The path to the present

Needless to say, contemporary Japanese society is nothing but the product of the accumulating processes of its past history, especially after the end of World War II. It is no exaggeration to say that almost all the features of today's Japan have been molded during this particular period, which I would like to divide into three stages; the Age of Recovery (1945–70), the Age of Harvest (1970–90), and the Age of Postmodernity (1990 –).

The first stage is characterized by 'scarcity' and 'production.' Scarcity was not only material goods and services (cf. power, steel, factories; food, houses, clothes; and medical doctors, universities, or whatever), but also freedom and free time. Health and sanitary conditions were poor, and tuberculosis and other contagious diseases deprived the youth of their lives. In spite (or rather because) of this, people were busy and hard-working, thus the re-industrialization process evolved (GNP-ism, 'economic animal'). The industrial relation was tense, as labor unions were aggressive in demanding more pay and more political power. Parallel to this was the social mobility of people from rural to urban areas (urbanization or excessive concentration of the population in urban areas and relative decline of the population in rural areas) and restructuration of various social institutions into a more democratic form (democratization). As shown in chart 1, this first stage witnesses two-digit GNP growth rate, while the primary industry still employed 38% of the Japanese labor force and the proportion of the aged population (65 years-old and over) was around 5 percent of Japan's total population.

The second stage is characterized by 'affluence' and 'consumption.' In other words, it is the coming of the post-industrial society in this country. People began to enjoy the 'fruits' of their hard-working efforts, 'affluence.' They were concerned more with non-material than material things, and the so-called post-industrial values were popularly acknowledged. As they became satisfied with the substantial needs of everyday life, more money was poured into the 'affluent' activities and investments, thus the trips abroad and the enrollment in higher educational institutions increased remarkably. At the same time, they began to have a wider choice of lifestyle; thus individualization (self-realization) prevailed. The concept of basic human rights was also widely appreciated in Japanese society, and feminism and other human right-related movements were enhanced.

On the basis of these historical developments, the third stage comes into existence, which I would like to characterize by "ambiguity' ('uncertainty') and 'reflection.' Before proceeding my argument, however, I would like to point out some of the main characteristics of the preceding periods, which are directly related to the social changes we are experiencing today.

1) Japanese exceptionalism

Seymour Martin Lipset, an American political sociologist, compares American 'Exceptionalism' and Japanese 'Uniqueness' in his recent book dedicated to explain contemporary America. (*American Exceptionalism*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). According to his observation, the American organizing principles and institutions are exceptional and qualitatively different from those of other Western nations, as Alexis de Tocquville found in the 1830s. In the same token of thought, I can introduce the idea of 'Japanese Exceptionalism.' The Japanese organizing principles and institutions are 'exceptional and qualitatively different from those of other Asian nations,' even though Japan has borrowed many of the cultural elements (such as Buddhism and Confucianism) from these countries, particularly China and Korea, and cultivated them to create a Japanese culture.

In connection with the modern capitalist development (the US and Japan, both exceptionally successful), America has advantages because it has no feudal or hierarchical traditions which might have hindered its development, while Japan has many such heritage and it is said to have, contrary to the case of the former, contributed to facilitate Japan's modernization process, at least until recently. In other words, the Parsonian value pattern, *particularism-achievement*, was the basic principle of individual behaviors and institutional organizations in Japan. With the Emperor as the integrating symbol, the Japanese nation as a particularistic