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The Situational Nature of Japanese Emotional Expression

Japanese culture is often viewed by the West as one of stoicism; the proud samurai, the quiet geisha, the ever-smiling corporate salary-man. Given the nature of their obligation-centered society, it's easy to think that the Japanese are a people of muted emotion, never expressing themselves lest they disrupt harmony. This is partly true; however, it should also be noted that there is a long standing Japanese tradition of highly emotional culture, such as their tragic *bunraku* puppet shows and deeply melancholy literature. The key to understanding Japanese emotional expression is to understand the importance of situational factors in any given emotion inducing incident.

One of the most revealing factors to consider in Japanese emotional expression is the public eye. If you've ashamed yourself, then you must show those watching that you acknowledge and regret your actions. You also don't want to disturb others with your loud laughter or angry yelling. Japanese emotional expression occurs with a mind towards who's watching. In 1972, Ekman and Friesen conducted a survey comparing Japanese and American emotional displays. In the first half of the study, the participants were shown positive and negative visual stimuli when they believed they were unobserved, and their facial reactions were recorded from outside the room. In the second half of the study, the participants were again shown positive and negative visual stimuli, but this time an impressive looking scientist observed them and recorded their results. In the first half, the Japanese and American facial reactions were exactly the same. However, under observance by a figure of higher social status, the

Japanese participants' reactions immediately changed. The Japanese participants reacted to the stimuli in a much more neutral way. In particular, "In every instance in which the Americans showed negative emotions, the Japanese either showed no emotions or smiled" (Matsumoto, 45). Ekman and Friesen suggested that this was because of the Japanese cultural rule of not showing one's negative emotions in front of a superior. From this we can see that it's not that Japanese people generally have muted emotions; emotions are just suppressed in public situations.

When in a "culturally safe" situation, Japanese will often express themselves quite freely. These emotional displays just tend to be more private, among those one has a very close relationship with. Indeed, within Japanese society emotions are more highly valued than "rationality." The Japanese word for rational, *rikutusu*, carries many negative connotations of coldness, and being calculating. Conversely, though, emotions must also be restrained, not necessarily to allow for *rikutsuna* (rational) decision making but to spare the feelings of others. What can and cannot be expressed varies. In a 1991 study of how Japanese people express themselves in public and in private, Matsumoto found that anger and fear are acceptable to express with casual acquaintances and in public; specifically, it is acceptable to show anger towards someone of lower status, and fear towards someone of higher status. On the other hand, sadness and disgust were not rated as being acceptable to express, even among close friends and family members, as they could disrupt social bonds.

Japanese social interaction is very focused on the feelings of the "other person," and emotional expression is one of the easiest ways to hurt feelings or cause misunderstanding. "Emotions can facilitate and develop bonds between individuals. In a collective society such as Japan's, this aspect of the emotions is very important, because emotions become the social glue that maintains group harmony and cohesion" (Matsumoto 47). Awareness of the feelings and

social position of others dates quite far back in Japanese history. During the Japanese medieval period, complex class systems emerged in the Japanese public and in the Japanese court. Especially within the capital, it was crucial not to offend those of higher status, and so emotional control became a necessity.

This attitude has continued up into the modern day. Medieval concepts of loyalty and status are particularly relevant in today's Japanese corporate world. In places like the Japanese company, emotional control both helps to differentiate between the statuses of individuals, and encourages group harmony. Being polite and restrained or open with your emotions is a way to confirm your social position, and maintain the status quo. Group cohesion is created through shared emotional expression. In Japan, "The sharing of emotional expressions and experiences serves to strengthen bonds among group members, thereby filling an important role in group functioning" (Matsumoto 52). This is known as collective emotion. If the company does well, the employees celebrate together. If it does poorly, they commiserate together.

As we have seen so far, Japanese expression is both encouraged and discouraged. When social discord would be sewn, the consequence is that Japanese learn from an early age to not display how they really feel. But the ways in which Japanese ARE encouraged to express themselves publicly are often surprising. As we read in Hasada's paper, "on some occasions people expect a person to show tears or cry" (181). Although shedding tears publicly is considered shameful, most likely due to its loud and attention-drawing nature, paradoxically it is also expected when something deeply shameful has happened.

Based on such examples, it would seem difficult to navigate society and successfully understand what emotions are appropriate in what situations. So what is the safest way to show emotion in the Japanese culture? This would be the classic and oft seen Japanese placid smile.

This emotion mask is the perfect tool to conceal one's true feelings while still maintaining a degree of expression. Lafcadio Hearn wrote that in Japanese society "the smile is to be used upon all pleasant occasions, when speaking to a superior or to an equal, and even upon occasions which are not pleasant; it is part of deportment. The most agreeable face is the smiling face; and to present always the most agreeable face possible...is a rule of life...Even though the heart is breaking, it is a social duty to smile bravely" (Hearn, 1894, 658-59). This smile, while calm and unoffending, is also capable of expressing a wide degree of feeling, from acceptance to resignation to tolerance (to, of course, true happiness). Often this smile is seen by Westerners as disingenuous or patronizing, but really the Japanese rictus is just another way to be mindful of the feelings of the other party. It also allows for evaluation of an emotional situation, and for maintaining the ever important status quo.

Japanese culture is one of full and deep emotional richness. However due to the nature of its status based culture, these emotions will only be expressed when social conditions allow. It may be hard to break through the Japanese smile mask; but just because the mask is there doesn't mean there's nothing underneath.

References

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