Centrifugal Vs. Centripetal Discourses of Reform: Contending Subcultures Within the Japanese Professorate

Review of *The Japanese Professor: An Ethnography of a University Faculty*, by Gregory S. Poole
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Since Western scholars began researching the Japanese educational system in earnest in the 1970s, they have focused mostly upon the primary and secondary levels. These studies have largely failed to address university education in Japan, which, in the sparse treatment it has received, has been typically viewed as a four-year respite from serious academic study. Dr. Gregory Poole helps to fill this gaping hole in the literature by exploring how professors at one small, private university in Tokyo (the "Edo University of Commerce," or "EUC") configure their working world. As an associate professor, head of the international programs, and trusted confidante of the university president, Poole parlayed his insider status to gain impressive insight into the worldviews of his Japanese faculty coworkers—hence illuminating not only the inner workings at EUC, but also dynamics shared at many universities in Japan (particularly small private ones). The result is a useful reference for both non-Japanese and Japanese which can be utilized not only to inform research about the cultures of Japanese universities, but also so university faculty members can better understand their workplaces and increase their effectiveness therein.

This ethnography is a chronicle and analysis of organizational cultural change, as EUC is in the process of modifying its programs to recruit and retain students in the midst of fierce competition for an ever-shrinking pool of potential Japanese students. In the first two chapters, Poole lays the groundwork for his study. Placing such changes within the context of educational reform since the Meiji Restoration, he concisely, yet punctiliously details the current sources of pressure for university reform (e.g., decreased government funding, a declining student population, and the transition to a customer mentality among students) as well as common university responses (e.g., aggressive student recruitment, efforts to improve student retention, and the introduction of new curricula as well as more engaging, effective teaching methodologies to bolster student satisfaction).

Poole employs concepts familiar to any interculturalist who specializes in Japan, including *nemawashi*, *kaizen*, and *tsukiai*, but describes how they are employed within EUC to establish, leverage, and negotiate power—actions which impact how the university culture evolves. For example, through *tsukiai,* social capital is both built and exercised in terms of organizational insider knowledge being gained and shared, as well as influence exerted on looming decisions. Understanding such dynamics is essential for anyone wanting to affect change in universities, and Poole is a more than competent guide.

Poole's explanation of Japanese university "*zemi"* also demonstrates how non-Japanese university faculty members can utilize this book to inform their daily work practices. The number of native English speakers teaching

zemi is still relatively limited, so when those at my university were required to begin doing so last year, our first question was, "What does one actually *do* in a *zemi*?" *Zemi* and "seminar" may be linguistic relatives, but we knew that they were not practical equivalents. Poole clarifies the educational goals and methodology common in such courses, and in the process, as he does in so many aspects of Japanese university life, he illuminates the daily rituals, roles, and expectations deeply ingrained among Japanese teachers and students which are often unfamiliar to those of us who were educated outside of Japan.

The next three chapters form the meat of this volume. When considering the internal cultural debate among EUC professors as to how they should respond to pressures to change, Poole introduces two competing discourses: reform and tradition, which divide the faculty between two "camps" that vie for control. He argues that these discourses engender contrasting ideologies embraced among EUC's professors about how their university should be modeled, how faculty members should best go about spending their time in service of the school, and who is a "good" professor. Moreover, such discourses provide contrasting guides for how to accumulate symbolic capital and consequently gain influence, recognition, status, and power.

Poole coins the term "*sotomuki*" ("outward-oriented" or "centrifugal") to describe the ideology of reform that involves a break with the past, and "*uchimuki*" ("inward-oriented" or "centripetal") for the ideology that extols reinforcing tradition. In the *sotomuki* paradigm, Japanese universities are

similar to businesses in the service industry and operate according to competitive market principles. Professors and administrative staff members are expected to provide a service (higher education and degrees) to customers (students and their families), who in turn expect a high-quality product. Quality and efficiency in work are continually emphasized, so administrative jobs, especially those requiring long hours of "merely" being present at meetings, is generally frowned upon as a poor use of time.

Individual achievement is compatible with the *sotomuki* world view—typically actualized through off-campus research activities and involvement in academic networks that extend beyond one's university of employment. Teaching is the most highly valued among professorial duties, followed by research, and last comes administrative and committee work. In this model, professors accumulate symbolic capital through high student evaluations, teaching awards, speaking invitations to outside groups, refereed journal articles, Ph.D.s, and external recognition of one's scholarly accomplishments. Being a well-known scholar not only reflects exceptional individual achievement, but also is thought of as one way to attract student applicants.

The second ideology, *uchimuki*, emphasizes the importance of tradition and frames the university as a community, or even a family, where social control and institutional management rely on consensus. *Uchimuki* is characterized both by mutually-interdependent, hierarchical relationships and a cooperative, communal spirit of egalitarianism (in terms of equitably

distributing teaching and administrative duties). Reciprocity and loyalty are stressed, and social debt (*"on"*) is continuously calculated.

Loyalty is also paramount to the university, and it is best expressed by spending long hours where one is *visible* at work—in many cases in group-centered activities with little emphasis upon time efficiency. At such functions, whether they are committee meetings, alumni receptions, or after-hours drinking parties, professors gather valuable insider knowledge, reinforce interpersonal alliances, and affect decision-making. In the *uchimuki* paradigm, administrative work, particularly when done in groups, is valued over research, while teaching—i.e., using innovative educational methods to impart advanced academic knowledge—comes last. Although such teaching is not emphasized, it is important to spend long hours with students (in one's office, pubs, or on overnight retreats) to impart wisdom about life and becoming a functioning member of society—in other words, to participate in students' socialization and identity formation.

Symbolic capital in the *uchimuki* world view is gained by committee chairs, titles, recognition as an *oyabun* ("boss man"), possessing a network of human relationships to affect change at the university, and status as a professor who spends long hours, even weekends, at work in devotion to administrative tasks. The symbolic capital of the *sotomuki* mode can be seen as threatening by those subscribing to the *uchimuki* ideology, as individual achievements in research and teaching generally improve potential job mobility and thus heighten the possibility of being disloyal to the institution by moving elsewhere.

Ultimately, *uchimuki* and *sotomuki* form ideal types which are not mutually-exclusive, diametrical opposites, but rather two poles on a continuum. For example, some professors operate within only one paradigm, while others deftly maneuver between them, gathering symbolic capital and its benefits through their sensitivity to context and ability to work within either set of assumptions and requisite behavioral norms. Some do this without conflict, while others feel an inner struggle to rectify the contradictions between the paradigms. Therefore, although Poole describes EUC as *uchimuki*-dominant, the pre-eminence of either paradigm varies according to the situation and the actors involved.

Poole's analysis of *uchimuki* and *sotomuki* forms this book's crowning achievement and an important addition to the corpus of concepts used in the intercultural field to better understand Japanese work organizations, the diversity of Japanese people's values and behaviors, as well as the complexity of culture itself. Poole nimbly demonstrates the necessity of recognizing the conflicting values and requisite norms within any culture so as to more clearly understand it—thus rendering obsolete hackneyed essentialist narratives of Japan (or any other culture for that matter).

Although this book focuses upon university organizational culture, many of the insights can also be applied to other business contexts, which is useful for corporate trainers and scholars needing to better understand the cultural dynamics of such work organizations. At one end of the continuum, family-oriented firms, such as those detailed by Kondo (1990), fit the *uchimuki* ideal (a reactive, preindustrial, and interpersonal model), while

American multinational companies in Japan often mirror the *sotomuki* world view (a proactive, postindustrial business model). Many companies in Japan, however, are actually dynamic amalgamations of the *uchimuki* and *sotomuki* paradigms.

On one hand, *uchimuki* tendencies towards lifetime employment, building generalist expertise and tacit knowledge that is largely applicable only within one's current work organization, heavy time investments in after-hours relationship building with coworkers and customers, and a seniority-based organizational hierarchy all conjure images of Japan's past—but also a past that is being reclaimed and fortified in the present as the limits are realized of *sotomuki*-style business practices and corporate reforms. *Sotomuki* ideals are promoted in what is often considered an American corporate model, where promotions are based on performance, workers are given greater autonomy, work-life balance is emphasized, and specialists with explicit knowledge (who can also readily transfer their skills between companies) are common. Japanese companies are indeed at a crossroads—trying to adapt to an increasingly competitive global marketplace, but also striving to retain and even reinvent the organizational cultural factors which contributed to Japan's rapid economic expansion and success for so much of the second half of the 20th century. Therefore, the insights in this book can be utilized by the astute reader to better understand the changing organizational cultural dynamics in work organizations outside the realm of tertiary education.

This book is generally well-written, but it could be improved on several fronts. First, when Poole references the academic literature, some explanations of concepts or theories that appear in these works are sparse or omitted, which can make for difficult reading if someone has not read those specific books or articles. In the Preface, this is most problematic. Also, the fifth chapter ("Cultural Performance") feels underdeveloped, as if it would be either better integrated into previous chapters or expanded to deliver a more thorough analysis of the topics explored. Finally, while I admit this point is biased towards my interests, as an interculturalist, especially since Professor Poole is American and oversaw a staff of native-English-speaking teachers, I wanted to learn more about the interface between foreign and Japanese professors. While these relationships, as well as the place of non-Japanese faculty within EUC, were treated to some extent, such intercultural relations formed mostly a peripheral topic.

Ultimately, this volume constitutes a detailed guide in how to earn and preserve symbolic capital—and, by extension, core membership status—within Japanese work organizations. Such membership is realized by building trust with coworkers, and it enables people to participate in daily decision-making and affect change. It can be argued that the creation of an open society for foreign residents in Japan is not necessarily accomplished by creating mini-havens within work organizations where English is spoken and non-Japanese behavioral norms adhered to (as is often the case when groups of non-Japanese and Japanese work together); in such enclaves, employees can remain largely cut off from their organizations' primary

decision-making bodies. Rather, integrating foreign people *into* those core decision-making groups could be a more effective way of actualizing a "borderless" society in which acceptance is based not upon national origin but instead upon Japanese cultural and linguistic competence. This book articulates not only where such decision-making is made in a Japanese university, but also how access to these groups is typically gained and maintained. If both non-Japanese and Japanese use such knowledge wisely and cooperatively, they can be empowered to create organizations where reform occurs in a manner that is sensitive to the concerns and interests of *all* of their members.

References

Kondo, D. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.