

David W. Plath

Long Engagements

Maturity in Modern Japan

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press

Stanford, California

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Leland Stanford Junior University

Printed in the United States of America

Cloth ISBN 0-8047-1054-6

Paper ISBN 0-8047-1176-3

Original edition 1980

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:

92 91 90 89

Acknowledgments

Seven years have gone into the making of this book. It has been a long engagement with ideas, with materials, and with people who have helped me focus my thinking and curb my mannered writing. Such persons are many in number; all have my gratitude, but I must mention a few who deserve special thanks.

An ethnographer's greatest debt is always to those who have allowed him to peer into their lives. For this I thank 23 people who must remain pseudonymous: the Hanshin men and women who accepted the burden of being interviewed, and who so patiently responded to questions that must often have seemed to them outlandish.

Financial support for my year of study in the Hanshin in 1972–73 came in the form of sabbatical leave from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. The University of Illinois Research Board and its Center for Asian Studies supplied me with research expense money during the field year, and have given me funds to hire an assistant twice in the years since.

Professor Masuda Kōkichi and his staff in the Department of Sociology, Kōnan University, Kobe, provided me with a base of operations in the Hanshin. They aided me in numerous ways, not the least being those very crucial personal introductions to the people whom I eventually interviewed. Other colleagues who were particularly helpful during the field phase of the study include Ishige Naomichi, Sugiyama Sadao, Umesao Tadao, Wagatsuma Hiroshi, and Yoneyama Toshinao.

Ikeda Keiko, my chief assistant in the field, was a superlative interviewer; she deserves most of the credit for the quality of the

materials from which I put together the life histories that appear in Chapters 3–6.

Portions of this book derive from essays, lectures, and conference papers that I have written during the past six years. I have also discussed some of these materials with an array of classes, seminars, and colloquia in my own and other universities. The result is that so many people have commented upon parts of the work that I could not hope to list them all. However, I want to offer special thanks to four persons who critiqued the entire manuscript in one or another of its several drafts: L. Keith Brown, Philip Lilienthal, Lyn L. Plath, and Thomas Rohlen.

Parts of Chapter 3 first appeared in different form as an essay, “Bourbon in the Tea: Dilemmas of an Aging *Senzenha*,” in *The Japan Interpreter* II, 3 (1977), 362–83.

I first offered the gist of section IV of Chapter 4, in “The Last Confucian Sandwich: Becoming Middle-Aged,” in the *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 10, 1–2 (1975), 51–63. Versions of the same material were also given at the 1973 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association and at the May 1974 meeting of the Midwest Japan Seminar.

Most of the ideas in Chapter 5 were first presented in an essay, “Cycles, Circles and Selves: Consociation in the Japanese City,” written for the Workshop on the Japanese City, Mt. Kisco, New York, April 1976. The section on *The Makioka Sisters* was also given at colloquia at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle in May 1977, and at the University of Pittsburgh in April 1979. The section on Goryōhan’s life was presented first at the Triangle East Asia Colloquium, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in April 1978. Goryōhan’s narrative also served as the basis for three other papers, given to the Mita Tetsugakkai, Keiō University, November 1976; to the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs in October 1977; and to the 1977 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

Section I of Chapter 6 derives from an analysis of the book *A Man in Ecstasy*, which appeared as “Cares of Career, and Careers of Caretaking,” in *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 157, 5 (1973), 346–57.

Perhaps I should also say a word in behalf of my university's Center for Advanced Study. When I returned from Japan in 1973 I asked for a semester's appointment in the Center, so that I could give full time to the writing of this book at once, while my impressions of the Hanshin and of my interviewees were still fresh. In its wisdom the Center rejected my request. So instead of the six months that I had projected for the task, I ended up needing six years to finish the writing. I have a hunch that the book may have aged and mellowed because of it all.

Long Engagements

How very extraordinary it was, this being middle-aged, being the person who ran and managed and kept going. . . . It was as if more than ever one was forced back into that place in oneself where one watched; whereas all around the silent watcher were a series of defences, or subsidiary creatures, on guard, always working, engaged with—and this was the point—earlier versions of oneself.

DORIS LESSING, *The Four-Gated City*

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The Rhetoric of Maturity

The drama of life seems to develop like a dialectical play between the initial one-sided starting position of ego-orientation—that which we find we “are” when we have come to the first awareness of ourselves—and the later opposing claims of the Self which pull in a new direction with the demand that we become what we are “meant to be.”

EDWARD WHITMONT, *The Symbolic Quest*

The gift of mass longevity seems as unsettling to people in our day as the gift of mass productivity was to people a century ago. Mass productivity raised hopes that material want might at last be overcome. It also brought fears that many would be forever alienated from the output of their own labors. Mass longevity raises hopes that everyone born human may enjoy a full span of years on this earth. It also brings fears that many will be ultimately alienated from their own experience, barred from employing it in the social marketplace.

The nineteenth century had to ask itself: if most people must work for pay, in an industrial order, what then is the value of human labor? Today we must begin to ask: if most people will live into adulthood, and many into advanced age, in a post-industrial world, what then is the value of human maturity? If the essential cultural nightmare of the nineteenth century was to be in poverty, perhaps ours is to be old and alone or afflicted with terminal disease.

Mass longevity is transforming the social framework of the life course, as mass productivity transformed the social framework of

work and property. With work redefined as paid activity, personal maturity comes to be defined in terms of access to “gainful employment.” But employment more and more is controlled by the state or by large enterprises, both of which enforce arbitrary, categorical rules for entry into and exit from employment. Youths, older adults, and women in general may find themselves unemployable—shut out not only from the material rewards but also from the moral stature that is conferred upon those who are at paid work. The post-industrial world, as some foresee it, may bring a new era of class struggle—pitting age-class against age-class in disputes over the right to participate in those activities and institutions that validate one’s human maturity.

Mass longevity is transforming the arenas of personal life as well as those of public life. The traditional cycle of roles is being stretched out, so to speak, at least two decades longer than was typical for our great-great-grandparents. Customary distinctions between life’s stages are attenuated, and what it means to “grow” or to “age” becomes unclear at all points along the way. The meaning of age—of *when* we are at some way station along life’s trajectory—comes into question in our everyday activities. It comes into question as well in those moments when we privately reflect upon who we are, where we may be going, and whether we are continuing to grow or are only growing older.

Mass longevity means co-longevity. Not only does the average person live longer, so too do those around him. He and they will travel the life course together a greater distance. Thus nuclear households may be on the increase in post-industrial nations, but so too are four-generation families, whether or not they happen to live under the same roof. A century ago the average person could anticipate that by the time he was old enough to marry, at least one of his parents would have died. Today the chances are great that both parents will live to witness his wedding—and possibly his retirement ceremony as well.

Consider the orphan: much less visible today, but a prominent figure in fact and fiction in the nineteenth-century West. Orphan-ages, once a flourishing enterprise, are beginning to close their doors—to be replaced by a clamoring, by a few of the childless,

for the fewer homeless children. And at the other end of the life course, older age is coming more and more to be a matter of older womanhood, of widowhood. Before the industrial revolution the male/female ratio in older age appears to have been nearly equal; now older women are in a clear and increasing majority.

In short, in post-industrial nations a new pattern of constraints and opportunities is shaping the entire course of life for persons as they go along enacting their allotted span of years. The situation calls for a fresh look at the biographical timelines of human maturation, for the mature person is one of the most remarkable products that any society can bring forth. He or she is a living cathedral, the handiwork of many individuals over many years. No single Rubicon divides those who are mature from those who are not. To know if we are mature we must convince people—ourselves included—that we embody the right history of personal experience. And to gain this history the self must enter into long engagements with the cultural symbols that identify experience, and with others in society who guard the meaning of the symbols. Rhetoric is the social art of such identifications, and in these chapters I explore the rhetoric of maturity as it is carried on in modern Japan.

The Japanese Experience

The mental purchase that we already hold upon the meanings of maturity in post-industrial societies has been gained through the scrutiny of humankind in the West. My own intellectual debt to Western scholars will be obvious to anyone familiar with the work of Erik Erikson, or that of Bernice Neugarten or Robert White, to name only three. Japan, however, has come into its post-industrial era in its own way. The demographic transition has taken place more swiftly there than in the West: it has come within the lifetime of the post-World War II generation. Since 1950 Japan has earned world acclaim for her “miraculous” rate of economic growth. What is less widely known is that in these years Japan’s rising rate of longevity has also set a world pace: average life-expectancy at birth is now higher in Japan than in the United States, and rivals that in northern Europe.

So like us in technology, so near in the shape of her major political and social institutions; yet Japan remains culturally distant. The gulf is particularly wide in the arenas of personal conduct. A century of struggle with industrial technics and with democratic institutions has, to be sure, brought change: the Japanese have—depending on your perspective—either “borrowed from” or “converged upon” Western or modern versions of what it is to be most human in our century. But Japanese continue to draw sustenance from a heritage of idioms of the self and social relations that retains its distinct configuration.

Two clusters of idioms are especially relevant. One has to do with the nature of the self and how it is to be cultivated, the other with the properties of social ties. Westerners often take the view that the Japanese are collectivistic whereas we are individualistic, and see the Japanese as peculiarly attuned to hierarchy or seniority in social relations where we are said to favor equality. Like all stereotypes these contain some elements of truth, but they can also drastically distort our understanding of the tempo and tenor of ordinary lives.

Arguing from such stereotypes Western observers have been tempted to conclude that Japanese as persons are able more simply and comfortably than we are to submit to the changes wrought upon them by aging. This might have been true in some era in the peasant past—though I am skeptical. Mass longevity has shaken any such framework of life-cycle security. Furthermore the stereotypes may, however unintentionally, amount to an ethnic snub. For the person who is “dependent,” whose self is “submerged,” who has “weak and permeable ego boundaries”—phrases applied to the Japanese—is by Western measures immature. He can scarcely be acknowledged to be “his own man,” gliding about with Emersonian self-reliance. Such images fail to take account of the expanding awareness of the world and the self, the ripening capacity to care for others in their terms, the increasing ability to apply one’s own experience, that are hallmarks of the mature person in Japan as elsewhere.

If I can show how such properties of the mature individual emerge, as Japanese build their biographies, then perhaps we can

begin to redress the misleading images. If we can redress the images, then perhaps we can begin to see how widespread the dislocation is between life course and life cycle in *all* post-industrial societies. And if we can grasp the magnitude of that dislocation, then perhaps we will begin to understand why mass longevity seems so unsettling.

Limits to Growth

Growth as a biological event can be described in terms of trends and stages within an organism. But growth as a human event is cultural as well as biological. It must be described in terms of a mutual building of biographies, a collective shaping and self-shaping of lives according to a heritage of values. To comprehend it we must keep the human animal in focus both as an *individual*, a separate center of initiative and integrity, and as a *person*, a moral actor in society's dramas. There is no question that we are marvelously malleable beings. The questions arise over the extent to which we can retain our adaptability in adulthood and can sustain growth humanly despite biological stasis or decline.

In East Asia the heritage of possibilism—the idea that we can go on improving with age—can be found expressed as early in history as Confucius. In the *Analects* the master says, “At 15 I thought only of study; at 30 I began playing my role; at 40 I was sure of myself; at 50 I was conscious of my position in the universe; at 60 I was no longer argumentative; and now at 70 I can follow my heart's desire without violating custom.”

Modern students of human development in the West echo this point of view in their own phrasings. Erikson, for example, cites “generativity” and “integrity” as two chief strengths that emerge only during adulthood. Robert White, sketching trends of “natural” growth during early adulthood, refers to a “stabilizing of ego identity,” a “freeing of personal relationships,” and an “expansion of caring.” Bernice Neugarten, in one of her essays on middle age, emphasizes “the central importance of what might be called the executive processes of personality: self-awareness, selectivity, manipulation and control of the environment, mastery, competence, the wide array of cognitive strategies.” And in an-

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other essay she remarks that conduct in maturity is a matter of “conscious self-utilization rather than the self-consciousness of youth.”

Adult Japanese, when I ask them how they have changed since their youth years, often respond with the word *atsukamashisa*, which can be glossed as “boldness” or “nerve.” It does not imply bravado: rather that one has established one’s ability to judge people and situations, and knows how to deal with them so as to obtain results. One continues to care about what others are thinking, and about the Oughts of morality; but one no longer feels driven by them.

To say this is not to claim that time inevitably brings growth in its train. The processes of human maturation, like all biological and social processes, seem to be legislated by a parliament of prodigals: there can be immense pain and waste; tragedy and future-shock can overcome anybody; growth must always be seen in the context of a discouraging potential for regress. Nevertheless, given time enough and health we do appear to have the potential to continue growing as persons indefinitely.

Like all human phenomena, growth is the child of circumstance, nurtured by opportunity and constraint. Whether there are absolute limits to personal growth—so long as vitality proceeds—remains a mystery. The most that modern social theory is able to do is to indicate orders of constraints that operate upon maturity and aging. Three such orders have had particular attention in twentieth-century thinking: the cultural, the individual, and the social. For each of these orders a vocabulary of analytic concepts has been coined. And as is true of any theory, each of the vocabularies can serve us well by illuminating one aspect of the phenomenon—at the cost of obscuring other aspects. Whether or not there are limits to personal growth, there are limits to what we are able, with our present philosophy, to explain about personal growth.

Culture in one of its anthropological usages can be thought of as a legacy of idioms and values that give point and purpose to living, a collection of recipes for human cultivation. During our early years in this world we become enculturated—infused and

informed with the timetables for growth that are standard for our generation and locale. Later, in adulthood, we adjust our unique historical thrust to these normalizing careers that make up the life cycle. There is an open-ended quality to the view: we are presumed capable of continuing to learn new role after new role so long as we are not—to use the current euphemism—developmentally disabled.

But the vocabulary of culture has difficulty accounting for growth that may occur despite, or even in playful opposition to, the standard roles and careers. And it tends to overstate the amount of personal discontinuity from one role to the next, from one stage of life to the next. It does not see how the human life course can be, in Robert Redfield's phrase, "a succession of added comprehensions." People can continue to grow, says the cultural view, but only to the extent that their culture provides forms in which to realize that growth.

The idea of *character* has to do with one's distinctive features as a person, the mark of individuality made by nature and nurture. Often, too, it connotes the kind of moral vigor acquired by self-discipline. Culturally defined roles and timetables are categorical. They offer only general instructions about how to become a certain type of person—a poet or a pensioner, for example. We must interpret their import for our unique situation and course of conduct. We are born with the potential for becoming a hundred different kinds of person, for following a thousand possible careers. But we realize, after all, only one obituary. To become human is to become particular and to know it. In the existentialist phrase, each of us must live the meaning of his own life.

The psychodynamic vocabulary of character sees the individual as propelled through life by inner drives that must be realized in practice or rationalized in fantasy. Character as an organization of these drives is thought to unfold in a more or less regular sequence of stages, at least up through puberty. After that the psychodynamic view is unclear about whether the earlier stages of character can be outgrown.

Classical psychoanalysis held that we grow only to the stage of "genital maturity," and after that are likely to stagnate or decline,

playing out the primal scenes of our infancy upon persons encountered in adulthood. Freud is alleged to have said that psychoanalysis would be wasted on anyone over 45. At the very least, significant character change in adulthood was thought improbable. Later theorists—Sullivan, Erikson, Lidz—allow for considerable changes during maturity in patterns of identity, if not, perhaps, in basic personality. People may continue to grow, says the psychodynamic view, but only to the extent that they can be liberated from childhood traumata.

We do not apply the cultural codes to ourselves in isolation; other people interpret them for us as well. Character and growth are shaped by the rest of society. The psychodynamic vocabulary grants other people the power to influence our character but tends, uncertainly, to see that power operating mainly in childhood. The interactionist vocabulary in social psychology, by contrast, regards the human self as always open to major reform. The interactionist self is a kind of blossom that appears in social relations. As reflexive (self-aware) beings we must constantly integrate our subjective and objective sides, reconcile the “I” and the “me.” We do not become actualized as persons simply by playing a role or cathecting a drive; what we are doing must be recognized or validated by others. People can continue to grow, says the interactionist view, but only to the extent that others allow or confirm that growth.

Growth then becomes in part a property of others, particularly of those who are one’s *consociates*. The term may be an unfamiliar one, but it is apt here. It derives from the work of Alfred Schutz and the phenomenologists. If “associates” are persons you happen to encounter somewhere, sometime, “consociates” are people you relate with across time and in some degree of intimacy. They are friends, lovers, kinsmen, colleagues, classmates. Figuratively speaking, they are empaneled as a special jury to examine and confirm the course of your being and becoming. Your biography would make little sense if it does not mention them. Consociates thus are at once our primary social resource and restraint. We grow on each other.

Culture, character, and consociates weave a complicated fabric of biography. The process is not only lifelong; it is longer than life. Consociates begin to shape our personal course even before we are born, and may continue to renegotiate the meaning of our life long after we are dead. To this extent, a person is a collective product. We all must “author” our own biographies, using the idioms of our heritage, but our biographies must be “authorized” by those who live them with us.

The Problem of Time Depth

In its elementary forms the rhetoric of maturity is much the same as any dynamic of human identification and persuasion. But it works across broad as well as brief intervals of time. And time depth complicates the problems of analysis. In the life-history chapters that make up the bulk of the book (Chapters 3 through 6) we shall watch the rhetoric in its workings across spans of more than a quarter-century—though the rhetoric operates in short compass as well as long.

Analytically we might think of a rhetorical “event” as consisting of three operations. Let us call them identification, justification, and projection. A person has to be timed along his or her life course, identified in terms of one of the standard cultural timetables for maturity and aging. He or she may initiate the claim; others may seek to impose it. Either way, self and consociates must reach an agreement on the matter. In the process of doing so they must justify the identification, offer culturally valid reasons for it. Once they are in agreement on the identification, self and others use it as a basis for projecting their mutual futures.

Grandparenthood, for example, is a very ordinary and expectable part of middle adulthood. But many people greet it with mixed feelings. Grandchildren can be a pleasure, but to be a grandparent is to be placed inexorably among the old of the earth. One of my Japanese interviewees is a woman in her mid-fifties, outgoing and socially active as the wife of the vice-president of a major national business firm. When her first grandchild was born she rejected being categorized as a grandmother. For some days she told friends and family, “Call me anything but that. Call me