reveal their real emotions to others for fear of being sanctioned, where women are treated in most sexist and discriminatory ways.

This contrasts strongly with a widely-held actual Japanese emic perspective of themselves, a perspective that the Australian as outsider could also embrace if he/she is prepared to accept Japanese society on its own terms. From this perspective Japan is a 'good society' in which both hierarchy and the focus on the group provide citizens with a sense of order, a sense of harmony, the tranquillity which comes from knowing one's proper place', the lack of conflict which results from observing the tenetam and never giving offence, the sense of belonging which results from displaying proper respect and deference, and careful dedication to the normal expectations created by 'on'.

While it is possible to do this sort of perspective-based analysis in a general sense, it is also very interesting to explore contrasts between the emic and etic perspectives on quite specific aspects of Japanese (and Australian)
social characteristics and behaviour. The potential range of these sorts of contrasts is enormous, so I provide only a couple of examples by way of illustration:

Is the Japanese "Izumos" or mask which one shows to the world and which hides one's inner feelings to be viewed as a fact of culture, respect and deference which helps maintain the order and harmony so important to the Japanese? Or is it to be viewed as an act of 'dishonesty' with the associated possibly racist notions that 'you can't trust them', 'you can't tell what they are really thinking', 'they are impossible to do business with because of their lack of directness', and as evidence of that repugnant Western stereotype of the inscrutable oriental?

Conversely, is the Australian tendency towards openness, informality, directness and preparedness to express one's point of view and to stand up for oneself to be seen as evidence of such qualities as honesty and friendliness, or to be seen as unspeakable rudeness, demonstrating a lack of respect and social decorum?

Is the Japanese orientation towards group to be seen as mindless conformity and a surrender of individual rights, or as a striving for social structures where everyone feels a sense of belonging and where everyone demonstrates a genuine care and concern for each other?

Is Australian individualism to be seen as the fundamental premise upon which our rights, freedoms and democratic way of life are based, or is it to be seen as appalling self-centredness and selfishness?

Perhaps these above contrasts could be deemed to be a presentation of extreme positions of 'cultural perspective', but such cultural judgments are frequently made and are a fertile source of 'repugnant' and 'romantic' stereotypes. Hence, associated with these specific issues is a question of serious global importance about the future of human-kind which involves consideration of the sorts of cultural perspectives which have the potential to assure a better future for us all. Specifically, given the 'larger picture of the rise and fall of civilisations', and given the current state of Western societies and economies relative to the current state of Asian societies and economies, the question that needs to be asked is whose cultural values and perspectives, or what combinations of both Western and Asian perspectives, are likely to enable humankind to strive for a better future for all? It is beyond the scope of this article to address this most complex of questions, but it was certainly one of the "big picture" issues which I found myself reflecting upon as an outcome of my recent study tour of Japan.

Conclusion

This article has sought to argue that one of the most important elements of 'social and environmental studies for the twenty-first century' is the reality of Australia's redefinition of itself in the world and in the region, to the extent where effective study of Asian societies is a crucial outcome of the nation's education systems. It has argued that genuine intercultural literacy in Australian understanding of Asia will only be achieved if cultural 'empathy' is one of the primary objectives of Asian studies. Since 'empathy' means being able to comprehend the world of the other from the perspective of the other, it has been further argued that effective Asian studies always attempts to explain the world of the Asian society from the perspective of that society. A number of examples drawn from Japanese society have been given to explore the complexity and challenge of this approach. The ultimate benefit of such intellectual effort, however, include a more sophisticated and profound understanding of other societies at the same time as developing a deeper appreciation of the highly specifically culturally-based nature of one's own world view and associated 'common sense, taken for granted assumptions'. To the extent that this understanding and appreciation can make the student less 'culturally dogmatic', such educational experiences have the potential to work towards a better world of enhanced cultural tolerance and international understanding.

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