Japan Study Institute

The focus of my studies at the Japan Study Institute was Japanese culture. In particular, I am interested as to why Japan was the first non-Western nation to modernize. Max Weber in a classic study argued that the West developed market institutions, because Calvinism was common in a number of Protestant nations. Calvinists believe that wealth was a sign of being predestined for salvation. Hence, they did not engage in conspicuous consumption, but re-invested their profits from business.

Japanese cultures is mixture of a number of number of different elements: Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism and Taoism. None of these traditions has the requisite abstinence feature of Calvinism. Hence, the Weberian analysis of culture does not apply to Japan, nor other Asian societies.

Two other cultural explanations for Japan’s successful modernization have been proposed in recent years. First, capitalists must be risk takers. Hence, it is argued that individuals who perceive themselves as lucky, i.e., gamblers, are much more likely to become entrepreneurs. Both Shintoism and especially Taoism hold that people’s fate is determined by luck. Hence, exponents of both are much more likely to become risk taking entrepreneurs. By contrast, Buddhists and Confucians hold that one’s fate is determined by one’s actions, not by luck.

Second, it is argued that an essential requirement for development is that the government leaders must adopt policies that benefit the nation, and not policies that just enrich themselves. We see this among government leaders during the Meiji period. But most political leaders in emerging African and Latin American countries just enrich themselves. The explanation for the difference has been attributed to a culture of nationalism during the Meiji and since. Both bushido and Emperor worship have obedience and obligation to one’s leader as prime directives. One is required to sacrifice oneself in obedience to one’s political leaders.

At present, I am trying to find empirical tests of the cultural explanations for why certain nations have been successful modernizers.