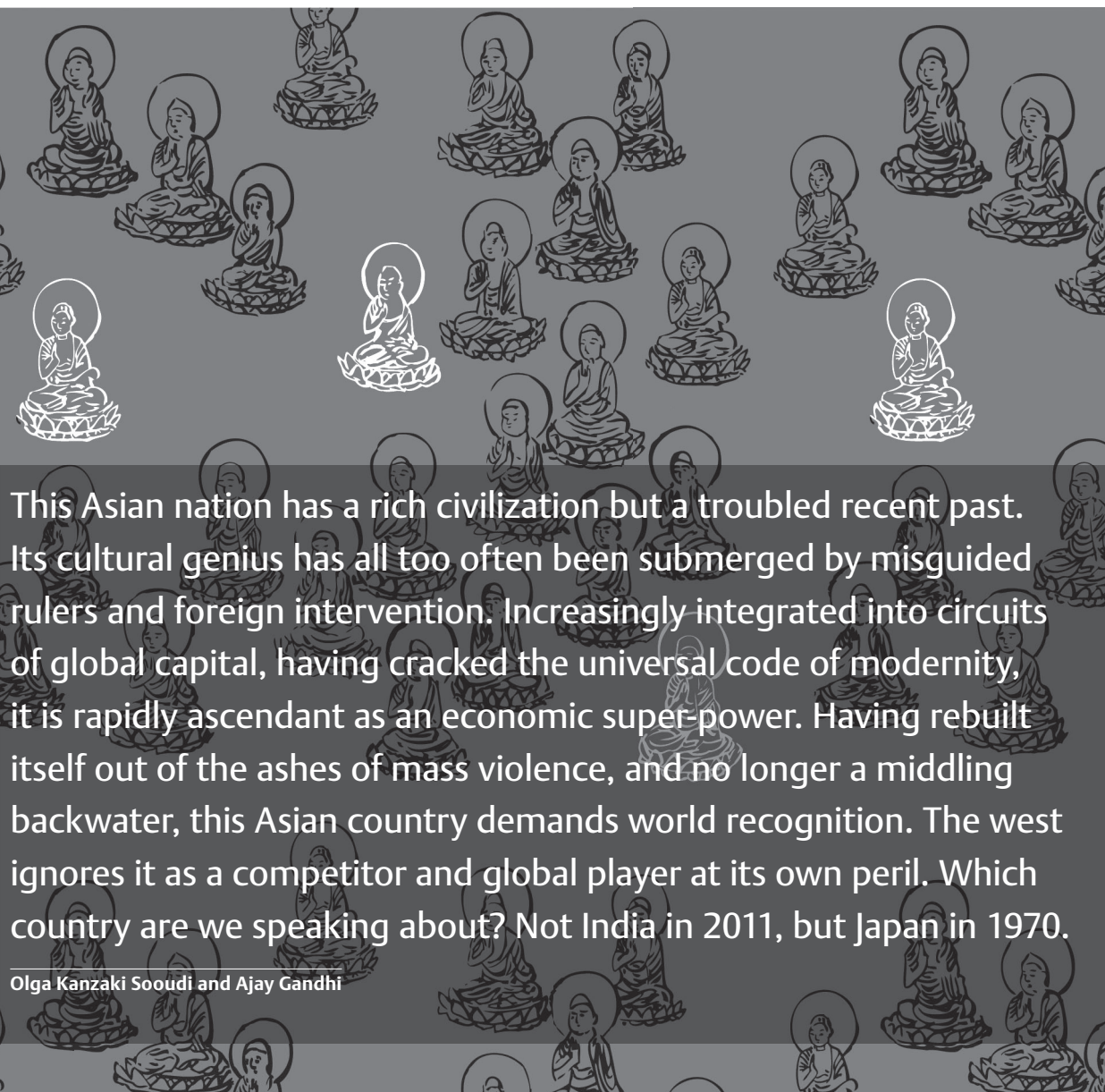# The exceptional Asian

This Asian nation has a rich civilization but a troubled recent past. Its cultural genius has all too often been submerged by misguided rulers and foreign intervention. Increasingly integrated into circuits of global capital, having cracked the universal code of modernity, it is rapidly ascendant as an economic super-power. Having rebuilt itself out of the ashes of mass violence, and no longer a middling backwater, this Asian country demands world recognition. The west ignores it as a competitor and global player at its own peril. Which country are we speaking about? Not India in 2011, but Japan in 1970.

Olga Kanzaki Sooudi and Ajay Gandhi

IN EVERYDAY PARLANCE, capitalism and modernity are separated from culture and tradition. At best, tradition is understood to be diluted by modernization; at worst, it is feared that cultures may be obliterated by the onslaught of global capitalism. These domains are opposed to each other, becoming imaginary poles in between which one makes sense of change. This familiar shorthand often crops up in discussions of globalization. For example, McDonald's and MTV are seen to flood every corner of the world, and thereby disturb pre-existing pathways.

Yet in the case of modern India and Japan, we encounter an alternative alignment of these ideas. Culture, be it in the form of aesthetic inclinations or latent hierarchies, is not simply the innermost sanctum that capitalism must colonize. Culture also enables the modern mastery of entrepreneurship and zeal for consumption.

The result is a distinctively Indian or Japanese capitalist modernity. One has only to peruse newspapers, business manuals, and popular tomes to see a multitude of such examples for India; a few decades ago, a similar set of ideas was disseminated for Japan. In this essay, we attempt to highlight how culture is a foil counterpoised to capitalist modernity. Culture, in other words, simultaneously enables and hinders its mastery in both India and Japan. We may begin to illustrate our thesis using some contemporary examples from both countries.

The eternally new India
India, it seems, is everywhere: Bollywood films are routinely screened simultaneously in American metropolises as well as domestic ones; Indian companies avidly buy up African oil fields and set up branch offices in Eastern Europe. The world is also increasingly in India: software code to be used in global mobile phones is designed in Bangalore; American treasury bills and Italian handbags are hawked to its elites. Indeed, the ubiquity of India abroad – whether as outsourcing menace or hoped-for market for multinational profit – seems only to be matched by the overwhelming presence of the outside world in India, in joint manufacturing ventures and middle-class fashions. India's fate seems increasingly intertwined with that of the larger world, its assimilation into a universal modernity a foregone conclusion.

All the more striking, then, how this process is explained, in everything from consultancy reports to self-help guides. India's ever-increasing modernization is often understood through its culture. Why is Indian governance so riddled by innumerable controversies? It is the country's accommodat-ing Hindu ethos which invariably results in tumultuous dialogue. Why do makeshift arrangements and last-minute haste mark the completion of manufacturing contracts and service tasks? It is the culture's ingrained habit of spontaneous improvisation and deferred action. Why do Indians succeed so well in mathematics, science, and engineering? A genius for numbers is latent in the people – they invented the numeral zero, after all.

Indian culture is evoked in paeans to self-invention and entrepreneurship; yet simultaneously, it is blamed for stymieing development. For example, books by Indian business gurus in recent years have stressed that the moral lessons within ancient Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* can aid Indian corporate decision-making. The case that even more prosaic elements of Indian culture may buttress capitalist growth was found in a 2009 report by the consulting firm, McKinsey. The report highlighted the north Indian term *jugaad*, which can be translated as 'makeshift arrangement' or 'hasty improvisation'. The term has a range of usages, and can refer to both unsavoury acts of corruption and admirable examples of craftiness. McKinsey's use of *jugaad* was decidedly upbeat, as proof of Indians' innately entrepreneurial talent. A less flattering presence of *jugaad* was evident during the belated preparations for India's Commonwealth Games in 2010. Seeking explanations for why such a showpiece project of world-arrival was riddled with corruption and mismanagement, Indian commentators dwelt on the culture's emphasis on spiritual and metaphysical concerns over materialistic and time-dependent ones. In all of these examples, the nation's interior tradition and civilizational depth is affirmed; India's particularity is elevated even as it seems to be subsumed by placeless malls and anywhere subdivisions.

These narratives emphasize the novelty of Indian cultural pre-eminence to explain its global arrival. Yet they often reveal little that is specifically Indian or that is about the present moment. If we widen our focus, geographically and historically, we see uncannily similar notions employed when other Asian countries experience capitalism and modernity. An instructive example is provided by comparing India's recent liberalization with Japan's post-war economic rise.

Boom-time Japan
Japan, like India today, was from the 1950s onwards understood to be on an unprecedented modernization drive. By the 1970s, commentators rushed to explain Japan's acceleration as a manufacturing rival, exporting hub, and consumer market. Along with the islands' Toyota cars and Sony walkmans, a growing fear of Japanese economic domination also landed up on the U.S.'s shores, resulting in 'Japan-bashing' in the 1980s. Business volumes extolled industrial techniques and managerial practices seen to be simultaneously hyper-modern yet rooted in Japan's ancient past and cultural specificity. In Japan, such writings, whether foreign or native-born, were part of a booming genre: *nihonjinron*, or discourses of Japaneseness. This genre bundled together notions such as cultural distinctiveness, historical arrival, national self-discipline, and innate entrepreneurial talent. While *nihonjinron* has older roots, it blossomed in the post-war period, peaking in the 1970s.

A presupposition of many *nihonjinron* narratives was that both the secrets of, and obstacles to, successful Japanese modernization were due to culture itself. The modern salaryman was the inheritor of the feudal *samurai*, carrying his discipline and aggression into the world of modern capitalist work. In the vast constellation of culturalist tenets about Japan, groupism and hierarchism are among the most enduring. These national traits were precisely what enabled Japan to become the world's post-war economic miracle and second-largest economy. They underwrote the Japanese company, and enabled utter devotion and loyalty to the firm, producing workers who were apparently untroubled by extreme overwork and enforced workplace conviviality. The same was true for the very young. The ferocious academic competition and cram schools of the Japanese education system were upheld as a culturally unique cornerstone of national prowess.

Yet in parallel interpretations the same traits had quite the opposite effect. From the mid-twentieth century, Japanese businessmen were often called 'economic animals' to describe aggressive, impersonal business behavior. Aggression and discipline similarly echoed descriptions of Japanese imperial incursions across Asia, just a few decades previous, bringing to mind images of Japanese soldiers who treated colonial subjects and prisoners of war with notorious cruelty and brutality. In this sense, the Japanese corporate salaryman, who carried out his work with selfless discipline and precision, on whose back the successes of post-war Japan were forged, is also the descendant of a violent, and shameful history. The prolific use of terms like *samurai, hara-kiri* (ritual suicide), and *kamikaze* pilots to describe Japanese business culture and society in general at the time attests to the assumption of a direct inheritance from the past to the present.

In other words, culture is simultaneously the source of 'character flaws' that perennially threaten Japan's international ambitions, epitomized by Japan's shimaguni or 'island-nation' mentality. This latter term is frequently deployed in Japan to explain various social shortcomings, such as Japanese hierarchism, suppression of individual creativity, and why Japanese are bad at self-expression and frown upon people who stand out. Thus Japanese culture must be a foil for both the mastery of capitalism and modernity as well as the seemingly irrational failure to adapt. Accordingly, in recent years, reports of Japan's aversion to immigration, despite a looming demographic crunch, have located the inability to manage coming labour shortages in the exceptionally strong hold of an especially homogeneous culture. As we shall see, such discourses of cultural exceptionalism are a highly seductive means of presenting and legitimizing the Asian on the global stage. Yet, as we argue, their inevitable effect is a depoliticization of the notion of culture itself.

The paradox of culture
Juxtaposing these narratives of India and Japan, we see an irresistible paradox: in either place, at many points in recent history: cultural particularity becomes both the source of, and the hurdle to, modernization. Unlike Europe or America, these Asian countries, howsoever much they are suffused with gadgets and fashion, irrespective of their export of factories and films, retain their essential selves. In the following sections, we sketch a modest genealogy of the assertion of Japanese and Indian cultural particularity in the context of modernization. The stock narratives of recent decades are set against a longer history of thought, stretching back to the nineteenth century, of how these places relate to the wider world. In so doing, we maintain that the seeming novelty of Japanese and Indian entanglements with capitalism and modernity elides a longer pattern of similar thinking.

As we will show, this analytical move is not merely an intellectual trend to be deconstructed; such narratives have consequences. For example, an emphasis on distilled cultural markers and civilizational histories obscures conscious political choices. Moreover, though the culture that is spoken about is leached of politics, it usually affirms state-approved notions. Inconvenient signs which may upset the culturalist frame – heterogeneous rather than homogenous ethnic roots, the messy legacy of historic in and out migration, shifting borders of the putative nation – tend to get jettisoned.

Juxtaposing the contemporary narratives of India and Japan, we see an irresistible, historically rooted paradox: cultural particularity becomes both the source of, and the hurdle to, modernization.

The fetish for culture In India and Japan

Our task, then, is not simply to place contemporary discourses within a longer, geographically-bounded history within both countries. To do so would restate the position that we seek to critique: that India and Japan relate primarily through their cultural particularity to the global and modern, as if in discrete, self-contained silos. Instead, we emphasize that Japan and India – howsoever complicated and distinct their trajectories in the wider world have been – are united by a shared affirmation of cultural particularity. This recourse to culture to explain a nation's success or failure at modernity, despite its appearances, often fails to impart an empirical description of a specific place. Indeed, the picture of Indian or Japanese culture that frequently emerges remains flat and obscure. Culture becomes not an explanation for how capitalism and modernity have remade Japanese cities and Indian selves; it is often an anti-explanation.

The fact remains, then, of culture's longevity as a default explanation in studies of modernizing Asia, as well as in Asian self-narratives. What we attempt to foreground is that the emphasis on culture grows stronger, not weaker, as India and Japan are integrated into forms of universal modernity. Globally, India and Japan are ubiquitous whether in migrant communities or restaurant fads. Yet howsoever much modernization or capitalism take hold, the culturally particular stubbornly persists. Contrasting examples of the failure of Japan and India to successfully adapt to capitalist modernity – coded in terms of certain inefficiencies or predispositions – are likewise culturalized, unlike similar processes in Germany or America.

Historic Japan

Japan's culture would strike many as so different from India's so as to be incomparable; yet upon closer inspection we find many of the same narrative strands. By examining the history of the culture trope in discussions about Japan and Japaneseness, we may see how culturalist notions have been used to forge an unchanging cultural essence that has underwritten modern nation-building and yet continues to over-determine all things Japanese.

One previous incarnation of the stereotypes that proliferated in Japan's economic heyday are found in American anthropologist Ruth Benedict's (in)famous 1946 book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Benedict encapsulated Japanese national character in a pithy dichotomy: one face was cruelty and aggression, the other, a unique aesthetic sense and appreciation of beauty. Benedict's study was commissioned by the American government, as part of an effort to understand enemy behavior in the Second World War. Here, Japanese are a paradox: both 'loyal and treacherous', 'militaristic and aesthetic', 'aggressive and unaggressive'. The book has had a huge influence on studies of Japan since, especially in the U.S. Though abundantly critiqued and lambasted by scholars as an example of antiquated anthropological ethnocentrism, Benedict may have had the last laugh: Japan continues to be understood in terms of the poles of aesthetic refinement and hostile defensiveness.

Aesthetics are, of course, an important domain of any society. Both Japan and India are well-known for their aesthetic productions, and art, fashion, and craft are deployed as important national ambassadors for popularizing the countries abroad today. In the case of Japan, the idea of a distinctively Japanese aesthetic sense as the core of cultural essence has a long history. Cherry blossoms, geisha, kimonos, and the tea ceremony, as well as their fresher-faced counterparts, like *anime* and *manga* figures, and the clean 'zen'-like lines of Japanese fashion, are all part of the all-too-familiar iconography of Japan abroad. Yet this was not always the case. Arguably, in Japan, the creation of a thing identifiable as 'Japanese culture'' was part of nation-building itself. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 saw the end of the feudal period and a transition into modern forms of governance and unprecedented levels of nationalization. Over the next decades, language and education were standardized, industrialization proceeded apace, and urban centers boomed. At the same time, the state had high ambitions for the new Japan to meet the apparent demands of a modern nation-state and growing empire.

The work of many prominent Japanese thinkers in the early twentieth century often sought to outline a cohesive Japanese identity that was both unique and modern, that is, on par with the west. For instance, in a famous speech he delivered to students in Tokyo in 1914, the novelist Natsume Soseki lambasted the Japanese for following all things western 'blindly', and exhorted young men to not parade about in these 'borrowed clothes' but embrace their Japaneseness instead.

What was this Japaneseness? One compelling version was put forth by the philosopher Kuki Shuzo in 1930. After spending nine years in Europe, he penned his famous treatise on

Howsoever much capitalism and a universally recognizable modernity take hold in India and Japan, and as informed by conscious political choices as this process has been, culture seems to stubbornly assert itself.

Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, *Iki no kozo*. Kuki's main argument is that Japaneseness can be encapsulated in a specific aesthetic and philosophical concept he develops, called *iki*. Given its cultural specificity, there is no translation for this term; similarly, it is not imitable by non-Japanese. *Iki* finds expression in a huge range of things – from colors to textile patterns to certain bodily postures and even attitudes towards life. While lacking clear definition, *iki* is the enduring cultural essence that distinguishes Japan(ese) from everything else, and makes it special in the modern world. Reading almost like a manual in taste, Kuki's work was part of drawing a particular kind of 'culturescape' in 1930s and 1940s Japan, wherein culturalized aesthetics was linked to the nation-state. Aestheticized representations of the state were a key part of ultranationalist ideology in imperial Japan.

We see echoes of Kuki's ideas in more contemporary mainstream Japan and abroad. Pioneering Japanese fashion designers working in Europe from the 1980s like Hanae Mori, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo, became famous as 'Japanese designers', meaning that their creative productions were inevitably defined by their national origin. While this use of culture may enable the Japanese artist to successfully market themselves in the global economy, it is an ambiguous burden. As frequent remarks about the imitative nature of Japanese (and Asian) mastery of western cultural forms like classical music imply, Japanese people and products are often doomed to be only that – Japanese, failing to achieve acceptance in more universal terms.

Historic India

Contemporary Indian commentators often express qualms about the breakneck speed of modernization. Changes since India's socialist, state-planned economy was unwound in the early 1990s – a rapidly expanding housing market, opportunities in information technology, the avid pursuit of social distinction through personal consumption – are often greeted positively. Yet unease remains: will crass materialism blot out India's civilizational inheritance in music and poetry; has the zeal for self-invention and facility with the foreign unmoored Indians from their culture?

As it happens, despite the novelty of privatized skyscrapers and the democratization of car ownership, this anxiety – that capitalism and modernity are eclipsing or extinguishing culture – is now new. Indeed, such worries might be understood as the latest iteration of a recurring preoccupation dating to the nineteenth century.

Then as now, a highly-educated and self-consciously national intelligentsia looked askance at the forces unleashed by foreign investment. Of course, by the late nineteenth century, the height of British colonialism, these issues took on a decidedly political and moral cast. Industrialization and technocratic governance, in their extracting and disciplining functions, were seen as an unwanted impingement from elsewhere.

An abiding interest, then, was to mark out the institutions and ideals by which Indians could eventually steer their destiny. The problem was in recalibrating such terms: by the modern period, destiny, and related terms such as fate, were bywords for Indian cultural group-think, dooming natives to timeless backwardness. Indeed, as the British consolidated their rule on the subcontinent, they catalogued indigenous rituals, folk traditions and religious pathways – and usually found them degraded and irrational. Indian culture, whether couched in appreciative, exoticist terms, or condescending, retrograde tones, was invariably counterposed to modern planning and capitalist efficiency. Karl Marx, in the nineteenth century, may have been especially upbeat, though he was hardly alone, in foreseeing the imminent extinction of Indian feudal habits and cultural morays through capitalism.

The response, by a wide swatch of Indian intellectuals, religious reformers, and nationalist cadres, was to conceive of an inner cultural domain that was simultaneously rational and untainted by an exterior modernity. Culture could provide a vocabulary for authentic institutions in the contemporary world; simultaneously, it was the core vault which modernity could not unlock. To this effect, a two-pronged strategy was in evidence: to streamline cumbersome beliefs and reform antiquated institutions, and use these modernized forms of culture to underwrite political self-determination and industrial policy.

For example, by the late 19th century, the *Arya Samaj*, a prominent Hindu revivalist movement, initiated educational institutions which sought to recover and disseminate religious teachings, in a regimented and nationalist setting. Seeing Indian culture as coterminous with Hindu epics and ancient Sanskrit had political effects, even in domains that were avowedly non-political. Prominent reformers and nationalists identified Indian Muslims as well as British colonizers

as enemies of cultural purity. A less militant version of the fetish for culture came in the nationalist *swadeshi* movement. Popularized in the early twentieth century, it privileged local manufacturing over foreign goods. *Swadeshi* fused an exalted place for culture with the exhortation to productively work for the nation.

The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, in the mid-twentieth century, further glorified a timeless culture via modern techniques of organization and discipline. This Hindu nationalist organization conjoined physical drills and spiritual education with an ambitious platform of community service and political activism. A recurrent presence in communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims after independence, it helped achieve a near-monopoly for seeing Indian culture as Hindu culture. A more prosaic example of how culture came to underwrite capitalist modernity came in the mid to late twentieth century government policy of import substitution, whereby foreign consumer goods were to be mimicked domestically. A descendent of the *swadeshi* movement, import substitution was an often inefficient and derivative industrial policy. Nevertheless, it ideologically contrasted India's nobler society vis-à-vis a rapacious western capitalism.

As in Japan, the ongoing production of a depoliticized notion of Indian culture unwittingly echoes the intellectual undercurrents of nation-building. The modernization of India from the 19th century onwards – as expressed in reformist movements and the proliferation of nativist theories of governance – was then, as now, accompanied by the talk of culture. This culturalist discourse did a political job a hundred years ago and continues to do so today: incarnating select groups included within the rubric of the people, targeting others as traitorous, and, most of all displacing such self-conscious choices onto the stony edifice of culture.

Asian cosmopolitan?

This essay has explored the enduring fetish for culture as a foil for capitalism and modernity in commonsense, everyday understandings of Asia. In contrast to some understandings that make a strict separation between these domains, we have sought, using contemporary and historical examples from India and Japan, to show that culture is frequently seen to both enable and frustrate the triumph of globalization. We have sought to historicize the contemporary elevation of culture as an explanation for myriad ills and successes, and by doing so, have argued that culture invariably becomes a black box, masking political choices and often offering obscure explanations for social predicaments. The surge of narratives fixating on, and elevating, India's culture as the source and the impediment to greater rationalization, trade and consumption, we have argued, does not differ in this respect from that accompanying the post-war boom years in Japan.

A reminder of the endurance of such narratives, and the depoliticizing effect of them, is in Japan's latest globalized incarnation is as a 'cultural superpower'. The Japanese government recently began the 'Cool Japan' initiative, which seeks to re-brand the nation as exporter of the arts and Japanese 'cool'. This year (2011), the government plans to pump over US$230 million into the creative industries, in the hope that culture will resuscitate a flagging economy. In this state-led vision, *anime*, *manga*, fashion, and urban subcultures are ironically rehabilitated from their more popular and diffuse roots as part of nation-building. Japan is represented as wellspring of the creative avant-garde, quirky, edgy, and ahead of the curve. Yet, as this essay has suggested, how much of this is really new? Japan is once again synonymous with culture, in slightly different, more high-tech garb.

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