

Happiness in Japan: The Study of Society Influenced by Eastern and Western Values

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Introduction

Overview of Japan

Japan is considered to be one of the most prosperous and healthiest nation on the planet. Outstanding life-span among its people, contains one of the lowest homicide rates, has the world's third-largest economy by nominal GDP, fourth-largest economy by purchasing power parity, the fourth-largest exporter and importer, has a highly skilled workforce, and is also the most educated countries in the world. ⁽¹⁾ For those living in Japan, these are favorable achievements. Adding more, Japan is regarded as one of the safest countries in the world, a feat many countries struggle to maintain. The standard of living in Japan is very high, as it is a developed country with the highest life expectancy in the world. ⁽²⁾ It is also popular amongst foreigners for its deep history and unique culture makes Japan a desirable destination for all nations of the world. But does this make Japan a happy country?

Of course it is easy to discuss about Japanese virtues and successes, but it has not always been an economic powerhouse as it is today. Japan has faced many challenges within its expansive history. From the beginning of Japanese history to present day history, Japan had witnessed an influx of cultural influences from China which helped consolidate the hierarchical system, the plethora of feudal wars which shaped Japan society structure, to the isolation period of Edo, which are all massive turning points within its rich history. Japan had the tendency to look beyond their borders to seek innovation but their demise during the Second World War changed this. This war which changed the political balance of the world, put Japan through years of distress and disorder (Hendry, 530). But by developing key points in government policy that nurtured loyalty in companies it had fortunately risen up from the ashes to become one of the biggest economic miracles of the world.

Japan's society today is seen as a success story, on the basis of population growth and its human development. It is no wonder many consider Japan as a fortunate and prosperous country as the declining mortality and growing life expectancy are key evidences to why it is considered so. Life expectancy at the beginning of the twentieth

century was 44 years for males and 48.8 for females, levels that were considered low in comparison to its Western counterparts. The life expectancy for men and women in Japan in 2014 is the highest ever recorded, the average for Japanese male being 80.5 years of age, while for female life-expectancy was calculated at 86.83 years of age, an outstanding improvement doubling the life-expectancy from just only a century ago. ⁽³⁾ Economic growth in Japan post-World War II era is considered to be a miracle where its GDP per capita grew by a factor of 30, nearly doubling the Gross National Income per person from 2,063,000 yen to 4,084,000 yen - allowing many Japanese people to be equipped to higher levels of comfort with bigger homes with abundance of amenities. Progress in education has also been outstanding, with the gross enrolment ration for tertiary education being above 62 percent compared to 1971s ratio of 17.7 percent. ⁽⁴⁾ This is due to the difference of economic benefits in completion of tertiary education. Individuals who have not completed senior high school in Japan only earn 80 percent of what individuals who have completed that level of education earn. ⁽⁵⁾ Japan has also consistently ranked among the top ten countries of all three categories of the United Nations Human Development index, i.e., health, education and standard of living since the 1980s.

Based on these statistics, Japan should be considered a happy and prosperous country. They have a hardworking and highly educated labor force, an industrial policy by the Japanese government, good health care system, emphasis towards high educational achievement, the third-largest economic power house in the world, and based on the Human Development Index a high level of economic and social well-being. However, the World Happiness Report, a measurement of the collective happiness in a nation, gives evidence that Japan isn't so happy after all. Being ranked the 53rd happiness nation, this is shockingly low for a first-world country that holds the title of the third largest GDP per capita in the world. This leaves the question, what does it really mean to be a happy nation? The concept of happiness is a very subjective one, but many seem to be in the pursuit of happiness. Everyone wants to be happy, there is no doubt about it, but does a nation's economic successes have an effect on its people? Does becoming a developed country make one country lose touch in happiness? In order to broaden understanding of happiness as a whole, this research will focus on Japan, as it is a country with influences from both Eastern values and Western values and see how these two gave birth to the modern Japan known today.

Happiness in Bhutan

Before delving into the differences between Western and Eastern values, it would be prudent to look at another country that has achieved a certain level of "happiness" —

Bhutan. Bhutan is well known around the world for being the “Happiest Nation”. Despite being hidden in the Himalaya Mountains, landlocked between India, Tibet, China, and Nepal and a population of about 700,000 and being the last standing Buddhist Kingdom and it also maintains one of the fastest growing GDP’s in the world. Also known as the “Land of The Thunder Dragon”. They have preserved much of their culture since the 17th century, adding importance to Buddhist traditions. The country avoided globalization by only allowing a few foreigners into their country and any influence outside of Bhutan were strictly prohibited up until a few years ago. Bhutan nowadays is embracing globalization but also has been strict in maintaining their environment and cultural identity. (Terue, 104) After embracing globalization, they began measuring people’s quality of life, thus creating the “Gross National Happiness” and have seen continual results of being ranked as one of the happiest nation in all of Asia. They have found a wonderful balance of both economic growth and spiritual growth, making sure that material and spiritual development happen together, a concept which many countries today are struggling to do.

Bhutanese Values

Buddhism plays a major part in maintaining the happiness levels of its people as it is the official religion of Bhutan. Monasteries, shrines, monks and other Buddhist programs are supported by the government both politically and economically. Buddhists are very politically involved in public policy as well. As stated earlier, Bhutan has been isolated for many centuries, so promoting Christianity and other major religions is still not allowed today even in its wake of globalization as they must preserve their Buddhist traditions. ⁽⁶⁾ On top of the beauties of their traditions, the people of Bhutan lives in a country which consist of high mountains, a beautiful landscape with many greeneries, and surrounded by hills and valleys. This description of the country may entice many tourists to come, but the restrictions on tourism makes it difficult. They want to preserve the beautiful landscape as it is their cultural identity. Bhutanese people are already satisfied and content with their lives as they are people who live close to their roots. They live a less materialistic life but are very fulfilled with their lives as they already have what is important to them, friends and family.

The Cost of Globalization

Many countries nowadays have a tendency to rate their country’s happiness based on economic growth. While economic growth should not be ignored when rating a

nation's happiness, it also should not be the definition of happiness. Many countries throw away their old values and traditions for globalization. When a country opens up to globalization, it may come with many benefits; economy becomes stronger, advanced technology, better health care system, attaining political power, and having an international presence but it also comes at a steep cost. When we're talking about globalization, it is generally about adopting language, religion, and ideas from the western culture. In order to become a developing nation, many countries such as these lose their way of life and also natural resources to globalization. However, to Bhutanese people, they favor preserving their cultural values instead.

The Gross National Happiness

The concept of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) started in the early 1970s when the Fourth King of Bhutan, a young teenager at the time, had questioned whether the Gross Domestic Product alone could decide if a nation is happy or not. Many countries yearned for economic growth as the GDP showed many promising results of a developed nation but has somehow failed to provide satisfaction or subjective well-being. The king believed that happiness is an indicator, a signifier, and a sign of good development and good society.⁽⁷⁾ And for years after the decision of making the GNH, the Bhutanese people pursued the GNH as it became a serious arbitrator for public policies and plans. A major reason why Bhutan today became a constitutional democracy in 2008 is because he believed in the legitimacy of public deliberation, public discussion, and public opinion in defining any goal.

World Happiness Report

On April 1, 2012, began the World Happiness Report, which was highly influenced by the Bhutanese Gross National Happiness, as being the first global happiness report. This is an annual approach to measuring subjective well-being and happiness of 156 countries around the world. The six key variables are GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, social freedom, generosity and absence of corruption. The WHR provides measures of experienced well-being, especially positive emotions that can add to life circumstances in the support for higher life evaluations. (Helliwell, 11) The process of tallying up such a list is quite simple, as stated in the world happiness index site: "Rankings are based on answers to the main life evaluation question asked in the poll. This is called the Cantril ladder: it asks respondents to think of a ladder, with the best possible life for them being a 10, and the worst possible life being a 0. They are then

asked to rate their own current lives on that 0 to 10 scale.”⁽⁸⁾

Figure 2.1 shows us that Denmark and its Nordic neighbors are the top contenders of this list. The United States having a respectful placing as the 13th happiest and the surprising 53rd placing of Japan. Taking a glance at the GDP rankings of 2016 (figure 1.1), the top five consist of United States, China, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, all of which are not included in the top 10 of the World Happiness Report, which gives us evidence that top GDP countries does not specifically signify a happy nation. Although Japan’s ranking is very low for a first-world country, China’s results in the World Happiness Report (figure 2.2) is also surprising with its disappointing 83rd place. The fact that Japan is outplaced by Spain (37th), a country struggling with its unemployment rate over 20%, Venezuela (44th) with its issues of a corrupt government and pollution, and also outplaced by Nicaragua (48th) with its poor public education and political crisis.

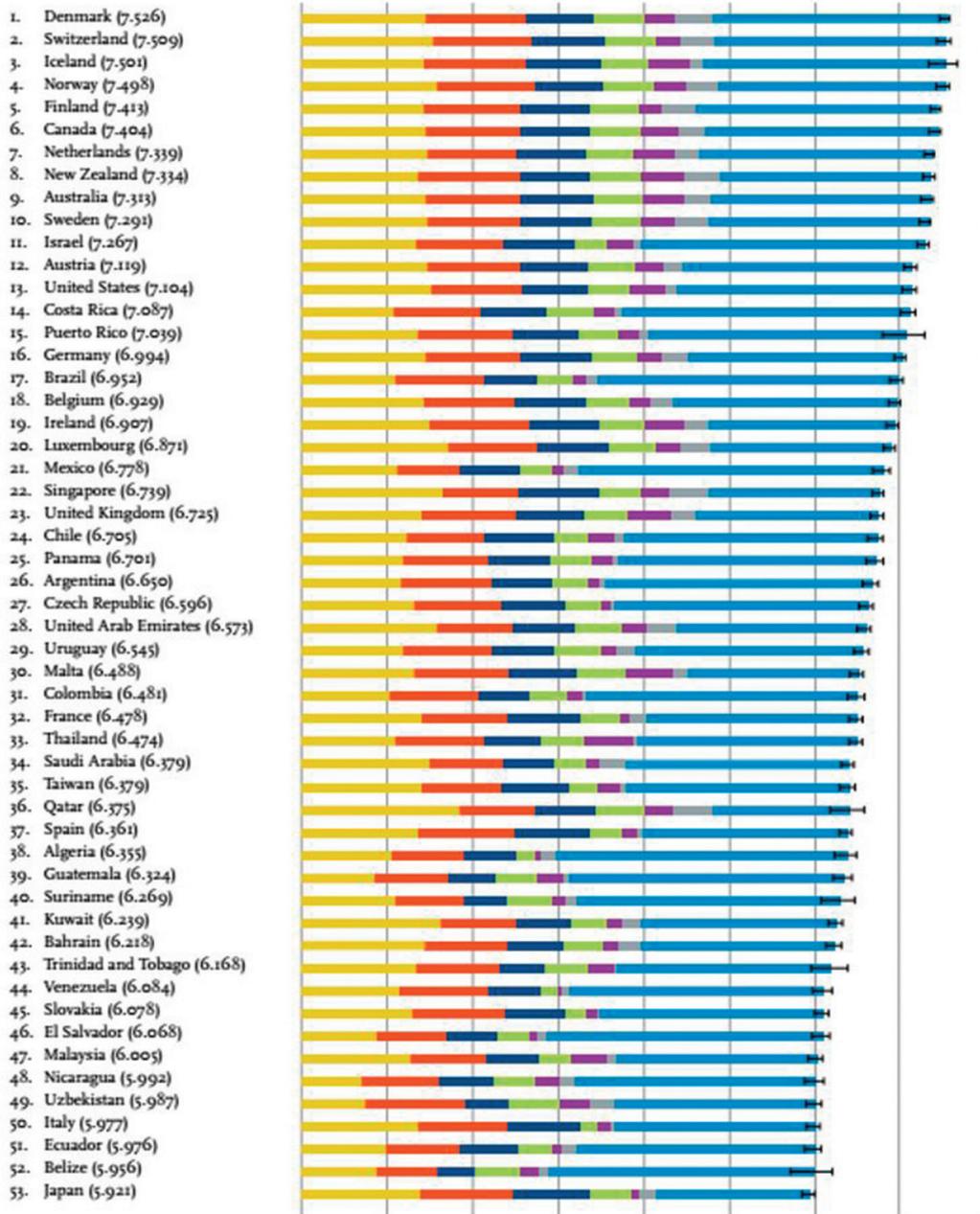
Figure 1.1

Country/Economy	GDP Nominal (billions of \$)				GDP PPP (billions of Int. \$)				PPP/Nbm		
	2016	share	Rank	2020	2016	share	Rank	2020			
United States	18,561.934	24.7	1	21,927	1	18,561.934	15.6	2	21,927	2	1.000
China	11,391.619	15.1	2	16,458	2	21,269.017	17.9	1	29,348	1	1.867
Japan	4,730.300	6.29	3	5,506	3	4,931.877	4.14	4	5,483	4	1.043
Germany	3,494.898	4.65	4	4,008	4	3,979.063	3.34	5	4,583	5	1.139
United Kingdom	2,649.893	3.52	5	2,928	6	2,787.741	2.34	9	3,244	9	1.052
France	2,488.284	3.31	6	2,851	7	2,736.717	2.30	10	3,185	10	1.100
India	2,250.987	2.99	7	3,297	5	8,720.514	7.32	3	12,842	3	3.874
Italy	1,852.499	2.46	8	2,046	9	2,220.590	1.86	12	2,518	12	1.199
Brazil	1,769.601	2.35	9	2,214	8	3,134.892	2.63	7	3,631	8	1.772
Canada	1,532.343	2.04	10	1,856	10	1,674.313	1.41	16	1,973	17	1.083
Korea	1,404.383	1.87	11	1,747	11	1,928.621	1.62	13	2,373	13	1.373
Russia	1,267.754	1.69	12	1,698	12	3,745.084	3.14	6	4,309	6	2.954
Australia	1,256.640	1.67	13	1,574	13	1,188.764	0.998	19	1,454	20	0.946
Spain	1,252.163	1.66	14	1,457	14	1,689.710	1.42	15	1,982	16	1.349
Mexico	1,063.606	1.41	15	1,325	15	2,306.668	1.94	11	2,800	11	2.169
Indonesia	940.953	1.25	16	1,274	16	3,027.827	2.54	8	4,119	7	3.218
Netherlands	769.930	1.02	17	893.2	18	865.908	0.727	27	1,013	29	1.125
Turkey	735.716	0.978	18	912.5	17	1,669.893	1.40	17	2,072	15	2.270
Switzerland	662.483	0.881	19	744.8	21	494.303	0.415	39	573.6	40	0.746
Saudi Arabia	637.785	0.848	20	816.6	19	1,731.229	1.45	14	2,074	14	2.714

Projected GDP Ranking (2016-2020).

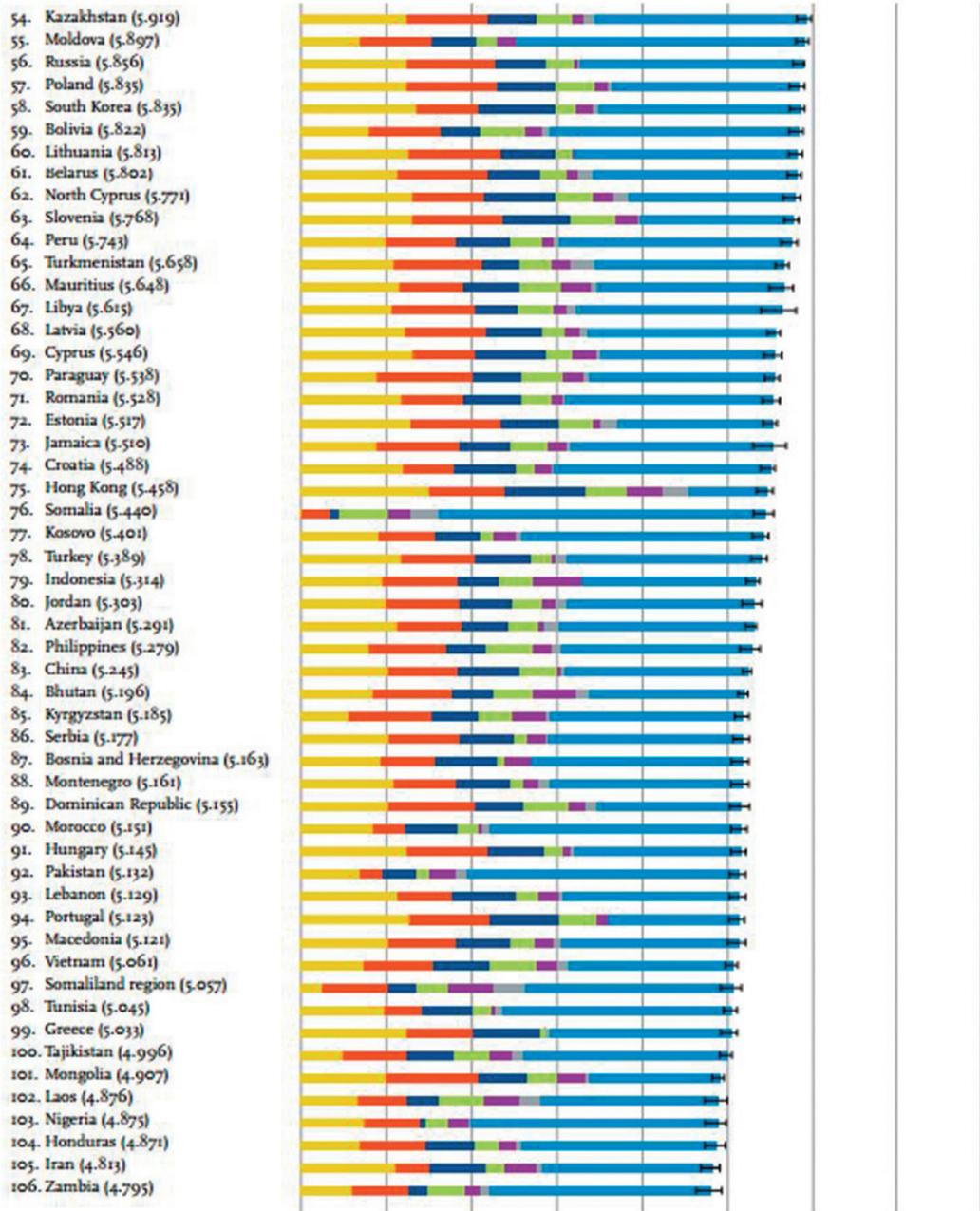
(<http://statisticstimes.com/economy/projected-world-gdp-ranking.php>)

Figure 2.1



World Happiness Report 2016 Update, p.20.
http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/HR-V1_web.pdf

Figure 2.2



World Happiness Report 2016 Update, p.21.
http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/HR-V1_web.pdf

The Difference between Eastern and Western Values Philosophy

When discussing about philosophy, the focal point of this section can be easily broken down through religion. Through its teachings give us a deeper understanding of ethics, morals, ideology, and perspectives. Western philosophy has a linear view of the universe and life, where based on Christian philosophy, everything has a beginning and the end. Eastern philosophy has a circular view of the universe, based on the perception of eternal recurrence. Bibikova stated:

“Broadly, speaking, Western society strives to find and prove ‘the truth’, while Eastern society accepts the truth as given and is more interested in finding the balance. Westerners put more stock in individual rights; Easterners in social responsibly”.

Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto are all Eastern philosophies which focus on self-cultivation, while on the other hand Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are about ethics and happiness. Eastern values are about discovering for your inside. The way to the top is inside yourself, through self-cultivation. Western values are about success and achievement that is connected with an external nature including money, faith, and popularity. (Bibikova et al., 2001) The way to the top is through active outside intervention. Individual worth is much larger in the western society where as the eastern society sets its importance to family and community.

Capitalism and Socialism

Capitalism and socialism are two political and economic concepts. To an extent, both of these concepts are opposite of each other. Capitalism, which favors the Western ideology, which prides itself in individualistic achievements. “Markets should be free of government intervention and the principles of supply and demand produce the best economic outcome for society.”⁽⁹⁾ Individuals make their own decisions and will make their own decisions. Socialism favors the Eastern ideology, which supports individuals to have access to what they need, but are also rewarded based on their contribution to society. Large scale industry and public services should be communally or government owned to ensure the benefits flow to society as a whole. A convenient way to sort these two concepts is that capitalism focuses on individualism and socialism focuses on collectivism.

Individualism and Collectivism

The main difference between individualism and collectivism is that for the former the basic unit of society is the individual and the latter's basic unity of society is the group. In an individualistic culture, people are encouraged to be independent, they make their own decisions, have their own opinions and solve their problems. They also value freedom, honesty, and social recognition. In a collectivist culture, people are dependent on shared identity while personal identity is less important. They also value harmony, filial piety, modesty, moderation, and equality. Individualistic culture values horizontal relationships, which means that everyone has the same social status so there is no need to communicate in a different style towards other people. Communicating is direct, absolute, and precise and people are encouraged to say what they think, in other words a low-context situation. Communication in the collectivist culture values vertical relationships, which means that people communicate differently depending on one's social status. People tend to speak in very indirect and in roundabout ways, in other words a high-context situation. (Luxor, 2013) Characteristics within an individualistic culture are quick thinking and taking the initiative while the collectivistic culture include patience and ability to lead. United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Nordic countries, and Netherlands are countries with individualistic cultures and China, Korea, and Japan are countries with collectivist cultures. Although a country may be considered either of these two cultures, it should not be assumed that everybody in an individualistic or collectivist cultures has all the characteristics of these cultures. (Triandis, 2001)

Foreign Influence – Introduction to new Values

Japan, compared to other countries, is remarkably unique. Japan has always looked for outside influence and China has been the biggest contributor. Importing wide range of ideas, techniques of production, institutional models, and material objects were influenced by Chinese civilization and had been promulgated across the nation which had then been used to build a civilization of their own. (Stearns) Although some may debate whether Buddhism was adopted from Korea or China, Buddhism played a pivotal role in changing Japan into a sophisticated country, a social change which created the foundation of Japanese tradition and culture we know today. Another drastic impact Japan had from the outside was the United States. Although this isn't the first time Japan had looked at Western countries for innovation, one of the influential interventions they had were from Commander Matthew Perry. Japan had only looked at its close neighbors China and Korea for influence and had failed to advance past the bow, sword and musket. When the "black

ships” attacked the island in 1853, Japan had realized that they were in a tremendous disadvantage. From that point, Japan had to catch up with the rest of the world. They adopted Western cultures in areas such as industry, technology, law, politics, economic, lifestyle, diet, clothing, language, alphabet, religion, philosophy, and values. ⁽¹⁰⁾ This significant intervention completely changed the mindset of the Japanese society; a wake-up call which urged Japan for restoration – the Meiji Restoration.

The Meiji Restoration

Japan at the time were controlled by hundreds of semi-independent feudal wars. The nation had had little technological development and had a weak military. Due to Western nations such as Europe and The United States, Japan had been forced to sign treaties to open its foreign trade. At the end of the Meiji period, Japan had attained a centralized bureaucratic government, a constitution establishing an elected parliament, a well-developed transport and communication system, a highly educated population free of feudal class restrictions, an established and rapidly growing industrial sector based on the latest technology, and a power army and navy. All of these improvements helped Japan become internationally relevant. ⁽¹¹⁾ Modernization came at a cost of getting rid of old traditions such as the samurai class, but had launched Japan into a powerful nation. Japan began to expand its power in Asia, becoming an aggressive military campaign throughout, and then in 1941, bombed Pearl Harbor.

World War II

The way people view war is largely contributed from the atrocities of the Second World War. Even today it stands as one of the most deadly and relevant wars of all time. This war gave birth to several political conflicts across the globe and it still leaves a glooming presence in the contemporary world. The beginning of World War II are often said to be the “Marco Polo Bridge Incident which led to a prolonged war between Japan and China (1937), and when Germany invaded Poland (1939). When Japan unexpectedly won the Russo-Japanese War, it had given Japan the opportunity to expand in Asia and the Pacific, so alongside Germany and Italy, they had developed strong desire to expand: Germany in Northern and Eastern Europe, Italy in Africa and Greece, and Japan in Asia and the South Pacific. Japan worked hard to subdue China but they also began to expand throughout the Pacific. In response to such attacks, the U.S., Britain and the Netherlands imposed an embargo on Japan, which meant the loss of oil. In retaliation, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and had involved the United States into the

World War. The ongoing war in Iwo Jima and Okinawa Island had continued for too long and Japan formally surrendered on August 15, 1945, after two atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁽¹²⁾

Post-War Influence

After the war, Japan was in shambles. But, Japan miraculously bounced back from one of the poorest nations on earth to having the second largest economy. This economic miracle is partly credited from the aid and assistance of the United States. After World War II, the United States grew interested in Japan to stop the flow of Soviet influence in the Pacific, so they began guiding the Japanese people to turn away from communism. The United States became their nuclear umbrella. Japan at this time cooperated with manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, and banks in close knit groups called keiretsu. By the late 1960s, Japan had completely recovered its economy thanks to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.⁽¹³⁾ The MITI propelled Japan's failing economy by focusing not only on exports and imports but for all domestic industries and businesses. MITI served as an architect of industrial policy by strengthening the industrial base and has provided industries in Japan in guidance on modernization, technology, investments, and domestic and foreign competition.

Shift in Values

Post-war Japan had witnessed the successes of capitalism from the United States and began adopting it to their own. Japan had begun to focus on consumption. Industries producing more consumer goods such as cars and other amenities had shifted the Japanese population's perspective on happiness. By adopting the system of globalized American-style consumption, it became the way of life. Higher income meant more happiness but it also meant that people were not complacent or content with what they had. Seeking happiness through stimulating consumption has become the norm in Japan, where working hard and earning money describes a fulfilled life.⁽¹⁴⁾ Although Japan had been a collectivist country, the country began to shift its views on capitalism, which focuses on individualism. Alongside the Japanese economy, the new Americanized economy helped aid Japan to the country it is today. Despite this the Japanese economy stagnated during the 90's after the bursting of the economic bubble in 1991.

Conflict of Values

Japan has always been a collectivist society, as it built its foundation on Buddhist principles and had been that way for most of its life-span. Japan nowadays is still having issues of balancing the new culture that an individualistic society might face, which is capitalism and over-importance in materialism. The Japanese society is much more different than the prosperous sixties, the Golden Age. Ever since the bubble burst of the nineties, Japan has yet to recover fully from the economic disaster which had spread fear nationwide. Japan is facing issues of its falling birthrate, its aging population, high suicide rates, divorce rates, increased homicide rate, and its overworking labor force all originates from the conflict of collectivistic and individualistic society. Japan is unique compared to its Asian counterparts as there isn't any other Asian country that emphasizes on Buddhist principles and also at the same time on Western principles. Balancing the two social concepts is seen as difficult.

The Downside of Capitalism

Based on the statistics produced from Japan, one would assume Japan is one of the most successful and prosperous nations in the world. Regardless of the results, it's very difficult to determine a country's happiness level, but many happiness psychologists are at hard work. Based on a study in Cambridge, Professor Diener stated:

“Observation in the most saturated societies that increased wealth did not necessarily bring about increased happiness. Economists have for generations wrestled with the question of how wealth and happiness are related to each other, and the generally accepted answer today is that the correlation between poverty and unhappiness is stronger than that between wealth and happiness which is another way of saying that the correlation between material and mental wellbeing becomes weaker with growing affluence.”

The capitalist system is subjugating their view of happiness. It diminishes our ability to appreciate and feel gratitude towards small happiness. It's true that capitalism did help Japan recover from the rut that was World War II, but the Japanese in general do not enjoy their successes. Preoccupied with material pursuits – though concerned nowadays less with getting ahead than with not falling behind – they are more affluent and more individualistic than they were a half a century ago, and they display higher degree of psychological distress, lower social skills and are more prone to become victims of crimes or to commit suicide. Japan's affixation towards happiness books are indicative of the present

crisis of Japanese society and the struggle to achieve happiness.

Happiness is Subjective

With happiness comes subjectivity. One's happiness might be another's unhappiness. There is much difficulty to truly rate and understand the depth of one's happiness because happiness cannot be fully rated in statistics and data. Ultimately, the World Happiness Report are just statistics ranged from a limited pool of people. The people who are the subjects of their research come from very different backgrounds, so to use such survey to determine a country's happiness is quite impossible. But to say that the report is useless is debatable as well. We all live in a time of uncertainty. We have a man that is thought to be one of the most divisive President in history, we have a country that is constantly threatening the world with armed nukes, and we have a large social gap which makes everyday people worried about their families and loved ones. People are constantly seeking for the next breakthrough study for the pursuit of happiness, but happiness is what one makes it out to be. One can live in the happiest place on Earth, but also feel negative and discontent with one's life. Being ranked low on the World Happiness Report should not fully affect our perspective on life as there are people all around the globe who are content with their lives despite ongoing social issues. Changing perspectives should be self-determined, because no one knows more about one's happiness except for the person experiencing it. How can one experience happiness? There are endless ways, such as the feeling of gratitude towards the people around you, being appreciative for the blessings you have, and simply enjoying the present is what happiness is all about. But in the end, happiness is subjective. Only the individual can determine the criterion to what makes one happy.

Conclusion

Japan's situation is held at a unique position. It compares both western ideologies and eastern ideologies which produces unprecedented results. We all are aware of the issues that is currently present in Japan but many seem to ignore the damage it is doing to our society. Other than deciding which social concept is superior, we as humans need to adapt and learn to change our perspective of happiness. I personally feel that many people today are unhappy due to their material pursuits and unaware of the privileges and rights that they hold. Feeling gratitude for the smaller things in life can help us stay "present" and "aware" to be alive in a country where people keep looking for what is insufficient and still want things.

Notes

- 1 "Compare your country - Science and Technology Indicators." *By OECD*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2016.
- 2 "GHO | By category | Life expectancy - Data by country." *GHO | By category | Life expectancy - Data by country*. World Health Organization, n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.
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