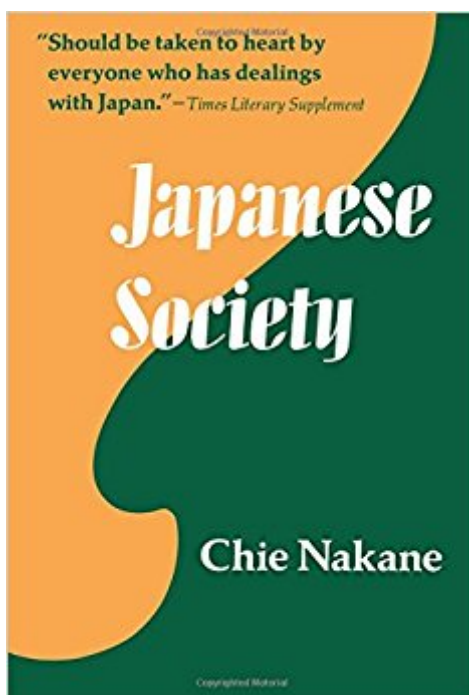


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Japanese Society (Center For Japanese Studies, UC Berkeley)



Synopsis

This short work presents a configuration of the important elements to be found in contemporary Japanese social life, and attempts to shed new light on Japanese society. Nakane deals with his own society as a social anthropologist using some of the methods which he was accustomed to applying in examining any other society. However, its form is not that of a scientific thesis (as may be seen at once from the absence of a bibliography; the author also refrains from quoting any statistical figures or precise data directly obtained from field surveys). Nakane has tried to construct a structural image of Japanese society, synthesizing the major distinguishing features to be found in Japanese life. He has drawn evidence almost at random from a number of different types of community to be found in Japan today--industrial enterprises, government organizations, educational institutions, intellectual groups, religious communities, political parties, village communities, individual household and so on. Throughout this investigation of groups in such varied fields, Nakane has concentrated my analysis on individual behavior and interpersonal relations which provide the base of both the group organization and the structural tendencies dominating in the development of a group.

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Customer Reviews

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"A brilliant wedding of 'national character' studies and analyses of small societies through the structural approach of British anthropology. One is of course reminded of Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* which deals also with Japanese national culture. Studies by Margaret Mead and Geoffrey Gorer deal with other national cultures; however, all of these studies take off from national psychology. Professor Nakane comes to explanation of the behavior of Japanese through analysis rather of historical social structure of Japanese society, beginning with the way any two Japanese perceive each other, and following through to the nature of the Japanese corporation and the whole society. Nakane's remarkable achievement, which has already given new insight about themselves to the Japanese, promises to open up a new field of large-society comparative social anthropology which is long overdue." —Sol Tax "This is an important book!"--Robert E. Cole, *Journal of Asian Studies* "If you have time for just one book on Japan, try this one."--David Plath, *Asian Student* "Should be taken to heart by everyone who has dealings with Japan. . . .Even those--or, perhaps, most of all those--who know Japan intimately will be grateful to Professor Nakane for her brilliant study."--Times Literary Supplement

Professor Nakane provided a clear and precise analysis of the Japanese characters and features. Her description of Japanese society as a collective, hierarchical and somehow xenophobic one is influential and remarkable. The stress on seniority and conformity in Japan is undoubtedly a distinct aspect of the East Asian country. This book is a solid foundation for students of Japanese Studies.

Forget the Military Channel. You won't understand the Pacific War if you don't understand the rigidly vertical form of Japanese society.

I have only begun to learn about Japanese culture and society, but I found this book to be helpful and worth reading.

the very basic principals of Japanese society has not changed. This book is one of the best to understand Japanese.

Nakane's work *Japanese Society* appeared as a good representation of the social anthropological viewpoint of the time, around 1970 after the publication of its Japanese versions a few years earlier. She employed the structural approach, emphasizing the 'vertical' hierarchical structure penetrating through the social stratum. I remember

many of my Japanese friends saying that her work was simply rewording of common sense and nothing original. I thought it meant that she managed to capture aspects so typically Japanese, that the Japanese themselves would find it boring, seeing nothing new or inspiring. Of course her contribution was that she provided structure and perspective to what was felt intuitively by everybody. It is still very interesting to read.

Chie Nakane's *Japanese Society*, is a structural analysis of what makes contemporary Japanese society Japanese. With this work, Nakane wishes to find out what the fundamental elements of society are in modern Japan. In the preface, she tells us that although some of the ideas she presents may not be entirely new, her "interpretations are different and the way in which [she] synthesize[s] these aspects" (viii) are. On the other hand, because this book was written in 1970, I cannot help but feel that some of the interpretations presented are outdated. Since Nakane is Japanese, I have the tendency, and I think she does as well, to believe that she knows what she is talking about as far as Japanese society is concerned. However, she really only bases her arguments on whatever fits her structural pattern. She even says, "I have also refrained from quoting...precise data directly obtained from field surveys" and admits to having "drawn evidence almost at random" (vii). What Nakane actually does, rather than provide a structural analysis of Japanese society, is use certain aspects of Japanese society to validate structuralism. Nakane begins by saying that the Japanese form social groups depending on their "frame," or their place of work, and not by "attributes," or what one's occupation in a company is (1). What makes these groups uniquely Japanese is that the co-workers, perhaps the boss as well, often go out drinking after work - forming very intimate relationships. Nakane believes this to be the foundation of Japanese society. Here I believe she is absolutely correct - 30 years ago. For instance, the well-being of the company is synonymous with the well-being of the group. Therefore, the Japanese worker tends to feel more inclined to work for the good of the company, rather than his own personal gain. However, due to the decline of the Japanese economy, these feelings are not quite the same anymore. When the economy was great, workers could rely on their companies for stability, but that is not as true anymore. One of the highlights of this book is how it deals with what are typically seen as traditional and time-honored aspects of Japanese society. For example, the life-time employment and seniority systems are often seen as traditions of Japan. However, we learn that they are actually post-war developments "not to be found during the earlier period of Japan's industrialization" (37). She shows us that although these systems are recent developments, they are the results of the informal structure of Japanese society persisting and finding new outlets

within this period of modernization (8). Although the structural approach works well in this instance, I cannot help but think it is too stifling a view with which to approach the entire Japanese society. Since part of the idea of structuralism is that everything can be traced back to a specific root, it denies individuality. In this book, Nakane traces everything back to the "frame" or group someone is a part of. In doing so, she denies the Japanese person a sense of individuality. Even if the Japanese man's life is centered on a group of his co-workers, he is still an individual and has his own thoughts and feelings, regardless of whether they are expressed or not. Nakane also discusses the structure within social groups. One of the problems I had with this section is that, even though Nakane's approach is well suited to her goal, it is quite possibly one of the most boring things I have read. For example, to explain the idea of vertical and horizontal organization, she uses an elaborate system of diagrams and of a-b, a-c and b-c variables to represent the relationships among group members - this goes on for pages. It would have been much simpler to state that without a group leader, the group falls apart. Instead, I almost get the feeling I am reading a math book. Since she is using a structuralist approach, I can see how these diagrams and variables could be justified, but it makes for dull reading nonetheless. When compared to Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, I believe Japanese Society has a lot to offer. Whereas Benedict had to rely mainly on interviews, Nakane is able to draw on her experiences of being Japanese. Another key difference is that, while Benedict merely tells us what the Japanese are like, Nakane tries to discover why the Japanese are such a way. Even though I do not entirely agree with Nakane's views, she has, at the very least, given us an alternative angle to look at what makes up the basics of Japanese society. If nothing else, this new angle should be viewed as a significant, though perhaps somewhat outdated, contribution to the study of Japan.

From the very beginning of *Japanese Society*, Chie Nakane explains her dedication to the structuralist approach to understand Japanese society, "I have used wide-ranging suggestive evidence as material to illustrate the crucial aspects of Japanese life, for the understanding of the structural core of Japanese society. . ." (viii). Where Ruth Benedict admits to the limited evidence at her disposal in drawing her conclusions, Nakane boasts that her belonging to the culture which she is attempting to define will aid in her critical analysis. Nakane's goal with the text is to use her understanding of Japanese culture to draw conclusions about its basic components. With this knowledge, Nakane should be able explain all aspects of Japanese culture in relation to the a few basic underlying elements and rules. The assumption that Nakane's structuralist approach makes is that all actions taken by individuals in a given society can be traced to a limited number of cultural

facets that are shared by all individuals that belong to a common culture. The benefit of the structural approach is that it produces concrete results and information that can help in understanding a given culture. Benedict's approach assumed that when Japan entered the modern era, the cultural traditions were rendered inert and unchanging. Nakane's approach allows for traditional Japanese culture to be more organic. The traditional Japanese values grow to find new applications in a modern context. The problem is that this model implies is that traditional culture appears to precede the people that live it. Though the traditional values are intact, no new cultural identity can be formed as time goes on. The structuralist approach relies on the basic elements of culture not changing. Nakane uses her expression of Japanese hierarchy to explain much of Japanese culture throughout her book, "In abstract terms, the essential types of human relations can be divided, according to the two ways in which ties are organized, into two categories: vertical and horizontal," (23). Nakane's initial assumption about systems of organizing social relationships could be applied to any group of people, not just the Japanese. She uses this idea of hierarchy to express how Japanese relationships are formed. Most of the text is devoted to showing how all Japanese relationships fit into this vertical and horizontal model. Of course, if the reader agrees with her initial assumptions then there is no way to disagree with her argument. Nakane's structuralist approach uses deductive reasoning to draw conclusions, so her basic argument is made infallible as long as the reader agrees with her initial assumptions. Another flaw in Nakane's argument is that many of her conclusions about the bare essentials of Japanese culture have changed greatly since the time the book was written. In 1970, Japan had not yet experienced the bubble economy nor the eventual recession. Many of the main points of the text's argument have decayed and lost their rigidity in face of Japan's failing economy, globalization and the eroding of traditional cultural values. Nakane's book gives an incredibly acute insight into Japanese society in the 1970's but many of its conclusions do not apply to contemporary Japanese culture. I am not attempting to deny that the underlying principles of Japanese culture and society have disappeared or drastically changed. The great frustration I had with this book is that in the past 20 years, many of the supposedly essential features of Japanese culture have lost their importance. The book left me feeling that The conclusions of a structural argument depend too much on the circumstances in which they were written and less on any objective point-of view. Japanese Society attempts to quantitatively define and explain Japanese culture. I do not think that that is possible.

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