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INTRODUCTION

I CHRYSANTHEMUM'S STRANGE LIFE: RUTH BENEDICT IN POSTWAR JAPAN

By Sonia RYANG[1]

Abstract

REVISITING Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, I follow in this article the postwar controversies in Japan over the book. Although enormously significant in the formation of postwar Japanese cultural identity and social scientific discourse, the book has gone through a strange life, subjected to diverse interpretations which reflect historical changes in Japan's self-perception. I propose that what is most strange about the reception of the book is the complete omission of the fact that the book ignores Japan's colonial and imperial

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history before 1945, thereby opening up the ground for postwar amnesia by the Japanese government of its prewar and wartime domination and atrocities in Asia. I examine the role that this book plays, albeit indirectly, as an historically produced text in helping to shape today's Japanese obliviousness towards its colonial past.

Introduction: The Benedictian Paradigm

Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has played a crucial role in postwar social scientific discourse on Japan. Japanese anthropologist Aoki Tamotsu has noted that *Chrysanthemum* served as the starting point for the holistic approach to Japanese culture taken by so many postwar analysts (Aoki 1990: 42).[1] Aside from such holistic approaches as those of Chie Nakane (1970) or Joy Hendry (1993), the whole range of works that study Japanese senses of self or patterns of behavior such as those of Takeo Doi (1971) or Takie Lebra (1976) are influenced by Benedict's paradigm in one way or another. As recently as 1992, David Plath and Robert Smith emphatically placed *Chrysanthemum* as one of the most (if not the single most) influential books in the western anthropology of Japan. Smith went as far as to suggest that "there is a sense in which all of us have been writing footnotes to [*Chrysanthemum*] ever since it appeared in 1946" (Plath and Smith 1992: 206). He also stated that all Americans who study Japan are "Benedict's children" (Smith 1989). More recently, Jennifer Robertson has stated: "It seems that cultural portraits contrary to the tenaciously normative template constructed by Benedict and subsequently reproduced can only always be 'alternative' or 'other' as opposed to unacknowledged facets of the complex, composite,

and integrated whole of 'Japanese culture'" (Robertson 1998: 311). It would be safe to conclude preliminarily that Benedict shaped the postwar cultural discourse of Japan's self-representation, and *Chrysanthemum* thus became paradigmatic.[2]

Perhaps of all the books written about Japan in modern times, *Chrysanthemum* has had the strangest life. One of the inexplicable contradictions about it is that despite the existence of harsh criticism from early on in Japan, to this day *Chrysanthemum* continues to be read and admired and to create debate about interpretation and reinterpretation of Ruth Benedict. It needs also to be noted that in this process of re-evaluation, some concepts that had been first proposed by Benedict and received self-critically by Japanese readers were revised and came to be understood as positive features of Japanese culture.

In 1984 the sale of the Japanese translation of *Chrysanthemum* reached 1.2 million copies (Nishi 1983: 12). In a more recent calculation, it is said that a total of 2.3 million copies of the Japanese version of *Chrysanthemum* have been sold in Japan (Fukui 1999: 173). One random survey has it that 33% of 944 adult Japanese respondents in an urban area have heard of *Chrysanthemum* (Befu and Manabe 1987: 98). Its pocket-size edition, first published in Japan in 1967, had its 101st printing in July 1995 (Kent 1996: 35). This shows a higher statistical interest than in the U.S., where 23,000 copies of *Chrysanthemum* were sold from 1946 to 1971 (Johnson 1988: 14), while Clifford Geertz records that a total of 350,000 copies were sold in all (Geertz 1988: 116).

Whereas in the U.S., interest and readership have been

confined to business and academe, except perhaps during the initial postwar years, in Japan *Chrysanthemum* has been quoted even in high school textbooks (Lummis 1982: 2). Every decade saw important articles or books published with *Chrysanthemum* as their theme, mostly in conjunction with the thesis of Japanese cultural uniqueness, or *Nihonjinron* (see e.g. Suzuki 1967, Nishi 1983, Soeda 1993). With the recent release of the Ruth Fulton Benedict papers at Vassar College, Benedict's alma mater, debates on Benedict's life in close relation to the production of *Chrysanthemum* have been revived in Japan among scholars. The ways in which *Chrysanthemum* has been read in Japan are indicative of changing self-perceptions of Japanese intellectuals as well as the general public, a self-perception which was then interactively fed back into the western discourse of Japan (see Hendry 1996).

Clifford Geertz has emphasized that by the time one is done with the book, one may wonder if indeed it is the Americans, not the Japanese, who are strange—the tenacious insistence on the part of Benedict on juxtaposing Japanese and American cultures, according to him, delivers the effect of inverting our perception (1988). Such a reading, I suggest, is distinctly American. Japanese did not read *Chrysanthemum* as a book that compares Japan and the U.S. They read it and continue to read it as a book on Japan—Japan only and nothing else.

It is in this connection that I see a need for a new (and long overdue) critique: nowhere in *Chrysanthemum* is the vision of Japan's empire and former colonies included. Japanese culture is explained from within, not in interaction with its empire in Asia. The war's end was not simply about the Americans and the Japanese; it involved the former colonial subjects. Yet, as

indicated by the way the U.S. occupation of Japan and postwar Japanese society ignored Chinese, Koreans, Okinawans, and other peoples forming the margin of the empire (although they were the ones first to be persecuted in case they caused trouble), the Japanese (as well as American) readership of *Chrysanthemum* has been completely oblivious to the fact of Japan's empire. This omission effectively granted the Japanese state a perfect alibi for not compensating for the atrocities and the exploitation it had committed against the peoples in Asia before and during World War II. This is not a coincidence—*Chrysanthemum* effectively presents Japan to its readers as a self-contained entity, having no link to any of the societies colonized beyond itself.

In this article I first discuss the contents of *Chrysanthemum*, and then follow the postwar reception of the book and the 1980s debate in Japan about the book. I then revisit the issue of the book's historical omission, an issue that has not been discussed by the existing critics of *Chrysanthemum* in and outside Japan: an issue that points to the ongoing neglect by the Japanese state of its colonial and wartime responsibilities.

Chrysanthemum—A Master Narrative

What *Chrysanthemum* explores most impressively is the hierarchy that is embedded in Japanese culture and society. The model Benedict abstracts from Japanese social hierarchy is based on a type of tight-knit group such as the family or the army. What creates and maintains rigid hierarchy within such a group is the relationship individuals hold to each other, notably, the principle of occupying "one's proper rank" (1946: Ch.3). Hierarchy, however, does not always function oppressively in Benedict's depiction: in the family, children

are loved by parents, and at the same time, must obey them. The hierarchy internal to Japanese groups involves at once protection and submission, supported by the notion of debt (*on*) that individuals supposedly owe to their parents, ancestors, community, the emperor, and the society at large (1946: Ch.4).

Another concept that fascinated Benedict is *giri* (1946: Ch.8). Benedict maintains that *giri* is distinguishable in two ways: one is *giri* to one's name, the other, *giri* to society. The former is a kind of self-respect, but deeply embedded in the notion of hierarchy. It does not necessarily mean the act of pursuing the possible highest achievement in terms of one's social success. Rather, it is more closely related to the notion of "taking one's proper place" within a circle that is already set up in a hierarchical order. The latter is a public duty that one has to pay. A loyalty to the feudal lord may result in leaving one's father or in opposing him. But it is a public *giri* that ultimately justifies such a deed.

By far the most important notion that Benedict formulated about Japan, which became heavily influential in both academic and popular discourses on Japan, is the notion of shame culture—although the actual portion in the book dwelling upon shame culture is very brief (1946: Ch. 10). In Benedict's contention, shame-based behavior is a type of performativity, involving the satisfaction of externally institutionalized social requirements. For this, no inner principle—"one's own picture of oneself"—is quite necessary. Rule-boundedness and the capacity to come up to the socially set standard are all that are required. Benedict is not denying the positive values of shame culture. Because of the shame mechanism, postwar Japan found it easy to shed the dream of the Greater East Asia Coprosperity

Sphere and switch to a different set of performance criteria, those involving peaceful coexistence within the community of (certain) nations (in the Cold War). This type of easy change Benedict calls "situational ethics."[3]

Although enormously successful in reviews, with Alfred Kroeber praising it for being "a book that makes one proud to be anthropologist" (Kroeber 1947: 169; see also Bowles 1947, and Morris 1947a and 1947b), there are problems in Benedict's study seen from the standpoint of today's scholarship, given especially that anthropology has come a long way from the Boasian culture and personality school of Benedict's time. As with other culture and personality scholars such as Margaret Mead, Benedict saw culture in too close a correspondence with personality types. In this way, culture becomes a closed system that houses finite personalities (see Handler 1986). She fails to pay due attention to the politico-economic transformations Japan went through, especially in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries: that is, in a word, modernization—a process that brings about not only societal transformation but also the individuation of people who now emerge as critical self-reflexive subjects, albeit with relative cultural differences. Rather, what matters to Benedict is "culture," which, in her view, stands aside from or above history, society, and economy. As a result, she ends up "explaining" such a complex entity as Japanese society by using fragmentary sources of words, isolated ideas, quaint literature, and partial observations based on second-hand information. The result is inevitably to identify an unchanging Japanese cultural essence. The consequent reductionism marks the book from cover to cover.

In contradistinction to the above, one can perceive that

Benedict is a "culture giver" to postwar Japan. When she refers to American freedom, American informality and openness and therefore genuine human relationships, and American moral democracy, she effectively places them, intended or unintended and despite her relativist principles, one step above those of Japan. They become something that Japanese, even with their peculiar ethics, can hope to aspire to, no matter how much she insists that her American readers be patient, tolerant, and understanding of Japan in its peculiarity. After all, *Chrysanthemum* was part of wartime "enemy morals studies," and was produced as a study by a member of the victorious nation about a defeated nation. In this sense, it is understandable that it became a verdict for Japanese—a kind verdict, for that matter—as to why Japan had to be defeated by the U.S. and how it could make itself more like the U.S., in order to salvage itself and its culture.

Those shortcomings aside, at a time when Japan was seen as a society of sub-human monsters, the significance of Benedict's words was immense: she salvaged Japanese humanity, by trying to render its "monstrosity" comprehensible and logical. Her book explained the fanatic loyalty of the Japanese to the emperor as a matter of cultural psychology, not as simple madness; it explained the extreme militarism of the Japanese, which was far beyond that of western military training, in accordance with indigenous cultural rationality, not as irrational frenzy; and it explained the national belief in Japan that Japan would be victorious in the war (a belief that was, needless to say, utterly false) in terms of national character that could be understood in its own right, not as pathological illusion or sheer lack of reflexivity.

Postwar Reactions

Before the Japanese translation of *Chrysanthemum* was published, Tsurumi Kazuko's critique of the English original attracted Japanese readers' attention to the book. Tsurumi had been educated in the U.S. and repatriated during the Pacific War. In her brief but critical review, Tsurumi first credits Benedict's skill in isolating Japanese patterns of behavior in contrast to American patterns of behavior. But Tsurumi then charges Benedict with superficial observation and methodological flaws in tracing national culture back to child-training without paying attention to sociohistorical processes that Japan had gone through, from feudalism to capitalism (1947: 222–224). She criticizes Benedict also for her selective use of examples; examples that fit her hypotheses are preserved, while counterexamples are simply dismissed. Tsurumi states: "... in Benedict's method [of studying] patterns of culture... changes in the means of production and the conditions arising thereby are left totally unconsidered" (1946: 224). Tsurumi further points out that Benedict mistakes the official discourse engineered by the state in order to disseminate emperor worship (for example, the Imperial Rescript for Soldiers), that is, "the ideology of the ruling class," for the representative view held by the Japanese people at large (ibid.).

Following the publication of the Japanese translation of *Chrysanthemum* in 1948 (Benedict 1948), *Minzokugaku kenkyū*, the most widely circulated academic journal of ethnology in Japan, paid tribute to the book in a cluster of articles entitled "What is offered in Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*." Five scholars, starkly divided into supporters and

denouncers of the book, presented their views (see Bennett and Nagai 1953). Among the supporters, Kawashima Takeyoshi, a Tokyo University law professor known for the study of the family system and family law (Kawashima 1950a), expresses his admiration for *Chrysanthemum* as follows:

> *Perhaps for those of us Japanese who were taught to blindly accept our own tradition and our own viewpoints and to judge others on the basis of our [own standard]... this book would be immensely shocking. This book was originally written for the wartime purpose of conquering and governing Japan, but for us, it is a book of lessons through and through. (Kawashima 1950b)*

Unlike Tsurumi, Kawashima credits Benedict as having abundant data pertaining to Japanese culture and commends her for her analytic capacity, which is displayed in her method of connecting various phenomena that may first appear as contingent and unrelated, but which make sense when carefully connected. Benedict thereby presents a picture that captures Japanese culture in its totality, which Kawashima calls "structural understanding of Japanese behavior and ways of thinking" (1950b: 2). This is what Aoki later called a holistic approach (see above).

However, Kawashima also notes inconsistencies in Benedict's work. For example, he argues that the hierarchy Benedict discusses is not unique to Japanese society. He also suggests that feudal patriarchy was supported by the Meiji totalitarian government and forcefully imposed on people, while people themselves had their own form of patriarchy away from the state-imposed norm. In other words, Benedict's understanding

of Japanese hierarchy is buying into the official propaganda of the state, and is simplistic and ahistorical in perspective. On this point, Kawashima is in agreement with Tsurumi, who has no praise to give to Benedict. More importantly, Kawashima is reading *Chrysanthemum* as a critique of the Japanese feudal legacy and looking toward Benedict as a provider of ideas that would lead Japan into democracy by eradicating feudalism. Nowhere in *Chrysanthemum* do we find such a stance, but for Kawashima's postwar frame of mind, aspiring for Japan's reconstruction, *Chrysanthemum* becomes a manual for enlightenment. Furthermore, Kawashima misses the point of the culture and personality school and Benedict's technique by trying to read into *Chrysanthemum* the assumptions of evolutionist history, according to which one historical stage must be discarded and replaced by the next stage.

Another contributor who positively reacted to *Chrysanthemum* is sociologist Ariga Kizaemon, also highly acclaimed for his studies of family, household, and kin group in Japan. Ariga endorses Benedict's approach to Japan as anthropologically valid, complimentary to the existing studies of primitive societies. Similar to Kawashima, Ariga is impressed with Benedict's attention to the Japanese concept of hierarchy. But unlike Kawashima, who regards the hierarchical aspects of Japanese culture as a legacy of feudalism, Ariga interprets Benedict to be suggesting that hierarchy is an inherent part of everyday life of Japanese across different historical periods (1950: 16). For Ariga, Benedict's originality lies in her synchronic approach. Ariga emphasizes that Japanese hierarchy is distinct in the sense that its structural base resides in kinship organization: even Japanese capitalism developed

from kin-based hierarchy that historically evolved together with the land-tenure system (see Ariga 1943). Ariga concludes his essay by suggesting that "in order for democracy to grow [in Japan], the conditions [that create hierarchy] must be overcome and an individual-oriented lifestyle needs to be established" (1950: 22).

The other three contributors read Benedict in a more negative light. Social psychologist Minami Hiroshi's critique revolves around details of Benedict's interview technique. He questions the appropriateness of samples that were supposedly taken from Japanese-Americans who were born in Japan during the Meiji period and, with emigration to the U.S., have preserved the old customs, while the reality in Japan itself has moved away from the old norms. Similarly, for Minami, the Japanese films Benedict studied for writing *Chrysanthemum* were biased from the outset, given that those films were made for specific propaganda purposes, and were designed to be exported to the U.S.

Minami then takes up Benedict's contention that the Japanese have a dual personality, one personality performed in front of others and the other for oneself—this being the psychological basis of shame culture—and that this dual personality derives from abrupt discontinuity between indulgent childhood and strict adulthood (Benedict 1946: Ch.12). Pointing to the fact that this contention was first published by Benedict in her article "Continuities and Discontinuities in Cultural Conditioning" (1938), Minami suggests that Benedict teleologically applied this conclusion first to "the abstract type called the Japanese" and then tried to avoid examples that did not suit her interpretation, thus resonating with Tsurumi's critique (1950: 12). What

underpins Minami's critique is that he basically sees shame culture as a negative trait and resists accepting it as an inherent principle of Japanese culture.

Folklorist Yanagita Kunio takes a similar line as Minami, although Yanagita is more detailed in counter-examples that are drawn from linguistic data. For example, Yanagita points out that the term *on* that plays a central part in Benedict's understanding of hierarchical human relations in Japan is in fact not part of daily language in today's Japan; the term originated in China. Yanagita suggests that Benedict misunderstood the term *on* used in state-engineered propaganda as a term used by ordinary people, another point that had already been made by Tsurumi, Kawashima, and Minami (1950: 33). He attributes the cause of Benedict's misunderstanding to the false self-representation that the Japanese state disseminated to the world through prewar and wartime propaganda.

By far the most critical or indeed dismissive reader of Benedict among the *Minzokugaku kenkyū* contributors is Watsuji Tetsurō. An important thinker of prewar Japan, whose philosophical investigation of Japanese culture, *Fūdo: ningengakuteki kōsatsu* (*Climate: A study of human science*), first published in 1935, is in fact very similar to *Chrysanthemum* in its quest for fundamental Japaneseness, Watsuji seems almost displeased to have had to read *Chrysanthemum* in order to make a contribution to the journal.[4] Watsuji bursts out in complaint, stating that the book "has no academic value whatsoever" (1950: 23). His essay took the form of a letter to Ishida Eiichirō, anthropologist and the editor of *Minzokugaku kenkyū*.

Watsuji's first point of criticism is on the principle of generalization, or lack thereof. For him, Benedict unmethodically