1. On methodology

Ruth Benedict is an important scholar in American social anthropology together with Margret Mead. However, Benedict and Mead are totally different in many ways in terms of the content of their academic works. Their methodologies in social anthropology in particular are clearly disparate.³

Mead’s social anthropology applies psychological techniques to members of primitive society and tries to define psychological traits or characteristics common to members of that society by accumulating and analyzing individual case studies. In contrast, Benedict tries to discover a cultural trait, that is to say, a pattern of culture in a primitive society, chiefly by investigating the way of life and forms of culture of that particular society.

Hence whereas Mead emphasizes data collection, such as interviews with individuals, observations of children’s actions, photographic records and so on as techniques of investigation, Benedict basically tries to capture culture as a whole and collects data from the viewpoint of group behavior and institutions. In other words, Mead attempts to discover

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¹ This special issue was originally published in Minzokugaku Kenkyū (Japanese Journal of Ethnology), Volume 14, Number 4, 1950.
² Translator’s note: I have included words and phrases used in the English summary of this article, “From the Standpoint of a Social Psychologist,” Minzokugaku Kenkyū (Japanese Journal of Ethnology), Volume 14, Number 4, 1950: 84-85 (346-347) where appropriate. I would like to thank Yoko Hayami and Tom Gill for checking the translation.
³ Translator’s note: The division into paragraphs in this translation is not the same as that in Minami’s original Japanese article where each paragraph is often very short.

social psychology by accumulating knowledge about individual psychology, while Benedict begins by trying to grasp social psychology and then infer individual behavior.

Benedict’s use of a top-down method, as opposed to Mead’s bottom-up one, is clear in the case of The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. There Benedict describes Japan’s cultural history, particularly the development of its moral philosophy, to depict the patterns of culture. That is to say, she looks for “[s]ome degree of consistency”4 (J: 24; E: 12) in “a system of values by which to live” (J: 24; E: 12) by which the people create “some design for living” (J: 23; E: 12).5

Moreover, Benedict tries to ascertain Japanese ways of living and “Japanese assumptions about the conduct of life” (J: 25; E: 13) by analyzing the contents of Japanese literature and cinema. At any rate, the monographs on Japan that Benedict could get hold of in Washington were unfortunately inadequate, and in particular the materials for understanding Japan after the 1930s were totally unreliable. This is due to the fact that Benedict, who was after all an anthropologist, did not sufficiently take into account the rigorous analyses conducted by important political and economic organizations when conducting research on Japan. This is clear from the following words by Benedict expressing overconfidence about her field of study.

Other social scientists who were studying Japan were using libraries, analyzing past events or statistics, following developments in the written or spoken word of Japanese propaganda (J: 17; E: 6).

These words indicate that Benedict did not pay adequate attention to the analyses of Japanese political and economic systems by many great social scientists. Above all, the fact that she did not utilize the penetrating analyses of Japanese capitalism by scholars in the U.S. who were associated with the Institute of Pacific Relations (I.P.R.) is manifested in the weakness of her basic knowledge about Japan. Of course, Benedict was greatly aided by the historical research of Herbert Norman and Hugh Borton. However, her understanding of history after the Meiji Restoration, especially of contemporary history, is questionable.

The above points also result in another significant limitation in Benedict’s methodology, namely the technique she employs for her interviews. Benedict assumes that Japanese culture and ways of life have remained almost stagnant since the mid-Meiji period. This is an ahistorical view often mistakenly adopted by anthropologists. It is thus natural that she adopted the method of interviewing Japanese residents in Washington as her samples when conducting case studies of the Japanese, since she considered Japanese culture as fixed.

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4 Translator’s note: Words in double inverted commas “” indicate quotations in 《》 and words in parentheses 「」 in Minami’s original Japanese article.
As a social anthropologist, Benedict could not exclude case studies by interview methods. However, since she primarily emphasized a top-down method, unlike Mead, Benedict believed that she could study Japanese culture by interviewing Japanese people “who had been reared in Japan” and “ask[ing] them about the concrete facts of their own experiences” (J: 17; E: 6).

The question is whether or not the Japanese residents she chose to interview actually constituted quantitatively and qualitatively appropriate samples as she claims. Firstly from the viewpoint of quality, Benedict seems to have chosen very old people as her samples because of her exclusive focus on the fixed or static aspects of Japanese culture. Many of the Japanese living in the United States were born in Japan during the Meiji period. They went to the U.S., taking with them the Japanese culture of that time, remained closed inside Japanese communities in the U.S., and were comparatively unaffected by American culture and the cultural developments of the Japanese homeland. Thus they had created a “pure Japanese culture” of the Meiji or early Taisho periods. Proper understanding of contemporary Japanese culture obviously became difficult as a result of including such exceptional people in the interview sample.

Moreover, the Japanese movies, which Benedict says that she watched with Japanese informants from whom she received help regarding their interpretation, were by no means carefully selected examples of typical contemporary Japanese cinema. It is clearly inappropriate to study Japanese culture from the analyses of Japanese films imported to the U.S. The materials she uses in analyses of Japanese literature and theater are also limited. It is obvious that they are inadequate aids for explication of the complex social psychology of contemporary Japanese people. In this way, we see that the materials for Benedict’s research on Japanese culture were greatly flawed in spite of the fact that she had made a most conscientious effort in wartime Washington.

Lastly, Benedict’s opinion of her interview method is also problematic. According to her, “[w]ho bows to whom and when, for instance, needs no statistical study of all Japan” (J: 29-30; E: 16), hence the number of people she interviewed to learn about the Japanese way of life “reaches the point where the testimony of great numbers of additional informants provides no further validation” (J: 29; E: 16). She also points out that “Sociologists and psychologists are preoccupied with the ‘scatter’ of opinion and behavior” (J: 30; E: 17), and criticizes them for not trying to understand the conduct of life, that is to say, the culture.

Benedict rightly criticizes the mechanical quantitative and statistical analyses, which are the negative aspects of American social sciences. But this does not mean that the problem of interview samples can be solved so simply in terms of numbers, since it is linked to the issue of the quality of samples. I say this because, as I pointed out above, the Japanese people she interviewed seemed to have included a considerable number of those who had cultivated a pure Japanese culture.

In this way, we can say that from the point of view of methodology, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword could not grasp the dynamism of contemporary Japanese society correctly due to
two reasons: flaws in its basic materials and inadequacies in its historical perspective. However, in spite of such handicaps, Benedict definitely discovered various aspects of Japanese culture through ways that we Japanese would not have thought of.

2. On the concept of “the Japanese people”

Benedict tries to discover the patterns of Japanese culture by using the methodology mentioned above. Patterns of culture refer to “some design for living” (J: 23; E: 12) as I have already cited. They are “certain ways of meeting situations, certain ways of sizing them up” (J: 23-24; E: 12) in social life, or in the case of Japan, “Japanese assumptions about the conduct of life” (J: 25; E: 13).

Those who are worried about such a vague definition of the concept of patterns of culture will be even more disturbed to find the following statements some pages later. “This book, then, is about habits that are expected and taken for granted in Japan” (J: 29; E: 16) and “[t]he ideal authority for any statement in this book would be ‘the proverbial man in the street’” (J: 29; E: 16).

As it can be seen from the above statements, patterns of culture referred to by Benedict are the design of living of “the proverbial man in the street” or “the ordinary person.” She presupposes the existence of such ordinary people in a particular society and posits a cultural pattern as a system of common agreements among them about social behavior.

The idea of the ordinary person in Benedict’s case clearly refers to the average person. This concept may be valid to a certain extent in the case of members of comparatively simple and uniform social groups that anthropologists are usually accustomed to dealing with. However, there is a danger of the concept being totally meaningless if applied to complex modern societies.

So what kind of people can we refer to as ordinary or average in modern Japanese society? Firstly, as a class concept, we can refer to middle class people who occupy the middle of the social strata. Ordinary people in that case would mean those who would be called the petty bourgeois, petite bourgeoisie or middle class. Secondly, as a quantitative, statistical concept, average people can be said to be those who belong to the social class that constitutes the majority of the population. In Japan, these clearly refer to the wide-range of lower class people including workers and peasants. Thirdly, as a more abstract typology, we can think of the ideal-typical Japanese. This is a model person bearing various personality traits that represent Japanese cultural patterns. Strictly speaking, such a person would not be found anywhere in Japan, but at the same time, it is imagined that every Japanese person would have at least one aspect of the ideal-typical Japanese.

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6 Translator’s note: The phrase ‘the proverbial man in the street’ is put inside parentheses 「市井の人」 (shisei no hito) in Hasegawa’s Japanese translation (J: 29) to which Minami refers. It is not indicated by inverted commas in Benedict’s original text (E: 16).

The term “the Japanese” that Benedict frequently uses appears to be a class concept since it refers to the ordinary person or the proverbial man in the street. However, she also often defines “the Japanese” in statistical terms by using the ambiguous expression “all.” For example, when she discusses the Japanese prisoners of war, she asserts that they all worshipped the Emperor, apart from a very few exceptions. She considers the average man in terms of the statistical majority by pointing out that “He [the Emperor] was all things to all men” (J: 47; E: 31), “unanimity in reckoning the Emperor above criticism” (J: 48: E: 32), and “unanimous Japanese veneration [for the Emperor]” (J: 49: E: 33). Such expressions clearly refer to samples taken across divisions of social class, as she also states in the same section, “[t]he prisoners’ testimony was worth paying attention to for they represented a cross-section of opinion in the Japanese Army” (J: 47; E: 31).

In other words, Benedict’s statistically average person is not representative of the class constituting the majority of the nation’s population, but just a vertical (or horizontal) typology of people with a common tendency towards specific social action such as worshipping the Emperor. Indeed it would be dangerous to rephrase this as “all” Japanese people.

In this way, it becomes clear that Benedict’s notion of “the Japanese” refers to the third kind, namely, the ideal-typical Japanese. When we read The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, we must keep in mind that the vague term “the Japanese” refers to this conceptual typology that Benedict has constructed. Then we would understand that it would not be logically impeding, even though it ignores class factors and may be completely unrealistic. However, it is precisely because of this that The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is fundamentally flawed, since it is too fixed and ahistorical to grasp the actual dynamics of social psychology of the Japanese.

3. The “dual nature of Japanese personality”

In spite of the faults mentioned above, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword successfully draws out several tendencies of social action common to many Japanese. They contain some exaggeration and distortion as they are from the viewpoint of an American, but because of this they highlight aspects that we Japanese do not notice in everyday life. Let us consider the issue of dual nature of Japanese personality taken up by Benedict.

It goes without saying that Benedict employs a certain amount of psychological analysis as an American social scientist. Although this is not as pronounced as that of Mead, as I have mentioned at the beginning, it clearly appears in Benedict’s discussions on the relationship between culture and personality. Benedict deduces that the dual nature of Japanese personality derives from their way of child rearing. She argues that the “experience of privilege and psychological ease in babyhood” (J: 350: E: 286) is the cause of “contradictions which all Westerners have described in Japanese character” (J: 350: E: 286) and “duality in their outlook on life” (J: 350: E: 286). She points out that the Japanese “retain through all the disciplines of later life the memory of an easier life when they ‘did not know shame’ (J:
350: E: 286), and because “the experiences of that earlier period never truly fade out,” a man “goes back to them in his permissiveness about human feelings” (J: 352; E: 287).

But are the actions of adults often going back to their childhood feelings and becoming “innocent” unique to the Japanese? Benedict argues that the Japanese man “has his exuberances, as well as his areas where great restraint is required” (J: 349; E: 285) and gives drinking bouts with geisha attendants as an example of the former. Thus Benedict considers that Japanese men re-experience the easier life of childhood in “such ‘free areas’ as drinking” (J: 350; E: 286) and are allowed the pleasure of “permissiveness about human feelings” (J: 352; E: 287). However, “free areas” such as drinking are not exclusive to the Japanese. In America, too, drinking disinhibits whatever is inhibited in human actions in everyday life, functions to release tension, and often leads to uninhibited behavior in wild parties. I do not think that we need to call this dualism in outlook on life or dual personality something unique to the Japanese.

Benedict also says, “The contradictions in Japanese male behavior which are so conspicuous to Westerners are made possible by the discontinuity of their upbringing” (J: 356; E: 290). The notion of discontinuity she mentions here is based on her idea of social conditioning, which she discusses in an article published ten years ago (Continuities and discontinuities in cultural conditioning, *Psychiatry*, vol. 1., 1938, pp.161-167).8

Various rules of social action are acquired as children become adults. Socio-cultural conditioning is said to be discontinuous when the rules of childhood and those of adulthood are completely different. By contrast, socio-cultural conditioning is said to be continuous in cases where children are allowed to live according to similar social rules as adults, or when the social actions of children are transformed into those of adults very gradually and continuously.

Thus, when Benedict talks about the discontinuities in Japanese education, she obviously has in mind the discontinuities between the unbridled cultural conditioning they receive during childhood and the strict social constraints of adulthood. As examples of this, she says that in Japan pre-school children are allowed to play sexual games very freely and to masturbate. They are also permitted to boldly criticize and boast, whereas such things are prohibited for adults. She regards these examples as evidence of “the great gulf fixed between the little child and the adult” (J: 331; E: 270).

But, as Benedict herself mentions in the same section, “The children know the facts of life both because of the freedom of grown-ups’ conversation and because of the close quarters in which a Japanese family lives” (J: 330; E: 270), the cultural conditioning of sexual behavior appears discontinuous only on the surface. In actual fact, children who live in environments where adults lead free sexual lives continuously receive sexual training freely and naturally. If that is the case, the discontinuities in Japanese education emphasized by Benedict do not necessarily apply to all aspects of life, since continuities can be seen in the case of sexual behavior.

8 Translator’s note: Minami cites Benedict’s article in Psychiatry here in brackets in English.
Benedict constructs an abstract typology, “the Japanese,” and attributes to it a feature of duality formed as a result of discontinuities in cultural conditioning. This is just one example of the way in which American social anthropology is clearly adversely affected by a mechanical application of social psychology.

On the contrary, social psychology in the true sense must first conduct a detailed investigation of the substructure of a particular society. It must then divide society into several classes that are constantly changing and attempt to discover the greatest common factor in the social actions performed by the people belonging to each class. Thinking about “the Japanese” in general, that is to say, postulating a psychological giant—as Benedict does by bringing together personality traits and tendencies of actions of diverse people belonging to different classes in Japan—is inadequate for understanding the complex activities of the Japanese who live in contemporary Japanese society. Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is instructive in the sense that it shows us how social anthropology by itself is inadequate for analyzing human beings in modern society. It is clear that this task can only be achieved through collaboration with other neighboring social sciences.