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 ascendent as an economic superpower. Having reeled itself out of the ashes of mass violence, and no longer a muddling 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.

The exceptional Asian

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 boring genre: niche, obscure, or discourses of Japaneseeness. This genre bundled together notions such as cultural distinctiveness, historical arrival, national self-discipline, and innate entrepreneurial talent. While nihonjin 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 salariman was an 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, group differences and hierarchies 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 some overemphasized workplace conformity. 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, impolite behavior. Aggression and discipline similarly shaped 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 salariman, 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 shamefaced.

The paradox of culture

Juxtaposing these narratives of India and Japan, we see a historically rooted paradox: cultural particularity becomes both the source of, and hurdle to, modernization. The paradox of culture

In every 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.

As we will show, this analytical move is not merely an intellectual trend to be deconstructed; such narratives have a longer pattern of similar thinking. Yet in the case of modern India and Japan, we encounter an alternative alignment of these ideas. Culture, let it be 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 ardently 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 or domestic ones; Indian companies avidly buy up African oil screened simultaneously in American metropolises as well.

What is the nature of this ascendancy? Why are India’s cultural elements so buttressed by the universal code of modernity? These narratives emphasize the novelty of Indian cultural pre-eminence to explain its global arrival. Yet they often reveal little that is specific about India or that is about the present moment. If we widen our focus, geographically and historically, we see uncanny similarities 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 revolution, exporting hub, and consumer market. Along with the islands’ Toyota cars and Sony walkmans, a growing fear of Japanese economic domination also landed 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 boring genre: niche, obscure, or discourses of Japaneseeness. This genre bundled together notions such as cultural distinctiveness, historical arrival, national self-discipline, and innate entrepreneurial talent. While nihonjin has older roots, it blossomed in the post-war period, peaking in the 1970s.

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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 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-bound history within both countries. To do so would restate the position that we seek to critique: that Japan and India relate primarily through their cultural particularity to the global and modern, if in discrete, self-contained epochs. Instead, we emphasize that Japan and India—howsoever complicated and distinct their trajectories in the wider world have been—are united by a shared history and current condition: their recourse to culture to explain a nation’s success or failure at modernity, despite its appearances, often fails to impart an empirical descriptive or predictive picture of Indian or Japanese culture that frequently 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 modernization. As in any cultural self-narratives. What we attempt to foreground is that the emphasis on culture trope in discussions about Japan and India’s so as to be incomparable; yet upon closer inspection we see how culturalist notions have been used 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 success—predispositions— are likewise culturalized, unlike similar experiences in Germany or America.

Historic Japan
Japan’s culture would strike many so as different from India’s as to be incomparable; yet upon closer inspection we see how culturalist notions have been used 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 success—predispositions— are likewise culturalized, unlike similar processes in Germany or America.

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 nineties, industrializing market, opportunities in information technology, the ached pursuit of social distinction through personal consumption – are often stated as fears.

As in Japan, the ongoing production of a depoliticized concept of Indian culture as coterminous with Hindu epics and ancient teachings, in a regimented and nationalist setting. Seeing Indian culture as the source and the impediment to modernization of India, may have been especially upbeat, though he was the first to stubbornly assert itself.

One previous incarnation of the stereotypes that proliferated in Japan’s economic heyday are found in American anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s (1914) book, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Benedict encapsulated Japanese national character in a pithy dichotomy: one face was cruelty and aggression, the other was 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 criticized 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.

Aesthetic choices, 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 agendas 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 open ‘zen-like’ lines of Japanese fashion, are all part of the familiar iconography 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 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, clothing, and lifestyle were modernized, de-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 explain 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 philosopher Kuki Shojo 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 Shojo. After spending nine years in Europe, he penned his famous treatise on Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, Iki no kozo. Kuki’s main argument is that Japaneseness can be encapsulated in a specific aesthetic sensibility: the 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 clothing to textile patterns to certain bodily postures and even attitudes towards life. While lacking clear definition, iki is the enduring cultural core of Japan’s exceptionalist notion of (Japanese) eevenself, and makes it special in the modern world. Reading almost like a manual in taste, Kuki’s work was part of a drawing a line between the ‘cultural renaissance of 1930s and 1940s in 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, in the 1980s like Hanae Mori, Yoh 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 bargain. As Kuki noted, the image of Japanese (and Asian) mastery of western cultural forms as classical music imply, Japanese people and products are often viewed as ‘non-European’, as Japanese, failing to achieve acceptance in more universal terms.

The fact remains, then, of culture’s longevity as a default explanation in studies of modernization. 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 as culturalist discourse is a political job a hundred years ago and continues to do so today: inciting select groups included within the rubric of the people, targeting others as traitorous, and, of all of displacing such self-conscious choices onto the stony edifice of culture.

Asian cosmopolitan?
This essay has explored the enduring fetish for culture in India and Japan as a foil for capitalism and modernity in cosmopolitan, 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 of 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 modern success and failures, 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 floating on, and elevating, India’s culture as the source and the impediment to greater rationalization, trade and consumption, we have argued, does not exist this way 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 globalization incarnation 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 (2013), the government plans to pump over US$238 million into the creative industries, in the hope that culture will reconstitute a flagging economy. In this state-led vision, anime, manga, fashion, and urban subcultures are increasingly rehabilitated from their more popular and diffusely roots as part of nation-building. Japan is represented as wellspring of the creative avant-garde, quirky, edgy, and above 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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Bibliographic note
Given the historical and geographic sweep of the topic, the public reader ship of the newsletter, and space limits, we have not given direct citations throughout. We refer instead to inflamed by ethnographic fieldwork in Japan and India, and many popular media sources. We have also drawn from the cocktail of Russian, Mark Gower, Thomas Blom Hansen, Ronald Inden, Andrew Sartori, and Thomas Trautmann, and on Japan the writings of Kuki Shojo, Harry Harootunian, Lionel midrinal, Doreen Kondo, Ezra Vogel, Natsume Soseki, and Ruth Benedict.