

**GLOBALIZATION, 'FOLK MODELS'
OF THE WORLD ORDER AND
NATIONAL IDENTITY:
JAPANESE BUSINESS
EXPATRIATES
IN SINGAPORE**

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Introduction

In this paper I examine the meanings -- the terms, assumptions, and metaphors -- that guide the activity of Japanese business expatriates in Singapore. The premise guiding my analysis is that in order to understand the social and organizational activities of present day Japanese business people, there is a need to analyze how their actions are related to a variety of (economic, political, and, cultural) processes termed 'globalization'. Theoretically, my project answers recent scholarly calls for a recognition of the fact that in order to understand present-day social and cultural trends in the world there is a need to 'go international': there is a need to theorize and conceptualize changes in the way the 'world' is now perceived and acted upon by a variety of social groups (such as states, movements, organizations or ethnic collectivities) and individuals¹ (Robertson 1992; Appadurai 1990; Breckenridge and Appadurai 1989).

Given the continued expansion of various Japanese corporations into countries around the world in general, and into Asia in particular (Yoshikawa 1991), an overseas assignment is slowly becoming a prerequisite for advancement into senior managerial posts in many companies. Partly as a reaction to this situation, recent decades have

been marked by the publication of studies of families of executives who have returned to Japan (White 1988) and investigations of returnee schoolchildren (Goodman 1991; Kobayashi 1978). But while these studies further our understanding of the problems that people face upon coming back to Japan, as of yet, apart from journalistic observations and some limited scholarly work (Befu forthcoming; Inamura 1982; Hamada 1992) no extended study of Japanese expatriates in their host country has ever been published in English. My inquiry aims to fill in this lack, and this specific paper does so by focusing the manner by which business expatriates reason about, and make sense of, their stint overseas.

I address these issues through a focus on the models -- which I will interchangeably term 'folk' models or schemas (Ortner 1973; D'Andrade 1992: 29)² -- that members of the Japanese business community in Singapore have of "overseas service", "international enterprises", or "global competition". In other words, my aim is to uncover the images and interpretive schemes that lie at base of mundane or common sense international business knowledge. By such terms as "mundane" or "common sense" I do not mean that this knowledge is simplistic, nor do I imply that it is unimportant. Rather, these terms refer to the unquestioned knowledge that "everyone knows"; to what Clifford Geertz has termed the "of-courseness" of common sense understandings. Such cultural models constrain concepts of reality mainly through providing deep-rooted, implicit assumptions concerning such things as relations between individuals and organizations, in-groups and out-groups, nationalism and internationalism, and societies and the world as a whole.

There are three elementary, but not mutually exclusive, models of the world and of international business which lie at the base of the reasoning of the business people I have studied. Interestingly -- but not surprisingly given the relations between the social sciences and wider social developments -- each one of these archetypes has its sociological counterpart. The first model is a classic one of center and periphery (or centers and peripheries). In this model Japan, (and in a

related manner) America and Europe are conceived of as being cores while their business outposts are thought of as peripheries. The governing idea here is one of flows: the center provides managerial personnel and know-how while the periphery supplies such things as labor, resources and goods. In addition, it is the center that has the power to bestow or withhold recognition and acknowledgment of the success of peripheries. The second schema is based on the Nihonjinron notion in which Japanese culture is considered to be a delimited and unique entity. The main idea here is of cultural contact and mediation between the bounded Japanese entity and other cultures. Japanese expatriates (and to a lesser degree other persons) translate and negotiate the understandings and expectations of these cultures. The third model involves a picture of a family of 'civilized societies'. The central image is one of certain international standards of advancement and cultivation which a country must meet before being recognized (by others) as civilized. In this view Japan is contradictorily perceived as belonging and as not (just yet) belonging to a set of advanced civilizations.

Such models of the globe rarely appear in the empirical world as ordered representations or systematic categorizations of areas and countries. Rather, they usually appear as complicated (and often confused) sketches that emerge during casual conversations or during more ordered situations (like research interviews) in which people reflect about their lives. To put this matter rather pointedly, while global, such schemas are actually very private because they reflect individuals' experiences and hopes, and what they see as being personally relevant. In other words, far from being disembodied graphs of the earth -- the abstract cognitive maps that geographers were once fond of discovering -- these schemas are refracted through people's concrete ideas about "what we are" and "what we are trying to do" through which economic reality is constructed. Following Plath's (1989: 72) suggestions that we study selfhood in environments defined by time, I propose that these various models of the world are essentially refracted -- turned, bent, deflected -- through people's understandings of their life-course. Along these lines, I suggest that

we join an analysis of the models I have been talking about to a life-course approach.

The life-course perspective allows us to theoretically link history, organization and individual action. In terms of an individual's life-course, overseas assignments are intersections of a number of long term processes: careering at the workplace, the exigencies of family cycles, organizational expansion and contraction, and wider historical trends. But the life course approach is also useful in uncovering the notions that guide people's long-term strategies for their lives: the cultural schemas or "ideas that help us plot where we are in the confused currents of time so that we can project where we yet may go. An earlier era might have called this a philosophy of life; today's anthropologist would call it an ethno-theory of the life cycle" (Plath 1989: 73). Put simply, my contention is that it is through the meeting between certain conceptions of the life course (primarily concepts of careering) and the three basic models of the globe that I have outlined that overseas service is understood.

In the context of this short paper I will address three questions: what are the general contents and forms of these various models? How are more specific notions of cultural contact related to these schemas? Finally, what are the characteristics of the wider social context within which these models emerge and are formulated?

Why Japanese Business Expatriates in Singapore?

This paper is the first report of a wider study of the Japanese expatriate community in Singapore. I chose that country, because I thought that it would be a suitable venue for examining the social and cultural implications of the 'globalization' of Japanese business. Thus between June 1992 and February 1994 I carried out my study primarily through interviews and participant observation. Of my 93 interviewees, 60 people were related to business (they were overwhelmingly men). Reflecting the general patterns of the Japanese presence in Singapore almost all of these sixty people are white-collar

managers and executives who have been posted to the country for a period of between three to five years at the end of which they return to Japan. Moreover, given the patterns of secondment of overseas posts in Japanese companies most of these men were in their late thirties and early forties.

Spurred by strong government support, Singapore has become during the last three decades a hub of business headquarters and manufacturing facilities for all of the ASEAN, South-East Asian and, in many cases, South Asian countries (Choy and Yeo 1990). While the large-scale movement of Japanese business interests outside of Japan began in the late 1960s, the shift to Southeast Asia began in the early 1970s. At its beginning, this movement comprised mostly production and servicing facilities but in the last decade or so it has increasingly come to include banking and financial services. Concurrently, while the first moves into the area were carried out by the large firms, in recent years, small and medium sized companies have increasingly come in their wake. In this context, Singapore stands at the forefront of Japan's move into Southeast and South Asia. A plethora of Japanese production facilities, headquarters, and sales and financial centers are now located in this small country and by some estimates as much as one-fourth of Singapore's GDP is generated by Japanese companies (Cronin 1992). The Japanese expatriate community which now numbers over twenty thousand people is overwhelmingly comprised of people who run these businesses and their families.

In terms of the issues I have set out to study, there are a number of reasons for choosing this research site. One, Singapore is an international city par excellence: it is such a city in the material sense of being a hub of business headquarters and manufacturing facilities for all of South-East Asia, and in the social sense of comprising a concentration of arenas for contact and communication and the meeting between different (national) business communities. Two, Singapore stands at the forefront of Japan's move into East and Southeast Asia: in it are located a plethora of production facilities, headquarters, and sales and financial centers. As such it forms a prime

location of the 'internationalization' of Japan. Three, the Japanese expatriate community is made up of the actual people who figure in Japan's global reach: not politicians and top bureaucrats, but the managers and engineers through whose efforts Japanese companies are expanding. Four, the very economic success of Singapore in itself is an issue which raises, for Japanese as for others, the issue of understanding and making sense of such success. Being situated between some postulated ideals of 'East' and 'West', the Singaporean city-state raises questions for Japanese in ways that other world cities -- London or Paris, for example -- do not. Five, the relatively high rate of literacy and education, and the profusion of communication channels and local and international media in Singapore have led to a situation in which deliberations about various social and individual identities are part and parcel of the city-state's public culture.

Exemplification: Three Extracts

Let me move on to the more analytical part of my paper by presenting three "revelatory incidents" (Peacock 1986) that give the flavor of the kind of material that I am working with. They are revelatory because they are taken from interviews held with more introspective individuals who were capable of formulating their thoughts, and because they are 'rich' in terms of the understandings which can be gleaned from them. The first passage is from an interview with the deputy manager of Komatsu's Singapore office (opened at the beginning of the 1970s). The man, aged forty and a graduate of Tokyo University's faculty of engineering, had been out of Japan on many business trips, but this was his first assignment overseas. When I interviewed him in 1993, he had been in Singapore for three years. We were discussing the move to a foreign country.

There is something very subtle here (*bimyo*). Throughout your career if you say that you want to be posted overseas then on the one hand they can say that you are a positive person, very good. But on the other hand, if you say you want to go abroad too often, then they may say that you don't like your work. This

is risky and you must not say too many times that you want to go abroad so as not to create the wrong impression, and you must not be too quiet because then they will not pay attention to you.

But Singapore is a good opportunity for me. But here again there is a danger because you don't know what will be in the future. If you will be here too much time, then they may not know you in Tokyo; and so you constantly have to show Tokyo that you are working hard, and that they will constantly say Yamamoto is in Singapore but he works hard. Everything is controlled from Tokyo, your salary, your promotion. If I stay here for twenty years maybe I will have a lot of power but I am finished in Tokyo because they will not know me...

It doesn't really matter if it's Europe or America or Singapore. In principle, Tokyo always looks at your performance, at how you work... The question they always ask is how much this person has contributed to the company. That's what they look at...

In this point there is an advantage to being overseas. Look, I am an engineer. In Japan there are a lot of bulldozer engineers that are much better than me in the technical side. But if there comes a stage in which they will compare me with someone who designs machines, then my advantage when I go back is that I know the conditions of the market, the prices in Southeast Asia and then maybe they will say that I have to be his boss.

The second extract is from an exchange with the general manager of Sumitomo Bank (which set up business in Singapore in 1972). Now in his early fifties and a graduate of Keio University, this was his fourth posting abroad (after the United States, Venezuela, and Italy) and his second year in Singapore.

Here the general manager is appointed for three years and the other Japanese for four or five years; and when they decide on the number of years here, they take into account whether you are here with your family or not. At the other Japanese banks

like the Bank of Tokyo or Sakura the GM (general manager) changes every two years.

When I was in New York I was in charge of all of America and Canada and South America... I visited most of these countries and tried to introduce syndicated loans to them all, including the Japanese companies in these countries... Then they sent me to Venezuela to open up a representative office there and I spent two and a half years there. Despite the fact that the economy of the area went down during that time, I arranged for loans to places like Trinidad and Colombia and I became famous in the bank for someone who knows this kind of business.

Then in 1985, I don't know the word exactly, but I was brought back to Japan [laughs] for rehabilitation after I was outside for such a long time. I was in a department in charge of internal auditing and then a manager of one of the Tokyo branches of the bank. It was a small branch but very successful... Then they sent me to Milano in 1989 and they sent me here directly to Singapore in 1991...

I don't think I will be at a disadvantage when I go back to Japan after Singapore. The experience overseas is probably more important these days than the experience in Japan. These days international business is becoming more important...

This is the time of Southeast Asia and not America or Europe and that's why places like Singapore or Hong Kong are so important. From the banks point of view they are strategically important and that's why it's a challenge to be here... Especially for Sumitomo Bank we are lagging behind the other Japanese City Banks and my mission is to recover position here in Singapore...

You can make decisions here, decide about new directions, implement new things.

The third quotation comes from the words of a director of Uchida Yoko a company dealing with office furniture and equipment and design. A graduate of Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, and in his mid-thirties, this was also his first posting abroad. I asked him about coming to Singapore in 1988.

When the Yen became strong, our aim was to keep our level of business and profitability by selling our products to this area: Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, Taiwan...

In Japan we are one of the four biggest companies for office furniture; everyone knows about us and even if we are a young company here in Singapore it's good to start with the brand name of Uchida because there are about 1,500 Japanese companies in Singapore.

It's different from the big trading companies like Marubeni, Mitsui or Mitsubishi who have more than 10,000 people. We are a medium sized company with about 2,800 employees [in Japan] so we don't have a special personnel department to prepare people for service abroad because we don't have that much activity overseas.

Overseas we have a number of places, Hong Kong, Malaysia where we have a chair factory which we own 51 per cent, and America. You must understand that along with the man who came with me here in 1988 [the other company director] to set up the company we are very ambitious. If we were in Japan we would maybe be section heads (ka-cho), but here in Singapore, we've become directors; and, if we maintain a good level of business and a good level of profit, we can do what we want to here; and we won't be bothered unless we show losses... When we began the whole focus was on this triangle of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, but the real focus now is to turn into the number one Japanese company in this area...

You know, coming here I have more of a feeling that I would like Japan to be a place that's nice to live in, that it be more international. I've read books by a man named Kenichi Ohmae and he says that Japan is a rich country but that it doesn't reflect in people's lives: apartments are expensive and there are transportation problems. In this way, the life outside of Japan in a place like Singapore maybe makes this point much stronger, the feeling that Japan has to invest in infrastructure.

What are the cultural understandings -- the models or schemas -- that lie at base of these three passages?

The World Personalized: Careering and Internationalization

David Plath, who has been the most forceful and eloquent scholar to suggest the utility of the life-span or life-course approach³, proposes that it is through two dimensions (and the tension between them) that Japanese individuals develop and mature: careering at the workplace and cultivation of social relations with family and friends. Evoking the image of the "commuter" as one of the great archetypes of the industrial lifestyle, Plath (1983: 1) states that his "master tempo of activity revolves around a daily shuttle from home to workplace and back again... Each of these two centers of activity is ordered by its own rhythm of long-term conduct: work and home each involve us in different, often contradictory, career timetables". Given the limits of this paper, I will focus only on the workplace dimension of the life-course.

From an organizational point of view, the essence of a career is that it is a predictable sequence of movements, a relay of roles set up to normalize the potentially turbulent flow of persons through the organization. But from an individual's point of view, as Skinner (1983) reminds us, careers are uncertain, unpredictable. Given the numerical limits on promotion only some people will be able to advance up the organizational hierarchy. This contention stands in contradiction to many portrayals of contemporary Japanese organizations. While it has by now become a commonplace notion that in the much vaunted life-time employment system (applicable to men in large corporations) one can find job security, what is much less appreciated are the uncertainties over promotion that mark this system. "In the literature on organizations in Japan there is a recurring tendency to assume that the security offered by "permanent employment" also means a career of increasing responsibility and authority as employees move through their years of association with an organization" (Skinner 1983: 68; also Hamada 1992). But in effect, many middle-level positions are limited

and a series of job movements may be undertaken without advancement.

The result of this situation in which workplace advancement is a rather indeterminate matter, is that individuals must constantly and actively undertake strategies and investments to assure promotion along what Hamada (1992: 136) terms the long-term career marathon of Japanese corporations. Crucial to the active design of their careers, in turn, are certain cultural guidelines. These guidelines -- or models or schemas -- set the standards by which people appraise themselves and are appraised by others in terms of their movement in time. An individual,

guides himself by cultural standards that define goals, competence, and achievement; and he is guided by other persons close about him who have the power to interpret the general standards as applied to his life's particulars. The standards are articulated in an array of pathways, routes and timetables that provide for continuity in an individual's conduct (Plath 1983: 3).

The implication for our analysis is to uncover the cultural guidelines which underlie the actual life strategies and movements of Japanese business expatriates as they bear upon, and are actualized in, overseas assignments.

A model of organizational life. I begin by tracing out the basic elements of what may be termed the cognitive model of Japanese white-collar organizational life. Please keep in mind that it is conceptions that we are talking about and not the patterns of actual behavior studied by social scientists. Basically, these people understand their career as a generally upward movement within one hierarchical organizational structure. This path is accomplished through a more or less regular pattern of rotation within company headquarters, and between headquarters and branch offices or facilities. Rotation may take place sideways to more or less equivalent positions, or upwards to more important posts. But this movement is

not a smooth or automatic flow from one position to another. Rather, organizations, according to this view, are comprised of individuals who constantly maneuver and jostle for promotion to an ever decreasing number of senior executive posts (to reiterate, we are talking about males and managers here). In the competition for intra-organizational advancement, individuals must actively undertake a variety of strategies aimed at succeeding in business dealings and cultivating support networks (comprising an individual's seniors, juniors and counterparts). Along these lines, each new assignment within the general patterns of rotation presents both potentials and hazards for one's career prospects.

With the expansion of a firm's business interests beyond the borders of Japan, and with the establishment of offices and production facilities abroad, an assignment overseas corresponds to the patterns of rotation within the company. But such an assignment is also a sort of promotion: because companies situated outside of Japan are like "daughter companies" (kogaisha, although their exact legal definition may vary), people who were (to give two examples) department heads (ka-cho) in Japan become division heads (bu-cho) overseas, and section heads (kakari-cho) become department heads. This point was put to me rather picturesquely by the engineering advisor of Kitamura (a small company producing plating for semi-conductors) who said that "while in Japan I was just an engineer in charge of a small area, here I am like the head of a factory". Hence in comparison with posting to new positions in Japan, the stint abroad presents opportunities to handle greater responsibilities and more important tasks. In the case of companies which have expanded relatively recently to foreign countries, moreover, going abroad is (in a sense) like going to a frontier: an extreme limit of settled land, beyond which the country is wild and undeveloped. In these cases the tour of duty in another country represents an adventurous undertaking in which the individual 'charts out new lands'.

In this context, however, it is important to note something that was not a taken for granted matter in most Japanese firms until a few

years ago: a tour of service out of Japan has by now become a normal part of most managerial careers. It used to be a part of 'normal' career development only in the general trading companies (sogo shosha) (Yoshino and Lifson 1988) and in other internationally oriented businesses like shipping or airlines. But now it is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for individual advancement in very many companies (including medium sized and small firms) (Hamada 1992: 155). For example, according to a manager in the Bank of Tokyo, about fifty or sixty per cent of the firm's managerial corps has been abroad; the manager of the treasury and personnel department at Sumitomo estimated that about twenty per cent of the general trading company's staff are, at one time, abroad; the deputy general manager at Nissho Iwai observed that it was now typical for about half of all of the company's managers to be abroad at any one time; and a vice president of Nomura Securities observed that while the major part of the company's business is still focused on Japan itself, a sizeable minority of executives are developing careers by specializing in overseas investments and transactions.

Let me now chart out the models or schemas of the world order that lie at base of this view and then relate them back to notions of careering.

Center, Periphery and Promotion

Center and periphery as 'folk' conceptions. The most obvious schema at base of the view of Japanese business expatriates in Singapore is a center and periphery model. The fundamental conception is one of Japan as a center and the various outposts and stations abroad as peripheries. According to this logic, expatriates are sent from (and later return to) the center in order to provide organizational and technological knowledge; while people from the periphery usually stay in their place and sometimes sent to the center to learn and to enrich themselves. The center holds both economic and technological power, and the authority to bestow or withhold recognition and in both senses is "the" place where things happen. The

guiding, if at times somewhat unappreciated, imagery here has to do with the constant use of such terms as "headquarters" and "head office" (and relatedly "branch" and "outpost"). These metaphorical expressions carry implications of the prominence, hierarchy and 'mental' functions of the Japanese center.

One example is reflected in the words of a manager at a Japanese city bank who boasted of the fact that apart from Singapore the only other places where they have a data processing center connected to Japan are London and New York. In this way, of course, he both evoked the image of a network of communication and information centered on Japan, and portrayed the relative importance of different peripheries. To provide another example, according to the senior manager in charge of engineering at Seiko, the prize winners from around the world in the annual intra-company competition for QC circle activities travel to Japan for a reception and presentation meeting. During the previous year, he proudly told me, a local Singapore team had won a prize and was invited and publicly acknowledged in Japan.

The firm's reference group. Underscoring the view of Japan as center is a widespread notion that competitors are primarily (but not exclusively) other Japanese companies. The implication of this view is that "getting ahead" is overwhelmingly a matter of getting ahead of other Japanese companies. The short excerpt from the interview with the general manager of Sumitomo Bank that I presented earlier, underscores this point most forcefully. Similarly, the deputy general manager of Komatsu (which is the second largest heavy machinery manufacturer in the world after Caterpillar) conceded the competition with the Americans, but quickly related it to the Japanese context: "our business is to fight with Caterpillar, they are our big competitor; but also we compete with Hitachi and Kobelco. It depends on what sort of machine we are talking about". For the Seiko executive, the adversaries are Citizen and Casio and "yes well, also the Swiss watch makers". The marketing manager at Kinokuniya Bookstores noted that his company is among (and therefor competes with) the "high class"

(joojoo) book companies in Japan. Finally, the manager from Sumitomo noted that "along with Sumitomo the most well known shosha (general trading companies) here in Singapore are Marubeni, Mitsui and Mitsubishi". The competition that "really matters" thus takes place on the basis of standards set at the center: Japan.

Yet the terms 'center' and 'periphery' may be too static to exemplify the dynamic aspect of people's images. The expressions that people use depict a vibrant globe in which the ebbs and flows of their company's business meet the currents (and sometimes, torrents) of other enterprises in various locations where competition for markets, goods and sources takes place. For example, the perception of Southeast Asia's growing economic strength and the business potential that this power represents figures in the primacy attributed to it in global terms. But the more fundamental point is that for these people, the map of the world -- the cognitive lay out of the 'globe' -- is arranged according to how the firm's business activities and possibilities bear upon an individual's prospects for promotion. While these "business maps" of cores and peripheries may be isomorphic or disjunctive with other maps of the world (say with sketches based on a perceived status hierarchy of societies), from the business person's point of view this is the most relevant map. Why are they relevant?

Overseas posting present opportunities and dangers for promotion in the firm. Three major themes appear in discussions about the potentials and hazards of the stint abroad. Not surprisingly, all three directly bear upon the issue of future promotion: the skills that one garners abroad, possibilities for developing business deals, and the networks of people one cultivates. All of the people I interviewed, including men from banks or general trading companies who had been abroad a number of times, emphasized that a tour of duty in a foreign country was an opportunity to learn new skills and abilities. A manager from Kyodo Printing put this most succinctly when he said that his period in Singapore should be seen as part of "a life-long learning process in the organization: we must study till we die". Others talked either about the knowledge gathered about the

specific place where they undertook their post (the local or regional markets and legal environments) or more general capacities such as sales and marketing skills, management of large and ethnically diverse numbers of employees, or the knowledge of English. Typical of the first point is the vice-president of Nomura who mentioned that the advantage of being outside of Japan lay in learning the rules and dynamics of other money markets, and the contents of various options for financial growth. The deputy general manager of Komatsu, who is an engineer by training, talked in very positive terms about how he had to learn such things as financial control, marketing and sales and the administrative side of his company.

While these points are seen as advantageous, they are also seen as potentially dangerous: the skills and knowledge garnered abroad may come at the cost of gathering capacities and experience relevant to functioning within Japan and, in this way, hinder one's prospects for eventual advancement. Thus the deputy director at a large Asahi Glass factory confided that while he may learn about the Singapore's legal and business environment, he was not sure that this would be of "good benefit" upon his return to Japan, and that he would have to "catch up" with his colleagues who had stayed there. But the main danger of staying abroad, which came up time and again throughout my interviews, as well as in Hamada's (1992: 146ff) study, was related to the disconnection, the lack of contact, with networks of personal supporters in Japan. Thus for example, a manager at an equipment company mentioned that "you may feel out of pace after a few years, and then you can end up being sent to the edge of Japan, like Hokkaido". Many others talked about their careers depending on Tokyo and the need to constantly monitor their relations and contacts with important people at "head office". Indeed, notice how much all three men whose interview material I presented, talk about how they will be perceived back in Tokyo.

Let me sum up the discussion so far. The opportunities and hazards presented by a tour of duty outside of Japan are related to the intra-company competition for promotion. In this manner global

centers and peripheries are personalized: what interests people are their relative standings (and competition with) their organizational consociates. People compete with members of their cohort (or within the standards of advancement of the cohort) by competing with other companies (primarily Japanese) for market share and prestige. The way to "get ahead" at the center is thus to succeed for the company abroad. The guiding imagery is a dynamic one marked by constant rivalry for scarce posts (senior executives) within the center in which rotation to the periphery offers opportunities and hazards for advancement.

Cultural Uniqueness and Cultural Mediation

Another schema, an attenuated form of the Nihonjinron approach (Dale 1986; Miller 1982; Befu and Manabe 1991; Manabe and Befu 1992), is used alongside the center and periphery model to make sense of service abroad. It is used primarily to account for the cross-cultural contact within the (overseas) workplace and secondarily to reason about the long-term organizational implications of living outside of Japan. This schema consists of three elements related to intercultural encounters: a subtle but strong differentiation between the Japanese parts of the company and other parts, the unique quality of Japanese verbal and non-verbal communication, and the need for cultural mediators to bridge the gap between the two 'cultural' parts of the organization.

While there is a variety of formal and legal discriminations between head office and branches, or main and daughter companies, the most important one is the informal differentiation between the Japanese and other parts of a company. This differentiation is grounded in an invisible but nevertheless highly significant boundary around what could be termed the 'actual' company. To put this point in another way, formal relations within an organization's offices are not the meaningful ones. Rather, for Japanese expatriates the 'real' -- in the sense of both personally relevant and culturally shared --

organization is the one in which Japanese people participate. While this view is consonant with the emphasis on careering and the centrality of Tokyo (or the head office), its locus is elsewhere: on the special understandings and connections that only Japanese people can have. At the heart of this schema, then, is a rather certain view of the essence of Japanese-ness. Japanese culture, according to this schema, is so unique, so special that only some people can participate in it (see Yoshino 1992). To be sure, this culture is not exclusionary in a hermetic sense. A few foreigners can and do cross over into the 'real' part of the company, but they do so only if they master the Japanese modes of communication. This mastery, however, is problematical because of the technical difficulties of the written and spoken language, and the related intricacies of non-verbal perceptions.

One central role of Japanese business people within this schema, and this a very widespread self-conception among expatriates, is to be cultural mediators. This notion was often phrased in humorous terms as when I was told that the primary function of Japanese managers was to translate documents or telephone messages for the local staff. The general manager of Sumitomo Bank stated:

It's a bit different now, most of the circulars from the head office now come in English. But a good deal of the work of the Japanese here is still related to translation. For example, all of the material that arrives from the general managers' meetings is in Japanese and I have to translate it into English. But, on the other hand, many of the forms here, like for renewing a loan after it reaches maturity, even if they go to a Japanese company they are in English.

More significant aspects entail teaching Japanese customs and manners to locals. A manager at a servicing facility for a large manufacturer told me about how uncomfortable he and his colleagues feel when called by their name without the addition of "-san". He went on to tell me how the staff have to teach each newly recruited local employee to add "-san" to Japanese people's names. Almost all of the

interviewees told me that part of their assignment in Singapore was to accompany guests from Japan around the island not only to act as translators in the strict sense of aiding the visitors in terms of language, but more generally in explaining and negotiating different cultural expectations.

Other issues are the distinct and 'classic' qualities of the purported Japanese corporate culture. Take group responsibility. In the words of the regional general manager of the Japan Travel Bureau office, unlike Japanese, local Chinese people have trouble working in groups. According to a man who works in a financial service company: "In Singapore I feel that there is more hierarchy. Like between people who have finished their A levels and O levels... And this leads to people building up a wall around themselves and not willing to take responsibility for anything outside their area; very different from the Japanese". The engineer from Seiko talked about group orientatedness: "as you know the Japanese like working in groups and here they are relatively individualists. You have to change their way of thinking and to teach them how to work in groups like in the new production system we brought here about three years ago.". Finally, while the marketing manager of Kinokuniya Bookstores noted that Singaporeans lack "cooperativeness" (kyoocho), the managing director of NYK Shipping Lines observed that they lack "loyalty".

Consistent with this view is a danger that may accompany cultural mediation, and one that came up time and again in my exchanges. The risk is one of losing one's Japanese essence: to appear to "have gone native", to be seen as too localized. There is a very strong and widespread conception among the expatriates that they must maintain the appearance -- the demeanor, language and attire -- of Japanese. To give but one example, a high level executive in one of the securities firms noted that he dressed differently when meeting Singaporeans and when meeting other Japanese: "When I meet Japanese guests I always wear a suit. If I don't I will feel awkward, very uneasy. Maybe they will think that I am too localized, too

relaxed. So in order that they don't get that impression I dress this way".

These are far from unimportant issues, as is brought out in Merry White's (1988) somewhat overworried book. The problem is important because international business is perceived to pose certain threats to one's 'Japaneseness'. The danger has less to do with the actual character of the company as an actor in the international arena as such, as with the possible influences of exposure to other cultures on individuals. The director of Sumitomo Bank mentioned that after "I returned to Japan after a good few years abroad they thought that I needed to be rehabilitated and they gave me work in internal auditing and then running one of the Tokyo branches of the bank". And, the director of Uchida Yoko mused good-naturedly:

Last year I returned to Japan for reeducation: part of the reeducation that they carry out for people who return from abroad. There was this guy there in the personnel department who said that there are people overseas that become maybe a little too much independent, more than in Japan. And maybe their way of thinking is different from normal people that work in the main office in Japan.

Thus the model here is that of a unique, somehow clean society that must be protected from external influences⁴. Here again, however, the basic model is personalized: it is related to the life course, and to the standards by which individuals and their significant others appraise themselves. In this model Japanese business expatriates mediate two boundaries: the (national) cultural and the organizational.

'Civilized Societies'

The essential elements of the third model are a family or group of 'civilized societies' that are perceived to be marked by a certain level of cultivation or sophistication. Societies wishing to enter this elite group must adopt the standards of refinement and urbanity by

which it is distinguished. Historically speaking, as Gong (1984) has brilliantly shown, this 'folk' model is related to the emergence of an international standard of 'civilization'. His focus is on the international arena and the confrontation that occurred as Europe expanded into the non-European world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He carefully shows how this clash was not only political and economic but also cultural or civilizational. At the heart of the clash were the standards of civilization by which these civilizations identified themselves and regulated their international relations.

My argument is that this international, diplomatic and elitist model has today become a 'folk' model. For the Japanese business people that I studied (and for others) a major image of the world is centered on the inclusion or exclusion of societies in a family of 'civilized societies'. To reiterate, the criteria for incorporation are not only technological advancement, but no less importantly a certain kind of cultivation of style and etiquette, and interpersonal behavior. Moreover, as I will show, this schema intersects, reinforces and weakens the previous ones that I have outlined.

Take the following three passages. The personnel manager at Sumitomo talked about the lack of manners among local women receptionists: "They don't have the same attitude as in Japan. For example, on the telephone in Japan the women learn to speak with a pretty voice, but here you don't find it. Sometimes I even feel that they are not kind to customers". The vice-president from Nomura talked about his stint in Bahrain: "I don't want to sound prejudiced, but they are less cultivated in say their language ability or mathematics ability. So we employed people from other countries like India and didn't rely on the Bahrainis; In London, the British are very similar to the Japanese in their mentality". When I asked a senior manager at one of the city banks about the kind of preparation that he thought would benefit employees before going abroad he answered: "Listen, language is important, but I would also like young Japanese to learn the culture and customs of overseas countries; like how to dine. For example, I often feel ashamed that they don't know which glass of

wine to use, how to eat with a knife and fork, how to offer bread to clients". These three examples underscore the intricacy of this model: Japan, at one and the same time, is a 'civilized society' that other societies must try and emulate, and a society that needs to go further and itself follow more advanced countries in America and Europe.

This model and the standards intrinsic to it find their strongest expression in the manner by which Singapore is talked about. For many of the people I interviewed, Singapore is problematical because it stands on the boundary, just outside of, the family of 'civilized societies'. An example that came up in some interviews was the purported lack of appreciation by Singaporeans of "who they are", of their tradition and roots. The words of the senior engineering division manager at Seiko are a very typical example: "Another thing that surprised me here is that they don't read. When you ask them things they just don't know, and don't read, and don't like history". Other people talked about how the Singaporeans have no real identity. Similar in tone were regular comments about the materialism of the locals. One man said that they were interested in three things: "money, money, money", and another man mentioned the paucity of the cultural side of Singapore as in theater, music or the preservation of historic neighborhoods.

Being civilized however, does not directly imply being Westernized. A closely related theme that I encountered involves membership in a purported 'Asian' civilization. Historically speaking, the modern Japanese notion of Asian civilization may be traced to the idea of the 'Greater Asian Co-prosperity Sphere'. But of no less importance are current debates about "Asian-ness" that are appearing in such places as China, Korea and Malaysia and that are a central issue in public debates in Singapore (Chan 1993). From the perspective of this paper, what is interesting is that for Japanese expatriates Singapore becomes a sort of 'test case' through which to explore notions of Asian-ness and Westernization. For many Japanese that I met, Singapore represented an Asian country that is very Westernized. A senior manager at a general trading company told me that in the

Singapore branch of his company, after work activities tend to be formal affairs like the annual dance and dinner. This is, he said, "a very solid affair like the parties the English hold; it's not like our bonenkai (end of the year parties) where you shout, laugh, drink and do all sorts of silly things". Evoking both the exclusivist Japanese model and the schema of civilized societies, he then went on to ruminate:

Let me say this directly. Maybe you as a European feel that we and the Singaporeans are the same thing: we have the same black hair, brown eyes, or color of the skin. But I feel that although we all look like orientals as though we are similar to each other, the Singaporeans are very different. They have names like Desmond or Tom, and this creates a very strange feeling for me (hen na kimochoi); as though they are in some way Western. It's funny, their roots are in China and in this way they have a relation to us Japanese. But the younger generation here have lost their identity because they don't speak good Chinese, they have lost their Chinese [language]... The personal philosophy of many of them is very Western so many times I feel I don't understand them. Many times they will say what they think as a logical opinion and then I don't have the same feeling of understanding them like I do other Japanese.

Notice the terms that this man uses: orientals, European, racial features, Western, and language as an indicator of cultural identity and belonging. What is apparent is that these expressions have become almost a common set of idioms for articulating issues of global situatedness around the contemporary world. Let me lead my discussion towards its conclusion by addressing the following question: what are the social conditions under which such terms have increasingly become the central and standard terminology for exploring issues of national (and international) identity and the structure of the world order?

The Social Context

In answering this question I turn from examining images and conceptions to suggest a number of points related to social relations: to the circumstances within which these models, and the discourse attendant upon them, emerge and are reproduced. The use of a rather conventional set of images and phrases for talking about the modern world is not incidental. Here I follow Robertson (1992: 135) who suggests that "globalization involves the development of something like a global culture -- not as normatively binding, but in the sense of a general mode of discourse about the world as a whole and its variety" (emphasis in original). As I understand it, his proposal is that what we see today is not the advent of any kind of world-wide consensus or harmonious co-existence, but rather that the basic terms and the criteria which are used in various discussions about the world are accepted by many contemporary groups. In other words, many nation-states, organizations, social movements and individuals today share a common discourse about the world.

Why is this so? On the most general level, as the processes of globalization proceed there is an attendant constraint upon such social entities to 'identify' themselves in relation to global-human circumstances (Robertson 1992: 58). With increased communication and integration there is more cultural contact (but not necessarily agreement) which leads to a situation in which people make such schemas as I examined here more explicit. "In an increasingly globalized world there is a heightening of civilizational, societal, ethnic, regional, and indeed, individual self-consciousness. There are constraints on social entities to locate themselves within world history and the global future. Yet globalization in and of itself also involves the diffusion of the expectation of such identity decelerations" (Robertson 1992: 27). It is in this sense that talk by Japanese business expatriates about such societies as England, Bahrain, the United States, Italy, or Singapore implies discussing the essence of Japanese culture. Indeed, the very term 'Japanese culture' predicated as it is on the

assumption of a culture common to a nation-state is a product (and a continual expression) of global processes over the last hundred years.

The social carriers of the terms and criteria for contemporary identity are a variety of actors such as cultural mediators, business leaders, politicians, media representatives, intellectuals, academics, and (increasingly) expatriates⁵. The activities of this last group, however, seem to simultaneously actualize and reinforce the actions of the other elites. Expatriates (organization men and women) who are posted abroad for a number of years are the people who are in constant contact with members of other cultures and who most acutely face the personal issues of accounting for and understanding globalization. These people are not the 'captains of industry' nor the 'international statesmen' who are seasoned veterans of media interviews and who regularly deal with (to put this point by way of the Japanese example) such issues as Japan's trade surplus or the felt need to increase its political and security presence in Asia and around the world. Rather these are the rather unexceptional people who work overseas and who carry out debates about the global-human situation (although they may not use this kind of term) on a daily basis. It is also these millions of people who carry their experiences of contact (or its lack) back to their countries.

I am making two points here. The first is that the social circumstances within which the 'larger' debates about globality take place are related to and refracted through personal life-courses. The second is that the extension of expatriate service (in organizations) to larger numbers of people is itself making the problems of accounting for globalization much more intense. Let me explain. Social psychological studies have shown that an important task in adulthood is to achieve a sense of coherence: the individual needs to weave disparate experiences into a comprehensible story or personal narrative (Sugarman 1986: 129-30). What seems to be happening during this historical period is that issues of face-to-face cross-cultural contacts are a central element in constructing coherent personal narratives. Stints of service outside of one's country are, for all of the

people that I interviewed, "major life events", transition points in the human life-cycle that are benchmarks. They are benchmarks in the sense of setting the basic criteria and the terms for people asking and evaluating such questions as "who they are" and "where are they going".

But the situation is more complex than this because in constructing their personal narratives, expatriates make use of the more general models and explanations found in their culture and propagated by the cultural carriers I mentioned. The most obvious example of this point is the use by the majority of my interviewees of the Nihonjinron kind of explanations to underline the uniqueness of Japan. On a more concrete level, people use ideas from a variety of intellectual products -- books, magazine articles, radio and television programs -- to make sense of their worlds. I encountered a revealing illustration of this point towards the end of my fieldwork. During our interview, the director from Uchida Yoko (the office equipment manufacturer) told me of how he had read and begun to apply the ideas of Kenichi Ohmae (Japan's "management guru"). He was constructing his personal narrative by using Ohmae's ideas of company leaders breaking down economic barriers and overcoming state intervention.

Conclusion

The thrust of my analysis lies in the contention that in order to understand contemporary Japanese society one has to "go international". In this regard, I question the assumption lying at the base of many studies of Japan that there is an isomorphism between the geo-political boundaries of the state and its social and cultural limits. My contribution should be seen as proposing a first step towards a reconceptualization of Japanese culture. This culture -- without assuming too much about its unitary nature -- could be understood not only along the lines proposed by most social scientists

who have studied Japan, but also as a set of negotiated symbols and meanings that travel across national boundaries (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Brannen 1992; Creighton 1991). To put this by way of example, just as it is possible to gain a richer appreciation of the variety of experiences entailed in being Japanese through accompanying various tour groups to Europe or China, or visiting their hangouts in Thailand, so it may be possible to learn something about "Japaneseness" in contemporary Singapore.

The theoretical innovation of my study lies in linking an examination of 'folk' models of the world to an analysis of the guidelines people use to make sense of their life-course. On the one hand, I have delineated three main models -- the center and periphery, cultural exclusionist, and 'civilized' societies schemas -- which Japanese business expatriates use to understand what is going on in the contemporary world. On the other hand, I have examined the most central schema of personal development that these people hold: the model of careering within the organization. One can understand the basic cognitive categories by which these people think by juxtaposing the two kinds of models: the general and the individual. Accordingly, to 'go international' implies not only placing our analysis at the macro level of global processes, but no less importantly to 'go personal' to the micro level of individual consciousness and reasoning. Going global means getting personal.

Notes

1. Following Robertson (1992), I refer to the 'world' in inverted commas to underline the sense of a growing consciousness of (but not necessarily consensus about) the global situation that is found among such groups.

2. A "script" or "schema" is a distinct and strongly interconnected pattern of interpretive elements which can be activated with minimum inputs. A schema is an interpretation which is frequent, well organized, memorable, and which can be made from minimal cues, contains one or more prototypic instantiations, and is relatively resistant to change (D'Andrade 1992: 29).

3. Along with Plath's studies, the last decade or so has seen a number of works which implicitly or explicitly use the life-course approach. These works include studies of promotion at work (Aoki 1988: chap 3), family planning and composition (Coleman 1983), household strategies for success in education (Rohlen 1983: chap 3), or the organization of women's life-span (Brinton 1992). All of these studies commence from a view of change over time that involves individual perceptions, active strategizing, and historical circumstances.

4. This view also seems to fit Goodman's (1991) findings about how returnee schoolchildren are perceived in Japan.

5. And what Robertson (1992: 61) terms new actors and 'third cultures' -- such as transnational movements and international organizations -- that are oriented, negatively or positively, to the global-human circumstances.

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