The Chrysanthemum and the Sword

Ruth Benedict

with a Foreword by Ian Buruma

PATTERNS OF JAPANESE CULTURE

ALSO BY RUTH BENEDICT

Tales of the Cohiri Indians
Patterns of Culture
Zuni Mythology
An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict (edited by Margaret Mead)

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Foreword

would remain committed to pacifism, but if the great powers were to gear themselves up for war again, Japan would soon revert to its old militarism. This didn't happen. Despite the Korean War, from which the Japanese economy benefited greatly, despite the Vietnam War, despite tensions with the Soviet Union and China, and despite constant U.S. pressure on Japan to rearm and play a military role again, the majority of Japanese have stuck to their pacific ideals. This might change in time, but not nearly as quickly as Benedict had predicted.

This is not a criticism, for an anthropologist is not a fortune teller. She could not have known what would happen many decades after writing her book. Much has changed in Japan since 1945. Young Japanese today might have a hard time recognizing some aspects of the "national character" described in Benedict's book. Loyalty to the Emperor, duty to one's parents, terror of not repaying one's moral debts, these have faded in an age of technology-driven self-absorption. But the fact that one can still read The Chrysanthemum and the Sword with pleasure and profit is what makes it a classic book.

It is a classic book because of its intellectual and stylistic lucidity. Benedict was a superb writer who explained complicated ideas without resorting to ugly jargon. Style, some would say, is a reflection of character. Benedict was a writer of great humanity and generosity of spirit. A description of a mortal foe, prepared in wartime, this book, when read today, could not possibly offend a Japanese reader, even if he or she disagreed with some of Benedict's conclusions. Finally, despite the many changes that have transformed Japan and the Japanese over the past half century, there is much in the book that still rings true.

Assignment: Japan

The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle. In no other war with a major foe had it been necessary to take into account such exceedingly different habits of acting and thinking. Like Czarist Russia before us in 1905, we were fighting a nation fully armed and trained which did not belong to the Western cultural tradition. Conventions of war which Western nations had come to accept as facts of human nature obviously did not exist for the Japanese. It made the war in the Pacific more than a series of landings on island beaches, more than an unsurpassed problem of logistics. It made it a major problem in the nature of the enemy. We had to understand their behavior in order to cope with it.

The difficulties were great. During the past seventy-five years since Japan's closed doors were opened, the Japanese have been described in the most fantastic series of "but also's" ever used for any nation of the world. When a serious observer is writing about peoples other than the Japanese and says they are unprecedently polite, he is not likely to add, 'But also insolent and overbearing.' When he says people of some nation are incomparably rigid in
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their behavior, he does not add, 'But also they adapt themselves readily to extreme innovations.' When he says a people are submissive, he does not explain too that they are not easily amenable to control from above. When he says they are loyal and generous, he does not declare, 'But also treacherous and spiteful.' When he says they are genuinely brave, he does not expatiate on their timidity. When he says they act out of concern for others' opinions, he does not then go on to tell that they have a truly terrifying conscience. When he describes robot-like discipline in their Army, he does not continue by describing the way the soldiers in that Army take the bit in their own teeth even to the point of insubordination. When he describes a people who devote themselves with passion to Western learning, he does not also enlarge on their fervid conservatism. When he writes a book on a nation with a popular cult of aestheticism which gives high honor to actors and to artists and lavishes art upon the cultivation of chrysanthemums, that book does not ordinarily have to be supplemented by another which is devoted to the cult of the sword and the top prestige of the warrior.

All these contradictions, however, are the warp and woof of books on Japan. They are true. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways. They are terribly concerned about what other people will think of their behavior, and

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they are also overcome by guilt when other people know nothing of their misstep. Their soldiers are disciplined to the hilt but are also insubordinate.

When it became so important for America to understand Japan, these contradictions and many others equally blatant could not be waved aside. Crises were facing us in quick succession. What would the Japanese do? Was capitulation possible without invasion? Should we bomb the Emperor's palace? What could we expect of Japanese prisoners of war? What should we say in our propaganda to Japanese troops and to the Japanese homeland which could save the lives of Americans and lessen Japanese determination to fight to the last man? There were violent disagreements among those who knew the Japanese best. When peace came, were the Japanese a people who would require perpetual martial law to keep them in order? Would our army have to prepare to fight desperate bitter-enders in every mountain fastness of Japan? Would there have to be a revolution in Japan after the order of the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution before international peace was possible? Who would lead it? Was the alternative the eradication of the Japanese? It made a great deal of difference what our judgments were.

In June, 1944, I was assigned to the study of Japan. I was asked to use all the techniques I could as a cultural anthropologist to spell out what the Japanese were like. During that early summer our great offensive against Japan had just begun to show itself in its true magnitude. People in the United States were still saying that the war with Japan would last three years, perhaps ten years, more. In Japan