

THE NEW JAPAN: Debunking Seven Cultural Stereotypes. *By David Matsumoto.* Yarmouth (Maine): Intercultural Press, Inc. (in association with Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London). 2002. xvii, 236 pp. (Graphs, tables.) US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 1-877864-93-5.

The author challenges a century of Japanese and Western scholars concerning their cultural theories about Japan. All of them, he claims, have painted the same picture and stereotypic images and perceptions of Japan: "These Japanologists have characterized Japanese society and culture as homogeneous, centered on a few core values, personality traits, and moral virtues. These views have been promulgated by Japanese and non-Japanese alike, in academic and non-academic circles" (p. 3). Even today, in academic circles, Japanese culture and people are portrayed in a fashion similar to the way they were described in the writings of Hearn, Benedict, Dore, Morris, Nakane, Nitobe, Reischauer and other leading Japanologists (p. 16). The fundamental hypothesis of this book is to show that these stereotypic images are not compatible anymore with the NEW JAPAN, where drastic cultural and societal changes are occurring. With some minor restrictions, this reviewer agrees with the substance of this book and strongly believes that this book can be very useful in understanding the new and changing Japan.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1, "Japanese Culture, Past and Present", looks at classic and contemporary views of Japanese culture. In the second chapter, which is the most important of the book (49 pages), the reader will find a list of the seven stereotypes which have to be

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“debunked”: Japanese collectivism, Japanese self-concepts, Japanese interpersonal consciousness, Japanese emotionality, the Japanese salaryman, Japanese lifetime employment and the Japanese marriage. Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the reasons and the meaning of the changes in Japanese culture in everyday life. In the last chapter, the author presents his vision of a New Japan in the future.

Matsumoto's own research and other studies quoted in the book show clearly that there is no support for the claim that Japanese people are collectivistic and Americans individualistic (p. 40). In fact, some of the research concludes that the Japanese may be less collectivistic and more individualistic than the Americans (p. 41). I fully agree with him. There is no doubt that serious transitions are taking place on various levels of the Japanese societal structure. The strict hierarchical stratification so characteristic of Japanese social groups is beginning to break down. Individualism has steadily crept into Japanese society.

Are these changes mostly restricted to the younger generations? The reader could very well raise the point that most of the research quoted is limited to samples of university students (p. 36). Matsumoto believes, however, that these changes do not represent “a fad or a generation gap that the youth will ‘get over,’ but are signs of real and drastic changes in the culture of the Japanese society” (p. 36). Some readers, including this reviewer, will argue that these “changes” are only now beginning to take place; therefore, strong bastions of tradition are still left in Japanese society. There is quite a lot of evidence that, for instance, university students entering the business world are initiated and socialized in the older traditions. Matsumoto seems to agree with this: “Quite frankly, the data argue against the stereotypic notion of Japanese collectivism, at least among the younger generations, and speak directly to the existence of at least two groups in Japan with quite different cultural value systems” (p. 47). In fact, this is more in line with the author's “Visions of a New Japan in the Future” (chapter 5), where he proposes the concept of “individual collectivism”: “This concept suggests that a society can celebrate cultural diversity in thought or action (individuality) while maintaining core values related to the importance of group and hierarchy (collectivism). I do believe it is important for Japan to maintain its basic core values, those that have come to represent the essence of Japanese culture” (p. 198). Within the limitations of this review, one cannot deal at length with Matsumoto's views on Japanese education (pp. 186-190); however, his remarks should be read by all educators. The emphasis on rote memorization and the learning of facts and the single-minded focus on entrance examinations have produced students who have difficulty in thinking creatively about the world around them.

Many foreigners living and working in Japan (which is not the case for Matsumoto) would disagree with the conclusion of his research (pp. 43-44) that foreigners in Japan are not an outgroup category. It is true that the

Japanese no longer regard foreigners as strange human beings, especially if they speak Japanese. Foreigners in Japan are generally treated politely and kindly, yet it is still very difficult for them to be considered as part of the ingroup: the Japanese group. I strongly believe that Martin Gannon's opinion (*Understanding Global Cultures* [London: Sage, 1994]) is still accurate: "It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a gaijin (foreigner) to be fully accepted in Japan: to do so would upset harmonious relations between and among groups that have taken years to develop. A foreigner is like the rock tossed into the garden's pond that momentarily disturbs the harmony but quickly disappears from sight" (p. 126). This aspect of Japanese culture will take more time to change!

The New Japan is an important book which should be read by all those who are interested in Japan and would like to have a better understanding of the transformations—cultural, economic and political—this country is struggling with.

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