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An Empirical Approach to Political Communication and a Critical Approach to International Communication

by ITO Youichi*

The first flash of memory that I have of my life is of seeing my father in a Japanese Navy Hospital in 1944. I was two-and-half year's old. My father's warship had been attacked by an American submarine and had subsequently sunk in the southern Pacific Ocean. After drifting for half-a-day in the middle of the ocean, my father was miraculously rescued by a Japanese ship. The second flash of memory that I have of my early life is that of something that occurred about half-a-year later. Some thirty Douglas B-29 bombers were roaring in the sky above us. I saw this scene from inside the air-raid shelter in our garden.

Probably because of these experiences, when I was a small boy I read many books and saw many movies dealing with the Japanese-American War. As I grew up, my interest turned to the political, military, and diplomatic *causes* of the Pacific War as well as the Second World War in general.

One of the important points I learned was that there was no dictator in Japan who was the equivalent of Hitler in Germany or Mussolini in Italy. Some Chinese and Americans have accused Tojo Hideki and Emperor Hirohito of being dictatorial. However, Mr. Tojo became the Japanese Prime Minister only six weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. When the island of Saipan was invaded by the American forces in August 1944, one year before the Japanese surrender, Mr. Tojo apologized to the National Diet (the Japanese parliament), resigned as prime minister, and completely retired from politics. Another well-known reason for Mr. Tojo's resignation was that he could not get along with Mr. Kishi Shinsuke, who was the Minister of Commerce and Industry at that time and who became the prime minister after the war (1957-1960). The pre-war Japanese Constitution did not give power to the prime minister to fire his cabinet members. Actually, after the war, Mr. Tojo said that weak prime ministerial powers or weak leadership was the main cause of political confusion and the Japanese tragedy that resulted from it. Mr. Tojo was hanged in 1948 as the head of the Japanese government at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

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** AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Japanese, Chinese, and Korean names in this article, including the author's, are given in their traditional order, the family name first followed by the given name.

Emperor Hirohito may be responsible for not being able to stop the Japanese aggressions in China or the attack on Pearl Harbor. The reason for this was that the Emperor was not given much political power under the Japanese Constitution at that time either. Compared with the German Kaiser, the Russian Czar, or the Chinese Emperor, the power of the Japanese Emperor was much more limited. Partly because of a unique Japanese history in which the Emperor (the head of state) and the Shogun (the head of the military) had shared supreme power since the late 12th century, there existed many contradictions and ambiguities in the prewar Japanese Constitution promulgated in 1889, which later brought about the difficulties of controlling the military.

Another important reason was Emperor Hirohito's personality. He was basically a marine biologist and was not much interested in the military or politics. Actually, he published three academic books in his lifetime. All these books deal with shellfish, seaweeds, and marine bacteria. Even the Soviet Union and the Japanese Communist Party, who wanted to abolish the imperial system in Japan soon after the war, could not present any evidence that Emperor Hirohito promoted or expressed any pro-war jingoism in the 1930s and 40s. Then who or what was responsible for Japanese history after the Manchurian Incident of 1931 until the end of the Pacific War in 1945? This question was left unanswered for me until quite recently.

After I graduated from Keio University, I entered the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). Two years later, I got a Fulbright scholarship and went to Boston University to study communications. In a class on international communication we read *The Silent Language* and the *Hidden Dimension* by Edward Hall (Hall, 1959; Hall, 1966). Edward Hall was, and I understand, still is, highly respected as a cultural anthropologist. However, I was shocked that there were so many misunderstandings in his books regarding Japanese customs, way of life, and way of thinking. These misunderstandings later on influenced my ideas regarding academic methodology.

Although I returned to the NHK after one-year's study at Boston University, I quit NHK after a year and entered the Graduate School of Keio University. When I became an assistant professor, my students and I read the Japanese translations of Edward Hall's two books mentioned above as well as his *Beyond Culture* (Hall, 1976). I was intrigued by what the Japanese translators of *The Hidden Dimension* and those of *Beyond Culture* (altogether four, but all different) have to say in their postscripts to the extent that although Japanese readers might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by some of the descriptions and observations of the original author, this book was nonetheless worth translating into the Japanese language. These comments, I thought, explained the shock that I felt when I read Edward Hall's books as a graduate student.

At that time, a similar phenomenon took place in Japan, only in the opposite direction. A famous Japanese social critic, Yamamoto Shichiei, presented himself

as a Jew living in Japan named Isaiah Ben Dasan, and published a book entitled *The Japanese and the Jew* (in Japanese) (Ben Dasan, 1971). The book not only sold more than one million copies but was granted a very prestigious book award (the Oya Soichi Award). As the book sold so well, the Japanese publisher decided to translate it into English and sell it overseas. I was intrigued to learn (many years after it was translated) that the American translator (although I do not know whether or not he was Jewish) felt so uncomfortable and embarrassed by many parts of the original Japanese version that he omitted them. As a result, the English version became much shorter than the original Japanese version. The Japanese readers' understanding, including mine, was that Yamamoto criticized the Japanese culture by contrasting it to the Jewish culture, which, according to Yamamoto, is "just the opposite" of the Japanese culture. I have no idea what bothered the American translator, but there must have been misunderstandings and exaggerations that he found hard to swallow --- something similar perhaps to what the Japanese translators pointed out regarding Edward Hall's *The Hidden Dimension* and *Beyond Culture*. Interestingly, no Japanese book reviews cautioned that the content of the best-selling and award-receiving book, *The Japanese and the Jew*, might make American or Jewish readers uncomfortable or feel offended. The Japanese, including myself, simply did not notice.

These experiences in the 1970s brought me to the following conclusions: (1) It is extremely difficult to discuss foreign cultures, and especially difficult to interpret human behavior in foreign cultures. (2) Those who discuss foreign cultures cannot escape from the mind-set that their own culture is normal and foreign cultures are by and large abnormal, weird, or inscrutable. (3) Research based on episodes, facts, or even statistical data is not reliable as long as they are arbitrarily selected by the researcher.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s much discussion was undertaken regarding "Western cultural imperialism," "Orientalism," and the like. At that time, I was asked by many Western as well as non-Western scholars and researchers at international conferences if the Japanese as non-Westerners suffer from American or Western cultural imperialism. My answer was that the Japanese certainly recognized and felt the "cultural imbalance" or even "threat" in the middle of the 19th century (or at the early Meiji period) and soon after the Second World War (especially during the American occupation period) but it was no longer a problem in the 1970s and 80s. It was not just my personal opinion. There was no Japanese expert or journalist at that time who argued that Western or American "cultural imperialism" was a serious problem for Japan. My non-Japanese friends asked me why I felt that way and reminded me of the unbalanced news flows between the United States and Japan, the existence in Japan of Tokyo Disney Land, McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and so on. Although I did not have answers readily to hand at that time, it became gradually possible for me to answer these questions.

As for news flows, it is true that the news flows between the United States and Japan were unbalanced. Japanese mass media's coverage of the United States at that time was about ten times more than the American mass media's coverage of Japan. However, many empirical surveys repeatedly revealed that Japan was better covered than Germany, Italy or Israel although less covered than the United Kingdom, France, or the (former-) Soviet Union. Armstrong (1982) content analyzed American newspapers and compared the space given to the changes of Japanese prime ministers and those of German chancellors. The result was that the American newspapers tended to give more space to the change of Japanese prime ministers than to German chancellors. Should the Japanese have complained that Japan should be covered to the same extent as the United Kingdom, France, or the Soviet Union? Furthermore, news flows between major Western European countries such as England, France, and Germany and Japan were well balanced, and the rest of the world, except the Soviet Union and China, covered Japan better than the Japanese mass media covered them. Then, it is only natural that the Japanese did not think that the international news flows pattern as a whole was a problem for them.

What about the existence of Tokyo Disney Land, McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chickens, and so on? Here again, the question was not really valid. As in the case of news flows, the comparison was made only between the United States and Japan. If we look at the flows of popular cultural products on the global level, Japan exported more than she imported. This pattern was true even between Western Europe and Japan, except for the United Kingdom in some years. At that time major Western European countries, including France and Italy, changed their national broadcasting policy and dramatically increased the number of channels and length of broadcasting time. As a result, new commercial TV stations were flooded with American dramas and Japanese animations. After the animations, "karaoke" penetrated into even Scandinavian countries and small country towns in the United States. I discuss these phenomena in my paper entitled "Trend Winds Change: Japan's Shift from an Information Importer to an Information Exporter, 1965-1985" published in *Communication Yearbook/13* (Ito, 1990).

Some Western observers argued that the appearance of so many Caucasian models in Japanese TV commercials and magazine advertisements had to do with "Western cultural imperialism" or even the Japanese national "inferiority complex". To me, however, the "inferiority complex discourse" sounded like an example of psychological projection. In other words, those who want to enjoy superiority want others to feel inferior to them. Do frequent appearances of children or dogs in TV commercials or advertisements, for example, mean that viewers suffer from inferiority complexes regarding children or dogs? Furthermore, not only white but also black talent, including celebrities such as Carl Lewis, Mohamed Ali, Florence Joiner, and Naomi Campbell, often appeared in Japanese TV commercials. Although the air-time frequency of black talent was definitely less than white talent, they were

still conspicuous considering the extremely small percentage of black residents in Japan. Some Westerners, who had lived in Japan for many years, complained that the way Caucasian models in Japanese TV commercials and advertising were used was blatant stereotyping and sometimes even insulting. They often appeared as cowboys, bunny girls, or in the nude. In a recent shampoo commercial, the straight black hair of a Chinese starlet (Zhang Ziyi) is admired and envied by curly-blond-hair models. Reflecting the “*kanryu* or Korean style boom” in recent years, many Korean actors and actresses are used in TV commercials and advertisements.

Ignoring all these complexities, some Western scholars and researchers are still indulging in the old “Western domination model”, which I nowadays call “Western narcissism”. For example, according to Eric Kramer, an Oklahoma University professor:

In this article we argue that increasingly a single aesthetic body-image is emerging globally and that it is Caucasoid.....Due to global media domination, Western tastes are becoming world tastes. But this sets up an untenable situation whereby, the more a non-Caucasian internalizes this globalizing aesthetic, the more they attempt to “adapt” and fit the ideal mold, the more they are likely to come to see themselves as hopelessly inadequate, if not ugly (Kramer, 2000, p. 83).

However, the reality is that most of the “Caucasian body-images” that we are receiving every day over the internet are pornographic. I searched for and collected English-language articles similar to Kramer’s and criticized them in my article entitled “Globalization and Western Narcissism” (Ito, 2003), which, I believe, belongs in the category of “critical study” on international communication.

Robin Gill, who speaks and writes the Japanese language and lives in Japan as a free-lance writer, published a Japanese language book entitled *Anti-Nihonjinron [Anti-Japanism] Book*, in which he criticizes the Japanese prejudice against Western cultures that he called “Occidentalism” (Gill, 1985). He also wrote a long column entitled “Occidentalism: Preoccupation with the West” in *Asahi Shimbun* (Gill, 1990). Major examples of Japanese “Occidentalism” are as follows: Westerners are selfish or too ego-centric and too calculating, and never apologize because they are afraid of being sued. However, according to Gill, unfriendly or unfavorable prejudices are easier for Westerners to handle because they can refute them. Problems arise when the instances in which the Japanese envy Westerners are based on prejudices or preoccupations that have some seemingly good reasons. For example, the Japanese believe that white and black people have stronger sexual desires and potency because they are meat eaters. On the other hand, the Japanese believe that they themselves are more “botanic” because they live on rice, fish, vegetables and bean products.

According to Gill (1990), the Japanese believe that the Westerners’ brain works like an “on/off switch”, enabling them to adapt to new situations very quickly. Even

Doi Takeo, an internationally famous psychiatrist wrote as follows:

... the Westerner's expression of thanks is generally speaking, brief and to the point, with no unpleasant aftermath. If he says "thank you," that "finishes" it; there is none of the Japanese's lingering sense that ---- as the word *sumanai* literally signifies --- things "are not finished" (Doi, 1973, p. 90).

In other parts of his book Doi makes the same argument regarding apology because the Japanese use "*sumanai*" or "*sumimasen*" when they apologize as well. When the Japanese apologize by saying "*sumimasen*" it means that the feeling of apology is not yet finished and will last a long time. However, the Japanese believe that once Westerners say "Thank you" or "I am sorry", that's it. They soon forget what happened and their attention shifts to other matters. The Japanese envy this "efficiency".

The Japanese who are going to the United States are advised as follows: "In America, when you want to say "maybe", say "no". When you want to say "no", say "no way", and when you want to say "no way", shout "f**k you!" Although this is taken as a half-joke, this kind of image held by the Japanese affects Japanese translations of English expressions. Gill (1990) points out that the Japanese translations of English language documents or literature are always made to be simpler, clearer, and "more logical". In order to meet readers' expectations, Japanese translators tend to translate "B rather than A" in the English original as "B not A". Reserved expressions such as "seems to be", "might be", "would be" tend to be translated into Japanese as simple "is" or "are". These translations further reinforce the Japanese image of Americans as straightforward, simple, and "logical" in the strictest sense. In the recent American movie entitled "Lost in Translation", an American business executive dispatched to Tokyo makes a speech in English before Japanese employees. A Japanese interpreter standing next to him is supposed to interpret his speech paragraph by paragraph. The American businessman becomes perplexed because all the paragraphs that take two or three minutes for him to say are translated by the Japanese interpreter as five to ten second phrases. Although that movie scene is only a caricature, it reflects the stereotyped image of Americans who are believed to be straightforward and say nothing subtle, delicate, unclear, or complicated.

These experiences reminded me of the misgivings that I had about Edward Hall when I was a graduate student. For any scholar or researcher in the world their own culture is normal and foreign cultures are somewhat abnormal, weird, or inscrutable. Similarly, for those who have strong beliefs or ideologies, theirs is normal and all others are abnormal. Therefore, the research method by which the researcher arbitrarily or non-systematically selects episodes, facts, or statistical data in order to "prove" some theory or hypothesis is quite problematic. This method, which I consider a kind of "critical method", is valid when its user's intention is to criticize and not prove something because revealing and discussing the intentionally ignored

episodes, facts, or statistical data can make effective criticism. I believe, however, those who intend to *prove* something should use some systematic method where the results are unpredictable or uncontrollable.

In 1987, I happened to come across the memoirs of Mr. Hata Seiryu, who was the Editor-in-Chief of the Asahi Shimbun, the most prestigious national newspaper in prewar Japan. He also worked as a leading journalist before World War II. Reflecting on his entire journalistic career and especially the hectic 15 years from 1930 through 1945, he wrote just before his retirement in 1987 the following :

Newspapers at that time did not necessarily try to flatter those in power. Rather, they wrote to please readers. I may sound evasive, but there certainly existed some kind of mechanism that aggravated the situation through subtle interactions (between newspapers and the public). Readers were hungry for articles reporting the exploits of the victorious Imperial Forces. Newspapers indulged themselves in a competition to appear more patriotic and to see who could print the most articles urging and exalting victory. Newspaper companies cooperated through the dispatch of entertainers, calls for patriotic songs, campaigns for contributions to build more airplanes, and in various other ways. The heavy responsibility that the newspapers bear is second only to that of the government. However, I disagree with the claim that “the general masses were victims”. Newspapers form public opinion, but public opinion also influences newspapers. The general masses are not like horses that can be tamed and trained to do their master’s bidding (“Senso”, 1987).

Were there any wars in history that were caused by public opinion rather than dictators? Historians say yes, and that the oldest example is the Peloponnesian War between Greece and Sicily that erupted in 415 BC. Thucydides, the great Greek historian who was embedded with the Greek forces, describes how the Greek decision to send an expeditionary force to attack Sicily was influenced by jingoistic public opinion at that time. However, as that is ancient history let us not discuss it here. (See Ito, 2002 for further details.) The Spanish-American War of 1898 is a better example.

The *Encyclopedia Americana* describes the Spanish-American War as follows: Spain “was in no condition militarily or economically to fight the United States”, and consequently the Spanish government “employed every means to prevent the outbreak of war”. The Spanish government informed the American ambassador in Madrid “that the Spanish government was making all the concessions that public opinion would tolerate”. However, President McKinley, on his side, was “under tremendous pressure from public opinion to embark on a war to liberate the Cubans from “Spanish tyranny” and avenge the Maine (that sank in Havana harbor from an explosion causing the death of 260 members of the crew).” (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 25, 360w). And, of course, American newspapers at that time helped whip up pro-war sentiments.

There are hundreds of books written on the Spanish-American War and Japanese history from the Manchurian Incident until the end of the Pacific War. However, their methods are all historical or journalistic. How can we, as social scientists, contribute to the study of the mechanisms of that interaction between public opinion and the mass media that may cause a major war?

There exist no opinion-poll data on the Spanish-American War or the Japanese wars in the 1930s and 40s. However, it seems to me that if newspapers are supposed to reflect public opinion, it should be possible to deduce public opinion from the contents of newspapers. Actually, many scholars have done this in the past but only in descriptive ways. My idea is to extract public opinions from old newspapers not only as text data but also as statistical data.

Newspapers report a variety of opinions representing organizations and individuals. My students and I classified every opinion in the newspapers into the following categories: the government, the ruling party, opposition parties, the mass media, the business community, labor unions, specialists, intellectual leaders, ordinary people, foreign governments, and so on. Then, coders judged to what extent each of these opinions was favorable or unfavorable to the issue or subject of our concern. By adding up the points, we estimated to what extent each section was favorable or unfavorable to the issue at hand.

Compared with the government and the mass media, it is difficult to establish and rationalize the category of “public opinions”. However, we have statistical data for components of public opinions such as ordinary people, opposition parties, intellectual leaders, and so on. By combining these components, it should be possible to establish the category of public opinions and measure the percentages of favorable or unfavorable opinions regarding the issue of our concern. Even if different experts cannot agree on the definition of public opinion, the longitudinal statistical data of public opinions should be valuable as long as they depend on a consistent and unified definition.

So far, I have completed more than five research projects based on this premise. (See Ito, 2002 for papers published in English). In order to classify each opinion in the newspaper articles into appropriate categories, we need to have strict, detailed, and concrete definitions and understanding of the government, the mass media, and public opinion. This is one of the contributions that this method makes to the conceptualization and theorization of the interactions among the government, the mass media, and public opinion.

Last summer my father died at the age of 91. A few months later, I received a long letter from his younger brother who is now 86 years old. He wrote to me that he greatly missed my father and regretted that he did not have a chance to discuss seriously the meaning of the wars for which they had to sacrifice their most precious years. As a matter of fact, they had another younger brother but he lost his life on a battlefield in China. Therefore, my father’s younger brother earnestly wrote to me

that he would like to learn what my father said about the war during his lifetime because he would like to learn the meaning of the war as much as possible while he still had his full faculties.

The social sciences, including their methodologies, are supposed to be neutral, objective, and rigorous. However, they do not exist in a vacuum. In order for social scientists to produce unique and meaningful works, they need special motivations. These motivations may be traumatic experiences or events such as those currently going on in the Middle East, some kind of mental complex, or national fiasco, as in the case of Japan from 1931 through 1945. As for my method of research, I will use the “critical method” when I wish to criticize some theory or study and use the empirical or orthodox scientific method when I wish to prove something. Finally, one of the practical lessons that I learned regarding international communication education since my first encounter with Edward Hall’s books is that it is better not to stress the differences too much because, after all, people tend to think that their own culture is the normal standard. The differences become exaggerated as people talk about them. If, for example, people are repeatedly told that Americans are individualistic and the Japanese are collectivistic, negative stereotyping ensues on both sides, and in several years, the following may happen: Americans will come to believe that the Japanese are all authoritarian and the Japanese will come to believe that Americans are all selfish.

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