The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: The Use of Radical Comparisons to Enhance Mutual Understanding

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Poverty and other issues associated with development are commonly found in many Asian and African countries. These problems are interwoven with ethnic, religious and political issues, and often lead to incessant conflicts with violence. In order to find an appropriate framework for the conflict resolution, we need to develop a perspective which will fully take into account the wisdom of relevant disciplines such as economics, politics and international relations, as well as that fostered in area studies. Building on the following expertise and networks that have been accumulated in Ryukoku University in the past, the Centre organises research projects to tackle with new and emerging issues in the age of globalisation. It aims to disseminate the results of our research internationally, through academic publications and engagement in public discourse.

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The recent debacle concerning Japanese Prime Minister Abe denying, and then confirming, that the Japanese military played a part in organising “comfort women” for the servicing of Japanese troops during World War Two, revived the debate about whether or not Japan had apologised enough for its actions during the war and whether Japan fully acknowledged its responsibility towards those involved as “comfort women”. Abe’s indecision and backpedaling highlighted continuing distrust towards Japan concerning wartime activities, but his eventual admittance of evidence to support military involvement finally calmed down the flames of distrust and disconsolation: for the moment it seems that relations between America and Japan are once again amicable.

Over 60 years ago, Ruth Benedict played a major part in restoring relations between the two countries after the war dragged the relations down to the lowest possible point. The Japanese, as an enemy, were unfathomable to the point that it was thought only their complete annihilation would suffice as a solution in the endeavour to create a peaceful world. Despite such wartime racist ideas, Benedict was able to portray the Japanese in a human light and persuade her readers that the Japanese could be comprehended and play a part in a new peaceful world order. She was able to sway the debased wartime images by strategically deconstructing the wartime Japanese images and then reconstructing new, more human, images by locating the Japanese cultural traits comparatively with those of other cultures. She pertinently points to differences but discusses these within the context of the Japanese culture, thus allowing the reader to see how cultural traits are framed. This acknowledgement of very distinct traits that, nonetheless, can be located comprehensively within the framework of Japanese culture and comparatively against the larger framework of other cultures (especially America) is the key to achieving an understanding of the Japanese. The Chrysanthemum and the Sword still reverberates with students of Japan today, as demonstrated by its continuous sales. The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is available in a number of languages and most translations have either been reprinted or newly translated since the 1990s. Moreover, in the ongoing...
“Japan boom” in China, *Chrysanthemum* sold over 70,000 copies in 2005 and ranked second on the academic publications’ list (an unprecedented incident for such a book in China).

Thus, Benedict is still advising students about the ethical system that represents some of the commonly held cultural values of the Japanese. This begs the question: Why does Benedict’s work on Japan still command such an enormous audience? There is, of course, no simple answer to this question. However, the relevance of *Chrysanthemum* can be explained, in part, by situating Benedict within the intellectual and academic milieu of her times and using this background to reassess some of the mechanisms she employs in order to stimulate her readers’ minds and sensibilities, with the aim of creating a “world made safe for differences” (Benedict 1946: 15). *Chrysanthemum* incorporates methodology and theory that Benedict had developed hitherto. It also incorporates Benedict’s vision for socially just societies that would allow the individual a certain amount of individual freedom. Considered ahead of her time, Benedict was conscious of the need to represent ‘Others’ without the inevitable Western, biased or racist filters that were so prevalent in her time. Her meticulous attention to all manner of mundane detail allowed her to see the integration of different aspects of culture in the form of a cohesive pattern. In attempting to create these patterns she was decidedly “post-modern” in her use of media, literature, film, etc., to represent the ‘Other’ stripped of as many ethnocentric filters as possible. However, she was decidedly modern in her assessment of cultures, attempting to go beyond relativity in her quest to highlight the influence culture plays in the individual’s life, but at the same time, also demonstrate the agency of individuals and the possibility of bringing about change for a better society. The use of the pattern was an abstraction that allowed attention to detail and the emergence of cultural symbolism that is not constricted by biological elements or physical environments, effectively creating a framework for cross-cultural comparison (Jenks 2005: 35). Interdisciplinary research, which was unusual at the time Benedict wrote, also provided her with more details and comparisons that helped to locate the Japanese in the international community.

In *Chrysanthemum*, Benedict’s use of the “but-also” mechanism, and radical comparisons, not only cross cultural boundaries but unsettles many preconceptions the reader may hold, allowing them to critique their own culture whilst, at the same time, get a glimpse of the ‘Other’ without the ethnocentric filters to blur the image. Professionally and personally, Benedict was aware of the filters that could condemn a person for being different. At the height of the Pacific War, no one was considered more different or alien than the Japanese and the feeling of extreme enmity, coupled with stereotypical images, was a barricade that Benedict had to attack first before she could gain access to the sensibilities of her readers. Her ideas and theories pertaining to culture and her understanding of discrimination and racism were essential when she
took up the topic of the Japanese.

By discussing some of these ‘unsettling strategies,’ against the background of her vision of anthropology, I will try to illustrate some of the reasons for the success of *Chrysanthemum* in changing wartime perceptions to more human images of the Japanese.

**A Brief Background to *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword***

Benedict began writing *Chrysanthemum* when she worked for the Foreign Morale Analysis Division, Office of War Information (FMAD, OWI) during the Second World War. She wrote the core argument about the ethics system of the Japanese initially as a report for the OWI. This report was produced in a short period of about two months at the height of tension and confusion just before the end of the war with Japan (NARA, FMAD Log, May 17, 1945). The report, which numbered 57 pages, was later expanded during a sabbatical directly after the war and appeared as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in November of 1946. Benedict was part of a team of researchers that included members of Japanese ancestry. There was also a section to process the enormous amount of data that arrived daily. Data would be sifted and summarised, compiled in reports, etc., and passed onto the research team for analysis. The team was interdisciplinary. Data included available references, travelogues, films, literature, self-revelations by the Japanese, daily news and radio reports from Japan, interviews of POWs (prisoners of war), interviews of people of Japanese ancestry, military intelligence reports, etc. Film analysis had only recently been developed in anthropology with Gregory Bateson’s analysis of *Hitlerjunge Quex* and other Nazi propaganda films, in 1941-42. His techniques were further employed by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the predecessor to the CIA) to conduct an analysis of Japanese films. Although Benedict did not write the report on the results of the analyses, she participated by watching the films and observing the reactions of a Japanese audience. She did this in order to gain more insight into how the Japanese reacted to their own culture. Benedict also relied on Robert Hashima (*kibei*) who was also a part of the FMAD team. She depended on his advice about questions that puzzled her and for further insight into the meaning of words and cultural elements that seemed particular to Japan. Others were also employed to conduct further interviews with those of Japanese ancestry living in the United States.

In this way, despite the fact that Benedict was unable to visit Japan to explore the field with her own eyes, she was able to collect a large amount of data that ranged widely.

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Among her colleagues, Benedict was known to be meticulous in her repeated examination of data in her efforts to ‘make sense’ of what the people she was examining experienced in their culture (Lee 1949). In fact, many of her students, frustrated by her ability to comprehend masses of information as patterns, were convinced that it must all be due to witchcraft (Young 2005: 156).

Before writing *Chrysanthemum*, Benedict had already penned *Patterns of Culture* (1934), which is still occasionally used in introductory classes to anthropology today. There she developed the idea of ‘pattern’ as a way of analysing individual cultures with the intent of comparing and contrasting these for the purpose of finding correlations of cultural arrangements and their effects on social life. How do social institutions condition the thought and behaviour of people? What were the social conditions or arrangements that minimised elements that were detrimental to social well being, such as frustration and aggression, and provided an environment that encouraged vigour, zest and a sense of being free? In other words, Benedict tried to identify causes and deterrents of particular social outcomes with the hope of identifying ways of improving arrangements in such a way that personal freedom would become an integral part of that arrangement (Young 2005: 1-2). Thus, even though she was credited with popularising the idea of cultural relativity, her aim was always to go beyond relativity and evaluate cultural mechanisms so that it would be possible to change society to better suit individual freedom.

Her quest was influenced by the social milieu which affected her both personally and professionally. On graduating from Vassar College in 1909, she spent a year abroad in Europe where she came into contact with values that differed greatly from those she had learned. She soon found herself comparing and questioning those cultural values. At Columbia University, where she studied under Franz Boas, she was part of a very diverse set of students. Women, Afro-Americans, Latinos, Jews who had fled Europe, and others from various backgrounds, were all welcomed to Columbia by Boas. As a student of the Boasian school, she was well aware of how social evolutionism of the nineteenth century precluded tolerance toward a vast range of differences. Boas himself had extended a great deal of his efforts to fighting social evolutionism, arguing that classifications such as savage, barbarian and civilised peoples were artificial and based on Western values (Handler 1990a: 254). The Boasian School encouraged dialogue between biology and anthropology in order to expose and remove the racist bias. Benedict, in particular, used “deviances” to gauge how a culture would deal with marginalised persons. For example, perceived “deviants” in Western society could be valued members in other societies; while homosexuality and suicide were perceived as abnormal behaviour in the West, Ancient Greece honoured these two elements in their society. Long before the representation of alterity was taken up in anti-colonial and post-modern discourses, Benedict had stated in *Patterns* that anthropology could be
used as a vehicle to reconceptualise the ‘Other’: “Anthropology was by definition impossible as long as these distinctions between ourselves and the primitive, ourselves and the barbarian, ourselves and the pagan, held sway over people’s minds” (Benedict 1934: 3-4). “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking” (Ibid: 5-6). Benedict’s concerns with ethnocentric interpretations are evident throughout her work. In her introductory chapter in *Chrysanthemum*, she writes that she cannot concur with those who profess a brotherhood of man but who believe:

that all the differences between East and West, black and white, Christian and Mohammedan, are superficial and that all mankind is really like-minded. … But to demand such uniformity as a condition of respecting another nation is as neurotic as demanding it of one’s wife of one’s children.” Instead she sought “a world made safe for differences. (Benedict 1974 (1946): 14-15)

In her personal life, Benedict chose to spend her life with female partners after separating from her husband, thereby making her acutely aware of the contemporary attitudes towards homosexual relationships. In her professional life, despite the fact that she garnered many prestigious awards and was highly regarded by colleagues, Columbia University was slow to promote her, causing Benedict much frustration. Benedict and other active female anthropologists of the time were “each excluded in subtle ways from important disciplinary rewards or achieved them at a much later stage in their lives than their male peers”. ³ (Lamphere 2004: 127)

Despite the Boasian efforts to elucidate the influences of culture, one of the consequences of the rise of Nazism and the imminence of war was intensified racism, scientific racism and prejudice against minorities. Boas recruited Benedict to write a book about race and racism and, in 1940, she published *Race: Science and Politics*. Here she devoted the first part of her book to race and explained how ‘race’ is fundamentally a number of abstract classifications for the purpose of scientific research. In the second part of her book, she points out how economic, political, social and religious conditions have created situations that make minorities the target scapegoats, and later on, with the rise of the nation state, how racism developed. The book was widely read and Benedict, with Gene Weltfish, produced pamphlet and cartoon versions for children, which were distributed in large volume. Pointing out the fact, however, that

³ For example, even Boas denied Benedict a full-time paid job after she received her doctorate, as she was still married and therefore should not need the income. Not until she separated from her husband (1930) did he give her a salaried position. After Boas’ retirement, despite being recognised as one of America’s most prominent anthropologists and having taken on the role as acting chair in her department at Columbia University, she was overlooked for the chair, which was finally given to Ralph Linton. Her promotion to professor occurred only in the last year of her life. (In the same faculty at Columbia, the next female to be promoted to professor, occurred only in 1981.)
African Americans living in the North produced a higher IQ than that found in Anglo Americans in some parts of the impoverished South, attracted extreme criticism from a Southern senator, highlighting the prejudice that was prevalent in the US at the time. Eventually, when Benedict approached her subject of the Japanese at the height of the Pacific War, she was well acquainted with the mechanics of racist prejudice, discrimination and stereotypes, and also very familiar with the vehement reactions they could elicit.

**Racism and the Japanese**

In *Chrysanthemum* Benedict opens with “The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought” (p.1). Immediately she acknowledges the feeling of enmity towards the Japanese but also the fact that they were very alien to the Western imagination. Moreover, her use of the past tense signals to the reader that the Japanese can be comprehended now, despite their differences. An understanding of the extent of enmity towards the Japanese during the war makes further sense of this opening statement. It must also be kept in mind, however, that other representations of this alien nation, which were sublimated during the war, are also a key to Benedict’s strategy to unsettle and stimulate her readers.

First, it will be useful to address the extent of wartime racist attitudes towards the Japanese. Recently, David Price has used the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to hitherto unreleased documents about the war with the Japanese and conducted interviews with George Taylor, an historian who headed the Far Eastern Division, Office of War Information (OWI). (Taylor was, thus, Benedict’s ‘boss’.) Price’s research reveals the racist attitudes of the White House and also the War Department, which leaned towards a genocidal campaign to obliterate a “race” believed incapable of surrender. In contrast to this attitude, Taylor noted that his job was to conduct psychological warfare both on the home-front and overseas in order to minimise racist stereotypes on both sides (Price 2004). An illustration of these racist attitudes is epitomised in a report commissioned by the OSS, “Preliminary Report on Japanese Anthropology” (1943) which sought to identify “culture- and race-specific means of killing Japanese soldiers and civilians”. In other words, the aim was to invent a weapon that would kill only Japanese. The report’s objectives were to find: “physical characteristics in which the Japanese differ from others in such a way as to make these differences significant from the point of view of carrying on the war”. Japanese anatomical and structural features, physiological traits, susceptibility to diseases, and possible weaknesses in the Japanese constitution or nutrition were all examined. However, although the report could determine no “useful” morphological differences to target, it nevertheless suggested the use of “anthrax bacilli which attacks the respiratory tract, a known weak spot in the Japanese body, [as] the most effective agent”. On the
other hand, it was also understood that the effects of the anthrax would spread to livestock, etc., with the result that whole regions would remain dangerous and uninhabitable for many years. Other biological warfare strategies were also discussed but, without specific racial characteristics to exploit, further research into a cultural/racial specific weapon was considered futile. The authorship is still classified information, but it is known that a number of anthropologists who were consulted showed little enthusiasm for the project (Price 2005). It is interesting to note that the initial research question illustrates the confusion about the relationship of culture and race.

John Dower, of course, has also discussed similar cases and the acute feeling of animosity towards the Japanese within the framework of racism. He documents the stereotypes that experts inevitably reinforced—images of the Japanese as primitive, childish and neurotic—concluding that this racist attitude “points to the basic categories through which male-dominated Western elites have perceived and dealt with others over the centuries” (Dower 1986: 146). He also demonstrates how prejudice was far stronger concerning the Japanese in comparison to the Germans or the Italians. Stereotypes of the Japanese swayed between primitive, uncivilised and inferior, to superhuman men who flew across the treetops. These were not just popular notions. These stereotypes were reinforced by academics and so-called scientific investigation. Dower is scathing in his comments about academics and scholars who contributed to these biased images and cites many examples, including the Institute for Pacific Relations (IPR) Conference held in December 16-17, 1944 (Ibid: 138). Some major academic figures of the day, gathered to discuss the “Japanese Character Structure”.\(^4\) Two months before the conference, Benedict, had mapped out her advice to psychiatrists in an OWI memo.\(^5\) Her advice was to compare the “deviant”. Those who examined Japanese behaviour should look for “atypical” or even “neurotic” behaviour. The point of this was not to isolate neurotic behaviour but to realise that when much of this type of behaviour occurs in a uniform manner and with support and approval in Japanese culture, obviously new perceptions would be necessary for analysing behaviour which had hitherto been perceived only as ‘abnormal’. Only with a revision of analytical techniques could the shackles of the Western Imagination be thrown off. Some specific topics she suggested for study by psychiatrists included: dealing with insult and the Japanese; shame and the traumatic possibilities this can have on prisoners and post-war Japan; minimising Japanese aggression in the international world; dealing with the distress felt by prisoners of war who felt they had broken with their pre-war lives.

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\(^4\) Participants included Japan experts such as Geoffrey Gorer, Douglas Haring, Helen Mears, Gordon Bowles (Head of the State Department at the time), John Maki (OWI) and Andrew Meadows (OSS), while social science analysts included Talcott Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Andrew Leighton (FMAD), Margaret Mead, Erik Erikson and others.

\(^5\) “Problems in Japanese Morale Submitted for Study by Psychiatrists” (RFB Papers, October 26, 1944).
However, at the IPR conference, Western notions of deviance and abnormality formed the basis for the ‘experts’ conclusions. Margaret Mead summed up the conference findings.

Considered as an outstanding new insight was the comparison of the Japanese to adolescents. The ‘insight’ provided a framework for the scholars to work within: the comparison being with adolescents in American society, a well documented and understood subject in the realms of American psychological and psychiatric knowledge.\(^6\)

In addition, it also was suggested that comparisons of gangsters (mafia) and the Japanese might produce some results. John Embree later criticised this conference for its loss of objectivity and its ethnocentric insights which led to the biased conclusion that “those objectionable little people must have an evil, a ‘pathological’, or at best an ‘adolescent’ culture” (Embree 1950: 430). Although Benedict was in attendance, she found none of the conclusions enlightening and perhaps realised how deeply stereotypes had become embedded.

Dower is dismissive of such scholarly efforts, but he recognises Benedict’s acute awareness of racist issues and her endeavour to temper racist notions with more objective observations. He even goes so far as to describe Benedict as “perhaps the most graceful and subtle of the wartime analysts of Japan” (Dower 1986: 124).

Indeed Benedict was aware of racist views of the Japanese but she was also acutely aware of other images of the Japanese which provided for a complex understanding of the Japanese by Americans. In contrast, Dower, despite the robust arguments he provides about racist stereotypes during the war, has oversimplified the role these stereotypes play in his haste to explain the dissipation of enmity after the war.\(^7\) According to Dower, one of the reasons that cordial relations were revived so quickly after the war was simply that racist stereotypes flipped over to their polar opposites (\textit{Ibid}: 304-5). For example, stereotypes of the Japanese as destructive apes, changed in the post war period to the stereotype of a domesticated monkey with the ability to charm and mimic the occupation forces. Likewise the stereotype of the Japanese as the lesser man or child was turned into an image of the child willing to learn, pliable and good at imitation. Whilst Dower’s explanation that these stereotypes were merely sublimated and re-emerged during the ‘trade wars’ of the 1980’s (\textit{Ibid}: 310) can be explained

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\(^6\) See, “Provisional Analytical Summary of Institute of Pacific Relations Conference on Japanese Character Structure”, December 16-17, 1944. Summary prepared by Dr. Margaret Mead. (24pp.) p. 3. RFB Papers.

\(^7\) See, Dower, 1986; Epilogue.
according to his theory, his reversal of stereotypes theory is insufficient for explaining the hiatus between crises. In times of peace and cooperation, diplomacy and negotiations, a common ground of understanding must be achieved and a certain amount of equity must be attained in the relationship. This requires an awareness of interdependence and balance of power in order to create a substantive relationship, which is mutually acceptable to both sides. This cannot be achieved by simplistic images such as domesticated monkeys or submissive and meek children. Certainly, the racial prejudice and stereotypes of the war were powerful images but they were infused with an element of enmity which, besides being dependent on ethnocentrism, bigotry and condescension, requires an infusion of “a sense of a threat to the very life of the nation” (Kennedy 1997: 348). It is necessary to distinguish between distaste or prejudice and full-blown enmity.

Dower notes that models for the stereotypes of the Japanese could actually be traced back to Ancient Greece and were part of the imagery used by whites for non-whites. Comparisons of the Germans in WWI and the Japanese in WWII have shown that the demonisation process was similar. Both were “demonized and animalized, accused of sexual atrocities and mass butcheries” (Ibid: 350). In the twentieth century, images of a savage enemy were manufactured to mobilise American citizens for collective effort. When the crisis ended and the instrumental utility of the images was no longer necessary, the images would lapse, as would the sense of enmity. However, as images for different “enemies” were manufactured from similar roots, it does not stand to reason that a simple reversal of stereotypes allowed for substantial post-war/crisis relationships.

Thus, although Dower’s explanation of the enmity towards the Japanese is a powerful and convincing argument, Benedict’s manipulation of both wartime stereotypes and hints of other images from different periods has proven an effective way to create a more substantial understanding of the Japanese, rather than just cancelling out stereotypes with their opposite images. Through her use of the “but-also” mechanism, she demonstrates an understanding of other sublimated images that might be elicited for a more comprehensive ‘image’ of the Japanese.

Strategies for Understanding

As already mentioned, Benedict addresses images and stereotypes in the opening pages of *Chrysanthemum*. The Japanese were alien, and ever since the opening of Japan “the Japanese have been described in the most fantastic series of but-also’s ever used for any

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8 Some examples of but-also’s are: polite but also insolent and overbearing; aggressive and unaggressive; rigid and adaptable; loyal and treacherous; brave and timid; conservative and hospitable to new ways; militaristic and aesthetic (Benedict 1946: 2).
nation of the world” and “[l]ike Czarist Russia before us in 1905, we were fighting a nation fully armed and trained which did not belong to the Western cultural tradition” (p.1). Already, she has taken the reader back in time to another set of images. The reference to Russia is of particular interest as this was the time when “things Japanese” were enjoying great popularity, especially amongst the upper echelons of society in America. The company of upper class Japanese was a sought after commodity and there was enthusiastic interest in a number of aspects of Japanese culture. In 1904, as the negotiations between Japan and Russia faltered, editorials in the *New York Times (NYT)* constantly remind readers that it is Japan that is being forced into war by the “impolite Russians” and there are numerous reports about the ground-swell of support for the Japanese position. Benedict began her studies at Vassar College, in New York State, and it might be assumed that she was aware of such reports in the newspapers. Moreover, from the time of the opening of Japan there were, indeed, many reports that indulged in the but-also images. The second article on Japan to appear in the *NYT* is one such example. A shipwrecked captain forced to put into a Japanese port was allowed to go on shore alone, but found that everything had been shut up before he could get there, “Yet he was treated with great respect and kindness, and furnished with sixty men to prosecute repairs to his vessel”. When the Japanese Embassy set foot in America in 1860, they were well received and advertisements in the *NYT* show that their visit had captured the imagination of merchants who were quick to produce new ‘Japanese fragrances’ or, as a marketing ploy, suggested that the Embassy would no doubt be visiting a particular establishment to obtain the latest in new spring hats. The arrival of the Embassy coincided with the development of technology that allowed pictures to be transmitted across the country, which was probably the reason that many females excitedly awaited their visits and, in particular, hoped for a glimpse of the young, samurai heart-throb “Tommy”. The but-also images do not necessarily occur in the same article. They are often an accumulation of images that have been spliced together and many can be found in the *NYT* and other popular media. Even as war loomed, reports of the success of popular Japanese tennis players and swimmers can be found in the sports section of the *NYT* and stories about Japan’s quaint way of life can be found in the book reviews and other sections. Thus, although racist images abounded during the war, there was already a stock of different images filed away from pre-war times.

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10 “After some little difficulty, he (Capt. Anderson) was allowed to go singly on shore ... Everything presented a blank wall to him, and he was not permitted to gratify his curiosity in the slightest particular. Yet he was treated with great respect and kindness, and furnished with sixty men to prosecute repairs on his vessel.” Article 7, No title, *New York Times*, December 2, 1851, p.4.
11 “One commendable peculiarity I ought to notice with reference to the females employed in the Mint— they were all behaved themselves. ... Female human nature, however, suffered an irrepressible conflict when it was announced that TOMMY was in the room... They took possession of places at the windows where they thought they could view unobserved the personnel of the Embassy, and their eyes glistened through the chinks, like so many diamonds studding the window frames.” The Japanese at Philadelphia, *New York Times*, June 14, 1860, p.8.
Benedict’s understanding of this set of images, that seemed to see-saw from one to another, allowed her to grasp the complexity of American views of the Japanese, thereby allowing her to appeal to some of the subliminal images (positive included) her readers already held. She then, gradually, throughout the book, brings these images to a conscious level through comparisons with other cultures, eventually demonstrating that the Japanese were just as human as Americans. However, she does not moderate the alien nature of the Japanese. In fact, she sustains the very difference of their culture throughout and places it at variance with American and other cultures. Not only did she refute stereotypes but also she pointed out the very tangible differences between Japan and the US and used the stark contrasts to make her reader aware of their narrow understanding of Japan.

Edward Sapir, a contemporary and friend of Benedict, suggested the use of “a radical theory of cross-cultural comparison, or, to use a currently fashionable term, deconstruction” as a way of destroying the familiar and ‘taken for granted’ constructions, in order to understand fundamentally different modes of expression (Handler 1990a: 255). A destructive analysis of the familiar would allow the speaker to consider not only an alien language but also the exceptional nature of one’s language. Benedict employed a sustained radical cross-cultural comparison in *Chrysanthemum* in order to stimulate a simultaneous understanding of not only the unfathomable Japanese culture but also of the more familiar culture, thereby creating space for a new approach to the alien (*Ibid*: 256). For example, she casually compares ‘*giri* to one’s name’ to *el valor Espanol* in classic Spain and *die Ehre* in Germany along with a less common type found in Italy but goes on to explain it is not a trait common to the Orient (pp. 146-7). The recently departed Clifford Geertz also noted this strategy:

> It rests on Benedict’s use, over and over again, from the beginning of her career to its end, and virtually to the exclusion of any other, of the rhetorical strategy upon which that mode of critique centrally depends: the juxtaposition of the all-too-familiar and the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places. (Geertz 1988: 106)

These unsettling juxtapositions penetrate the readers’ deeper thoughts and help to sweep away the blind enmity of war and remind them of other images of the Japanese. At the same time, Benedict constantly ‘deconstructs’ examples from America to make her readers aware of the contradictions in their own society, which, nevertheless, still manages to maintain a cohesive structure. Chapter Nine, *The Circle of Human Feelings*, is a continual contrast and comparison of Japanese and American perceptions on individual traits such as sleeping, eating, sex and marriage, masculinity, drinking, good
and evil. She also compares Japan with a vast array of other countries, such as America, Melanesia, China, Burma, Prussia, Spain, Italy, the South Sea Islands, etc., thereby locating Japan within an international framework rather than classifying her simply as ‘Oriental’ or leaving her in isolation, or in polar opposition to America. This clarifies that Japan is similar in some aspects to other countries, while pointing out not all countries value the same things as America.

Benedict constantly refers to particulars and trivia throughout her study but also uses the concept of pattern to bind together all the trivia in a comprehensible (and more memorable) package. Although she does not name these patterns as she did in her first book, *Patterns of Culture*, ‘Taking one’s proper station’ is one pattern which illustrates the weight given to hierarchy in Japan as opposed to the ideal of equality in America. Another pattern deals with the ethics system of obligations and responsibilities which demonstrates how *on*, *gimu* and *giri* interact in differing relationships. Finally, the pattern of shame, which is the method of sanction that functions to guide and punish the Japanese, is contrasted with guilt, which is perceived as the ideal sanction for most Americans. By providing abstract frameworks of thought, it can be argued that Benedict gave the reader the opportunity to extend their interpretations. Thus, by using the trivia of everyday life to explain the overall pattern of behaviour the reader is able to understand the thrust of Benedict’s argument but is also left with a general overall impression of pattern with which to organise their understanding of the Japanese, comparison also provides readers with valuable references and Benedict paid particular attention to the range of a certain behaviour in order to be able to compare it with other examples. Thus her descriptions involve, for example, a range of behaviour which can differ according to the social strata from the samurai downwards.

As Benedict explains the alien Japanese cultural attributes and values, she is also careful to explain the process of logic that underlies the contrasting values and ideals. In contrasting Japanese hierarchy with American equality, Benedict explains that Japanese hierarchy is not merely class distinction, but a complex system that is practiced in families, where distinctions of age, sex, family ties, etc., dictate behaviour. Hierarchy is bound up by ‘meticulous rules and conventions’ (Benedict 1946: 48) but also by responsibilities that are incumbent with one’s station in life. Such responsibilities do not allow for ‘the use of the mailed fist’ (*Ibid*: 56) but do require “acceptance of strong and sanctioned emotional ties in the Japanese families” (*Ibid*: 57). This hierarchical or caste system is compared with China and other Asian countries to clarify differences between similar nations. Moreover, the sensibilities of Americans and their love of equality (and their difficulty to understand Japanese sensibilities because of different standards) are noted throughout the explanations with cautions about ‘our’ cultural beliefs inserted to

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12 See, Geertz 1988: 117-120.
unsettle the reader about their own convictions. For example, on talking about the
American faith in equality, Benedict writes: “Equality is the highest, most moral
American basis for hopes for a better world. …We uphold the virtue of equality even
when we violate it and we fight hierarchy with righteous indignation” (Ibid: 45).

The patterns are also a framework for discussing cultural arrangements and the social
outcomes they produce. For Benedict, culture was “an enveloping and multifaceted
whole, though always malleable by its members” (Young 2005: 16).

She distinguished between cultures that allow a sense of being free and those that
extend freedom to only the few. The distinction rests on institutional security and
welfare that give support and scope to all individuals within a culture, and a sense
of freedom was found in many different institutional arrangements. (Ibid: 16)

Benedict stated in one of her lectures in 1947 that “egalitarian and hierarchical societies
can be arranged to make the parties either secure or insecure” (Ibid: 22), illustrating that
the arrangements to be found in a society were not necessarily determined by their
political or social ideologies. She was not interested in cultural determinism or cultural
essentialism, nor did she insist that Japan embrace American style democracy. “For
Benedict the point of the concept of ‘culture’ was to understand other people’s
rationality without misunderstanding it as identical to our own” (Rosenblatt 2004: 467).

Thus, a careful reading of Chrysanthemum will reveal many cautions about assuming
too much about one’s own cultural values, often in very subtle ways, in order not to
offend but to instruct. However, in explaining the matter of dignity in relation to proper
station, the message is not so subtle:

Americans who cry out today that Japan cannot be given self-respect until we
enforce our egalitarianism are guilty of ethnocentrism. If what these Americans
want is, as they say, a self-respecting Japan they will have to recognize her bases
for self-respect. (Benedict 1946: 150)

Chrysanthemum is often dismissed as the quintessential nihonjinron, but an examination
of it against the background of Benedict’s work shows that Benedict was, in fact, very
aware of the dangers inherent in cultural essentialism. Her depiction of the Japanese as
completely alien but not beyond comprehension is a bold and effective strategy. By
using this strategy to deconstruct and reconstruct images that fundamentally change the
outlook of the reader (as they reassess their own culture), she is able to show how a
seemingly alien (Japanese) culture provides order that gives meaning and direction to
the actions of its members. Finding coherence in a society does not mean that
Benedict’s view of culture is one that “coerces and compels individuals” as suggested
by some critics. Cultural integration involves the recurrence of similar patterns at different levels and in many areas of social life and is a possibility but, not necessarily, a matter of dogma. Benedict’s use of history (although criticised as flawed) is to show the build up of cultural mores that have been transmitted through a number of generations. This view of cultural integration is important both because it distinguishes the Boasian ‘culture’ concept from ideas about ‘national essence’ and because it raises the productive question of how coherence occurs (Rosenblatt 2004: 461). Although individuals are conditioned by culture, this is an ongoing process that involves agency on the part of the individual which produces the possibility of change and reform. Chrysanthemum explains how the Japanese have changed according to differing situations and, towards the end of the book, Benedict is confident that the Japanese will be capable of change again in the post war period.

Of course, much of the data itself is now dated and there are plenty of places that can cause one to cringe. Conclusions she makes about creating individual freedom for the Japanese has been described as an attempt to make Japan a cultural equal “for the personal ethic of the cosmopolitan, responsible, liberal intellectual” (Shannon 2005: 85). Further criticism of the book has been documented in a number of essays but few of these pieces provide answers to questions about the longevity of the book.

Benedict’s research on the Japanese was conducted in an interdisciplinary environment. In a large cross-cultural research project, Research in Contemporary Cultures, Benedict established just after the war and modeled on the OWI, she created an environment for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural comparison research, which was innovative and experimental. This preceded the national character research projects of Harvard and elsewhere which were also influenced by the OWI model. Natives of each culture were included in each cultural research group and “it was a requirement that statements made about a culture should be phrased in terms that are acceptable to members of that culture” (Mead 2000: xx). Certainly Chrysanthemum has struck a chord in Japan where it has continued to be popular. Interest in nihonjinron and the essentialism of Japanese culture must account for some of the sales but it cannot account for all of the sales. It can be argued that Benedict’s ability to unsettle her readers and represent the ‘other’, with as little ethnocentric bias as possible, was a successful strategy that straddles borders and appeals to both Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

Not only has Chrysanthemum crossed the English and Japanese borders but, as interest

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14 This research later became known as culture at a distance.
in Japan increases in Asia, the book has also become a best seller in China. However, just as wartime experiences shaped American perceptions of the Japanese, colonisation and the war experience has coloured the perception of the Chinese today and produced a translation with an ironic twist. A translation of the recently published Japanese Kodansha version (2005) includes visual material that sometimes complements the text but at other times is an obvious reminder of Japanese imperialism and militarism. The visual materials seem to have no copyrights and are accompanied by captions. There are a number of pictures of the Showa Emperor with one particular photo located above a picture of Hitler. Although there is no reference to the Yasukuni Shrine in the book, a picture of the shrine appears when the text refers to the religious system. By simply skimming through the book and looking only at the pictures, it would be very easy to form a very different image from the message in the text. This reminds us that the mood and sensibilities of our readers can influence the way information is presented. Benedict went to great pains to break down ethnocentric preconceptions but this latest translation of *Chrysanthemum* ironically reinforces Chinese preconceptions through the use of these visual materials and captions.

In a way, this proves to us that culture does matter and that Japan can still be a volatile subject. In some circles there is a swell of support for further research about cultural systems and how culture influences behaviour and thought. Needless to say, cross-cultural research is considered a key to a further understanding of these systems. For example, Harrison and Huntington edited *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (2000) in which the authors attempt to show how cultural patterns shape political, economic and social performance. Culture can influence social outcomes such as affluence and poverty. Likewise, in the area of dispute resolution the cultural factor is now considered “the new sexy issue” (Lederach 1995: 4) because different cultural perceptions can play an influential (and often destructive) role in resolution negotiations. Understanding how these cultural factors function is once again considered an issue that deserves serious attention. In this sense, Benedict’s concept of culture, as both scientific and political, provided both practical and theoretical hints for later writers. Her examination of ‘others’ shares many of the concerns of post-modern critics and her analysis of the “trivial details of daily intercourse” is echoed in their research methods.

By embracing the alien character of the Japanese as one image and then deconstructing destructive stereotypes by radically comparing such images to cultural traits found in America, Benedict was able to unsettle her readers sufficiently so that they were open to new explanations about the Japanese. She then proceeded to build an explanation of Japanese behaviour, that was still alien yet, nevertheless, could be comprehended when located within its own cultural values. This, in turn, reduced the feeling of enmity towards the Japanese allowing Americans to negotiate the rebuilding of Japan in the post-war period with conviction.
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