A Study Into The Society And Culture Of Japan

Assessment: Task 1

Part A

Nature of traditional society and culture

Japanese culture was influenced by ancient time periods. Primarily, the influence was from multiple Chinese dynasties, although other Asian countries also contributed to Japanese culture today. The influence of China can be seen within the Japanese language, considering it uses Chinese characters (kanji) for writing.

Despite the influence of globalisation and westernisation, Japan has a distinct culture of its own. This was mostly built up in the Edo era where Japan exercised a strict isolationist policy, closing off all relationships with the outside world (Tsutsumi, 2017).

Traditional Japanese culture is made of many aspects. Family, the environment and creativity hold great significance, and this can be seen through the country's famous gardens, flower arrangements and many arts and crafts. High standards of behaviour are also a major feature of this society. Japanese traditional culture places high value on the concept of harmony and interdependence of persons. Children are taught to act harmoniously and cooperatively with others from the time they go to pre-school and emphasizing this concept throughout the education system socialises individuals from a young age. Along with these values, the traditions and customs of the country all contribute to the social structure and nature of Japan.

Nature of power and authority

There is an evident power dynamic in Japanese culture. In terms of a macro scale, Japan is ranked 7th of the most powerful countries on earth, according to 'Business Insider' (Business Insider, 2019). This statistic reflects the power of the nation as a whole, however internally there are also various power structures.

The power of the Government in Japan has evolved over the course of time. The emperor was previously the embodiment of all sovereign authority, however now, is the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people. Sovereign power rests with the people and their fundamental human rights are explicitly guaranteed.

A particular social hierarchy of power and authority is also entwined into the Japanese culture, as seen below.

An individuals' identity is made up majorly from their position in this hierarchy, considering that it will determine who the person interacts with. With each level of this hierarchy comes varying levels of respect, a key component to gaining power in Japan. The Emperor always has the highest authority and the lower an individual is placed on the hierarchy, the less power or relevance they have to influence society.

Age also brings about power in Japanese culture. Superiors and elders have significant authority and are shown respect through the meaningful gesture of bowing (ojigi).

Despite the overall consistency in the power of the Emperor, Japan did see historical change in the 20th century, as the traditional power and authority figures, the Emperor, the Ujis and the family, were all challenged by new institutions in Japan. However, the power of the Emperor has always been resumed, and hereditary power remains consistent in Japan.

Continuity and change in the micro, meso and macro levels of society

Both individuals and groups are impacted by the continuity and change in Japan. Japanese society is complex considering that the people continue to value thousand-year-old traditions, yet simultaneously, the country has one of the most innovative societies, with rapid fashion and technological developments.

Regarding the macro scale, there has been considerable continuity in Japan, particularly within the political system. The government of Japan is a constitutional monarchy, of which it has been throughout the course of history. The Japanese monarchy is claimed to be the oldest continuous hereditary monarchy in the world. This continuity has impacted individuals and groups on a macro level considering that the people have no input into choosing the leader of their nation and the way in which they rule. The hereditary monarchy system does not allow an election process, majorly impacting the lives of Japanese people as the chosen Emperor regulates their systems and social structure.

Japan, however, has also seen significant transformative change at the macro level. Over the period of 1995 to 2007, the Japanese economy experienced what is now called ‘The Lost Decade’, in which GDP fell from $5.33 trillion to $4.36 trillion, real wages fell around 5 percent and the country experienced a stagnant price level. This economic process of social change impacted the meso society, as most groups of people now had little job security with the many Japanese companies replacing their workforce with temporary workers. It impacted the individual as it put everyone into a challenging financial position, forcing each person to essentially ‘fight’ for themselves and for their family’s wellbeing. Many also ended up in major debt, negatively impacting the financial future of individuals. Some macro impacts were that Japan had the highest level of debt of any nation on earth as of 2013, and it took 12 years for Japan's GDP to recover to the same levels as 1995.

On the meso and micro levels of Japan, continuity and change have also been evident. On the meso scale, family structures within Japan have seen evolutionary changes over time. Families consisting of a father who is a salaried worker and a stay-at-home mother with two children were the norm in Japan during its era of high economic growth and urbanization in the 1970s (News, n.d.). However, in more recent years, family dynamics have diversified, varying to households consisting of a ‘single earner’ or a ‘4-member household with one earner’.

In terms of continuity, traditions amongst Japanese people have been around for centuries, one of these, being bowing (ojigi). Bowing plays a major role in the interactions of Japanese people as it shows respect and gratitude. This practice is so significant in Japan that people of other cultures have also learnt to bow when conversing with Japanese people, reflecting Howard Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory. Bowing began in Japan with the introduction of

Chinese Buddhism, and since the Asuka and Nara periods (538-794 AD), it has been a prevalent part of Japanese culture. This is a clear example of continuity impacting the way individuals and groups interact or the micro level.

Part B

Gender roles and the status of men and women

Socio-cultural processes have led to continuity and change within Japanese gender roles. Significant inequality between men and woman has always been prevalent in Japan and there has been a consistent imbalance in power between the two genders. In regard to politics, Japan had a right-wing perspective for centuries, and women were considered irrelevant in the political system until the mid 1900s. Change in this role for women only began in December 1945, when a revision of the Election Law granted women the right to vote. Despite this political process of social change, the continuity of inequality remained. The proportion of female representatives in Japan's House of Representatives today is only 10.2%. This is one of the lowest in the industrialized world (Nippon, 2019). This inequality results in little opportunity for woman to have influencing power in the Japanese society.

Throughout history, men have also held more power than woman in the workforce. Years of stereotypes and expectations of Japanese woman to submit to traditional roles has led to Japan having the third highest wage gap in the OECD (Wikipedia, 2019). In Japan, power and authority is earnt with hard work and success, so with men dominating the workforce for centuries, woman have had far less opportunity to gain power or have an impact on their communities.

Although this imbalance is still present, Japan has seen some transformative change in recent years. Westernisation has impacted Japans values, in regard to the uprising feminist movements in western culture. In 2018, and for the first time in five decades, over half of Japan's women were employed.

However, a cyclical pattern in Japan can still be seen as statistics also show that in 2018, women only represented 44.1% of the entire Japanese labour force. This displays how men have remained dominant. Japan is yet to regulate and eliminate discrimination for gender identity, reflecting the continuity that remains in Japan.

Impact of the change – progress

Compared to the country’s previous lack of efforts, progress has certainly been made as Japan undergoes evolutionary change toward equality. The previously very limited legislation supporting women has seen major progress as Japan now passes many laws, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), enacted in 1985. Japans employment rates between men and women have also significantly improved, considering that over the past decade, the employment rate of highly educated women has increased reaching 79% in 2017.

This can certainly be classified progress as the country is improving the lives of its citizens by evolving its social structure. Women have been directly benefitted as their opportunities for work and political influence have expanded drastically. Their power within micro, meso and macro

settings has evidently grown, changing the ways in which they can interact. Men do not necessarily disbenefit from these shifts, however, considering their previous dominance and power over women, many right-winged individuals could perceive the change as a loss to males. This change reflects the linear patterns within Japanese society.

Technological processes of social change have created access to technologies in Japan. This has had an impact on change, particularly through globalisation. Members of Japan's society being exposed to the media opens up a comparison between countries. The ability to observe the change occurring in other parts of the world can majorly influence what change is desired in Japan. As well as this, the internet exposes, and essentially shames, the progress made in different countries. For example, The Gender Inequality Index (GII), ranking nations on their levels of equality. The desire to obtain a good reputation can also clearly be responsible for the rate and direction of change in Japan.

Social theory – Conflict

The conflict theory is a social theory highlighting that competition in an inherent characteristic of humans. The theory exposes the prevalent conflict that societies obtain between social classes, as well has conflict around personal morality, religious beliefs, gender and age.

The conflict between right and left-wing members of society can effectively explain the continuity and change in Japan. In terms of a right-wing perspective, the traditional gender roles and practices are considered the most effective and appropriate social structure. This stance is held by many individuals as The National Police Agency estimated that there are over 1,000 right-wing groups in Japan. Contrarily, many of Japans citizens have evolved their values and support the progress of the country in eliminating gender inequality. This is a left-wing standpoint.

These opposing perspectives naturally conflict with each other as the country is divided between resistance to change, and the desire for social change and linear progress. This conflict has been responsible for continuity in Japan, as the nation struggles to agree on policies regarding gender roles. The previously discussed low ratings in economic participation and political empowerment for women, are a clear representation of the continuity in inequality that conflict has created.

Karl Marx's conflict theory can also explain the change within Japans social and power structures. As globalisation encouraged Japan modernise its social values, traditional gender roles were challenged. Numerous protests and political groups advocating for change were created during this rise of conflicting perspectives. Through socio-cultural and political processes, the social change around equality was a result of the conflict in Japan.

The near future (5 to 10 years)

• determine current trends and suggest probable future directions for the aspect of the country studied in the focus study

Analysing Japans rates of equality over the past few decades can expose certain trends in the country's progress. Japans gender gap has been seen to slide down over the years of the early

2000s. However, a trend of growth towards equality can be seen over the past decade, as Japans ranking in the Gender Gap Index has gradually began to climb back up. This is reflected in the graph below.

In 2015, The Intensive Policy to Accelerate the Empowerment of Women was formed. In 2016, The Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace fully entered into force, and the Japanese government has supported various efforts toward achieving the target of increasing the share of female managerial level to approximately 15% by 2020. All these statistics, sources from the Global Gender Gap Report 2016, reflect an aspect of continuity, where Japan will continue in a positive direction toward gender equality.

These trends also suggest a certain direction of change in Japan. The proportion of people in support of traditional gender roles have evidently decreased, suggesting that the values of the remaining right-wing population will also evolve. This probable social change, however, will not likely occur in a transformative manner, it will be a gradual evolutionary change.

Technologies within Japan are extremely valuable to the progress of the nation. The future of Japan's culture and political structures somewhat relies on the advancing technologies available. These technologies, particularly communication devices, will continue to allow Japan to stay relevant and influential on a macro scale, creating channels for trade, and relationship between nations.

Conclusion

The complex nature of Japanese society is observable within the micro, meso and macro environments. The country has evidently experienced various continuity and change over the course of time, in terms of its diverse culture and contradicting political views on gender equality.