

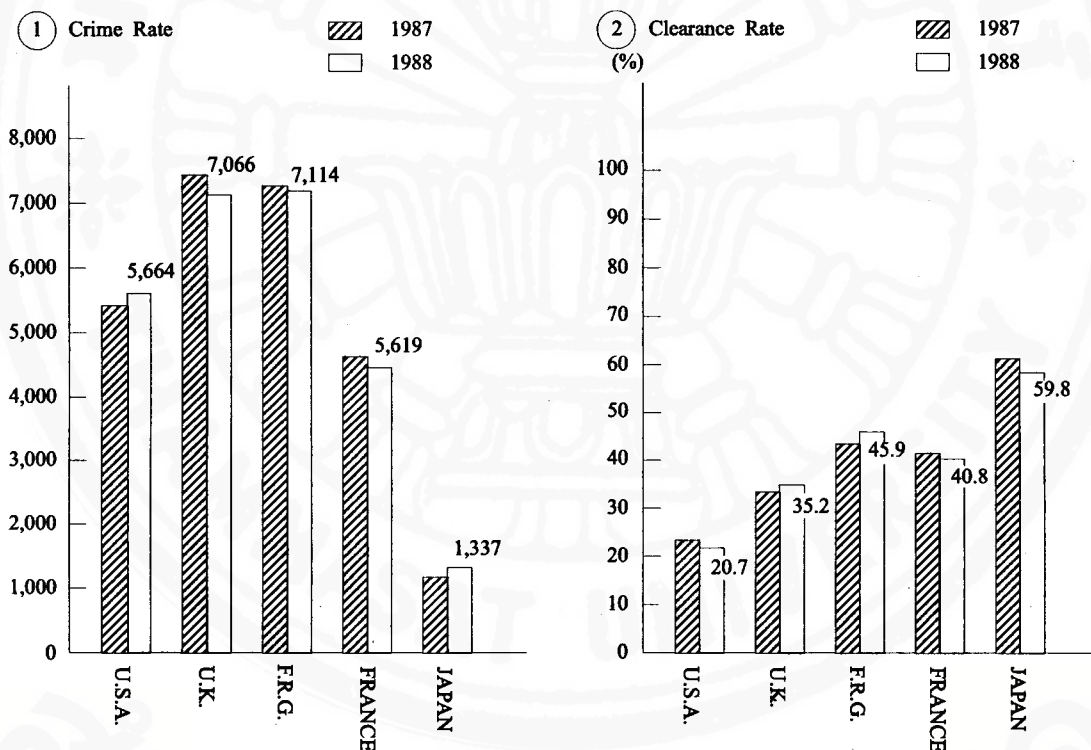
# A Low Crime Rate in Japan: A Cultural Explanation\*

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Japanese society is known as a low crime rate society when compared statistically to other industrial nations such as the United States, the

United Kingdom, West Germany, and France (see figure 1)

Figure 1 Crime Rate and Clearance Rate of Major Crimes (1987,1988)



Source : Summary of the White Paper on Crime 1990, Ministry of Justice, Government of Japan.

\* This article is part of the research "Juvenile Delinquency in Japan : A Cultural Aspect" sponsored by The Hitachi Scholarship Foundation, 1991.

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Foreigners who come to stay in Japan, especially in the crowded city like Tokyo or Osaka can perceive the less crime and less aggressive atmosphere of Japanese society. Therefore, it is interesting to learn what can be an explanation for this phenomenon. This article will present some plausible interpretation; that is, the "uniqueness" of Japanese culture, groupism in particular.

Group oriented of Japanese people is widely known and recognized by people who are interested in Japanese society. From the Japanese point of view, Japanese group orientation is based on an assumption that the members of the group cooperate in their collective efforts towards collectively defined ends, and by so doing, each member simultaneously satisfies his individual needs and secures his individual rights.<sup>1</sup> Group membership gives Japanese a sense of self identity and security.<sup>2</sup> Lebra suggests that Japanese needs the feeling of "ittaikan" (feeling of oneness) with other members of the group.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a group is a significant part of Japanese's life ; group and individual are also assumed to be harmonious in Japanese society.<sup>4</sup> The interpersonal relation and group solidarity are emphasized on through one's life. From the study of Rohlen<sup>5</sup> shows that from nursery school to early employment, the same basic routines and same school lessons of group solidarity are reiterated and repeated again and again. The shared housekeeping chores, dress codes, group discussion, patterns of group assembly and movement are relearned at each new entry point. A group has been employed to control people's behaviors in stead of single authoritative figure, from a child to an adult. The group tends to claim priority over the individual in many aspects of life, The suppression of the individual's needs and emotion in favour of blending into a group is common among Japanese. Independence which is highly praised in Western idea, is not recognized in Japanese society. Teaching a child to think and act independently is not mentioned as a parental goal.<sup>6</sup> Self-assertion independent of the group is strongly discouraged.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on interpersonal relationship and group harmony among Japanese is also seen from the survey of

Japanese National Character, carried out by Chikio Hayashi et al.<sup>8</sup> The survey has been done for every five years, beginning in 1953. The result shows that majority of respondents give the priority to a group benefit rather than self satisfaction. They try to avoid conflict and keep a group harmony. The survey also suggests that the good personal relationship is the most important matter for Japanese people, more than money and principle which are also very important for them. These attitudes have changed very little over the passing 30 years. In addition, according to the group interviews of mothers and teachers which were carried out by the writer, portray that those people consider the good relationship with others as an important part of one's life because human beings cannot live alone by themselves. Some teachers point out that very few Japanese are assertive.

Once a group harmony is so important; therefore, Japanese people tend to conform to group norms. Social conformity to them is no sign of weakness but rather the proud tempered product of inner strength.<sup>9</sup> Hence a group becomes the important social mechanism of controlling individual's behaviors. It is pointed out by Tokuoka<sup>10</sup> that Japanese's behavior is guided by obligations to family employer, neighbourhood, and society rather than by self-interest. The child learns from at an early age to judge the consequences of all his acts in terms of their effects on his family.<sup>11</sup> The non productive behavior is felt to be "injure" to the parents.<sup>12</sup> When a person does something wrong, it will not cause shame to himself or herself but it will cause shame to the whole family, to the school, to the company, and so on.

The obligation and attachment to the groups of Japanese people may well account for the low deviant behaviors in the society. As suggested by Hirschi<sup>13</sup> that the more a person attaches to the social institutio (a family, a school, a community, etc.), the less likely he becomes deviant. When a person attaches to a group, the group norms are likely to be internalized. Then he or she will accept those norms as his or her guides of behaviors. In addition, Japanese put high value on the harmonious integration of group members and have high

degree of cohesion and consensus within the group as presented by Nakane<sup>14</sup> and other which already mentioned. This can be another explanation for the low crime rate in Japanese society. According to Durkheim,<sup>15</sup> where there is a high level of social integration or cohesion, there will be a low level of deviance. On the other hand, in the place where there is a low level of integration or cohesion, the control of individual is low, leading to a high level of normlessness and a high level of deviance. In Japan, the social cohesion and social control of individual's behaviors are strong formally and informally, even in Tokyo which is the largest metropolis in the world. From the study of Wagatsuma and DeVos<sup>16</sup> about delinquency in one community in Tokyo presents that the cultural traditions of the past still play a vital role in shaping the present-day life of the people. In addition, there is a police box in every community in the city for people to report crimes. The police box system is developed from "goningumi" (a group of five people) which was established in Japanese community before World War Two. A main function of "goningumi" at that time was to prevent people from escaping a military draft by keeping a close watch. Besides a police box system, a petrolman will knock on the door of every residence and ask questions about the people living there twice a year.<sup>17</sup> Japanese people do have a good cooperation with a police. Every neighbourhood in Japan has a Crime Prevention Association composed of volunteers in the community who work closely with the local police station.<sup>18</sup> The wide-spread community participation in police-support activities is one of the main reasons for declining crime rate in totals.<sup>19</sup> The good cooperation of Japanese people stems from the fact that they have positive attitudes towards a police.<sup>20</sup> All of the officers dealing with crime and delinquency whom the writer had a chance to talk to, are satisfied with a police's performance in general. From the group interviews of mothers and teachers suggest that even though they do not absolutely trust a police and are afraid of him, they are satisfied with the way a police handles a delinquent and in bringing out the safe society.

The positive attitude towards a police of a Japanese is quite unique. The police in many countries is seen as an authoritative figure which is corrupt, cruel, and unjust. Japanese do have a good attitude towards a police may be because most of the polices work or patrol in the areas they live in so that they are considered as part of the communities. Another explanation is a historical one. After Meiji revolution, many samurai become police officers. A samurai, with Bushido spirit,<sup>21</sup> was considered as a prestigious person who was relatively uncorrupt and who attempted to govern with an exceptional degree of equity and fairness.<sup>22</sup> The uncorrupt, equity, and fairness ethic are believed to be held by civil bureaucrats, including a policeman even nowadays. This accounts for considerable public respect<sup>23</sup> and contributes to the good cooperation of the people to a police.

The societal reaction to the wrongdoers, based on the Japanese belief about "mushi" may well also decrease the number of crime. This belief assists in preventing the stigmatization on a wrongdoer and, in turn, prohibits the perpetuation of criminal acts. According to Japanese's belief, when one does something wrong, it is not because of his bad nature. Rather it is a "mushi" (a bug) which is distinct from the rest of one's personality. Therefore, the wrongdoer can be rehabilitated and becomes a good person as normal. The Japanese believe that behavior patterns can be permanently remolded.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the wrongdoer is a victim of external agent, "mushi," that caused the nonconformed behaviors. When he is made to realize that he acts in discordance with social norms and he can "seal off" the bug, then he will be accepted back into the community as a normal member and without an excessive sense of guilt that may be damaging to the self.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on forgiveness is presented in many Japanese children's stories<sup>26</sup> and is practised in Japanese criminal justice system. As Ames<sup>27</sup> points out that Japanese justice system tries to preserve the social fabric through forgiveness rather than disrupt relations by always insisting on "justice being done, If Japanese's beliefs

on remoldable of deviant behaviors and on forgiveness really exist, the stigmatization on criminals or delinquents will not be strong. Therefore, it is easier for those people to be back and live as normal in the community. This will decrease the number of recidivism, lower the overall crime rate.

Besides the overall low crime rate, Japanese society has experienced the low number of violent offenses. The gun control law of Japan is claimed as a main reason behind this phenomenon. However, an impermissiveness of expressing the violent or aggressive behavior of Japanese culture may be another plausible explanation for the low violent crime (whether the impermissiveness of violent act is the product of World War Two, is another interesting question). From the study of Rohlen,<sup>28</sup> the Japanese mother seeks to avoid confrontation with the child's will and much less frequently express her anger directly than American mother. Anger and the assertion of authority are avoided while patience and forbearing become Japanese parental means of regulation, based on the assumption that the natural effects of the bonding involved are to sensitize the child to the parent's feelings and wishes. DeVos<sup>29</sup> also suggests that the child-rearing pattern most evident in Japan manifests a relative lack of physical punishment. It is not only the parents who avoid expressing an aggressive behavior, but the school system also prohibits corporal punishment. A Japanese teacher seeks control of student's behaviors without an emphasis on asserting direct authority. The teacher tends to gradually shape the children's understanding rather than trying to forcefully control their behaviors. The keys of shaping students' behaviors are patience and persuasive; Japanese teachers rarely talk about control.<sup>30</sup> From the writer's interview

with teachers clearly shows that hitting is not accepted as a way of correcting misbehaviors. What the teachers do is, finding a real cause of the problem by talking to the student and emphasizing on reinforcement rather than punishment. For instance, the student makes trouble in the classroom; this is because he is not good at school or cannot compete with others in school. Therefore, the teacher corrects this behavior by providing supplementary lessons and trying to figure out the student's special talents and support him to pursue those talents. A group is also mentioned as a tool in creating the conformed behaviors of an individual. From the interview of mothers, some of them seem to use hitting as a mean of punishment. However, they feel it is not good and should not be employed.

Both major societal institutions, family and education do not use violent or aggressive means of correcting the nonconformed behaviors of the children. The physical punishment is also unallowed in the correctional institutions for juvenile delinquency. The aggressive behaviors are rarely seen in Japanese society. Hence the children learn that aggressive or violent behaviors do not allow for anyone and they hardly see the examples to imitate. This may account for the low violent crime in Japan.

Thus the uniqueness of Japanese culture, especially groupism seems to produce the low crime rate in the society. However, groupism cannot go well with individualism, personal freedom of privacy, which is highly recognized in Western ideology. So one might need to decide whether it is worth to sacrifice one's privacy for the safe society. As suggested by Durkheim that, "crime is one of the prices we pay for freedom."<sup>31</sup>

## Footnotes

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2. H. Wagatsuma, **Ibid.**
3. Takie S. Lebra, **Japanese Patterns of Behavior** (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976).
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11. C.W.Kiefer, "The Psychological Interdependence of Family, School, and Bureaucracy in Japan, in **Japanese Culture and Behavior** T. Lebra and W. Lebra eds. (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975).
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15. G.C. Kinloch, **Sociological Theory: Its Development and Major Paradigm** (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977).
16. H. Wagatsuma and G. DeVos, **Heritage of Endurance: Family Patterns and Delinquency Formation in Urban Japan** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
17. H. Tokuoka, **op.cit.**
18. D. Bayley cited in H. Tokuoka, **Ibid.**
19. W. Ames cited in Tokuoka, **Ibid.**
20. The positive attitude towards a police among Japanese people is also presented in Tokuoka, **Ibid**; Wagatsuma and DeVos, **op.cit.**
21. see more details in Inazo Nitobe, **Bushido: The Soul of Japan** (Tokyo: Chales E. Tuttle Company, 1989).

22. Wagatsuma and DeVos, **op.cit.**
23. **Ibid.**
24. H. Tokuoka, **op.cit.**
25. H. Wagatsuma, **op.cit.**
26. B. Lantham and M Shimura, "Folklores Commonly Told American and Japanese Children: Ethical Themes of Omission and Commission," **Journal of American Folklore** (vol.80 no. 315,1967)
27. W. Ames, **op.cit.**
28. T. Rohlen, **op.cit.**
29. G. DeVos, **op.cit.**
30. T. Rohlen, **op.cit.**
31. E. Durkheim cited in Sue Reid **Crime and Criminology** (Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1976).