The *Ura* and *Omote* of Debate

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In a landmark article in 1994, Robert James Branham presented a convincing body of historical evidence of a strong debate tradition in Japan that predates the Meiji era, which is when both Western and Japanese communication scholars generally had claimed "debate" started in this country. Moreover it had been said to have been a phenomenon adopted from the West; many Japanese themselves, as well as Westerners, continue to claim that it does not suit Japanese sensibilities, or the Japanese language.

> The main cultural arguments employed to explain the supposed absence of argumentation and debate in Japan are: (1) Japanese society is characterized by strict hierarchy and obedience to authority, making argument unthinkable; (2) Confucianism and other moral and religious traditions explicitly proscribe speech and debate; (3) Japanese society is devoted to harmony, a value that precludes debate; and (4) Japanese language is unsuited to exposition, logic and contradiction. (134)

Branham deals with each of these claims, using historical facts to refute them. What is interesting about these four "cultural arguments", though, in addition to the existence of evidence that disproves them, is that they do not clarify or take into account — and thus effectively ignore — the differing parameters of the various types of human relationships that exist in Japan. They thus indicate incomplete

understanding of what debate involves and how it engages the debater and the audience.

Debate is a public speaking activity. While it is often equated with argumentation in a general way, when the two are differentiated it is by way of clarifying that a debate with someone is conducted with the intention of persuading an audience, not the person or persons with whom one is speaking. "We *argue* with someone to convince them and *debate* against an opponent to convince an audience."(Cirlin, 9) . The fact that debate is conducted in any of a number of different formats further distances it from the sort of direct engagement of an opponent which would obtain in a private encounter. Nevertheless debate texts in both the U.S. and Japan list among the skills that can be developed such things as critical listening, open-mindedness, self-confidence, and the ability to cooperate. They stress that the main purpose of debate is to learn. They emphasize that debate develops respect for others' ideas and points of view. The conclusion that can be drawn from this kind of emphasis is that debate participation is not the antithesis of harmony but the antithesis of intolerance, and that it operates as much on the mind of the debater as it does on the minds of the debater's audience.

For those who see themselves as individualistic, this sort of training would seem to be aimed at tempering such individualism, in the interest of promoting in oneself and in one's audience a broader understanding of issues. Insofar as the objective of debate is to "convince an audience", it is concensus-building, not contentious. But clearly its goal is effective expression of a point of view. Thus, there is an aspect that focuses on the self, and one that focuses on the other.

Branham demonstrated that ideas of debate and dissent were very much a part of Japanese history and socialization, even in their prohibition. And in spite of the preponderance of evidence supporting this fact, "notions persist that debate is somehow antithetical to Japanese culture." (132) Well, how? Branham's implication

is that these notions are inappropriate. But "Japanese culture", like any other culture, is a broad, multitiered entity. Commonly-held assumptions such as (1) and (3) above, among the main relevant points that Branham found in the literature, ignore important human aspects of that entity. And further, descriptions of "debate" as Japanese know it today are, it can be seen in Branham's article, basically the American procedures translated and promulgated in the 1860s. (143) This suggests that the idea of debate has been considered, in a de facto sort of way, as a Western concept. Insofar as Japanese today are familiar with it, it *is* a Western concept.

Western practitioners of debate as a specific activity have been socialized to look upon it as an acceptable way of interacting with others. It is described as being governed by rules as well as conventions (Cirlin 1994; Goodnight 1987; Richards & Rickett 1995) which constitute its "formal" aspect, understood, if not expressly designated, to be separate and distinct from the personal relationships of the people involved. Nevertheless, debate is not necessarily for everybody. Cirlin, in his internationally-oriented text, suggests that the activity might be suited to a limited number of people with the appropriate temperament. (6) Although he is speaking of the confrontation of performance, as practiced in the U.S. and in many other places around the world, it is at the same time clear that the debate concept, as communication, reaches beyond this dimension. Insofar as it is a communication method, it is bound (1) to be invariably linked to the dynamics of human relationships, and (2) to differ among cultures and subcultures, as those dynamics differ.

Jensen (1992), while allowing that there are "multiple strands in Asia" with "varying rhetorical contexts", undertakes to delineate an "identifiable core of rhetorical traditions which will allow for the use of the singular label 'Asian'"". In a discussion of underlying values, he refers to the views of life and one's relationship to it in the teachings of Lao-Tzu, Confucius, Krishna, and others, and to ideas and

principles centering on harmony and "groupness". The importance of face-saving, seeing differences as complementary rather than adversarial, and having a sense of the oneness of the universe are seen as evidence of a lack of emphasis on the individual as singular identity. He claims:

> Motivations for group-centeredness are multiple. Surely such laudatory ones as unselfishness, loyalty, harmony, kindness, and altruism play a central role, but fear of exclusion and the need for security are also strongly operating. (156)

He carefully contrasts these ideas with Western notions of individualism, "a centrifugal force, a moving away from, a separation of oneself from groupings and a bringing to full flower the individual as an individual." (156) Such comparisons and contrasts are not unusual in literature which attempts to look at cultural differences. In many cases the oversimplification inherent in such exercises, however, obfuscates the truth, which often lies outside the range of assumptions generally attached to the use of such terminology.

Tobin (1992), in discussing the socialization of the Japanese in this regard, comments:

> Westerners, like Japanese, also ideally have multifaceted selves, selves able to adjust to different people and different situations...The difference may be less one of psychology than of ethnopsychology, less a difference between Japanese and Western psyches than in the way the dimensions of the self are portrayed and evaluated in Japan and the West. In Japan, unlike in America, circumspection, circumlocution, formality, ceremony, ritual, and manners are viewed as vehicles for expressing as well as masking pleasure and for

realizing rather than for binding the self. Less likely than Americans to view social conformity as a sign of weakness of character, joining the group as a betrayal of individuality, or ritualized public discourse as hypocrisy, Japanese value the *omote*, formal dimension of the self, as well as the *ura*, more spontaneous dimension. (24)

Tobin further explains *omote* and *ura* this way:

The word *omote* does not carry with it nearly as much of the negative connotations as does the English word "formal" of being constrained or pleasureless. Rather *omote* and *ura* refer to different kinds of pleasures and satisfactions and to different aspects of the self...[W]hen the children...use honorific language each day at school to refer to their parents...[i]t is the social order, not their parents, that is being honored by this use of formal language. The most important distinction being taught and learned is not, as it might appear to be, the Confucian one between high-status parents and low-status children, but rather the distinction that exists between the side of self that finds expression in one's private, *ura* relationship to one's family at home and the side of self that finds expression in the public, *omote* relationship to one's family that is shown to the outside world, through stylized, formal words and gestures. (36-37)

An important issue, therefore, is presentation — what situations constitute the public, what dynamics operate there, and how these dynamics differ from those operating in the private sphere.

Relevant theories, models and concepts

One well-known way of referring to this distinction is *uchi/soto*. This dyad is

itself quite ambiguous, however, not allowing for discrimination between various types of inside-outside relationships or, for that matter, inside-inside relationships (those involving the self and members of an "inner circle"). Kuwayama (1992) comments on this and suggests that "reference other orientation" clarifies these possibilities, permitting examination of them with less interference from a culturocentric perspective. It "focuses on two propositions: (1) that others provide the self with significant frames of reference for self-appraisal and attitude formation; and (2) that there are three distinct categories of others in Japan, *mawari* (people around), *hito* (people at large), and *seken* (society), which are concentrically related to the self (*jibun*) at the center." (122) The basis for this is a recognition of the importance of reference groups in addition to membership groups: "What distinguishes a reference group from a membership group is not so much whether or not one has a formal membership in a particular group as whether or not one refers oneself to that group, either positively or negatively, in shaping one's attitudes and evaluations." (130)

This would seem to have clear applications not only to the audience orientation of all aspects of debate, including the choice of approach and presentation, but even to the decision to debate at all. Kuwayama states that "the Japanese self is related systematically to [the above] categories of others...linguistic evidence shows that *hito* serves as an agent of socialization." (142-143) In fact *hito* can stand both for a third person and for that represented by *jibun*, a linguistic fact that illustrates the fluidity and blurring of boundaries that has been commented on as being distinctive in Japanese society.[1] Kuwayama adds, however, that "even though the Japanese self is relational, as the occasional interchangeability of *jibun* and *hito* shows, the self has an identity of its own. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is only by acknowledging the existence of a self, whatever form it may assume, that we can discuss relationships of the self and others" (145), thus showing the advantage in some

contexts of using the reference other model instead of *uchi/soto*.

While Kuwayama describes several categories of Other, Lebra (1992) postulates three dimensions of Self, two of which are particularly relevant here: "the interactional self" and "the inner self". The interactional self, which she characterizes as "socially contextualized", has two polar orientations: presentational and empathetic. The presentational self she explains as the one concerned with face, "addressed to the world of audience [which] is called *seken*...the face-sensitive self addressed to the *seken* is identified as *sekentei*." (107) It is this presentational aspect of the interactional self which is vulnerable to sanction.

Lebra describes the presence of *seken* as having "immediacy and inescapability", but the entity represented by *seken* as being "invisible and ill-defined". It nevertheless seems to represent some kind of standard, as suggested by the usage in Japanese of the expression *seken-nami*. It seems that this is the dimension of self that causes a Western viewpoint to label Japanese "conformist", a term that implies that they are unwilling or unable to speak or behave in a way that would threaten their comfortable niche in society, and by extension, are unable to feel comfortable in the confrontational situation of debate.

In this interactional self there is an empathetic orientation as well, "empirically continuous with, but conceptually distinct from, the presentational self" involving "the awareness of self as an insider of a group or network, or as partner to a relationship..." (108) Here again, Western thinking has the opportunity to interpret this orientation in a similarly negative way. By way of enlightenment, therefore, Lebra's examples of what "group" or "relationship" might mean are offered here:

> While middle-class Americans, for example, tend to locate the bonded self within the family, Japanese spread it to wider society, particularly in a group of intimate peers...such as former classmates, or an office group within a

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> company ...Further, for Americans, sexual bonding seems essential to the
> well-being of the empathetic self, and therefore, within the family, it is
> conjugal ties that claim priority. For Japanese, sexuality plays a less crucial
> role, and the strongest bond within the family is that of parent, mother in
> particular, and child...It may be hypothesized, then, that intimacy seeking
> among Americans is more concentrated within a family, and further
> condensed in a sexual pair, whereas it is more dispersed and generalized
> among Japanese. (109-110)

These examples illustrate differences in very basic assumptions underlying
behavior in these two societies, regarding very basic relationships. It is reasonable to
suggest that differing components of these relationships might dictate different
behaviors to be appropriate. Certainly what constitutes confrontation, and with
whom it would be "safe" and acceptable behavior, could be more complicated issues
than they may at first seem.

Lebra, like Kuwayama, points out that the interactional self is a relative concept,
and gives as one example "the lack of the exact equivalent of 'I' which would serve
as the fixed point of self. As long as one stays in the interactional world, multiple
and variable self-identification seems necessary." (111) However,

> Japanese do divide self into the outer part and the inner part...It is the inner
> self that provides a fixed core for self-identity and subjectivity, and forms a
> potential basis of autonomy from the ever-insatiable demands from the social
> world...While the outer self is socially circumscribed, the *kokoro* can be free,
> spontaneous, and even asocial. Further, the *kokoro* claims moral superiority
> over the outer self in that it is a reservoir of truthfulness and purity...This
> association of the *kokoro* (or inner self) with truthfulness gives rise to the

paradoxical notion that the "real" truth is inexpressible. Thus words and speech as means of expression are often regarded as potentially deceptive and false, and silence as indicative of the true *kokoro*... (112)

This idea may sound generically "Eastern" to some, but Lebra refers at this point to her citing in 1986 of a study done with subjects in Korea, Hong Kong and Japan, in which

Japanese respondents, compared with Chinese and Korean counterparts, were found consistently to pay more attention to their state of mind, feeling, and *kokoro*...To complete the sentence fragment, "If you are kind to others,"" nearly half of the Japanese sample referred to the inner satisfaction or joy of the kind actor whereas similar responses were given by about a quarter of the Korean sample, and only 4 percent of the Chinese. (112-113)

This Japanese result could be interpreted (Western-style?) as other-directedness. Or it could be seen in one of two "Japanese" ways: as revealing the power of *seken*, with its eyes and ears attuned to everything, forcing people to behave in a way that *seken* would perceive as being acceptable; or as manifesting the importance to the individual of *kokoro*.

While this [inner-outer] division may be detrimental to communication, Japanese also believe that the inner self, the *kokoro* in particular, is what makes communication possible and complete...the inner self, when dissociated from the outer self, may be directed as an asocial obsession with self-expression or self-actualization through work or sheer perseverance...the moral emphasis upon the interiority of self leads to "spiritualism" aiming at

the triumph of the spirit over the material world...Today's version of spiritualism functions differently: economically affluent and technologically advanced, Japanese warn themselves against losing the *kokoro* in the midst of material abundance...Spontaneous, emotional, impulsive acts are thus tolerated...the overloaded "private self" thus has a way of releasing itself into public self. (113-114)

Here, then, we can see one possible explanation for why certain behavior could be simultaneously compatible with Japanese cultural norms and perceived as flouting them. Rather than a case of the Japanese either not knowing their own culture or of misunderstanding it, it could well be a case of their being more conscious of certain strands of a complicated cultural web, and less conscious or unconscious of others. In this they could be said to be similar to actors involved with any other culture.

Studies of communication behaviors further clarify how social categories vary in the different cultures, and thus how public and private spheres can be recognized. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) gathered and summarized some of the important studies pertaining to Japan and North America. A major point is that the verbal plays a different role in communication; North Americans focus more on words than the Japanese. (62) Interaction in Japan depends more directly on mutual understanding, recognition and acceptance of group memberships (recall Lebra's description, above), whereas for North Americans, "individuals' attitudes, beliefs and feelings" are the most important. These are only secondary considerations for Japanese. (63) Miyanaga's view is also cited, that honest feelings being expressed too early in a relationship can create strong negative reactions. (66)

Concerning "predispositions toward verbal behavior", Gudykunst and Nishida report:

...the greater the uncertainty avoidance in a culture, the more individuals within the culture experience anxiety when communicating. Consistent with this prediction, Japanese and Koreans report higher levels of social anxiety than North Americans...This is consistent with cross-cultural studies of communication apprehension...Recognizing [this]...should not be interpreted as implying that communication apprehension is a problem in Japan or Korea. In fact, the opposite is true: it is valued. [It has been argued] that Koreans are attracted more to individuals who do not engage in a lot of verbal activity than they are to those who engage in high levels of verbal activity. A similar argument can be made for Japan. (75)

Having said this, they cite researchers Partridge and Shibano, who "nevertheless argue that Japanese do behave assertively. Japanese assertiveness, however, takes place within the situational contexts in which they embed their behavior." (76)

Applications

An important issue, then, is not whether the Japanese have individual identities or opinions, or whether they ever express them, but how, when, to whom, and to what end they get expressed. Clearly verbalization and lack of verbalization both have functions in Japanese society distinct from what their counterparts might be in some Western, and some other Eastern, societies. And the complexities of language use are not necessarily understood clearly by people simply because they happen to be native speakers of, or conversant in, a particular language.

Branham cites Western scholars' reports about how the "Japanese themselves" feel about their own language, and then reveals, apparently with no sense of incredulity, that the opinions came from "Japanese university debaters." It is curious that young students with a limited knowledge of how language functions in the

Japanese society (they are not in a position of having to deal with many different or complicated social situations) should be taken in any way as authorities as to what is possible in the Japanese language. This would be particularly true when dealing with students who learn "debate" in Western formats as a part of English-language activities. In fact, it seems that the labeling of an activity or exchange or situation as "a debate" is what triggers similarly uninformed Japanese adults to come up with the arguments Branham enumerated, which are quoted at the beginning of this paper, and which, as aforementioned, indicate an identification of the activity as Western.

At the same time, it is very clear that there are cultural restraints that would preclude the more obviously adversarial aspects of debate from being appropriate in some situations, irrespective of how "harmoniously" they might be applied. Concepts of hierarchy and harmony referred to in Branham's abovementioned summary of arguments are complex and governed by particular rules which are all the more challenging for being flexible. Bachnik (1992) states:

> ...for Japanese, appropriate personal and social behavior is identified, not as a general set of behaviors which transcends situations, but rather as a series of particular situations which generate a kaleidoscope of different behaviors *which are nonetheless ordered and agreed upon*. (155)

There is no doubt that debate is a part of Japanese history, particularly when taken to mean argument and persuasion. But it is equally true that the idea of debate strikes many Japanese as being a problematic strategy for dealing with certain social situations. This attitude, it has been demonstrated, is not simply born out of ignorance, but reflects intimate familiarity with the Japanese social dynamic.

An important issue for educators is how and in what situations the Japanese can take advantage of debate in their own language, as a general skill. The previously

mentioned abilities developed through the practice of debate are, it has been shown, not incompatible with Japanese society. Indeed it is the classroom, where Japanese children learn and hone basic social skills (Tobin 1992), and where fewer of the constraints of the adult world come into play, that would seem to be the ideal environment for allowing this sophisticated technique to be incorporated seamlessly and appropriately as a competitive exercise. A number of schools have begun to experiment with including Japanese-language debate in their classes, and the first national tournament of junior and senior high school debate teams was held in August 1996, with 32 schools participating — demonstrating that Japanese flexibility continues to contribute to the evolution of interpersonal and organizational relationships along lines compatible with Japan's changing role in the world.

Note

1 See, for example, Fischer 1964; Lebra 1976; Smith 1983, and Suzuki 1986.

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