

TRAVELS IN A JAPANESE MIRROR

AN E-MAIL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN JAMES BENNETT AND
ALAN MACFARLANE (March-June 2007)

COMPILED BY ALAN MACFARLANE

CONTENTS

Preface

Conventions in editing

Into the mirror and culture shock

Economy

People

Power

Ideas

Beliefs

Out of the mirror

PREFACE

I have been in correspondence with an American lawyer, Michael Lotus, for several years. I asked Michael if he would read a copy of a revised book on F.W.Maitland. He agreed, but asked whether I would also like his friends James (Jim) Bennett and James McCormick to read it as well. I said I was happy for them to be involved.

I received useful comments from Michael on the Maitland book, but quite soon my correspondence with Jim Bennett took a different direction. He said he was interested in reading a chapter, then chapters, of my forthcoming book *Japan Through the Looking Glass* before it was published. The correspondence below comprises most of our exchanges about the book in the period between March and June 2007. It includes enough autobiographical material from Jim to establish his interests and angle of vision.

The correspondence seems interesting for a number of reasons. It shows the new potentials of scholarly collaboration provided by the web. Without email, it would have been impossible to carry out such a conversation between Colorado and Cambridge. It shows the narrowing gap between academic scholarship and interested ‘amateurs’. Although Jim was at University and taught by famous anthropologists, as he explains, his day job is in computing and the pursuit of the riddles we discuss is a ‘hobby’. But it is a serious hobby since he has written an important book on *The Anglosphere Challenge* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) and is gathering material for new works.

What I did not realize at the start was how much Jim knew and had thought about Japan. Nor did I realize that his work had been influenced by my other books. I did not anticipate that he would see so clearly the ways in which the book on Japan is a further chapter in my pursuit of ‘The Riddle of the Modern World’. As a result his comments have enriched my own thinking. He has drawn out the wider implications of my book and shown me how it links to our more general shared concern with understanding the origins and nature of the modern world.

These letters reveal how ideas are expanded, how creativity works, how the imagination and intuition guide us. After a short while, the conversation developed into a kind of intellectual archery contest. I would set Jim some targets. He would make guesses. I would then send him the answers as I saw them. He would see to what extent he had guessed in a way that anticipated my interpretations – and occasionally elaborate or dispute my findings.

I find the correspondence supportive in two ways. It is a privilege as a writer to be understood at a deep level by someone from a very different background. I had this experience with my late friend Gerry Martin, an engineer and scientist, with whom, for twelve years, I had

many conversations. He seemed to understand both the goals and methods of my journey. I have the same feeling with Jim. We both use the metaphor of climbing a high mountain; climbing requires comrades. It is a privilege to have such a knowledgeable and agreeable comrade.

Secondly, I have put forward an unusual interpretation of Japan. I suggest that Japan is very different from every other civilization. I challenge many conventional ideas and this leaves me open to criticism. My interpretation could well be mistaken. That someone as experienced, thoughtful and widely read as James Bennett finds my interpretation convincing is of importance to me.

If one archer fires an arrow at a target, it may be off the centre. When another archer fires from a very different angle and hits the target at the same point, it looks as if my answers may be plausible. In this day of post-modern anxiety about the reality of the external world and the deep subjectivity of our interpretations, this confirmation is especially important.

CONVENTIONS IN EDITING

The correspondence over these months took place between four people and I received comments from Michael Lotus and James McCormick as well. I have decided, with their permission, to confine this piece almost exclusively to the correspondence with Jim. It would make it more difficult to follow if other archers were involved. But I thank them both enormously for their support and insights.

I have made few editorial changes apart from a few grammatical or spelling alterations. I have sometimes added 'Dear Jim' or 'Dear Alan'. Often the emails were addressed to all of those involved, or had no addressee, but to give it a sense of an exchange of letters, I have slightly altered this. I have left most of the differences between American and English spelling ('labor' and 'labour' etc.) to give the sense of a dialogue between nations divided by a common language.

There are frequently references to some terms which we took for granted from the wider context of our inter-action. A number of these, such as the concept of the 'Axial Age' are explained in the book on Japan.

Another frequently mentioned concept is 'The Exit'. This is the idea, put forward in a number of my books and developed from Ernest Gellner and others, that many civilizations have been trapped. Yet, for reasons as yet incompletely understood, certain civilizations, in particular England in the eighteenth century, 'escaped' into a new kind of world based on science and industrialism. This is 'The Exit'.

A number of my books are referred to in the text by their short titles.

Individualism:	<i>The Origins of English Individualism</i> (Blackwell, 1978)
Marriage:	<i>Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840</i> (Blackwell, 1986)
Culture:	<i>The Culture of Capitalism</i> (Blackwell, 1987)
Savage:	<i>The Savage Wars of Peace</i> (Macmillan, 1997)
Riddle:	<i>The Riddle of the Modern World</i> (Palgrave, 2000)
Making:	<i>The Making of the Modern World</i> (Palgrave, 2002)
Glass:	<i>The Glass Bathyscaphe; How Glass Changed the World</i> (Profile, 2002)
Tea:	<i>Green Gold: the Empire of Tea</i> (Ebury, 2003)
Lily:	<i>Letters to Lily; On How the World Works</i> (Profile, 2005)
Japan:	<i>Japan Through the Looking Glass</i> (Profile, 2007)

Finally, I would like to thank Jim Bennett and Sarah Harrison for their help in checking this correspondence.

INTO THE MIRROR AND CULTURE SHOCK

15 March

Dear Professor Macfarlane:

Thank you very much for asking Mike to pass along the manuscript for the Maitland book, and for your kind words about my writing on these topics. Not having a graduate-level academic background, I am always a bit uncertain about how scholars will take my comments on and uses of their lifelong labors. Therefore, I am happy to hear that you think my treatment of your work is balanced.

I was barely aware of, and had never given serious thought to Maitland or his work until I had encountered your discussion of him, and I am very happy to have made that discovery. You are absolutely correct in pointing him out to a wider audience, and linking his thought (and that of Stubbs) to the direction of inquiry originating in Montesquieu via Smith and Tocqueville. In my opinion this line of inquiry is very complementary to research and thought now arising in economics, sociology, legal and historical scholarship, and other even more esoteric areas. Taken together, these findings deserve to be the basis for a new synthesis of thought and understanding that will, I believe, enable clearer thinking about pressing issues. John Maynard Keynes famously said that the common sense of businessmen was really the opinion of some long-dead economist. Perhaps. But it is certainly true that the unexamined assumptions of many current economists (and other experts) lie in turn on the opinion of some long-dead sociologists or anthropologists, most of which is due for reconsideration. Your work from *Origins and Marriage and Love*, to the most current, needs to be a fundamental part of that reconsideration.

On a personal note, these issues have been of interest to me, in one form or another, virtually all my life. I had the experience of growing up in daily contact with a number of individuals who had been shaped in a truly pre-modern, peasant world, namely my maternal grandparents, who had grown up in turn-of-the-century Italy. Particularly this was so for my grandfather and his sister, who were from Muro Lucano, high in the mountain country in the province of Lucania, which was desperately poor and backward until only the last few decades. This is the country described in Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, and was studied in Banfield's book *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, the foundational work on radius of trust. It was very apparent to me that, even given the Americanization they had experienced in later childhood and beyond, they thought in a fundamentally different fashion about life, and everything I subsequently studied on the topic always had the character of throwing illumination on these differences that I had observed, and why they were so different from my paternal grandparents, of mostly British Isles (English, Scots, Ulster) background.

My academic major at the University of Michigan was anthropology, and I was fortunate enough to have professors like Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf who pointed me to the then-existing literature, to White, Service, and Marvin Harris's *Rise of Anthropological Theory* and through that to Wittfogel. Although I never fully bought Wittfogel's hydraulic theory, it was exciting to me to see an overarching theory attempting to explain the big questions, without buying into the Marxist framework, which I had already thought was questionable. This was particularly the case in an academic world in which every other field seemed, more and more, to regard overarching theories as inherently impermissible. So, although I never ended up doing graduate work, and have not fully kept up with the anthropological literature, I have at least understood the questions and how they were framed. Therefore when I encountered *Origins* (via a footnote in Claudio Veliz's *Gothic Fox*) and your subsequent work, I was predisposed to find it exciting.

To some extent we have come at these questions in different ways. You were, if I may try to characterise it, working backward in time to try to find the moment at which English exceptionalism arose, working with the then-current assumption that its origins must have been somewhere near the beginnings of the Industrial revolution. What you found was that the origins lie much further back in time, that continuity rather than radical break was the central fact of English history, and that we must even give some credence to Montesquieu's conjectures about Tacitus and the forest Germans.

I for a long time accepted what I would call the IMF-World Bank consensus, that development was essentially an automatic thing that happened when certain macroeconomic thresholds were crossed, and that all societies had in the past and were now were fated to go through "stages" of development in a more-or-less automatic manner. (This is the opinion of the long-dead anthropologist.) In the mid-90s I ended up doing very retail-level venture capital work in Argentina, Brazil, and a bit in Bolivia. I was very taken with the optimism and feeling of liberation that was created by the early-90s reforms there, particularly the end of hyperinflation in Argentina. Watching the course of events in the Southern Cone through the end of the 90s made me look very hard at the underlying assumptions. I recall in particular a three-hour conversation I had on a plane in Argentina with a very intelligent lady, a law professor, who asked, in essence, "Where did we go wrong? Didn't we do everything you (i.e., the IMF) asked?" In particular I began to believe that both the current assumptions on development, and by implication those regarding the historical roots of development were far too simplistic if not false in essentials. This led me to much research in the issues of corruption and transparency, radius of social trust, kinship and familism, particularly comparing North and South America, and by extension the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds. This led me to Veliz and thereby to your work. It also led me to the conclusion that English-speaking exceptionalism was still a real and important factor in the world, a point on which I continue to think and research.

This is a long-winded way of saying I am delighted to be discussing these issues with you, and that I think these topics are of great importance. I look forward to our further discussions.

Best regards,

Jim Bennett

20 Mar 2007

Dear James (if I may),

Just to expand a little on my brief previous reply to your long and most interesting email...

Yes, your comments do strike me as extremely thoughtful and balanced. I have, in fact, found that I get the best ideas from people who have not become imprisoned within academia. Gerry Martin, co-author of *Glass* and a business man was more profound than most of my academic friends. Adam Smith found the same in Glasgow among the shippers and traders...

Your training is fascinating. Marshall Sahlins is one of my great heroes -

to my mind the most interesting living anthropologist. You were fortunate in your teachers, people with large visions which, as you say, are now unfashionable.

Still, I continue, as Einstein recommended, to ask the child-like large questions - who are we, how did we get here, etc., as in my *Letters to Lily: on how the world works*. It may be fruitless, but it is fun.

My next book, on *Japan Through the Looking Glass* does the same thing - but inverts it in the strange mirror of a civilization which destabilizes all the developmental paradigms. If you'd like to see a chapter, let me know... It comes out in August.

Thanks for telling me about your background. I loved *Christ Stopped...* A wonderful book. And it has obviously helped you to think comparatively - that background - just as my Assamese upbringing probably helped me.

Yes, Wittfogel is intriguing, but implausible - especially as he was trying to show how Russian absolutism occurred, an inauspicious place for a hydraulic thesis!

Your characterization of my work - working backwards (and forwards) as Marc Bloch recommended is right. You will see more of it later on my films in the series 'The Day the World Took Off' as I put them up on Youtube...

Yes, the current assumptions of development (on a Rostovian model of the 'normal' course) have been thrown into total chaos by Africa, China, Iraq and many other things and we are, as you say, learning how difficult and unlikely the 'escape' is.

So, in short, I look forward very much to your reactions to Maitland. If this goes well, I might try the same with Tocqueville...

With best wishes and thanks again for agreeing to help.

Alan

20 March,
Dear All,

As for Japan, I shall send you both a chapter. I think you will, indeed, be interested. It is a true Tertium Orbis (my latin was always bad...) something out of Borges. Here is the publisher's blurb. Choose a chapter - the one on people is about the overcoming of the major problem of Contract and Status and the closest to Maitland...

Best wishes,
Alan

Japan through the Looking Glass
(Profile Books, August 2007)
Alan Macfarlane

Japan - ultra-modern, efficient, urbanised, the second-largest economy in the world - is an enigma, a mystery to its Asian neighbours, to the west, even to itself. Japanese customs and culture have baffled generations of travellers. Countless difficulties remain to trip up the tourist, catch out the passing academic, and ensnare the unwary business person. In his entertaining and endlessly surprising book Alan Macfarlane takes the reader on an exploration into every aspect of Japanese society from the most public to the most intimate. He shows how even the familiar and mundane are in fact strange and mysterious. In a series of meticulous investigations he gradually uncovers the multi-faceted nature of a country and people who are even more extraordinary than they seem, yet perfectly reasonable and logical once their world is understood.

Our journey encompasses religion, ritual, martial arts, manners, eating, drinking, hot baths, geishas, family, home, singing, wrestling, dancing, performing, clans, education, aspiration, sexes, generations, race, crime, gangs, terror, war, kindness, cruelty, money, art, imperialism, emperor, countryside, city, politics, government, law, and a language that varies according to whom you are speaking. Alan Macfarlane weaves deftly through past and present, totem and taboo. Clear-sighted, persistent, affectionate, unsentimental, honest, he shows us Japan as it has never been seen before and in the process helps us to see our own world afresh.

Contents

- 1 Into the mirror
- 2 Culture shock
- 3 Wealth
- 4 People
- 5 Power
- 6 Ideas

7 Beliefs
8 Out of the mirror

20 March

Dear Alan:

The chapter on culture shock sounds intriguing, I'll go for that, thanks.

Best regards,

Jim

20 March

Alan:

Now I shall be brief, at least for the moment. There are yet more things about my background that may be of interest, but I shall save them for some future exchange. The University of Michigan anthropology faculty in the late 1960s was a very interesting place;

Sahlins was in addition to being a very perceptive scholar, an entertaining lecturer, even for his undergraduate courses. But there was a great deal of talent there at that time.

I never did any real fieldwork, to my regret, so I have tried to make any cross-cultural experience my fieldwork. I would be particularly interested in seeing any of the Japan book you would care to send—the parallel case of Japanese exceptionalism is fascinating and highly relevant to any discussion of development. I only have visited Japan once, but it was a most interesting visit. My cousin was then in postgraduate study at Tohoku University, and I accompanied him and his parents on a tour of Japan arranged by his university travel office, which meant that we stayed at all the hotels with which the university had a reciprocal relationship: we never saw a gaijin at any place we stayed, including a hot spring inn in the Japan Alps. When we got to Sendai his professor entertained us lavishly in his home.

Best regards,

Jim

21 March

Dear Alan:

My “day job” is currently running a small start-up company in the space and information technology areas, Wyoming Space and Information Systems, Inc., which I founded last year. I live in Lyons, Colorado, just northwest of Boulder—the location of the University of Colorado. Our offices are in Laramie, Wyoming—another university town—and I commute up once or twice a week, and telecommute otherwise.

I look forward to my virtual visit to Japan.

Jim

26 March

Alan:

Thank you again for the Japan chapters, it is a delight to read them. I had the chance to give them an initial reading this morning, but I will wait until I have returned comments on Maitland before I go over them again in detail.

One quick comment: Have you ever read Peter Popham’s *Tokyo The City at the End of the World*? It is a fascinating discussion of Japanese urbanism and why their cities are the way they are. It has much to do with Japanese land ownership and property tenure, which makes planning, zoning, and eminent domain alien concepts. Concepts of “home” and “outside the home” space also enter into it. As with just about every other phenomenon in Japanese life, “parcel of land” and “road” are not thought of exactly the way we think of them. This will probably not surprise you.

Best regards,

Jim

26 March

Dear Alan,

Just a minor note on baseball. I’m a little sceptical of the arguments about Japan doing well in the International Baseball Classic because of their cooperative attitude. The Americans did poorly because they saw the competition (the first of its kind) as an unimportant exhibition event and did not train seriously for it. I’m happy they did poorly as there will be pressure to take the event seriously the next time around. The Canadians, who normally play in the same leagues as the Americans and have the same style of play, took the events more seriously and ended up doing much better.

It is true that the Japanese leagues have their distinct style, and that Japanese culture plays a big part in that style. I have read some interesting accounts by American players who have played in the Japanese leagues, and it’s clear that the social consensus affects the outcomes of the

games, most due to the different attitudes of the umpires. Like Japanese judges, the umpires see their role as maintainers of harmony rather than arbiters of objective standards, and some of their calls will astound American players. However, it is not so different that Japanese players cannot adjust readily to play in the American major leagues.

Another fairly random thought came to my head while reading the chapters, that it must be a different experience coming to Japan from England, than from coming to it from the west coast of the USA. I was living in the San Francisco Bay area when I travelled to Japan, and there has always been a substantial Japanese presence and influence in California, and San Francisco in particular. The young and trendy business people there would interject Japanese words and phrases in their conversation as some classes of English people like to do with French, and everybody had to have, or aspired to have, some level of familiarity with Japanese art, film, religion, martial arts, and cuisine. My first wife, for example, was quite deeply interested in Zen Buddhism and we would spend vacations at the Tassajara Zen monastery in the mountains, with its meditation hall and hot spring baths. And of course Americans of Japanese descent were routinely present in daily life and business, and even though they were entirely assimilated they had their links to Japan. I found the geology and landforms quite similar, as was the omnipresent possibility of earthquakes and all that came with that, including the relative absence of brick or masonry structures. California and Japan have an interesting relationship, a bit like the yin-yang symbol—there's a drop of the opposite within each side.

Regards,

Jim

27 March

Dear Jim,

Many thanks for both your comments - I must look at the book on Tokyo you mention. I think I had heard of it, but not read it. I shall not change baseball, but I understand it a little better.

And the point you make about the entry into the mirror is fascinating. One of the points I make in the last chapter is that it is so difficult to 'see' Japan because it is invisible. I had thought that many outsiders could not see it because it was too unfamiliar (or they learnt Japanese and then 'became' Japanese, and then it became invisible again). You have given me a third option - that coming from the west coast of America (including Vancouver etc. I suppose, Japan is already rather familiar, and hence a bit invisible. When I was in Berkeley 18 months ago I found the same thing happening in relation to China - which now overlaps with the west coast...

Anyway, many thanks for your characteristically astute and interesting points.

Best wishes, Alan

27 March

Dear Alan:

Yes, Vancouver has a similar relationship with Japan, and Asia. Its links with India are particularly strong due to the Commonwealth heritage. The first little detail I notice going to western Canada from Colorado is that all the security guards seem to be Sikhs.

Perhaps a concise summary of the effects of coming to Japan from the west coast of North America would be that the surface impression of difference, the “ethnographic dazzle”, is somewhat less—which only shortens somewhat the time to the understanding that you really don’t understand Japan at all.

Regards,

Jim

27 March,

Dear Jim,

Thanks v. much. I liked your last point - that not being dazzled shortens the time to being totally confused. Do you know how the Japanese economy works? I only found out the key (I think) last spring - very Sahlinesque...

Best wishes, Alan

27 March

Dear Alan,

I would not pretend to know how the Japanese economy really works!

I await enlightenment...

Jim

28 March

Dear Jim, Mike and James,

You have been very generous with your time and comments over the last few days and if I answered all your thoughtful points, I would write pages.

Instead, I have decided to store up all your comments on Japan and absorb them over time - especially as there are further instalments.

But thank you very much indeed for new insights - and the suggestion (from Michael) that I spend a bit of my retirement following the footsteps of Tocqueville in America (though this is not quite how you put it). I shall think about that.

And thanks for the references to reviews, new suggestions for reading etc. It is as well I sent you Japan after the book was finished and off to publisher, otherwise I would require quite a long time to absorb all your new suggestions.

The reason I asked whether Jim knew how the economy works connects to the Columbus and the Egg problem. After the event, it is easy to see how things work. But thinking about it in advance shows the problems. This applies to all the book, which I shall gradually send in instalments. When any of you think you can see what the solution to the problem of Japan's peculiarities are, let me know. In the book it is only revealed in the last two chapters...

So am attaching the next chapter - the economy. As you will see from the last paragraph, there is a surprise in store here. I only understood (in so far as that is possible) the economic world after 15 years of puzzlement...

ECONOMY

28 March

Dear Alan:

The first two chapters of the Japan book were interesting and enjoyable, but the chapter on the economy was exciting. Although I had known most of the supporting facts you presented, the analytical framework and conclusion were genuinely thought-provoking. Ever since I had read Fukuyama's discussion in *Trust* of the *ie* as a means of extending radius of trust beyond the biological family, I knew we were looking at a unique parallel evolution of a mechanism that was somehow key to Japan's much easier transition through the Exit compared to any other non-Western society. But you have, I think, articulated this explicitly and have come up with some very astute observations of what might actually be going on here.

I believe you are also conveying why it is important to stop looking at the Japanese solution as an incomplete transition from whatever Japan was in pre-modernity to modernity as we know it. It is not incomplete; it is rather a successful transition to what they are now, which is a social pattern which is successful in its own way. (True, they have big problems, but so does everybody else, and it's not clear that the answer for their problems is to become more like us today.) After all, the authoritarian bureaucratic military states of the European continent in the late 17th century viewed England as a country that had failed to make the transition to modern state forms, and inexplicitly held on to archaic features such as parliaments, non-professional armies, and common law. They would have thought it absurd that these retained archaicisms might eventually become advantages. On the other hand, without wanting to descend into our own form of *nihonjinron*, I rather doubt that any other society could really adopt Japanese institutions and make them work.

Thus, I think you are right to say that the Japanese social system retains many layers of retained archaicisms that none the less are functional in today's world.

Some observations:

The corporation (or the government agency, or the university) is a modern development from the *ie*, clearly. This is consistent with von Wolfren's picture of Japan as a collection of large effectively autonomous institutions, with nobody really in charge.

One big difference from England, historically, is that pre-modern Japan never had to be genuinely competitive with other states in its system in either land or naval power. It was enough to defeat the rare invasion attempt. Thus it never developed the clear unified military command that the English crown eventually obtained. N.A.M. Rodger's two books on the history of sea power in British history had a good discussion of how the navy became, first autonomous, then co-equal, and finally senior to the army, and how British land and sea forces became unusually competent at joint operations compared to their rivals. In contrast, after the Meiji restoration/revolution (as you like), the Japanese army and navy were recruited from rival samurai clans, mentored respectively by Prussia and Britain (each thus acquiring the mental habits of a senior service), and never really subjected to an effective unified command authority. A disaster waiting to happen, and eventually it did. This situation became even worse after the collapse of the Taisho democracy, and undoubtedly was a major factor in the outbreak of the Pacific war, as each service effectively pursued its own foreign policy and fought its own autonomous war. (Walter MacDougall's history of the Northern Pacific has a nice discussion of this rivalry.)

I don't think the problem of obtaining a clear consensus of all the contending power groups in difficult times was ever solved—the Occupation and the MacArthur constitution solved it for the subsequent thirty years, but now there is no real way to resolve deadlocks. I suspect that might have been part of the reason the economic situation drifted on so long in the 90s without effective action being taken.

Another observation is that Japan resolved the contradiction of a market economy that was highly effective in accumulating wealth, and the material scarcity of pre-modern Japan, by making labor-intensive services the source of almost all luxuries. Although homes were small and cold, and food was not lavish, a prosperous person was able to spend lavishly on dining out (with elegant but small portions of luxury items like very fresh fish, skilfully prepared), drinking parties, theatre, music, and art, and highly expensive geisha mistresses. And even today this continues, with the Japanese spending a high proportion of their disposable income on very frequent and not cheap dining and entertainment. Cleverly, these luxury services mostly must be produced by native talent, so conspicuous consumption does not hurt the trade balance.

Finally, you note the dichotomy between (market-mediated) goods and (relationship-mediated) human services. True. This is not entirely unique to Japan. You note that professionals such as teachers often do not set their own salaries by negotiation and cannot collect payments through the court system. The same has historically been true of English lawyers from time immemorial—witness the famous pocket on the back of their gowns, to permit the client to slip the coin in away from the eyes of the recipient, serving exactly the same function as the envelope in Japan. Not nearly as widespread an attitude as in Japan, but still, it is an example.

For brevity's sake I shall stop here (too late for brevity now, I suppose). An utterly fascinating

chapter, and I think a breakthrough in understanding Japan.

Regards,

Jim

29 March

Dear Alan:

I am glad you found my comments worthwhile. I became seriously interested in Japan during the early Nineties, when there was a big debate over industrial policy in the US. Japan was held up as a model, but the more I looked at the supposed model (which essentially saw Japan as a Confucian society successfully adopting a European social-democratic planned-economy model), the more it was clear that we were being presented with a simplistic caricature for political and rhetorical purposes. Having only read the usual Benedict, etc., that was still enough to tell me that something different was going on. Reading Van Wolferen, which I did at that point, was very illuminating. It fitted with everything I had been perceiving, and converted me to the idea of Japanese exceptionalism. I also read the Popham book at that time, which along with Van Wolferen started to give me the picture of Japan as a case study in Hayekian emergent order, but put together in a way that we westerners could never have invented ourselves. Visiting Japan two years later, under non-touristical circumstances (being in essence a very, very tenuous, temporary, and marginal member of a Japanese institution— Tohoku University—but still enough of one to experience how one is taken care of) reinforced everything I had concluded from reading.

I remember walking along a mountain road outside of Zaosan Onsen, the hot springs resort, and encountering an upright rock, about three feet tall, with a red headband cloth wrapped around the upper part, and several small offerings—a half-drunk bottle of soda, a mostly-empty pack of cigarettes with two or three remaining, etc.—placed at its foot. I realized this was a shrine to a kami, apparently a very minor one. It impressed me even at that time that this was not a country that had made a “full transition to modernity” as normally understood. That detail always stuck in my mind.

As for guessing the secret, I’ll save that for another email.

Best regards,

Jim

31 March

Dear Jim,

Amazing!

You have guessed the answer to perhaps half of the riddle in this single email...!

I shall keep it carefully with the others and when you read the final book, you will see how close you have already got. Among your very perceptive clues are:

- embedded society
- archaisms retained
- Siberian shaman origins
- mixed origins also from Polynesia
- difficulty of dealing with foreigners, especially those who learn Japanese

You are absolutely right about the last point - the crucial entry through our Japanese friends. Without them (see preface) we could have got nowhere at all.

I shall send the next chapter, which will amplify your first point much further, in a week or two.

They have also brought out a much better cover for the book which any of you can see if you wanted - me as Harrison Ford basically...

Thanks again for your fascinating guesses. It looks as if you will reach the solution well before you reach the final chapter!

Best wishes,

Alan

30 March

Dear Alan:

Well, it seems to me that the retention of embedded-society characteristics in social relations is one key, and all the “retained archaisms” are not just relics here and there, but a distinct and highly idiosyncratic system in themselves. This must be a big part of the secret. Some of these may go back to the high Palaeolithic tribal societies of Siberia from which the Japanese probably stem, and/or the Chamorro and Polynesian elements that entered through Okinawa and Kyushu, where they are still most visible. Are the kamis ultimately related to Siberian shamanism? Probably so, I would think.

Another of my cousins has been a martial-arts instructor all of his life, and he is fluent in Japanese and had studied under sensei in the Japanese main islands and also Okinawa. His observation was that he was ultimately more comfortable with the Okinawans, who he thought had personalities much more like Hawaiians and Samoans, jolly, easygoing, and not at all austere, in contrast to the mainlanders.

I suspect this embedded nature of social relations is one reason why the Japanese have such problems interfacing with foreigners. Everyone in Japan must have a specific, knowable, and

assessable social identity and relationship in order for another Japanese to be fully comfortable dealing with him. Failing that, confusion and anxiety reigns, to be dealt with (in my observation), by piling on extra layers of politeness, and when that fails, withdrawal, rudeness, or even shutting down, “forgetting” one’s English, and ignoring the gaijin. (This is why fluency in Japanese can actually aggravate the situation of a foreigner in Japan, as it takes away the option of feigning ignorance of English.)

In my own travel there, I noticed that my treatment by Japanese was substantially different when I could explain my reason for being there -- unlikely as it may seem, being a cousin of a student of Professor Abe gave them a relationship they could then crank into their calculations, and they became much more comfortable. Visiting a family member, how meritorious. A scholarly family, better yet. You probably had the benefit of your relationships to the scholars you were visiting and their institutions; if you were even some sort of “visiting scholar” with an actual formal affiliation, all the better. That is the best way to visit Japan, I think, and I’m sure it gave you all sorts of access and insights of which you seem to have made excellent use.

We will continue on the secret...

Best regards,

Jim

31 March

Dear Alan:

At some point retained archaisms surely must cease being archaisms, and become just another path to modernity. The English lawyer’s coin pocket is a retained archaicism; the Japanese approach to salaries as “gifts” is a contemporary system with ancient roots. Again, the parallels with English-speaking society as a retained archaicism that became a system seems to be useful.

I am looking forward to the next chapter and the continuation of the riddle. This is great fun.

I am wondering whether the uniqueness of the Japanese writing system, and its almost cryptological complexity resulting from being a series of layers accumulated over time, is a pointer as well. When studying exceptional societies, anything exceptional in them must surely be examined for clues. The writing system is like the Japanese city— nobody designing either from a clean sheet of paper would ever have come up with those solutions, yet they work. There is a bit of a parallel with the English language, with its multiple historical accretions of layers of Anglo-Saxon/Norse, Norman French, and Latin vocabulary, each carrying their own social significance.

I think you will find the Popham supportive of all this, when you get a chance to look at it. It’s yet another piece of evidence that the Japanese have found a distinct way of constructing a modern society, using solutions (adapted from Western models) that we wouldn’t have thought of. Just a minor example I noticed—nobody in the West would have imagined that you could

have an urban railway system half made up of independent private lines that didn't even have a common city-wide ticket, yet, like the rice paddy surrounded by skyscrapers, the Japanese just work around the problem, and you merely buy a ticket for the next line from a vending machine when you transfer.

This is also starting to remind me of Sahlins' point about Hawaii's— that the social organization was substantially more elaborated than its material culture is typically associated with. The other way to say this is that it had a Bronze Age or even Iron Age political structure with Neolithic technology—Kamehama's armies were organized and disciplined like early Mesopotamian ones, yet used shark-tooth swords and coconut-fiber armor. This is simply because, being volcanic islands, there was no metal available. At the same time there were unique features to their social organization. Encountering Hawaii's at this point in its evolution was a wonderful opportunity—as if a group of Georgian gentlemen, intelligent and careful observers, had dropped in to Ur and taken notes, in English yet.

But the point relevant to our discussion is that the “mainstream” of cultural evolution is strongly affected by its material and geographical circumstances. We still tend to take west-central Continental Europe's patterns as “normative”, yet they were strongly affected by constant land-based military competition, as Downing discusses. Every European society that was sheltered somehow from this competition, whether by the Channel, the Pyrenees, or the Baltic, developed in an “exceptional” manner, and the exceptions actually outnumber the normative cases. Anthropologists have paid much attention to the effects of material and geographical circumstances on pre-agricultural and preliterate societies, and a fair amount of attention to pre-industrial (pre-Exit) societies. What scholars have paid less attention to are the differences among contemporary industrial (post-Exit) societies due to the legacy of these quite different paths. Japan is probably the most striking case in point, if you actually look at it and do not try to fit what you see into preconceived categories. Victorian travellers were fixated on the “feudal” nature of Japanese society, but tended not to see, or minimize, the great differences between the Japanese case and either Continental or English feudalism. Contemporary observers try to fit it into straightjackets of “social democratic” or “capitalist” models, but it is neither, really. (A Hayekian has much less problem with calling it a market society.)

I have written elsewhere, regarding development, that “Undeveloped societies are everywhere alike, each developed nation is developed in its own unique fashion.” This is certainly true of Japan.

Let us continue.

Regards,

Jim

1 April

Dear All,

Thanks to you very much for comments, and particularly to Jim for his further wonderful comments. They picked up several more clues, especially on the language etc. (which you will see developed in chapter 6 of the book). Many of the things Jim says are exactly what I say, in different words, in the book. Very comforting. I shall send the next chapter in a week, as an Easter present (?) - it is the one on people which Michael chose... I won't comment in any detail on any of your points now, but all very well taken. You will see that your discussion about the political system is also reflected very much in the book.

My wife Sarah is also enjoying the discussion. She is in charge of my website and will put up the one which will go with the book when it comes out. I was wondering whether it might be an idea of keeping all your comments as the book arrives with you as a sort of blog that can go on the website? I don't know of anything like it and Jim's comments are so absorbingly interesting... Don't feel inhibited by this - but it is worth considering.

With warm wishes and keep the guesses coming!

Alan

1st April

Dear Alan:

I look forward to the next chapter. Perhaps I can use the next week fruitfully to review the Maitland ms.

Just another random thought sparked by our discussions: How much confusion has been caused with Western observers by translating the term Tenno as "Emperor"? It's bad enough using that word for the Chinese office, although one can see why western travellers would naturally do so. But then applying it to the Japanese office causes double confusion.

Looking over our discussions, it occurs to me that it might be usefully translated "Head Shaman". Will you be discussing the Tenno and the role of the court circle in your further chapters?

One last Bennett anecdote: My cousin's professor's family was from Kyoto. However, the family had originally been merchants from Tokyo, and had moved to Kyoto four hundred years ago. He related how the higher social circles in Kyoto were all families who had been court chamberlains, etc. in capital days and had considered Tokyo too vulgar to relocate to. His family was still not considered socially acceptable in such circles—they were referred to as "those Tokyo people."

When we lived in Alexandria, Virginia, there was a sort of equivalent, an old social circle around certain clubs and institutions. For them, it was not enough to have been an Alexandria native, or to have had an ancestor who served in the Confederate army—the ancestor needed to have served as an officer in the right regiment of that army. This, however, is a pale shadow of the Japanese case.

Best regards,

Jim

1st April

Dear Jim,

On the Tenno. Yes, 'head shaman' is perfect! As you will see. I do discuss the curious political situation in chapter 5... Not an Emperor at all, as you say.

Best wishes and keep the guesses coming...

Alan

1st April

Dear Alan,

Speaking of ronin, it would be interesting to do a little essay contrasting “The Forty-Seven Ronin” with the Robin Hood tales. The Robin Hood tales are made comprehensible to the Japanese only in the late redactions which portray Robin as motivated by loyalty to the missing King Richard; otherwise, they would just be contemptible criminals. Of course if the Japanese were to do a version of Robin Hood, he and his men would sneak into the Sheriff of Nottingham’s castle and behead him. King John would be so impressed by their loyalty to Richard that he would grant them the right to commit seppuku together—a happy ending. In other words, they would become the 47 Ronin.

The other thought is that all gaijin are Ronin to the Japanese, until they manage to create at least some kind of fictive tie to a Japanese institution or person. This is part of the problem they have with foreigners, and it also suggests that if you are going to Japan, you are well-advised to arrange some kind of tie before you go.

1st April

Alan:

I would be happy to see these comments turned into a blog-style discussion, assuming of course the typos from my hasty dashed-off emails can be cleaned up.

In addition to guesses, some questions start to arise:

1. Will you be saying that the Siberian legacy, and perhaps the Polynesian/Chamorro legacy loom larger than is generally supposed?
2. That leads to the next inevitable question from a comparative viewpoint: how do the Koreans, who I believe share the Siberian legacy, fit into all of this? Did they have such a heavy overlay of Confucian, Chinese-derived culture that the peculiar Siberian characteristics were lost—a bit like the way the coming of Roman law and the consolidation of the French state overwhelmed the Scandinavian legal and cultural influences in Normandy?
3. The same question, but regarding the Manchurians.
4. What lesson can we learn from the Japanese attempts (and failures) to integrate their cultural cousins in Korea and Manchuria during the 1905-1945 period? If the Japanese cultural system could be extended to anyone, one would think that Korea would be the place it would have worked. In fact, it seems to have worked better in Taiwan, although it's politically inconvenient to admit that. (More Bennett anecdotes about that, but not in this email.) Certainly in economic terms it was a great success.
5. Just another random thought: going back to the discussion of the quasi-independent nature of the Imperial Army and Navy, it's curious that the Army, whose roots go back to the Kanto plain samurai clans, was retracing the migration paths of the Siberian tribes in its expansion - - Korea, Manchuria, etc. The Navy, whose roots were in Kyushu and Okinawa, retraced the steps of the Polynesian voyagers— the Marianas, Micronesia, etc. Of course there are perfectly sensible modern reasons for all that—where would the Navy go but the islands, where would the Army go but the continental landmass? Still, it's interesting. The Navy and Marines might have had a major role in landing and taking the Chinese seaport towns, but they for the most part didn't.

Cheers,

Jim

1st April

Dear Alan and all,

The point has been made by a number of authors that the inefficient retail system in Japan performs a variety of social functions that must be taken into any calculus. For example, it's a useful place to absorb persons with mild mental disabilities who in America or Europe would be on permanent disability or even institutionalized—and at far less cost to society, and a more satisfactory and humane solution for the families involved. It similarly absorbs others who would be out of the workforce in other countries for various reasons of unsuitability. Part of the secret of this is that Japan is still very good at supporting people on very little. Yet they still have status and a place in society, and that's what counts.

This is part of what Alan talks about in regard to Japan still having aspects of an embedded society—the decision to support this sort of retail sector is full of these sorts of non-monetary considerations. I wouldn't advocate trying to implement such a system in the US or UK, but it makes sense for Japan and I am reluctant to advocate changing it (not that they'd take my advice anyway) without thinking through the ramifications in the Japanese frame of reference.

By the way, a Marxist would say this is not capitalism, but a Hayekian would not hesitate to call it a market-economy society, because for Hayekians the critical point is the free exchange itself. People's motivations are a black box, and it doesn't matter what the drivers are for any given decision.

Yours,
Jim

PEOPLE

2 April

Dear Jim, Michael and James,

Thanks very much for all your fascinating comments. I am glad you like the idea of having an edited version of all these discussions on the website to accompany the book - tidied up a bit, obviously.

I am very relieved that the book is off to the publisher tomorrow or Wednesday - otherwise I would have to rewrite various bits in the light of your perceptive comments!

I shall not reply to Jim's questions and very amusing comments on Robin Hood etc. (lovely), but reply by sending chapters in due course which will, I hope, answer almost all of his thoughtful questions on why not Korea etc.

Just to stoke up the fire further before I send the next chapter at the week-end, it might set your thoughts running if I mention the questions behind the next chapter - and see if you can guess any of my answers.

People:

Are there individuals in Japan?

Do the Japanese have weak or strong families?

How does marriage work in Japan?

How does the rearing of babies and children shape Japanese personality?

What do the Japanese think of adulthood and old age?

Are men and women equal?

What do the Japanese think of work?

Is Japan egalitarian or hierarchical?

Is Japan based on contract or status?

This is grossly over-simplified, but you'll get the gist of what is going to be covered...

My non-reply in detail to all your great comments does not reflect either disinterest or exhaustion, but just a desire to save them up and see which are left unanswered by the book...

Best wishes,
Alan

2 April

Dear Alan:

Wonderful questions, and now we get to the point where my rather superficial acquaintance with and reading on Japan is no substitute for the deep understanding that would require years in close proximity to Japanese family life to acquire. So I will wait for the future chapters and respond to them, keeping these questions in mind.

I will venture an opinion on the first question, though. There are certainly individuals in Japan, but (and here is the eternal qualifier) they are individualistic in a Japanese way that is not quite like that of anyplace else. The other way to ask this might be “Is ikebana or origami done by a non-professional in spare time a ‘hobby’ in the sense that a Westerner pursuing, say, model railways, is pursuing a hobby?”

Regards to all,

Jim

4 April

Dear Alan & gang:

“So we always have this double layer social structure. The outer structure of society is western, but the inner Japanese. We can see this double layer structure, in various combinations, in every aspect of social life in Japan.”

I think we are very close to the heart of things here, if my guesses are correct. And the critical point underlying this is that Japan was able to create an effective, functional modern market economy on indigenous roots, allowing pre-opening trading houses like Mitsui to become modern, internationally-competitive corporations. I can think of very few (if any) other countries where this happened. They already understood how to think about money; they just needed to learn the modern mechanisms for dealing with it. Could a culture adapt the external (i.e., extra-familial) layer so quickly without having already had a cultural construct like the *ie*? And it was precisely the speed and ease of this transformation of the external layer that allowed the internal (familial) layer to remain unchanged. In other cultures, breaking the embedded economic+family structures was needed to create anything like a modern economy, but in the process of breaking the external layer, the familial relations are disrupted as well. So Japan’s adaptation was unique and could not be readily copied in any other nation, although by 1905 every ambitious non-European reformer and nationalist tried to take Japan as a model. (I strongly suspect that the answer for Taiwan and Korea was “partly successful” and that the

Japanese imperial experience was a big part of the Four Tigers takeoff of the 60s-90s.)

The standard “transition from feudalism to modern democratic capitalism” model just can’t capture any of this properly. No wonder people are confused.

Anyway, that’s my guess at this point.

Regards to all,

Jim

4 April

Alan:

My pleasure. It will go out in a few days; I have some more copies on the way to me. [Jim had offered to send me a copy of his book *The Anglosphere Challenge* (2004) which I had gratefully accepted.]

The book has all the “first book” author errors. I seem to have been writing with the fear that I would step in front of a bus the day it went to the printers, and that therefore every topic I ever wanted to address needed to be discussed in that particular book. I also had a problem that you did not, namely that I ended up wavering between a desire to express ideas simply for the “average informed reader”, but also felt compelled to qualify and express nuances on points that only a handful of readers, well-informed on that particular point, would have required. Additionally it goes between technology and social issues, and past and future, in such a way that technologically-oriented readers get in over their heads on the history, and vice versa for social-science or history types with the technological discussions. And much of the discussion of politics in the various countries was so ephemeral it was really journalism, and should have been kept out entirely—it was overtaken between final text revision and actual publication. For all of that, it had several nice reviews in serious publications, including TLS.

My treatment of your work is something I would have done differently had I been writing today—I had actually finished the full text before I had seen anything of yours. While shopping that text around, I read Claudio Veliz’s *Gothic Fox*, (and immediately knew I had to revise the text) and saw the reference to *Individualism* in a footnote, and decided I really had to read and incorporate my thoughts on that as well. That led me to *Marriage*, also a critical work. I revised the book substantially, and it was accepted in that form. During my final pre-publication revisions, I read *Riddle and Making*, and had to go through and change things again (scrubbing out the last vestiges of “stages of development” thinking—this is so pervasive in contemporary thought that it is hard work to identify its effects in everything one writes .)

At any rate it seems to have been of interest to some people. But I am now motivated by the idea of subsequent books, which might benefit from your suggestions in the drafting.

Best regards,

Jim

4 April

Dear Jim,

Thanks. If you imagine the mystery I am teasing you with as a bull's eye with a red centre, then a blue ring, then a white ring, then black, this arrow has, like several of your other ones, hit the blue. It is probably the case that when enough arrows are stuck in the blue they will turn it red, since, of course, there are many answers to the riddle. But there is one final red bit which I am hoping you will not guess until near the end. Because your observations are really excellent.

No more hints, but a chapter soon,

Alan

4 April

Dear Alan,

Well, I'll just have to keep guessing, then. I look forward to the next clues.

I think you are right about the blue ring turning red—this analytical framework is so rich and (I believe) fruitful that it ought to spur a whole follow-on set of writing and speculation by those who understand it, and in the course of that all of these hints and directions should get elaborated much further.

ALAN SENDS CHAPTER ON 'PEOPLE'

6 April

Alan:

I have given the chapter a quick read. It is fascinating, and goes to show that the puzzle cannot be addressed by any simple formula. I have been saying, "OK, so we have a multiple-layered culture with an inner layer still having many characteristics of embedded society, while the outer layer shows primarily characteristics of a modern individualist, market-ordered society." Now I read this and say, "well, yes, that's true, but that is not an adequate formula to express the complexity of what we're looking at." Perhaps seeing Japan as a continuum of relationships with two poles of organizing principle at either end, with almost all social phenomena being

somewhere in the middle. Hardly anything is pure Community or pure Association. That describes, of course, but does not explain. I will respond at greater length after I have read the chapter carefully.

Some random observations:

Most Japanese seem group-oriented and conformist, but from time to time you meet Japanese who are strikingly individualist, and who set out their own course in defiance of social norms, and succeed. Then Japan merely redefines what they have done as being part of the consensus and harmony emerges restored. I think, for example, of Honda going into car production after MITI had told him there was, in their opinion, no room for another Japanese car exporter, and that he would get no help. Yet of course he ended up as a highly revered member of the Japanese industrial elite. It does seem to me that it depends upon the times.

Japanese institutions drift into deadlock and inaction through the drifting of the headless system Wolferen describes. (The power-from-below situation in the Japanese military you discussed is an example of this.) Then some external shock, a Perry or a MacArthur, shakes things up and puts everything into flux for a while. At those times individuals like Honda and Morita (of Sony, who also proceeded in his venture in the face of opposition from MITI) emerge, do surprising things very much like an American or English entrepreneurial swashbuckler. Then the system absorbs them.

Your picture also is consistent with which Fukuyama's discussion of the *ie* as a home-grown mechanism for establishing wider radius-of-trust circles.

So, are Japanese individuals? I think the answer is "yes, but...". Their individuation came from an entirely separate and unique path of social evolution, not much like the West's, or England's path, at all. So they have evolved a non-familistic social form that allows Japanese to fulfil an individual role but in a manner with substantial differences from what we think of as individualism. My question would be, isn't the very fact that Japanese literature produces introspective works examining loneliness and separation itself an indicator of some form of individualism?

Just a note on egalitarianism. It's interesting to contrast American and Japanese egalitarianism—the Japanese have a form of hierarchical expression in social relationships, but have produced a society with a remarkably equal distribution of wealth (although I wonder if the formal figures reflect the inequality of access to corporate resources not reflected in salary: the higher up in a Japanese corporation you are, the bigger the expense account, and a great deal of the luxury consumption in Japan is done through company expense accounts. It's usually the company that picks up the 400-dollar per-person sushi-bar bill or the thousand-dollar kaiseki dinner tab.)

America tolerates a high degree of income inequality (again, somewhat muddled by the presence of large numbers of very recent, unassimilated immigrants from very poor countries). However, psychological egalitarianism in social relations is still very important, and you would be ill-advised to treat service persons as social inferiors, especially beyond the urban enclaves. (The rich often like immigrants as service providers precisely because they are more deferential.) I remember when I had a job during student days as a driver of an airport shuttle van under contract to take air crews to their hotels. It was about a half-hour trip. All of the American

crews would invariably ask my name and use it in addressing me; they would chat with me, ask for recommendations of bars and restaurants, and generally pass the time pleasantly. At the end they would often shake my hand after I unloaded the bags. The non-American crews would all ignore me except for functional discussions, and call me “driver”. Except for the Canadians and Australians who were like Americans.

Aussies would always offer me a cigarette if they were going to smoke. The Brits were somewhere in between. I always remembered these differences.

Best regards to all,

Jim

6 April

Dear Alan,

Just a few words on the importance of your work to the revision of my text. Originally, I had set out to write a speculative work on the effect of Internet and related technologies on society in the coming decades. Some of this text survives in the book as finally published. It was organized around the theme of the strength and complexity of civil society as the underlying factor in development and prosperity. Although the general point is, I believe, still valid, the original discussion had been set firmly in a (largely unexamined and assumed) stages-of-development framework, in which technological and economic development were firmly coupled to strength of civil society. My experiences, particularly in Latin America, led me to examine far more carefully the origins of modernity and the specific role of England and the English-speaking societies in that origin. My first plateau on this mountain-climbing expedition, as it were, was the importance of radius of trust, with Banfield and Fukuyama as my Sherpas.

Setting up base camp there, I imagined I was near the summit. But even when the clouds had cleared I could not see the summit, and I decided to enlist the additional help of comparative studies, which led me to Veliz. Thus I came to *Origins*, and that led me to a new plateau. Now on oxygen, I began to climb much faster, and *Riddle* and *Making* brought a whole new team to bear. Smith and Tocqueville I had studied years before, and bit of Montesquieu (but mostly very specific stuff about balance of power and its influence on the writing of the American constitution.) Gellner I had seen summarized in anthropological-theory surveys, but his work never sounded relevant enough to read. Maitland I was ignorant of, and Fukuzawa as well. The overview of them all in *Riddle* and *Making* was the real new integrating viewpoint I had been wanting. (Some of this was foreshadowed in Wittfogel’s statement of the problem, but of course his answer gets lost in the thicket of hydraulic theory.) Americans always are taught Democracy in America, but hardly ever *L’Ancien Regime*; we get Montesquieu because of his influence on the Founders and the Constitution, but his view of Tacitus and the forest Germans, which strongly influenced Jefferson, is dismissed as historical romanticism. *Riddle* is a very useful corrective for the peculiar lacunae of American education, and these days, of English education as well.

I don’t know if I’m at the summit yet (probably one never gets there) but I am seeing much

further at this altitude.

I have read bits of *Culture of Capitalism*, but have never owned the book or read it in full. I'd love a copy. And I will get around to *Lily*, *Tea*, and *Glass*, especially after James's excellent reviews of the latter two.

Best regards,

Jim

[PLEASE NOTE; THE NEXT FEW EMAILS APPEAR TO REFER TO MATERIALS THAT HAVE CRISS-CROSSED EACH OTHER IN THE HECTIC EXCHANGE.]±

7 April

Dear Jim and Michael,

Again - excuses (Lily's tenth birthday etc.). But again wanted to say how delighted I was by these perceptive comments. In fact, you are absolutely right. This chapter does not explain much - but describes in more detail the problem. Using one of your travel metaphors, we are now right in the middle of the jungle of incomprehension - which will continue with the next couple of chapters. Then the forest will thin and we shall, in the last chapter come out into sunlight (I hope).

I shall paste a tiny bit from the conclusion which explains what I am trying to do, which may help...

I look forward to any further arrows, whether in the blue or crowding into the red. These ones are very perceptive.

And I shall save a copy of 'Culture' for you.

Best wishes,

Alan

(a small bit from the conclusion....)

The fact that Japan is the one great world civilisation which cannot be divided into segments has an effect on how we come to understand it. Like a photograph or painting, Japan is a gestalt; it is a place we have to take in with one glance, or not at all. In this sense it is like the standard undivided society studied by anthropologists. We cannot understand a tribal society by breaking it into bits. The pieces of the jigsaw mean nothing away from the whole. It has to be comprehended with one rapid sweep of the mental eye.

This is one reason why the portrait so quickly sketched in this book, while necessarily superficial in relation to any one part, is an attempt to capture Japan as a whole. My hope is that this approach will give a truer sense of what it is like than if one lingered longer on any one area at the expense of others. While it makes sense to approach America or France by studying them bit by bit, Japan eludes us if we do so. If we want to understand a central thread of Japanese culture, we have to trace it through all aspects of life. 'It is in this spirit penetrating every detail of life in peace and war, poetry and archery, ritual and leisure', wrote Singer, 'that we may find the true measure of the Japanese mind. For it is not to be discovered in an abstract idea, or system, or work of art, or institution.' To dissect is to lose this meaning.

7 April

Alan:

"Japan is a gestalt; it is a place we have to take in with one glance, or not at all."

Is that why, more than any other country, a gaijin thrust into Japan is either entirely charmed or entirely overwhelmed?

Best regards,

Jim

7 April

Dear Jim,

A short reply to a marvellous letter - it is Lily's birthday and Easter and family today.

But it was really nice. Your metaphor of climbing is exactly the one I often have - or exploration. One never reaches the top, but if one can, by standing on the shoulders of giants, see a little further and make sense of all the detail a bit, that is a wonderful feeling. It is an honour to have been one of your Sherpas and I look forward to further climbing, perhaps doing some of it together.

Your feelings about the greats were just mine. At present I am trying to understand another who, I think, holds a key, but I cannot name him as it would give away the plot to 'Japan' ... Sorry to tease.

Have a great Easter and thanks again,

Alan

7 April

Dear Alan,

“It is an honour to have been one of your Sherpas”

Sherpa, and in this exchange we have been having, sensei, because you have been adopting the playful yet purposeful questioning and response that a sensei uses to sharpen investigation and understanding. But if exploring these questions is not adventure and fun, why bother?

As for: “further climbing, perhaps doing some of it together.”

To adopt a slightly different exploration metaphor, your central work has guided us through a difficult and long-forgotten mountain pass, and now we stand where it breaks out into the “broad, sunlit uplands” Churchill liked to evoke. Other explorers are lost on the crags of the false passes and their skeletons litter the arid and stony slopes. As we prepare to descend and explore this wonderful and fertile country, we see carved on the walls, still legible, “F. Maitland passed this way” and, higher up, “Stubbs”. Yet beyond their final markers lies a whole new virgin territory to be explored. We remain amazed that we find so few other footsteps in it. To have gotten this far thanks to your trailblazing is gratifying; to think of our exploring further in cooperation with you is exciting.

Best Easter wishes to all,

Jim

8 April

Dear Alan,

“When we meet we can see what joint exploration might mean. You are 6 years younger than me, and obviously full of energy. So I can pass on things.”

“Joint exploration” is a protean term and can take on a very wide variety of forms; as you say, we can see. Even if it is never more than this sort of back-and-forth discussion it would be enjoyable and valuable.

Japan has influenced the culture of the English-speaking world immensely, in matters high and low, for a century and a half now. And vice versa. Whenever I see bit of our culture repurposed by the Japanese in ways we would never have thought up ourselves (what Western food items they consider appropriate for breakfast was frequently a surprise) I imagine what a Japanese would think of some bit of their culture wrenched out of context by us. The uses made of Japanese martial arts culture in, per your example, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, must surely be one such thing; I hope they have a sense of humor about it.

Regards,

Jim

9 April

Dear Alan:

I am trying to think of whether there is any other culture or civilization than Japan with whom we have such a great two-way flow of cultural bits, from the highest culture to the lowest. Phenomena such as degraded bits of martial arts culture, electronic toys, and animated cartoons seem to be impacting the lowest levels of popular culture in a way that other foreign cultures do not equal. Is it because Japan is so unique, or because it is an “inverted” version of our own society, as you noted in a previous email? I suppose we must see the turtles in this light.

A random note—are there any ties between Japan and Native American cultures, given that they are both descended from the Siberians? I see flashes of it, in parallels between the kamis and the treatment of local spirits in Native American religions. And there is the curious coincidence between the Japanese question-particle “-ne?” and the Chippewa question-particle “-na?” which is used in exactly the same way. On the other hand there are many languages and only so many phonemes, so there truly is room for coincidence.

Best regards,

Jim

10 April

Dear Alan:

I am continuing to feel that the Siberian legacy is central to the puzzle, as is the fundamentally independent line of evolution of Japanese civilization, straight from the tribal culture, with only very selective borrowings from China, Korea, and other outsiders. It’s a unique path not just from pre-modernity, but also from the Neolithic -- maybe even from the high Palaeolithic. (I’m hazy on my ancient Siberian ethnography here.) What was really going on in the 6th-9th centuries CE when their cities and institutions seemed to be emerging?

Wet rice culture, Buddhism, kanji, the grid-plan cities like Kyoto—

OK, there were many borrowings which became very tightly integrated into Japan as we understand it. Maybe their adoption of modern industrial institutions from the West is just another such wave, also now very tightly integrated. But perhaps the core of Japan existed even before the first borrowings; it’s just that they became very good at borrowing and integrating.

What a great puzzle!

Regards,

Jim

10 April

Dear Jim,

I almost feel I should give up and say you have hit the red, since most of what you say is in the answer. But since I want you to read on, I shall in a niggardly way say that there is one main idea as yet missing. There will be further clues in later chapters. But your comments are, as ever, brilliant.

But you are certainly on the right path and may pounce on the last clue soon...

Best wishes,
Alan

10 April

Dear Alan:

Ah, we are closing in. And the Tenno system and its community are at the heart of it. I suspected as much. I remember the description my cousin's professor had related of the "old family" circles of Kyoto, the ones with court connections, and I had started to get the picture of a little world for whom all the developments of the past four centuries were insubstantial shadows, but in which the spring rice-planting ceremony was truly, genuinely important, and their families' roles in all such things were the truly important things in their lives. A world does not have to be large to be psychologically self-contained; the Imperial household and its adjuncts (what, ten thousand people, maybe?) are certainly large enough to be such. And it, in turn, is not just a retained archaicism in Japan, somehow something critical radiates out from that circle.

Regards,

Jim

11 April

Dear Alan:

Will you get into the question of early state formation in Japan, whether the Japanese state was so early that it might have been a case of pristine state formation (pristine state formation vs. diffusion was one of my favorite questions as a student), and whether the Japanese state in ancient times was anything like what we would consider to be a state? I have this feeling that it was already there when Chinese influence led them to trick out the Tenno's position in some of the trappings of a Confucian emperor, just as they later tricked it out with the trappings of a Western monarchy. We know it was neither, perhaps we are just now starting to understand exactly how different and unique it actually was and is.

I will add some comments about the reciprocal influence of Japanese and English-speaking culture through popular and children's culture in future emails. I think about this sometimes when I watch Japanese-produced or Japanese-influenced kid's television with my son. There is one cartoon series called "Kappa Mikey" which is well-done and actually rather amusing; Mikey is an American young adult actor living in Tokyo and making a precarious living acting in cheap live-action Japanese children's television; he and a woman actress (named Lily, in fact) are the only western characters, all the others are Japanese. There is a running joke about the head of the studio, a gruff millionaire named Ozu, who is always threatening to make Mikey his heir and disinherit his biological son, who is a worthless suck-up. Watching it the other day, I realized that this plot thread doesn't seem credible unless you understand about adoption of heirs in the *ie* (although I'm sure the idea of adopting a gaijin as heir is a big joke to Japanese viewers.) However, in ten or fifteen years time, if one is lecturing American students on Japanese society and is trying to discuss adult adoption in the *ie*, you would have the option of using that plot thread as an example. Whatever the quality of the programming, children are getting some exposure to various bits and pieces of Japanese culture.

Regards,

Jim

12 April

Dear Alan,

In the search we are conducting, the Japanese habit of adaptation of foreign elements muddies the trail so well. But the exceptions continue to stick out, and they are our signposts.

Yours, Jim

12 April

Dear Jim,

You will see how far I go in the state formation question in the next chapter on 'power'. Not far enough is the answer because, as you will see, my line of argument is exactly along the lines you mention, but I leave it at the Heian and Nara since my knowledge of before that is very slim. But you are absolutely right, the more one looks, the stronger the ancient continuities. But I won't give anything more away.

Your comments on Japanese TV. and adoption of heirs etc. is very interesting. Every Japanese film or novel we read means so much more now that we know something about Japan. That, I hope, will be one of the benefits of my book - giving people context. And the influence is everywhere. For instance, last night I was at supper with a cousin who is a teacher in Edinburgh. The techniques she is using to try to help damaged children are clearly strongly influenced by Japanese child-rearing philosophy (fairly explicitly). As we have suggested before, we are all becoming Japanese as much as the other way round...

Best wishes, Alan

12 April

Dear Alan:

Our exchanges, and your book draft, are so helpful for turning a number of points of understanding, gleaned from Wolferen, Popham, Fukuyama, travel and observations, etc., into a coherent analytical framework. I would have understood the plot line about outsider adoption and the nature of the ie from Fukuyama, probably, but it makes so much more sense in the framework of understanding Japan as an independent line of social evolution from the earliest discoverable times.

Regards,

Jim

12 April

Dear Jim,

Yes, Japan is like a great separate river, whose surface is discoloured/coloured by all sorts of things, but which never flows in the same way or direction as other rivers. A metaphor I had when watching parts of the Yangtze converge. More will be revealed soon... I'm delighted it is helping.

Yours,
Alan

12 April

Dear Alan:

Fascinating as Japan is an object of study in its own right, you may have managed to make it the key to understanding the whole riddle of the modern world. The picture I now have (very crudely) is of the big Old World landmass generating the classic military-bureaucratic Old Order state. The West kept producing variants of this order that started to develop a different path, perhaps under the impact of repeated incursions of the barbarian nomads with their independent-minded ways, (you will recognise Wittfogel's influence here—I still think he was right about that point) from the Hellenes to the Saxons. But the different paths were always aborted by the traps. Finally the one big island on the left sheltered one of these hybrid tribal-state societies well enough for it to continue to evolve to the Exit. But the big islands on the right had a much older, more insulated independent society with its own version of a tribal-state hybrid society. To understand the whole picture that third example may be not just useful, but critical.

Regards,

Jim

12 April

Dear Jim,

Another brilliant piece of guesswork and absolutely on the border between red and blue. (You still miss one crucial part which is a better alternative, or perhaps parallel, to Wittfogel).

I particularly like the point about not being able to understand the two first cases (Eur-Asia) without the third - Japan. That is what I am increasingly feeling.

Do you know the brilliant, if much contested, article by Umesao (I think) who developed the diagram which showed this... I wrote about it in an earlier version of the book and can send you that later (remind me) which was pruned out by Japanese friends because Umesao is so contentious in Japan. But it is along your lines.

As we have agreed, there will be no final answer, but Japan by inverting everything does help to push us on...

Best wishes,

Alan

12 April

Dear Alan,

“(You still miss one crucial part which is a better alternative, or perhaps parallel, to Wittfogel)”

Poor Wittfogel: A great analytical mind, and formulated the question so well, I thought—just this little matter of being wrong in his central thesis. Oh well, that happens. I will be very interested in the parallel formulation.

I am not familiar with the Umesao article; I’d love a pointer to it, and/or the earlier version of the chapter, when you have time.

As to the value of Japan as the third example, ask yourself this question: If Japan had never existed, and some thinker had posited exactly such a society as a theoretical alternative, would anybody have considered it credible? I can only imagine the critiques proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that the possibility of such a society would be an absurdity and an impossibility. For that matter, people can and do look at the real-world actuality and insist on contorting what they see through analytical frameworks that insist that black is really white.

Jim

13 April

Dear Jim,

Yes. The wonder of Japan is that it is beyond belief, beyond satire, beyond invention. It is like science fiction or Utopian writing - but the fancy cannot be free, because it has to work and does.

As Maraini put it, quoted in my conclusion....

By looking carefully at Japan we learn not only about an unfamiliar part of the world or culture, but about ourselves. Comparison gives wings to eyes; it takes us up into space and permits us to look at the planet Earth from a new distance, from a point where backgrounds and positions can be seen in lights of revealing wavelengths. If Japan did not exist, Japan would have to be urgently invented.

Alan

13 April

Dear Alan:

I like the Maraini quote, also the “beyond belief, beyond satire, beyond invention” formulation. I remember reading Fukuyama’s discussion of radius of trust in Japan and the ie as the means of

expanding trust. It struck me at that time that he had found the “what” but we were still in the dark on the when, where, why, and how. Actually, as you have shown, it was one part of the what, but a key one. But it was also clear that the ie, and therefore Japan’s nature as a high-trust civil society was fundamentally homegrown and independently evolved. I filed this thought away for future reference but had not had much of a chance to improve upon it. The retained-tribal-attributes aspect brings a new frame of reference to the issue.

Perhaps we should just say that Japan is still a tribal society at heart, but one that has miraculously evolved to be highly functional in the modern era.

Regards,

Jim

13 April

Dear Jim,

Thanks very much. Yes, quite a few people (including to a certain extent Ruth Benedict) have got the what - but not the other ‘w’s’, which is what my book tries to achieve. Japan is indeed beyond invention - and sometimes I wonder whether, like Alice, I just dreamed it...

The idea that the country is still a tribal society (as in Sahlins ‘Tribesmen’ - a brilliant book) is, I am afraid a bull’s eye. But since I want you to go on shooting, I hope you will allow me to change the rules and demand several bull’s eyes before I give in...

With best wishes,
Alan

13 April

Dear Alan:

Well, the ideal of Zen archery, as we all know, is to hit, by proper mental preparation, the bull’s-eye the first time you shoot. Perhaps being a student of Sahlins was particularly good preparation, and one that, we can safely say, most of your readers will not have. Most people will have a very hard time seeing a society that has mastered modern technology and that has adapted modern institutions such as parliaments to their use as being tribal in any real way. But, in essence, it is. If I were being really picky, I would say “a modern society that has evolved from the tribal state along an independent path that retains core features of tribal societies nowhere else retained.” But that would be overly pedantic.

Never fear, however. I suspect I will get a huge amount from the rest of the chapters, and am still eager to see them. We can set up a few more targets, so that I can have the fun of shooting

at them.

Best regards,

Jim

14 April

Dear Jim,

Actually, while you hit the bull's eye with the tribal formulation (I had to spend quite a time thinking about this when writing the book since various readers made the point you did - that no-one would believe it, and also 'tribal' might be taken badly by Japanese, so I have used various synonyms), there is still one master arrow needed. It is the largest and most shocking fact about Japan which ultimately half describes, half explains, all the rest - including the tribalism. So I think we can leave the target where it is with the very centre to puncture...

Best wishes,

Alan

14 April

Dear Alan,

My guess at this point is that the final secret has to do with the Japanese mind and personality; their own exceptional road to selfhood and individuation. Clearly they have evolved on from the classic tribal mentality, they are not the clan-members of China, nor are they identical to the Western individual. Neither Western minds, nor Chinese ones, could make Japan's system work. So, what are they?

As for the internal similarities and differences of the English-speaking cultures, creating an accurate model of this world that possesses genuine predictive power is probably the core of what I am trying to accomplish. One can attack this problem usefully from many different directions. But the comparative method, both internally and externally, is the key tool. Confining oneself to examining pairs (US-Britain, US-Canada) is probably more misleading than enlightening. Every time one thinks one has isolated a meaningful difference, one can find an example in a third nation that ruins the generalization.

I think we will have some interesting discussions on this point.

Regards to all,

Jim

14 April

Dear Friends,

“Why do our two main examples of successful roads to the Exit—

England and Japan—both have the very visible and ancient retained archaicism of a monarchy, when everyone else was willing to abandon it.” (M.Lotus)

As I read what Alan wrote, he is saying, and I would agree, that Japan could not have gotten through the Exit by itself. However, it did get to a point from where it was easy to go through the Exit once the path had been pioneered—more easily than a number of European nations, I would say.

I have been fooling around for a while, particularly since I read *Savage Wars*, with some kind of formulation to describe what pre-opening Japan had done. They went as far as any other Smithian-optimal society in terms of specialization of labor, etc. in a pre-industrial setting. Then they went further, just by sheer squeezing of the human element—working harder, training people more intensely, getting by with less. Should we call this super-Smithian optimality? It must be some kind of record of what can be done without industrialization.

Yours, Jim

POWER

15 April

Dear All,

I shall send the next chapter on 'Power' in a week or 10 days, depending on Slovenia...

But here are some of the questions behind the chapter to give you hints of the next journey.

Is Japan centralized/absolutist, or the opposite?

Is Japan an imperial nation (or the opposite)

How old is bushido?

Was Japan a feudal society?

Is Japan a democracy?

Is Japan a bureaucratic or non-bureaucratic state?

Is Japan a literate or an oral civilization?

Is Japan peaceful or violent?

Is Japan an imperial aggressor or an inward-looking peaceful civilization?

Is Japan ruled by law, or lawless?

Is Japan crime filled or without crime?

Of course, it all depends on when etc. But these are the sort of themes...

Best wishes, Alan

15 April

Dear Alan,

Ah, sensei is teaching by making a joke!

You can make a very sound, well-supported argument for either side of every one of these questions. Given that we are dealing with Japan, I suspect the answer is probably “neither, or both, depending on how you define things.” Or rather, that these are surface appearances that can change lightning-quick depending on circumstances, while the underlying Japanese reality is unchanged.

So, my answer amounts to absolutely nothing useful. But hold on, I’m not done yet.

I will respond to all of these in time. But I’m thinking, in the hundred years from, say, 1860 to 1960, Japan went from the Tenno-shogun system it had maintained for several preceding centuries, to a Westernized monarchy (Meiji restoration/revolution), to a sort-of constitutional

monarchical democracy (the “Taisho democracy” period), autocratic military rule under the Emperor cult, and then to a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. Underneath all this, did the realities of power change very much? Certainly the army and navy lost their power after 1945, the zaibatsu became keiretsu, Parliament gained more power (but was it a real Parliament?).

It is all a collection of ie, tied together by sentiment and the ritual role of the Tenno. No real central direction; direction arises emergently from the collective acts of the ie. Japan has found an impossible-to-describe “wisdom of crowds” institution, as hard to understand as our parliament/jury/common-law/militia/stock-exchange system was to Louis XIV.

Yours, Jim

16 April

Dear Jim,

Thanks. Yes, it is a sort of joke and your answer, both/and, neither/nor is obviously right. But it took me 15 years to find this out, and you have grasped it much quicker.

And your account of the apparently rapid changes but the deeper continuity is excellent. Soon the pupil will exceed the master and I can retire to a high forest and drink green tea in the sunlight...

Best wishes, Alan

P.S. Nice point about the ‘unprincipled’ system which so puzzled the French...

16 April

Dear Alan:

The key to understanding these points is to become unmoored from the mental cables that bind one to the Western categories, and the ones that work for Asian mainland cultures as well. Once you become adrift, as it were, it is possible to observe what is actually going on, and the plentiful clues and hints found in Benedict, Wolfereen, Popham, the last chapter (especially) of *Savage Wars*, and finally your new chapters become visible landmarks that allow one to start steering for shore.

I was about to write, in a previous email, that the problem with the “tribal” label for Japan was that the general readership tends to think of “tribal” as implying loincloths and grass huts, rather than focusing on the key aspects of social organization and mental orientation. Then I thought of sumo wrestlers and cha-no-yu huts, and thought, well, even those are still there, vestigially, if

you know where to look for them.

Best regards,

Jim

16 April

Dear Jim,

As for tribal - yes, it is the associations which actually, as you say, are quite appropriate. But the word has too many overtones.

As for jettisoning the whole post-Enlightenment framework. It is easy enough for us anthropologists, but it took me a long time to let go...

Here are a couple of paragraphs from the concluding chapter - out of the mirror - which starts off a reflection on this.

It is not easy to see the world inside the Japanese mirror. Even when we do glimpse it, what we see is difficult to interpret. After fifteen years of visits, conversations and thinking, the Japanese do not seem to me to be just trivially different from the West and other civilisations, but different at such a deep level that the very tools of understanding we normally use prove inadequate. The Japanese do not fit within our set of distinctions.

This has been recognised by some of those who have tried to understand Japan. One of these is John Clammer, who believes that 'Japanese society does indeed challenge in major ways many of the perspectives of Western social theory' and that it has developed 'a unique form of modernity which challenges like no other the assumption and pretensions of the West and the social theory, one of its intellectual glories, that it has developed to explain itself and the world of which it is a part.' How, then, can we understand Japan?

Thanks for all your stimulating thoughts and be in touch soon...

Alan

25 April

Dear All,

I think a couple of weeks have elapsed since I last sent you a chapter of 'Japan Through The Looking Glass'. Here is my attempted answer to those questions I sent you about power in Japan.

It was a particularly difficult chapter to write since nothing (as usual, but more so) fits.

I had many discussions with political scientists (Maruyama's 'son' - ie. heir, and his heir in turn) and with my friends, one of whom is an expert in politics and international relations who writes quite a bit about this in the Japanese press. He finally approved of what I have written here, which is not dissimilar to van Wolferen in its essence, the curious presence of a Nation without a State (usually the other way round in my experience).

Hope you find it helps towards the mystery...

No need to react to it in any way.

With best wishes,

Alan

25 April

Dear Alan,

I have given Chapter 5 a quick read, and found it enjoyable. I think it is a very good one-chapter discussion of the problem of the Nation without State that a reader with no background in Japan can find accessible. Perhaps the even more remarkable aspect is that Japan seems to be a bureaucracy without a state, which perhaps has been a source of some of its problems.

Some random observations:

I wonder if the failure of Confucianism to transplant itself into Japan is the analogue of the failure of Roman law to establish itself in England?

The role of the faction leader in Japanese politics is reminiscent of the "big man" in Melanesian culture. Of course, it's also reminiscent of the ward boss in American big-city politics -- that world being almost as amorphous a political system as Japan's in some ways.

In fact, the description of the post-war single-party democracy of Japan is reminiscent of the "Era of Good Feelings" in American politics in the early nineteenth century, after the collapse of the Federalists and before the rise of the Whigs—one very amorphous party within which personality-led factions struggled and alternated.

There are enormous differences, of course, but those modern societies not descended from the classical continental Old Order throne-altar-sword regimes all seem to have found ways of dealing with power in a decentralized and diffuse manner. Japan's is just particularly eccentric, particularly obscure, and particularly exceptional.

Regards,

Jim

27 April

Dear Alan:

I believe that the analytical framework your work is developing will be a powerful tool for understanding, and that the three-branched model of the modern world (Old Order trunk in the middle, Japanese branch on the right, splitting off **below** the point where the Old Order really developed, English-speaking branch on the left, splitting off somewhat higher, but still low) should become a basic assumption.

Yours, Jim

29 April

Dear Jim and all,

Thanks again for all your helpful comments - much appreciated, even if my reply is desultory. Jim's comment on the need for a new analytical framework, and the image of the branching is, as usual, wonderful. Thank you. And many of the other comments equally good. I shall add them to the file.

Incidentally, I have bought and read Peter Popham's 'The City at the End of the Road'. I enjoyed it very much and he touches from time to time on the edges of the mystery - the ghostly effects which I observed in the first chapter of the book. But he does not know much about Japan's long-term history or deeper anthropological structure so it does not do more than touch one or two bits of the elephant (as in the blind philosophers). But thanks for recommending.

With best wishes,

Alan

29 April

Alan:

Yes, Popham is consistent with, but does not change your analysis. What I mainly enjoyed was

its portrayal of Japanese urban practices as different from anybody else's approach to running a megalopolis, yet working well in their own fashion. Also, it shows the diffuse nature of power in Japan, again applied to the sphere of urbanism. It would be interesting to see somebody write about the same material having had absorbed your analysis.

Jim

30 April

Dear Alan,

I have not read Maraini—I will have to put it on my list, especially if I will be going back to Japan. It would be interesting to re-read Popham once I have finished your new book, and see what I can glean from it with a more sophisticated understanding. I assume you have read Seidenstecker's *Low City, High City*. Like Popham, no big theoretical insights, but it's interesting again to see how the Japanese went about putting a big city together with pre-industrial technologies and made it work surprisingly well. I was struck by the description of the "firemen", whose job was to rapidly dismantle houses in the path of fires and secure the valuables therein. Organized as competing private companies, no less.

Yours, Jim

IDEAS

5 May

Dear friends,

I shall be sending the next chapter, on 'Ideas' in a few days. In the meantime, a few questions to see if you (and particularly Jim) can fire any arrows into the bulls-eye before all is revealed... This chapter takes one fairly close to the centre...

The chapter tries to explain how the thought patterns and language etc. of the Japanese allows them to live in a world which is simultaneously modern and non-modern, both surface and something other behind the surface. Among the areas examined...

Space - how is it organized?

Time - is it clock time or what kind of time?

Continuity and change in history - what is the deep structure?

Numbers and categories - how are they arranged?

Language - can the Japanese understand each other through language and what are its peculiarities?

Logic - how far does it conform to western logic or work by other principles?

Politeness and etiquette - why is it so pronounced?

Dirt, danger and boundaries - why the obsession with purity?

Polluted and dangerous sub-groups - Burakumin and Ainu... what are they?

Why the 'wrapping' culture? Are reality and invention opposed?

That sort of thing...

Best wishes, Alan

5 May

Dear Alan:

Fascinating stuff, and you are right—this gets to the heart of the riddle, doesn't it? And I'm on shakier ground than I was on the chapter on power, because much of what I do know about Japan comes from reading in areas that are basically political.

But when I say it's central, this is because if Japan truly is a unique branch sprouting out very low from the trunk, then the emergence of the civilized mentality from the primitive happened in a way different from that in any other culture, and that mentality truly is different. It may not even meet all the tests one might lay out in a definition of the civilized mentality—yet the Japanese ran one of the most sophisticated pre-industrial civilizations on the planet (maybe the most sophisticated) and today run a fully modern civilization, at least by any test of what tasks it can carry out. The uniqueness of the Japanese mentality must surely be one of the key points of your book.

Obviously being able to maintain the modern with the tribal (or "embedded") simultaneously is one of the requirements of this mentality. Exactly how this works in actuality is beyond me. Some of this gets back to the question of whether a Japanese person is an individual as we understand it—or whether they are "persona" in the original sense of the word—a mask worn by an actor, denoting a particular character he is playing at the moment. Let me go over the questions you presented and make some stabs and comments:

Space - how is it organized?

One of the interesting things I recall from Popham is that the Japanese think of streets as the space between the houses, rather than the houses as something depending from the streets. The house and its lot are the “hard spaces”, the streets are what is left over. This accounts for the irregularity of the street plan (except for Kyoto, which was copied from Xi’an) and the habit of numbering the houses in the order of construction, not the position on the street. This is a bit reminiscent of a tribal village, and Tokyo might be thought of as a collection of hundreds of thousands of villages

Time - is it clock time or what kind of time?

I know very little about the Japanese sense of time. They seemed punctual to me, maybe more so than Americans.

Continuity and change in history - what is the deep structure?

My sense is that Japan is more continuity than change, and that it has a strong, unique deep structure. But I’d have a hard time laying out a coherent supporting argument to that sense.

Numbers and categories - how are they arranged?

I know the Japanese have retained collective counting nouns, like our habit of counting “head of cattle”. I believe you have to use a counting noun to count anything: “Five stick of pencil”, “four sheet of blanket”, etc. I think this is a retained archaicism, and it may be significant to the general retention of archaicisms.

Language - can the Japanese understand each other through language and what are its peculiarities?

Japanese is fundamentally an easy language for English-speakers to learn at the basic levels—clear simple grammar, phonemically accessible to us, no tones, no cases— but then they have gone and made it fiendishly complicated to read or to speak with any level of competency. It is more than ambiguous, it seems to be structurally and conceptually ambiguous, in a way that actually makes it difficult - even impossible - to express anything plainly or definitively. Like politeness, this may be part of a way to maintain social peace within and among ie.

Logic - how far does it conform to western logic or work by other principles?

I sense that it does not conform at all to western logic, and it is hard to describe what the principles might be. Seeking the *wa*, or way of harmony in any situation, rather than seeking the “right and wrong” may be one of the key organizing principles.

Politeness and etiquette - why is it so pronounced? The surface answer would again be to maintain social peace and harmony within and between ie. Buffering all interactions with a thick layer of politeness is one way to insure that nobody is insulted unintentionally, and obligations are not left unmet.

Dirt, danger and boundaries - why the obsession with purity? Magical thinking enters the picture here, as “impure” is at heart a magical concept. But it’s also true that the Japanese seem to draw a sharp line between home and not-home; cleanliness and purity are for home, outside can be impure and dirty. To some extent their behavior in China and WWII stemmed from the fact that outside Japan, they were outside “home” and it was OK to leave a mess. Is this a retained tribal characteristic?

Polluted and dangerous sub-groups - Burakumin and Ainu... what are they?

Are these people who reside in Japan but belong to no ie? One an internally generated (and socially necessary) minority, the other the aboriginals, who the Japanese must have found hard to understand. Outside of the definition of purity. I have further thoughts on the Ainu, who I find fascinating, which I will save for a longer email.

Why the 'wrapping' culture?

Something to do with purity and insulation from either mana or pollution is my guess. Also wrapping a gift allows one to not open it in front of the giver, which could be socially awkward for both.

Are reality and invention opposed?

Hmmm—well, the embedded part makes it difficult for the answer to be clearly yes.

Those are my wild shots for tonight.

Re: China, I am suspicious of any argument for a successful transition based on inevitability of straight-line projections. This is reinforced by my experiences in Brazil and Argentina back in the time when those who believed in the automatic path to development were sure that those countries were bound inexorably for takeoff. As I said in my introductory email, it is hard to convey the excitement and optimism that we felt in Buenos Aires or Rio in the mid-90s, when we should have been more critical.

I am also suspicious of any argument for a failed transition based on inevitability of straight-line projections. I am trying to keep a genuinely open mind on the matter.

Regards to all,

Jim

6 May

Dear Jim,

As always, a really lovely and perceptive reply. You will see my answers in a few days, but I thought I would try to grade your answers in a pedantic and abrupt way in terms of the bull's eye: black, for not reaching target; white for roughly right, blue for very close, red for bull's eye. What is marvellous is that you have largely intuited so rightly - 'guessing before demonstrating' - and hopefully my chapter will give you the demonstration.

General intro on importance - blue. Yes, this is indeed a key to the early branching.

Space - blue - there is indeed tribalism and it is the gaps that are important.

Time - black

Continuity - blue

Numbers and categories - white/blue - a start

Language - blue

Logic – white
Politeness - white/blue
Dirt - blue, some good hints
Sub-groups; awaiting thoughts on Ainu
Wrapping Culture: - blue, esp. last point
Reality/invention - white

So, very good indeed. Nothing wrong, and many good guesses...

Yes, any prediction of either success or failure for China are premature. If it is the case that, as the Chinese politician answered when asked whether the French Revolution had been a success, 'It is too early to tell', so it is a bit early to know....

Very best wishes to all, and hope this staccato answer is o.k. I don't want to give away the plot yet...

Alan

6 May

Dear Alan:

There is a remarkable correlation between the closeness of the answer and my possession of any shred of knowledge on the topic! Time in the Japanese mind, for instance, is obviously important but it is something that I truly can't dredge up the first fact about either from reading or my brief experience. And that shows why brief experience can be useful but is no substitute for extended presence in the target culture. It's a good thing you are sending the chapter so I will end up knowing something about it.

As for numbers, it's a good thing I had read Menninger's book on number words way back when - I had found it fascinating, and in fact the Japanese retention of collective counting nouns was one of these little clues I had gathered over the years that the Japanese were truly different.

As always, a fun session. I look forward to the chapter.

Regards,

Jim

9 May

Dear All,

It is two weeks since I sent the last, so here is the next chapter - my attempt to begin to get inside the mental world of the Japanese.

As you will see, Jim guessed quite a lot, but here is further evidence.

Hope you find it fun, as I did when writing it.

With best wishes,

Alan

10 May

Alan:

This is indeed one of the key chapters. And you make a convincing case that the dual nature of Japanese culture is the fundamental key for understanding virtually every aspect of Japanese society. Had this been a key examination for which I had not done enough of the assigned reading, (an academic sin of which I had from time to time been guilty) I would have just taken a chance and extrapolated answers based on that assumption (e.g., on the time question) and I would have been essentially correct. I believe this is going to be a very important book for helping people understand Japan. At a minimum, nobody who reads it will be able to think of it as just a generically East Asian Confucian culture any more. Your presentation of the idea of the survival and transformation of the ancient Siberian shamanistic culture into modern times—Japan's unique path -- is a marvellous, and to me fascinating perspective. At the maximum, it would be wonderful if people will start to get a feel for the three-branched model.

Some observations and points:

I particularly liked the comparison between the Japanese style of thinking and reasoning, and Common Law. where you say "The Japanese behave in a manner not dissimilar to the codes enshrined in the English Common Law, that is to say they do not try to set out rules and laws of a detailed, universal kind, which they feel would be bound to become rigid and unworkable as contexts change."

This also reminded me of the discussion in NAM Rodger's *Command of the Ocean* about the differences between English and French ship design in the late 18th century. The French used emerging hydrodynamic theory as the basis for design, the first people in the world to do so. The English used rules of thumb derived from their long experience. Unfortunately for the French, their models, although based on correct theory, were very incomplete, not accounting for various forces not yet understood. So of course the English designs worked far better than the French. The burdens of being Cartesian!

The discussion of language was also very good. To me the classic understatement was the Showa Emperor's surrender message in 1945, where he said "the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage". (Actually, I just looked up the exact text, and it's interesting to re-read it in light of what I've read of the book.

Many of the themes you discuss are exhibited there.

<http://www.kyokipress.com/wings/surrender.html>

It's particularly useful to remember that language is more than merely a means of communicating information, but a means of interaction between people, in which the semantic content of the speech may be less important than the way in which things are said, or not said. Japanese seems to be a particular outlier in terms of the ratio of non-semantic to semantic communication.

In the discussion of the relationship of Japan to democracy, modernism, and postmodernism, it confirms some things I have been musing about for some time. It has seemed to me that Japan was particularly untroubled by the rise of postmodernism, because to them it was just another *gaijin* development, whose affect was easily enough mastered. To many westerners this phase was either troubling or liberating, I suspect to Japanese, it was neither. And Japan's adaptation of democracy was not a deep conversion to democratic values, but neither was it insincere—it was as you say an understanding that now it is time to do democracy and they proceeded to construct a Japanese-style democracy, or perhaps, better said, a democratic-style Japan.

One could say that these are all just masks that Japanese put on for various purposes, but that implies that there is a real face beneath the mask and that the mask is in some way false. Perhaps better to say that these are various costumes they choose to wear for various purposes, and after all one is always choosing one costume or another.

Incidentally, I was searching on the topic of Ainu DNA evidence, and I see that there is a lot of recent DNA evidence to the effect that the Jomon people seem to have been the ancestors of the Ainu, while the current Japanese seem to have been primarily descended from the Yayoi, who immigrated from Korea relatively recently. Do you discuss this at any point?

Regards,

Jim

11 May

Dear Jim,

Thanks once again for a very prompt and extremely supportive and perceptive email. Your messages always give me the impression that you have really understood what I am trying to do and, as you know, for a writer, that is enormously comforting.

Yes, if it can be shown that the three branched model exists it opens up enormous possibilities as we can see that the present outcomes are not necessary and final - history has not ended. And one has discovered a whole new type of civilization - that exists and works but was not known of before.

The next chapter will give you the final explanation and although you have seen the Siberian shamanistic path and its importance there is one final thing you need to realize and have not guessed to do with how/why Japan stuck to its deep note. There are still two weeks before I reveal all!

Yes, the messy English way has much to commend it. Tocqueville says as much and I observe it everyday in the creativity and subtlety of Cambridge. Too much Descartes is as bad as too little...

I must look up the Emperor's speech. Your comments on that and the ratio of semantic to non-semantic are perfect.

And all your comments on postmodernism and democracy likewise. They were intrigued by pm, but did not need it. And they put on the clothes of the west and really like them - but they are just clothes. A lot of this will come up in the final chapter where I knit everything together.

I didn't know that about the Ainu. I shall ask my friends. The whole thing is so politically fraught that Museums are constantly changing their displays. But if Japan was originally Caucasian (as Ainu are), I wonder how that happened...

Anyway, thanks again. Your arrows are now circling the red...

Best wishes,
Alan

11 May

Dear Alan:

You are welcome, and in turn it is comforting for me to know that I do seem to be reading your work correctly. Ever since I first read *Origins*, and with every subsequent book, I have had the feeling that it opened the way to an enlarged and more useful perspective. I often wondered "why aren't more people picking up on this framework?" Reading some of the reviews and comments found in Web search, I often have the sense that the reviewers either fail to get your point entirely, or when they do understand it, only understand it in the most narrow possible manner. They don't seem to be able to use it as a point of departure. This must be continually frustrating to you. But I suspect it is a by-product of the narrowing of focus in academia.

And the more I think about the three-branched model, the more I realize that the Japanese case is not just a curiosity or a sideshow, it (once one grants that it is a genuinely unique path to civilization) disproves a wide range of assumptions about society and progress. And it lifts the study of English exceptionalism vis-à-vis the Continent out of an ultimately misleading binary model into a much more fruitful multi-path (but not infinite or random path) model. We are at the very start of exploration of the implications of this model.

As for the secrets of Japan, "there is one final thing you need to realize and have not guessed to do with how/why Japan stuck to its deep note" contains a hint, that the secret has to do with the way continuity has been preserved. I would guess that this is fundamentally tied in with the dualism and the ease of putting on (at the proper times) the "clothing" of various culture and influences. I may try a few more arrows between now and then.

Best regards,

Jim

12 May

Dear Alan,

Yes, if the Japanese language is a mystery to outsiders (and, apparently, to many Japanese), a document composed in court language is the classic mystery wrapped in an enigma. This speech had always stuck in my mind, particularly for the extreme understatement of the “not necessarily to Japan’s advantage” line. Re-reading it in the light of the chapters I have now read was very interesting, and makes me suspect that everything said in it was actually sincerely meant.

Another thing that I want to think about more carefully in light of the book and the three-branched model is Lewis’s work *The Power of Productivity*, which I think we have mentioned previously. This work, which contains a fairly sophisticated statistical analysis, suggests that the substantial difference in outcomes in productivity between developing-world nations colonized by Britain and Japan, and everybody else. (The work of LaPorta, et al., has similar conclusions about former British colonies). This, if supported by further research, requires explanation—why should British outcomes be so different from, particularly, Dutch or German ones, when the cultures of those three nations were so closely related? And why the Japanese effect? It supports the idea that both Britain and Japan were different in some way from all the rest—which gets us back to the three-branch model. I have no answers yet, but my hunch is that it has something to do with diffuse power systems.

12 May

Dear Jim,

Many thanks. Yes, that is the difficulty. All this stuff was ‘sincerely’ meant - which makes it all the scarier in some ways.

I shall think about the success bit. It must be related to the bundle of features which they share, much stemming from relatively un-beaurocratic feudalism and an oral and messy system of law, combined with trust and trusts...

With best wishes, Alan

12 May

Dear Alan,

It is very hard for outsiders from centralized bureaucratic systems to understand what is going on inside diffuse systems. Genuinely good and genuinely malign actors and motivations can coexist and both influence actions in ways that are hard for even insiders to understand.

I think you are exactly on target about the influence of diffuse systems—I suspect they break up the Old Order systems of the colonized countries in such a way as to disrupt the historical traps from which they suffer, permitting them to then construct their path to the Exit.

Yours, Jim

12 May

Dear Alan,

Both the drift into war, and the difficulties of effecting the actual surrender demonstrate the problems of making state decisions in a diffuse system. Ironically, the “Emperor religion” may have actually made the surrender decision easier, or even possible at all—the traditional Tenno in most periods of Japanese history wouldn’t have had enough actual authority to impose a surrender. Studies of the actual surrender process, such as Thomas Allen’s and Norman Polmar’s essay “The Voice of the Crane” demonstrate that even after the atomic bombings, it was a near, close-run thing, and that the anti-surrender plotters had had a good chance of success.

Of course the Allies could have had a negotiated peace any time after 1944, or even 1943, but the various Allied summits (Cairo, Teheran, etc.) had frozen them into positions—reversion of Taiwan to China, of Sakhalin to the USSR, independence of Korea—that the Japanese just wouldn’t have accepted.

Yours, Jim

12 May

Dear Alan,

Two comments: I get the impression that Japan in the militarist period was not really comparable to the totalitarian societies of Europe or Russia, but rather Japan putting on the militarist clothes -- i.e., decision-making wasn’t too much different to before, except that elections and the parliament didn’t have much of a role. Japan already has such effective mechanisms for social conformity and mobilization of effort that totalitarian methods weren’t really needed.

Regarding a negotiated peace, the western allies were quite concerned -- rightfully so, as it turned out—about Stalin cutting a separate peace deal with the Nazis. But after the fall of Germany, there was a space in which one or all of the Allies could have negotiated such a deal.

But there was a huge gap between what the allies might have been willing to offer and what the Japanese might have been willing to accept without at least a trial of forces in an invasion of Japan. Certainly the Japanese would have expected to retain their core empire (Korea, Taiwan, Sakhalin) and probably Manchuria as well. They would have wanted to keep the positions in northern China proper that they had held for decades. It's just hard to see such a deal.

A random inquiry—is (are) there a good source(s) in English on the Japanese colonial experience in the core empire? At least, on a country-by-country basis. Assessing the Lewis thesis, I think, requires a better understanding of exactly what happened in Korea and Taiwan in those years.

Yours, Jim

13 May

Dear Alan,

On the Japanese surrender question and the Pacific War in general, I must admit I have personal motivations to be interested in it. My father was a signalman in the Fourth Marine Division during the war; he worked with the now-famous Navajo Talkers. He was in four island invasions, Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. He had enlisted as a private in October 1941, seeing the war coming, and ended the war as a lieutenant, promoted, as he used to say “by attrition”. He was wounded on Iwo Jima but recovered in time to take part in the Okinawa invasion. In August 1945 he was being briefed on Operation Olympic, the invasion of Kyushu scheduled for the coming autumn, and as he related it, few of the Marines scheduled for the initial landings expected to survive. So, my existence probably is a result of the prompt conclusion of the war. (On the British side, by the way, my wife's paternal uncle fought and died in Burma, and is buried at Imphal. So I am conscious of the British side of the Pacific war.)

I had started reading on the war from an early age, so I have a fairly wide exposure to the issues there. In fact the first book I ever read that gave me some exposure to the Japanese point of view was a memoir published in English as “Japanese Destroyer Captain” by Tameichi Hara.

I was twelve; I expected it to be pretty much a combat memoir but was actually an autobiography. I found the description of his life at the Japanese naval academy, and his experiences during the rise of the militarist period in the 1920s and 1930s fascinating and very perspective-widening. So I have always been interested in these topics.

I should add, by the way, that my father never expressed any hatred toward the Japanese, and was happy to see our reconciliation with that country in the 1950s. “Better friends than enemies” was his attitude. He also observed that the stereotype of the Japanese unwillingness to surrender was overstated; the nature of island siege warfare, and the language barrier, made it difficult to surrender. He said that, given a chance away from the heat of battle, individual Japanese—probably stragglers—would come in to surrender. I think the “individual” part is the key, I suspect that most Japanese would never want to admit to another one that they were

considering surrender.

Regards,

Jim

21 May

Dear Friends and readers of Japan...

My publishers sent the book to several scholars for their comments - which they may use in the publicity. One was to Prof. Andrew Barshay, who was head of the East Asia Institute at Berkeley when I gave the Maruyama lectures. Here is his short comment...

“Thinking beyond the ‘nets of understanding’ that have not helped us to capture Japan, Alan Macfarlane layers many years of careful contemporary observation, dialogues with important Japanese thinkers, an impressive breadth of reading in scholarship on Japan to reach with informed imagination for the gestalt that is Japan. Here is a real-live ‘looking glass world,’ an extraordinary civilization built on contingency and ‘relationality’ in which our conventional-yet essential-distinctions between mind and body, individual and society, artificial and natural, human and divine do not hold. Deeply attracted and yet troubled by Japan, Macfarlane turns his anthropologist’s perplexity into an exercise of ‘thinking with’ Japan about basic issues of how modern civilizations form and cohere. The result is a disarming, engaging, and provocative book.”

No need to reply to this, but I thought you would be pleased... He knows a lot about Japan...

With best wishes, Alan

21 May

Dear Alan:

Excellent! It’s always great to have a confirmation like this.

“Macfarlane turns his anthropologist’s perplexity into an exercise of ‘thinking with’ Japan about basic issues of how modern civilizations form and cohere” Yes, that’s the real, underlying significance of the work—I’m glad other people are seeing this.

Regards,

Jim

BELIEFS

23 May

Dear friends on the adventure,

Here is the final set of clues and answers....

Unless Jim had come across the most distinguished successor to Max Weber, Karl Jaspers, he would probably not have been able to see the way in which Japan branched off so early - or rather, the other civilizations of Eurasia branched off (through an axial revolution), and Japan continued as it was....

I hope you enjoy it.

Best wishes, Alan

23 May

Dear Alan,

The idea that Japan branched off very early implies that it might have remained apart from the Axial transition (a concept that I was familiar with from writers derivative of Jasper, although I had never read his original work); the key here is that although Japan adopted forms of Buddhism and absorbed substantial Confucian influences, it somehow managed to filter out the essence of the Axial transition. I probably overestimated the degree to which classical Buddhist theology or philosophy had managed to establish itself in Japan - - this is possibly because I know more about Japanese and particularly Zen Buddhism than I do about the mainland varieties.

I do know that at least some Japanese take the idea of reincarnation seriously, but since the ones from whom I got this impression were serious Buddhists (one is a former Zen priest) perhaps this is a minority sample. Even this reincarnation belief is a mild form; one is reborn neither higher nor lower in the world based on one's previous behavior, but merely more or less advanced toward enlightenment. This would fit in well with your general thesis—reincarnation in this understanding ceases to be an explanation for the good or evil that happens in worldly life.

Zen, in particular, fits well with this picture. The key doctrine is that embodied in the saying “before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”—i.e., stay in the world and carry on, but with a changed attitude. Monastic life is for a limited period of time, usually. And it's all about practice, not theology.

The question is, could the Exit have been attained without the Axial change? I suspect not. But everywhere except Japan, the Axial civilizational traditions made it harder, not easier, to achieve the Exit solutions that exceptional England originated. I suppose this is the Japanese paradox—by having avoided the Axial revolutions, it made it easier to participate in the Exit—but in its own peculiarly Japanese fashion.

Fascinating. I'll have more comments over time.

Jim

24 May

Dear Alan,

England, and western Europe, is an interesting, complex case in regard to the Axial transition and the Exit. I am on the side of the early difference, even beyond the retention of the Old European order and medieval constitutionalism—and this is on the basis of a sensing of patterns, rather than conclusive evidence. I have been fascinated by Campbell's *Anglo-Saxon State*, because we definitely see premonitions of the patterns described in *Origins* and *Marriage and Love* in pre-Conquest times. Campbell's discussion of the large amounts of silver coinage in

Anglo-Saxon sites, arguing for a more cash-oriented system in England, relative to the Continent is a case in point.

Now let me get even more speculative. 4th c. Christian Roman Europe had very definitely had the full impact of the Axial transition. However, the Germanic (and other) peoples moving in from beyond the limes had either a very incomplete exposure (during their time as immigrants and legionaries) or none at all, in the case of the trailing mass of later incomers. So many parts of the (former) Empire went backwards in regard to Axial transition in this period. I think of the early Christian Anglo-Saxon poetry presenting Jesus with the rhetorical accoutrements of the Anglo-Saxon warrior-hero; Jesus in the mould of Beowulf, which surely would have seemed strange to a late Romano-Briton. England's particular character, it seems to me, was really forged in the centuries between the Anglo-Saxon arrival and their full Christianization and re-incorporation into the then-extant European system, with a functioning Church in regular contact with Rome and under Papal discipline. The mix of influences into this character included the basic Germanic culture we know from Tacitus (and possibly an even more individualistic Scandinavian influence); some level of Celtic and pre-Celtic culture absorbed from the locals; the peculiarities of Celtic monastic Christianity as it was re-introduced via Iona, etc.; and the gradual re-introduction of mainstream Latin Christianity up to the Synod of Whitby. So the question is, in those centuries when Anglo-Saxon culture was mostly pre-Axial, did a non-Axial civilization form, and was it merely wiped clean, with a standard Latin-Christian civilizational form re-imposed upon it, or did it transmute into something that looks to us in retrospect like a normal European civilization, but was already substantially different?

All the evidence that was preserved was preserved (and selected) by people who very much wanted the answer to be "No, we are entirely orthodox, thank you." So we can't entirely trust it. Pre-Conquest England was never part of the Carolingian empire. And its Church was given a lot of leeway by the Papacy since they were doing the good work of bringing the very un-orthodox Celtic churches into line.

So, I think one can make an argument that England was already, from a very early age, a distinct civilization that for political reasons chose to seem more like its continental neighbors than it actually was.

Of course, at some point, it unquestionably went through an Axial transition. I'm not trying to argue that England, like Japan, was a non-Axial survival, or that it was an embedded survival. But I think it did have certain retained tribal characteristics that fused with the classical Old Order civilization in a unique fashion. So although neither as ancient a split-off, nor as thoroughly idiosyncratic as Japan in its retention of ancient characteristics, it was still a combination of retained and acquired characteristics—and perhaps both sides were essential to making the Exit.

Thanks for your indulgence,

Jim

26 May

Dear Alan,

You were a student of Campbell's—ah, so desu! [I wrote to say that as an undergraduate at Worcester College, Oxford, 1960-3, I had been taught by James Campbell.]

That fits. As soon as I had read Campbell's *Anglo-Saxon State* I felt it fit right in to the pattern. It would be very interesting if Professor Campbell were to join our discussions occasionally.

For me, your book is about Japan of course, but more than that, it is about the three-branched model and the evolving answer to the riddle of the world. Without Japan we would have been stuck forever in a likely set of wrong assumptions. But, as utterly fascinating as the place is, the quest ultimately leads us right back home.

Regards to all,

Jim

OUT OF THE MIRROR

2 June

Dear Jim,

Our journey through the looking glass is almost over, and I have greatly enjoyed and been stimulated by all your comments.

In about 4 days I will send the last chapter - 'Out of the Mirror' - where I come back and see how all this has changed my world.

Here are a few of the questions I address -

Are the Japanese upside down - or are we?

Why have outsiders (anthropologists, historians, sociologists etc) found it so difficult to see behind the mirror?

Why do modern Japanese find it so difficult to understand what life in the mirror is like?
Is Japan tribal? And if so, what does that mean?
Why is western social theory such an impediment to understanding Japan?
Is Japan a third form of civilization?
Is Japan a Utopia?
What implications does Japan have for other non-western civilizations, esp. China and India?
What are the dangers in this view of Japanese peculiarity?
What are the costs of all this peculiarity for the Japanese?
How can we leave the enchanted island?

As you see - an attempt to go back to the beginning of the book, the entry to the mirror, and come back into our world...

Have a good week-end. It is brilliantly beautiful here with roses all out and the poor students about to do their exams...

Best wishes, Alan

2 June

Dear Alan:

OK, here are a few Zen arrows, fired off as is proper with little deep analysis but with gut hunch. I await your scoring.

Best regards,

Jim

I changed the order in which I attacked the questions—some seemed to require that I answer other questions first.

Are the Japanese upside down - or are we?

Is Japan a third form of civilization?

Why is western social theory such an impediment to understanding Japan?

The third question is to me the most interesting one. I would first of all qualify it by stating it as “why has western social theory to date been such an impediment to understanding Japan?”

Certainly the path social theory has been on for the past century or more—in search of a universal explanatory algorithm that can generate a readily applicable model of social evolution—is in trouble if one accepts the three-branched model. But it was in trouble anyway.

Certainly the Hayekian concept of local knowledge provided a readily available explanation of why universal models tend to end up with more exceptions than examples. Even the milder deviations of the English-speaking world have sent the Marxists and their ilk on a century-long search for sufficient cycles and epicycles to explain English exceptionalism. But the three-branched model (which upon further research may turn out to have more branches—no problem) is merely the intelligent reworking of western social theory. If one accepts that the model will not provide iron laws of history, or permit precise predictions, one ends up with a theory that can yet provide much illumination, and in fact goes from being an impediment to understanding Japan to an asset. Social theory can still be a tool for understanding, because even if social phenomena are not precisely determined by predictable factors, they are still not random, nor are the possible outcomes infinite, contra the postmodernists.

Therefore, the other two questions fall into place quite readily:

Japan is definitely a third civilization and in fact is more distinctly different than the English-speaking from the Continentals.

And, neither the Japanese nor we are upside down—we are two particular ways of doing civilization. We may claim pride of place in having originated the Exit, but the Japanese made an Exit work for themselves, which is more than many human societies have managed.

Still the Japanese are so exceptional, and their pattern seems to be so un-transplantable, that I would not object if somebody wanted to say it was they who are upside down. Quantity counts for something.

Why have outsiders (anthropologists, historians, sociologists etc) found it so difficult to see behind the mirror?

The mirror shows them what they want to see, and to a large extent what they expect to see. This is the hardest illusion to see through. It takes a very perceptive outside investigator to pay attention to the anomalies in the picture (which he will be very tempted to dismiss or rationalize) and in effect reject his own theoretical basis. This is even harder to do when dealing (as is often the case) with Japanese who ardently accept some western explanation and defend it to the outside visitor. How could (for example) a Marxist visitor, dealing mostly with Japanese Marxists, expect to break out of that mode?

Why do modern Japanese find it so difficult to understand what life in the mirror is like?

Because all the explanatory theories they are likely to encounter fall into two categories: western social theory applied to Japan, or some version of nihonjinron. Neither is helpful.

Is Japan tribal? And if so, what does that mean?

I prefer the formula “Japan is a social form evolved from tribalism, containing substantial elements of tribal approaches (e.g., an “embedded” layer of relations) not retained elsewhere, and which lacks a number of critical aspects (e.g., axiality) previously thought to be essential for civilized societies.” I would note that when the Japanese interacted with genuinely tribal

societies (e.g., in New Guinea 1941-45) they didn't seem to have any particular ability to understand them better.

Is Japan a Utopia?

My definition of Utopia is a set of social forms or institutions that make their adherents genuinely happier, as opposed to policies that alleviate particular forms of unhappiness or discomfort. The Japanese seem to have all the unhappiness and stresses that the rest of us do, although perhaps in different percentages for different forms of stress. This doesn't seem like Utopia to me.

What implications does Japan have for other non-western civilizations, esp. China and India?

I think the lesson of Japan for other non-western civilizations may be a disappointing one. For a century, Japan was seen by non-Europeans as an existence-proof that non-European civilizations could achieve modernity, success, and power in the world. This is true. However, they also believed that therefore they could transform their own societies to the same degree. Japan is so exceptional that the second assumption may be untrue. At a minimum, they cannot follow the same path that Japan did.

I am mindful of the data in Lewis's *Power of Productivity*. This suggests that no undeveloped country has made it to development unless it had been a British or Japanese colony for a substantial period of time. (China counts as a partial -- map the successful areas of China with the longer-term Japanese occupation and the British commercial enclaves in HK and Shanghai. Pretty good fit, I suspect.) I am still trying to figure this out. However it is a bright red warning light, in that it is precisely the two outlying branches of the tree that are flagged as having a very important effect. This is a clue that needs following up.

What are the dangers in this view of Japanese peculiarity?

Nihonjinron. Accepting Western social models has been a trap. Accepting Nihonjinron is also a trap. Nihonjinron is the most nearly right, but it is still wrong on critically important points. It's somewhat akin to all the false explanations of English (or American) exceptionalism over time—the racial, ethnic, religious, etc, -- it makes you worry about irrelevant or wrong-headed problems, and ignore real ones. If you can provide a valid explanation of Japanese exceptionalism that avoids the errors of nihonjinron, you could have a revolutionary impact on Japan's understanding of itself.

What are the costs of all this peculiarity for the Japanese?

I think the metaphor of the onion that sheds layer after layer—only to find at the end that it's all layers - does fit the riddle of the Japanese nature well. The price they pay is the “octopus pot” isolation problem; the difficulties dealing with foreign cultures; the difficulties finding the real nature of their own societies; and probably a longing for the elements they see of outside cultures—romantic love, the all-embracing obsession of the Axial religions, the idealism - - that

are literally alien emotions. No wonder many of them are obsessed with the epiphenomena of Axial societies, which they observe dimly through the mirror.

How can we leave the enchanted island?

Ah, once you sense the enchantment, you can never really leave. It becomes part of you for good.

Embrace the three-branched model. It will help orient you and position you, see the similarities we share with the Japanese (the powerful characteristics of insular peace and prosperity), and also the similarities the Japanese share with East Asians (those powerful characteristics of wet-rice agriculture) , and realize that neither set of similarities are entirely dispositive.

But value our own links with the enchanted land. They need us, too.

Yours, Jim

3 June

Dear Jim,

How to reply? Another stunning set of replies.

I am half inclined to take each of your guesses and put it beside what I have written and ask 'spot the difference'.

The difference is usually that you put what I am saying in a more elegant way and with a new twist which deepens it. But every one of your arrows went into the red this time - indeed, in some way which is difficult to express, but I suppose is Zenish, by the force of their movement they have redefined the target and made it more interesting.

But I think that you will be able to do this for yourself and in some ways if I break up the last chapter into bits, it will lose its force. So my reply will be the chapter itself. But your commentaries will be a wonderful addition to the rich corpus of earlier comments from all of you.

I loved many of your remarks, but perhaps the last about enchantment most at the present since I am sitting looking out at a most glorious garden, with my grandchildren hovering close by, and all this seems enchanted. And one day I want to write something further on enchantment...

But, to anticipate, my ending takes me to another famous leaving of an enchanted island - Prospero and the Tempest. And you are right, we should never leave. Mark, who is copied in on this, said some very nice things about the last chapter, saying it had some echoes of the end of an opera or symphony.

I won't go on, though I could spend pages on each of your thoughts. They were really insightful. Thank you,

Alan

3 June

Dear Alan:

High praise indeed from sensei, it will make me too swell-headed! However, this entire interchange has been enjoyable from beginning to end. I think I am probably going to be very atypical of your readers, in that I am reading this on two levels at once; one, a very interesting book on Japan—especially the question of the survival of Siberian shamanism in the hidden recesses of the Imperial Palace; the other, the truly exciting development of the three-branched model and its implications for the exit, modernity, and civilization. Here is the next big step along the path from *Origins* and *Marriage and Love*, through *Riddle* and *Making*, prefigured by the last chapter of *Savage Wars*. I hope that perhaps you will take some time in the making of the China book to address the question of China in the context as a major, and characteristic, part of the trunk of the tree. In other words, just as the Japan book is really about the three-branched model using Japan as a lens, the China book could be a companion in the same vein. Anyway, that is a thought.

I look forward to the actual chapter.

Best regards,

Jim

6 June

Dear Jim,

'Our revels now are ended...'

Here is the last chapter - you will see the overlap with your brilliant guesses.

I hope you enjoy it.

Best wishes, Alan

6 June

Dear Alan:

Well, I can see why you liked my last set of arrows. I would not call them guesses, exactly; they were merely extrapolations from the many departure points you had liberally provided in previous chapters.

I will be very interested in the reaction the published book will draw, both in the west and in Japan. You have convinced me of your theory. If it becomes widely accepted, the book will be a significant advance in the understanding of Japan. In particular it seems very consistent with what Wolferen has described, but helps explain the enigma he observed but could not unravel.

I have a number of points and questions that perhaps we can discuss as things go forward. A smaller one is that I think Taiwan in particular bears further investigation; it may be the exception within the exception. Although we agree that Japan's solution is unexportable in general, it's worth looking at Taiwan as the one place where they came closest to succeeding. I have recently finished Nicholas Ostler's *Empires of the Word*, and saw the interesting fact that Taiwan under Japanese rule had managed to impart Japanese-language literacy at some reasonable level to 40% of the population, far higher than anywhere else in their empire. (The figure for Korea was on the order of 15%)

The old pre-1945 educated class is an interesting group of people; I knew the daughter of a member of that class, and I was always fascinated by how Japanese she seemed, in her cooking, dress, hobbies, taste, etc. Even her name—although she wrote it Chinese fashion as Ching-mei, she pronounced in Japanese fashion as Kiyomi. She had been a Taiwanese nationalist and had been jailed under the KMT government (with the approval of the Beijing authorities) and had only been released because her fiancé was an American sailor who had managed to apply political pressure from the US, on the condition of her departure. In discussing Taiwanese affairs with her, the picture I got was that the core of the Taiwanese independence movement was in fact the old educated class under the Japanese, who retained many informal ties to Japan, while the opposition to independence was the refugee population who came over in 1949.

I suspect it was the fact that Taiwan through the preceding centuries had never been closely integrated with the mainland, and had been exposed to many other cultural influences (including Japan, via Okinawa), made it a rather inchoate hybrid culture much more open to the Japanese template than any other land the Japanese occupied, and for the Taiwanese it was not just a matter of imposition (as in Korea) but also of attraction. But I wonder exactly how close to Japaneseness they ever got. Much of the evidence has now been eradicated by the enthusiastic Sinicization campaign of the KMT, and if they ever came under PRC rule the process would only be accelerated. This should be investigated before the pre-1945 population has entirely died off. But neither the KMT nor the CCP would be in favor of this happening.

If it is an exception, it is the exception that proves the rule.

There seems to be no sign of it having happened anywhere else.

The other point, which I will try to go into in more detail, is to the extent that Japan “works”, in a self-sufficient sense, in the modern world. I have done some thinking on the question of whether Japan's particular characteristics (the powerlessness of the system that Wolferen notes and we have discussed) doesn't cause it to regularly drift into a dangerous deadlock that is only resolved by outside intervention and/or disaster—the Black Ships, the collapse of Taisho democracy and the drift to war, the Occupation, the 90s crash, and maybe something coming

onto the horizon now—North Korean nuclearization, perhaps. So perhaps Japan is stable, perhaps overly stable, but not meta-stable, and requires interaction with the outside world to break it out of its periodic deadlocks. It seems to have been America's fate to have provided that interaction, in good ways and less pleasant ways, over the past century and a half. It has made me wonder whether we are fated to be “the grain of sand that irritates Japan into producing its pearls.”

More on this point later.

Thanks again for sharing this adventure. I believe this book is a triumph.

Best regards,

Jim