

***Japan and China: How Different They Are!* by KASE Hideaki and Seki Hei
(Summary)**

A prevailing notion by Sinologists, both in the West and Japan, is that as the wealth of the Chinese “middle class” rises, they will want more democracy and political freedom—they will want to be like the middle class found elsewhere. However, this notion is far from correct is sustained by the flawed belief that Japan and China are historically and culturally the same: the Japanese and Chinese think in the same manner, therefore, if Japan can be democratic, then democracy in China is inevitable. In fact, as Mr. Kase and Mr. Sekihei point out with numerous examples, not only are Japanese and Chinese cultures distinct from one another, Chinese cultural elements assimilated by Japan were significantly altered to fit into a Japanese social context. The changes are indeed marked in the authors extensive and insightful narration of Chinese history. It will be evident to the reader that historic Japan and China—and modern Japanese and Chinese—share almost no commonalities aside from perhaps a sharing of basic forms of *kanji*. (Even here, the authors point to great distinctions between Japanese and Chinese written language.) Thus, claims that modern China “wants” democracy can be dismissed as naïve as such claims were likely made without any consideration of Chinese history.

There are number of customs that Japan did not adapt from China—such as the binding of women’s feet and the use of eunuchs. One way of truly appreciating the cultural and historical chasm between the two countries is to point out Japan and China’s attitude towards food and eating. There is nothing more central to Han Chinese life than eating. Indeed, it is so central that a common expression of joy is “Today I ate my fill”. As far as quantity and what can be eaten, there are absolutely no restrictions. Such lack of inhibitions on the culinary level transfers to Han Chinese attitude towards internal non-Han Chinese minorities and to neighboring countries, the Han aggressively “consuming” ethnic groups and territories in their path. As members of the Chinese ruling class throw lavish banquets that epitomize waste, the rest of China starves. By contrast, the Japanese consider eating a private affair. Rather than stress extravagance and quantity, food is meant to be esthetically pleasing. Unlike the Chinese ruling class, the Japanese aristocracy ate simple meals, what the Chinese today would consider food for poor people. In fact, what was virtuous to the common Japanese people applied to the Japanese aristocracy and this was due in part to Japan’s transformation of Confucianism.

One other fundamental way that Japan differs from China is in Japan’s conception of Confucianism. Chinese Confucian virtues were directed towards the ruling class rather than the common people. The “foundation” of Chinese Confucianism is “filial piety,” stressing loyalty to one’s family above all else, demonstrated by the fact that Chinese emperors indulged their own families and ignored the public. Filial piety also extends to the point of denying and ignoring one’s father’s misdeeds. Despite lofty appeals to “benevolence” and “righteousness,” such things did not apply to non-Chinese peoples, who Confucius considered to be “barbarians”. By contrast, the Japanese emperor and people “are one”. Japanese-style Confucianism stresses loyalty to the community and the people at large rather than to one’s clan. Given the historical emphasis on one’s family, it should not be surprising that the current Chinese Communist

Party treats all of China as its own fiefdom—there is no “People” in the “People’s Republic of China”.

While there are those outside of China and Japan who make the mistake of assuming similarity between China and Japan as synonymous for sameness, there are many Japanese who have fallen for this faulty thinking as well. These Japanese have gone further to elevate Chinese—and to a certain extent Korean—culture above Japan’s, thereby inducing a cultural “inferiority complex”. Such thinking on the part of those Japanese carries serious consequences, by adversely affecting Japanese views on history and current Sino-Japanese relations.