

Prerequisites to the Determination of Culture Areas in Japan

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Chapter 8

Prerequisites to the Determination of Culture Areas in Japan

by T. ŌBAYASHI

I INTRODUCTION

Interest in the topic of regional differences in Japanese culture seems to have revived in the last six years or so after a decade of relative decline. One manifestation of this renewed interest took the form of a project entitled "Japanese Natural Features and Cultural Complexes" organized by the Union of the Nine Academic Societies. As the representative of the Japanese Ethnological Society, I gave a review of early studies of cultural complexes at an annual meeting of the Union.

The report concerned three possible cultural complexes in Japan based on different ecological conditions as suggested by early scholars, especially Ryūzō Torii and Masao Oka. These were the three cultural complexes based on shifting cultivation in mountain areas, coastal fishing, and dry field cultivation combined with horse herding in piedmont areas.

I pointed out in that report that the dearth of attempts at identifying cultural areas based on the folk culture of the early modern period (that is, the early part of this century) was a serious obstacle for attempts at reconstructing the ancient cultural complexes which influenced the traditional Japanese way of life.

"The possible cultural areas of the early modern period may not be the same as those of the ancient period, but had they been established they could have been an important basis for the reconstruction of earlier complexes". [Ōbayashi, 1982]

It must be noted, however, that the determination of cultural areas in early modern Japan is very difficult work. Collection of the necessary data itself is arduous work and, moreover, there are some difficult theoretical problems to be dealt with. I am here going to consider some of these theoretical problems in reference to Nagashima's summary of the project as reprinted in the previous chapter of this study. One of his important arguments is the rather negative assertion that the concept of cultural areas based upon ecological differences and upon different ethnic origins may not be applicable to Japanese culture. Before evaluating this assertion, it may be useful to consider the problem of the scale of a culture area.

II THE SCALE OF A CULTURE AREA

I have compared various attempts at setting up culture areas in different parts of the world and have found that differences in the scale of the area have much to do with the degree of clarity of divisions.

First, there are large-scale attempts at dividing whole continents into culture areas, such as Whissler's on America¹⁾, Herskovits's on Africa²⁾, and Bacon on Asia³⁾. In these cases, remarkable differences in natural environments, languages and other factors made it easy to distinguish culture areas.

Second, middle-scale attempts to divide one large country into culture areas was exemplified by Galvão⁴⁾. He divided Brazil into eleven culture areas. This was possible because of the ecological and ethnic diversities of the country, although Brazil itself had been in some cases regarded as a unitary cultural area called "Amazonia" or just the "Tropical Forest."

These two levels of scale do not apply to Japan, where ecological and ethnic differences are not so noticeable. A comparable model was, however, offered by Skinner in his attempt at postulating culture areas in New Zealand,⁵⁾ where the Maori inhabitants had basically a common language and culture. Culture areas of Japan could also be conceived of at this level of scale.

III A COMPARISON OF PROPOSED DIVISIONS OF JAPAN ON THE BASIS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS, DIALECTS, AND TRADITIONAL HOUSES

The divisions of Japan proposed by Nagashima (three basic types, A, B and C in the previous chapter) are based on the results of a questionnaire which was mostly concerned with social organizational aspects. These aspects can be compared with divisions of Japan based on other criteria, and I take here two kinds of divisions for comparison. One is division by dialect and the other is division by the form of traditional houses. There have been many attempts and studies in both fields but I take here only one case in each field in order to simplify the comparison: from linguistic studies, the classic division of dialects by M. Tōjō⁶⁾; and as the representative of studies of Japanese houses, Sugimoto's recent work on divisions of Japan according to the forms of traditional houses⁷⁾.

Tōjō first divided Japan into three main regions: East, West, and Kyūshū and then subdivided them into 15 smaller regions. Sugimoto, on the other hand, first divided Japan into 15 large regions and subdivided them further. Tōjō's small divisions correspond in size to Sugimoto's large regions.

I have closely examined both correspondences and differences between the division lines proposed by Nagashima and those by Tōjō and Sugimoto and, omitting details, shall give below the main results of the comparisons.

1) Nagashima's divisions do not coincide with those of the other two.

1) Wissler, *The American Indians*.

2) Herskovits, "A Preliminary Consideration of the Culture Areas of Africa."

3) Bacon, "A Preliminary Attempt to Determine the Culture Areas of Asia."

4) Galvão, "Indigenous Culture Areas of Brazil, 1900-1959."

5) Skinner, *Culture Areas in New Zealand*.

6) Tōjō, *Hyōjungo Biki Hōgen Jiten*.

7) Sugimoto, *Chiiki to Minka*.

- 2) Some divisions by Tōjō and Sugimoto coincide with each other and generally Nagashima's divisions are closer to Sugimoto's than to Tōjō's.
- 3) The dichotomy of East and West is common to all three but the boundaries are all different.
- 4) The division between the Pacific side and the Japan Sea side is also to a lesser degree common to the three and the boundaries more or less coincide in eastern Japan. But the boundaries in western Japan are considerably different among the three.
- 5) There are areas where the division lines of the three occasionally coincide. One such example is a line along the boundaries between Toyama and Gifu, and Shiga and Gifu. Another is a line running along the western borders of Kantō. There are also some other lines which are too complicated to mention here. These are, in any case, important clues for distinguishing culture areas in the future.

IV CONCLUSION

In this paper I have considered the problem of determining culture areas in Japan in relation to the validity of the study of regional differences in Japanese culture presented in this study. Two conclusions that can be drawn from these considerations are:

- 1) Culture areas in Japan should be microscopic, in that they are relative differentiations among otherwise ecologically and culturally homogeneous areas.
- 2) Indices for identifying culture areas should be selected from elements of material culture, such as the forms of dwellings, since they are susceptible to influences from the natural environments and are easily diffused. In contrast to these elements, social elements as adopted in this questionnaire are, though useful for reference, not adequate as criteria for the postulation of culture areas, and should be thought of as auxiliary to material culture⁸⁾.

Two points emerge from what I have said above. First, it is necessary to conduct further studies on distributions of various items of material culture, which would produce by accumulation more reliable divisions of areas. A primary emphasis on material culture does not mean, however, that a study of distributions of social factors is unnecessary and meaningless. It is not only useful as a reference for the postulation of culture areas, but also heuristically significant for the consideration of the position of social organization in culture. Problems posed by the study presented in previous chapters as to the reason why certain social elements show a dichotomous distribution between East and West, while others show a division between the Pacific side and the Japan Sea side, are interesting in themselves and would at the same time

8) For a discussion of similar problem in classifying ethnic units in native North America, Driver and Coffin 1974, and Driver, Kenny, Hudson and Engle 1972.

lead to new enquiries, which would again pose new problems. Inter-relations between various kinds of institutions and customs could be unexpectedly revealed through these studies. Finally, among other elements which have not been discussed, distributions of annual rituals and beliefs in supernatural beings may indeed be useful and require more attention.

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