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Railway Time and Rubber Time

The paradox in the Japanese conception of time

Yohko Tsuji

ABSTRACT. This article addresses the co-existence of rigid punctuality and a rubber-like flexibility in the Japanese conception of time. It examines how the clock and social norms shape the everyday use of time related to railways, work, and appointments in Japan. It demonstrates that multiple discourses of time and the complicated interactions among them create temporal complexity in which the seeming contradiction between rigidity and flexibility is compromised. The data derive from long-term participant-observation research among Japanese in Japan and abroad. **KEY WORDS** • appointments • Japan • railways • social relationships • time

Introduction

I was around ten years old when I first experienced the incredible concern for punctuality of the Japanese Railways (JR).¹ It happened on the train home after a family outing to the beach near Kobe. At a station between Osaka and Kobe, one of the doors did not close so the train could not leave on time. When the door was fixed and we resumed our journey, we were five minutes behind schedule. When we reached Osaka, we were only two minutes late. This delay, however, was serious enough for the Railways. Hence, they had started another train from the Osaka Station two minutes before our arrival precisely at the scheduled time of departure and terminated the service of our train there.

This anecdote, though several decades old, helps to explain why the JR have the reputation of being the world's most punctual railways. Statistics show that approximately 90 per cent of trains run on time not only in Japan, but also in Italy, France, and England. Only in Japan, however, any train one minute behind schedule is counted as a delay (Mito, 2005b: 14–15) and being two minutes late is included in the remaining 10 per cent. The Railways' attempt to recover a 90-second delay became one of the major causes of an accident that claimed 107 lives. Reporting this accident near Osaka in April 2005, a *New York Times* reporter wrote, 'anywhere else in the world, a train running 90 seconds late would perhaps be considered on time' (Onishi, 2005). He is right. A delay means 15 minutes behind schedule for local trains in Italy, 14 minutes for high-speed trains in France, and 10 minutes for inter-city trains in England (Mito, 2005b: 14–15). If the Japanese standard is applied, the number of trains running on time in these countries would be far below 90 per cent.²

Hall (1983) argues that there are at least two different ways to organize time. In monochronic time, strict adherence to schedule is expected, and wasting time is abhorred. Polychronic time, by contrast, emphasizes 'involvement of people and completion of transactions' rather than punctuality (p. 46). Hence, schedules are always subject to change and 'time is seldom experienced as "wasted"' (pp. 46–7).

The rigid punctuality of the JR is a good example of monochronic time. However, this obsessive adherence to schedule co-exists with the rubber-like flexibility of polychronic time. For example, when Japanese make appointments, 'almost everyone is prepared to suggest mutual adjustments, postponements, and compromises' (Smith, 1983: 85–6); the Japanese are reluctant to make fixed appointments and wish to leave room for change.

Furthermore, their scheduling covers a relatively short range. Thus, an anthropologist, Ohnuki-Tierney (1984: 176), was 'bewildered' when her Japanese colleague invited her to dinner that same evening. While I was teaching at a Japanese university, a dinner party was planned just a few hours ahead to welcome teachers hired for the summer program. Likewise, Yoshiko, a middle-aged housewife, calls her hairdresser to check if she can come in the next couple of hours for a hair cut. Many Japanese, however, do not even make an appointment to see a doctor or a beautician partly because an appointment system, though becoming more common, is not widespread. They simply show up and wait, sometimes for a long time, until their turn comes. If the place is busy, they may leave and return at another time. These examples illustrate that the Japanese sometimes organize time in the polychronic fashion. They avoid tight structuring of time and seem indifferent to wasting it.³

The co-existence of rigidity and casualness in Japanese handling of time indicates that the clock is not the only regulator of time. While the Railways example represents the primacy of the clock, the case of appointments suggests

that the Japanese temporal experience is not shaped by the clock alone. In this article, I challenge the idea that the clock is the supreme regulator of time and demonstrate that Japanese temporality involves multiple discourses of time and complicated interactions among them.

The article focuses primarily on two modes of time. First, I examine how the clock governs Japanese lives, demanding punctuality, speed, and productivity and how people try to conform to these values. Second, I investigate the temporal dimensions of social norms and requirements. I argue that social conventions in Japan not only provide different yet no less important time frames, but also generate strong temporal pressure.⁴ These multiple discourses of time and the intricate interplay among them create temporal complexity in which the seeming contradiction between rigidity and flexibility is compromised. The data for this article come from long-term participant-observation research among Japanese in Japan and abroad, including the most recent fieldwork in Japan in the spring and summer of 2005.

The Tyranny of the Clock in Japanese Life

Historical perspective

The Japanese had a means to know the hour of the day at least from the 7th century. *Nihon Shoki*, the first official compilation of Japanese history dated 720, recorded that in 636 one of the princes noticed the tardiness of the court officials in their morning visit to the palace and ordered them to arrive by 5 am and leave after 11 am (Yamada, 1992: 18–19). *Taiheiki*, a chronicle of mediaeval Japan, says Emperor Godaigo died at the western equivalent of 2 am on 16 August 1339. Many available records from the 16th century indicate that reckoning time by the hour was a common practice among farmers (Tsunoyama, 1984: 107). For example, in the chronicle of wealthy farmers' lives in Wakayama Prefecture from 1591 to 1730, births, rituals, and heavy snow were mentioned with the date and the time of occurrence (pp. 104–6). During the Edo period (1603–1867), Japan became a country of tolling bells (p. 66). Bells at temples, clock towers, and castles informed people of the hour. These bells were scattered throughout Japan, even in the remote areas. By the 18th century, it is estimated that the number of time-announcing bells reached 30,000 or 50,000 (pp. 66–7).⁵

These bells played a significant role in establishing temporal order during the Edo period. However, this bell-clock time was different from the mechanical clock time we know today. It was a variable-hour time system in which sunrise was set at 6 am and sunset at 6 pm. Hence, depending on the season, the hour of the day shifted and the length of one hour varied. The government switched this old system to a fixed-hour time system in 1873 (Nakamura, 2001: 18–19).⁶

The JR, which were instituted a year earlier in 1872, adopted the fixed-hour time system from the beginning. Nonetheless, trains were notoriously late in the next several decades. For example, a man who traveled from Tokyo to Kyoto in 1895 reported that his train was two hours late (Takemura, 2001: 48). Until 1903, the Railways were lenient to employees' tardiness, giving them a one-hour grace period to report to work (Nakamura, 2001: 37). At the turn of the century, delays of 10 to 20 minutes were still taken for granted (p. 41).

This picture changed during the Taisho period (1912–26). Due to the post-World War I economic prosperity, the volume of traffic – both of passengers and cargo – doubled in three years and the demand continued to rise (Mito, 2005a, 2005b: 76–7). Building more tracks and trains did not catch up with this fast-growing demand. Therefore, to increase their capacity, the Railways took full advantage of the existing facilities by speeding up trains and quickly turning them around at the terminal. They also reduced the length of time trains stopped at major stations, to one to two minutes in 1914 and to one minute in 1918. A further reduction to merely 20 seconds in 1925 forced passengers to get off in 10 seconds and get on in 10 seconds. Such a quick flow of many people required order and efficiency. Thus was born a rule that is still applicable today: those on the train get off first and those on the platform get on afterwards (Mito, 2005a).

In this accelerated pace of transportation, punctuality was a must because one train's short delay could easily affect the operation of others and could potentially shut down the entire system. Thus, punctuality and speed, as well as the incessant race with the clock, came to be an integral part of Japanese railway culture.

Contemporary Japan

During Japan's period of high economic growth beginning in the 1960s, the need for public transportation drastically increased due to the migration of people from the rural to the urban areas. To meet the demand, the JR, as in the Taisho period, relied more on the software (speeding up trains and passengers) than on the hardware (expanding the infrastructure). This fast flow of transportation served as the pacesetter of Japanese life and positioned punctuality at the core of the Japanese sense of order. Consequently, people today take smooth, on-time train operations for granted and show intolerance for a ten-, five-, or even two-minute delay (Mito, 2005a). At the same time, they contribute to the Railways' efficiency by queuing for the train and quickly getting on and off within the short time allotted to passengers. For instance, bullet trains from Tokyo to Hakata stop only for one minute at Okayama, Hiroshima, and Kokura and two minutes at the larger cities of Nagoya and Osaka.

With a mind-boggling increase in the number of trains and stations since the

1960s, not to mention the Taisho era, speed and punctuality are of utmost significance not only for railways, but also for passengers. Commuters, in particular, 'depend on trains connecting to one another with balletic precision' (Onishi, 2005). This explains why Japanese commuters are in such a hurry. Every morning at the train stations, commuters dash to jump on the train while the doors are closing. Or they step into over-crowded trains and hang on to a handrail by the door until white-gloved railway employees push them in safely. Some other morning scenes also reveal Japanese commuters' race with the clock. Many stand at the train stations gulping down a bowl of noodles or a bottle of milk. At the terminals, a huge crowd spills out of the train and rapidly moves to their destinations, be they workplaces, schools, or connecting trains.

The Railways also make an effort to enhance the fast flow of passengers. For example, automatic ticket-checking machines allow passengers to go through the gate in a few seconds.⁷ At some stations, extra gates are open during morning commuting hours. As I will discuss shortly, such efforts for punctuality, speed, and reliability culminated in the *shinkansen* or bullet trains.

The race with the clock must be won not only by speed and punctuality, but also by productivity. The clock enables the exact measurement of time and generates the idea of time as a commodity that consists of 'a collection of hours, minutes, and seconds' (Hallowell, 1955: 217). Hence, time, like money, should not be wasted but be utilized to produce something salable. The JR seem to excel in producing a good commodity without wasting time. Bullet trains, for instance, transport an enormous number of people with amazing speed and on a precise schedule. They also provide an unusually safe method of transportation.⁸ Though the tragic accident near Osaka in 2005 may have shattered people's belief in safe trains, Christopher Hood, the author of *Shinkansen: From Bullet Train to Symbol of Modern Japan* (2006), estimates that 'as many as 1.5 million trains may have passed [the scene of this accident] without any problem' since the Railways were privatized in 1987 (personal communication, 8 March 2006).

Japanese manufacturers rival the Railways in their high productivity. According to a longitudinal study on car manufacturers in Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom, from 1994 to 2001 labor productivity increased by 20 per cent on average at the Japanese plants, remained about the same at the US plants, and decreased by 13 per cent at the British plants (Oliver et al., 2002: 5). The authors attribute Japanese manufacturing superiority to what is known as the Toyota Production System (p. 1). This system aims at shedding all the unnecessary factors. Hence, companies have only the equipment and workers needed to produce what is actually sold and meet higher demands in the future by improving the productivity of existing workers (Togo and Wartman, 1993: 198). Another study shows that Japanese manufacturing industries grew 20-fold from 1955 to 2000 while the gross domestic product grew 10 times and the tertiary industry 13 times. Due to this 'tremendous' growth, maintains the

author, 'manufacturing industry is the key for creating Japanese nation's wealth' (Hitomi, 2004: 741).

These examples demonstrate that 'the tyranny of the clock' is a real thing (Smith, 1961: 85) in Japan because the clock regiments and rates people's activities at their workplaces and schools as well as on public transportation systems by demanding punctuality, speed, and productivity. Governed by clock/monochronic time (Hall, 1983: 46-7), Japanese people endeavor to be on time, do things swiftly, and avoid wasting time.

At the same time, however, the Japanese do not always honor these values because polychronic time (Hall, 1983) also has a significant impact on their lives by giving top priority to social relationships rather than punctuality, speed, and productivity. What accounts for Japanese behavior that displays both the adherence to clock time and the disregard of it? Why do Japanese use both monochronic time and polychronic time? The next section addresses these questions and considers contradictions and flexibilities in the Japanese handling of time.

Time and Social Norms

I propose to investigate the above questions in Japanese norms and social requirements. I believe that in addition to the clock, social conventions play a vital role in regulating the temporal dimension of Japanese experience. Let us begin with three examples that do not comply with clock time.

Three examples of non-conformity to clock time

The first example concerns the value of punctuality. As noted earlier, this value places strong pressure on Japanese workers in the morning to report to work on time. However, its significance seems to diminish at the end of the day. Many Japanese workers, especially male workers, do not leave their workplace promptly after their working hours are over. Why do the Japanese try to beat the clock in the morning but ignore it at the end of a day?

This seeming contradiction makes sense if we take into consideration that ongoing human relationships have a crucial impact on the Japanese conception of time. Thus, consideration of other workers weighs heavily in their efforts for punctuality. They are well aware that their tardiness inconveniences co-workers or meets with the boss's disapproval. Similarly, for 'the fear of female colleagues' critical looks,' women at a Japanese bank hurry back to work after lunch (Ogasawara, 1998: 56). In short, it is not only the tyranny of the clock, but also the importance of occupational relationships that urges Japanese workers to race the clock.

This temporal significance of workplace relationships also causes the indifference to punctuality at the end of the day. Sean, a young American worker at a major Japanese trading firm in Tokyo, says, 'My work officially ends at 7 pm but this official time is quite optimistic. Even though I have no more work to do for the day, I can't leave the office if my boss is around.' So, Sean normally gets home between 10 and 11 pm and sometimes after midnight. Many male (and some female) Japanese and other foreign workers in Japan share his experience. For instance, Darius Mehri (2005), an American engineer who worked for Toyota, learned how important it was to stay late with his colleagues after they '[had given him] a sour face' when he had left on time (p. 34). In short, Japanese workers stay late, not always because there is work to do, but because 'being present may in itself be considered work, no matter what one actually does there' (Steger, 2003: 188) and the team spirit obliges them to be present with their colleagues.⁹

It seems that Japanese do not believe 'one's commitment to the company begins and ends at specific times' (Levine, 1997: 179). In other words, the commitment to work is so important that there is no clear boundary between individual time and collective time and one's time belongs to one's workplace. This explains why Japanese do not, or more precisely cannot, leave work promptly at 5 pm. Men, in particular, invest so much time and energy in their work that they are regarded as 'married' to their company. They are also called 'corporate warriors' because of their hard work at the cost of their health or even life. The object of such devotions is not an abstract entity of a company they work for, but a group of people with whom they work and share both good and bad times. In other words, at the core of Japanese devotion to work are the team spirit and the sense of responsibility and obligation that they feel toward co-workers. Thus, as in the case of arriving at work, relationships with co-workers have a significant influence over when they leave the workplace. However, the same consideration for co-workers demands punctuality in the morning and flexibility in the evening.

Normally, women leave work on time unless they have career-track positions or an urgent job requires overtime. But they are not totally free from the pressure of 'stretching' their work time. According to Kriska (1997), her female colleagues at Honda's Tokyo headquarters start the day before the official work hour. For 10 or 20 minutes, they wipe the desktops, sharpen pencils for superiors, and unlock the cabinets. They also 'organize the pantry' by preparing tea and putting away dishes (pp. 50–1). At some companies, women take turns to do these tasks, which ensure the smooth transition from non-working hours to working hours (Steger, 2005: 189–90). Tea serving throughout the day also indicates women's lack of temporal control, because when men request tea for themselves or visitors the task must be performed immediately, regardless of what women are doing at the time (Ogasawara, 1998: 42–3).

It is important to note that employers control male and female workers' time differently. In the men's case, it involves working long hours into the night and at weekends. This requires men to spend most of their waking hours on their job and, if they have a family, to leave all the domestic duties to their wives. Mehri remarks on a Toyota sales manager who worked on average 12 to 16 hours a day and frequently 35 days in a row without a day off. To compensate for his absence from home, his wife and son sometimes spent Sunday at work with him (Mehri, 2005: 180–1).

Although women may start morning chores before men arrive, they are not expected to 'stretch' their work time as much as men do. Female workers' time is controlled by the requirement of making themselves available to attend to others' needs, especially those of male workers. A good example of this is the tea pouring mentioned earlier. A similar gender hierarchy is observed in housewives' time, which is claimed by their husband and children (see Yuasa, in this volume). Housewives also do morning chores for 'the whole family's smooth transition from sleep to the performance of social and public activities' (Steger, 2005: 190).

Attending funerals, the second example of non-conformity to clock time, betrays the value of productivity. In addition, it illustrates, as the case of working late did, that the Japanese use of time is other oriented rather than self-focused. Attending funerals is one of the important social duties in Japan. So, when my father was working for a Japanese company, he diligently checked obituaries in the newspaper and kept a black suit in his office so that he could attend a funeral at a moment's notice when his customer died or lost a family member. During my fieldwork in 1997, a high-school vice principal and the PTA president spent an entire workday traveling a long distance for the funeral of the principal's mother, whom he had never met. It appears that attending a funeral is so significant that it outweighs the loss of work time and the inconvenience caused by a sudden change of schedule. Why do Japanese sacrifice their time for funerals?

Most Japanese answer that *giri*, reciprocal obligation, compels them to attend funerals even of those they have never met. Membership in kin, communal, and occupational groups incorporates people into *giri* circles, requiring they attend funerals not only of relatives and neighbors, but also of co-workers and business associates as well as of their families.

To put it in another way, a Japanese funeral provides a powerful cultural mechanism to bind people in long-lasting relationships, which are predicated on reciprocity and mutual dependency. Attending funerals also defines people's positions in these relationships because many rules to be followed are position-specific (Tsuji, forthcoming). Moreover, the increasingly significant role that employers, co-workers, and business associates play in Japanese funerals reflects that work provides a major channel of tying people into social networks today (Nakamaki, 1992, 1999; Tsuji, forthcoming).

In this cultural environment, failure to attend funerals may jeopardize one's position within the group and result in social marginality and anonymity. Fulfilling *giri* is so essential for bonafide membership in Japanese society that it outranks productivity. In short, norms deriving from Japanese mortuary tradition supersede the clock-based values in guiding people's handling of time. In Hall's (1983) terms, polychronic time dominates.

It is also noteworthy that in determining the funeral date, Japanese use two types of calendars: the Gregorian calendar and *rokuyō*, a popular almanac that tells six days of different degrees of auspiciousness or inauspiciousness. Although a Japanese funeral is normally held a day after the death, people postpone it another day if this date falls on *tomobiki*, because *tomobiki* literally means pulling friends and may imply the reoccurrence of death.¹⁰

The third example – the seeming inefficiency of workplace meetings – may also be explained by norms about social relationships. These meetings are held frequently and called on at short notice. Their attendance is mandatory. Besides, many of them are long, boring, and unproductive. No wonder some attendees fall asleep (Steger, 2003). Sean, an American worker at the Tokyo trading firm mentioned earlier, says that a typical meeting at his company lasts for two hours, but it is not uncommon to spend over four hours in the meeting. A few meetings he attended lasted ten hours. He was also surprised that no major decisions were made at them. Likewise, Richard, an American visitor at a Japanese university, observes that many items on the agenda could have been easily taken care of with a memo. His Japanese colleague, Satoru, complains that he spends more time in meetings than preparing lectures or doing research. Why are meetings so important?

Inefficient as they may seem, these meetings have an important function in enhancing group solidarity. Some Japanese say that involving a group of workers of different statuses in the decision-making process makes it easier to carry out the plan. That is, by gathering people together at one place, these meetings serve as 'a ritual of *communitas*' (Turner, 1969). For the same purpose, many Japanese companies, Sean's Tokyo trading firm among them, start the day with morning gatherings in which employees recite company slogans or sing the company song, and the superior makes a brief morale-boosting speech and some administrative announcements.¹¹

Not surprisingly, the pressure to attend meetings is strong in Japanese organizations, be they work-related or social. At the dinner party mentioned in the Introduction, all the teachers, including me, were present despite the last-minute notification and regardless of our plans for the evening. As Japanese, we all understood the unspoken rule of giving priority to the collective goal.

Individuals' lack of control over time and the blurred boundary between private time and collective time are also manifested in a memo circulated among permanent faculty members. It says that all junior faculty members must be in

their office from 9 am to 5 pm every day unless they are giving lectures or attending meetings. Though many academic tasks can be done elsewhere, this is not an isolated case of such a requirement. Momoko, a professor at a national university, mentions that the same rule binds her and her colleagues even when the school is not in session. Such control over individual time reflects the cultural constraint that demands each person behave in the way acceptable to and expected by the group.

From individuals' point of view, complying with the demands of the group confirms their membership and shows their loyalty to the group. Robert Levine (1997) argues that '[Japanese workers'] acceptance of one's *giri*, and the willingness with which people then take on whatever is expected, no matter how much work or time it may require, underlies the Japanese dedication to the company' (p. 180). Attending meetings, working late, and going to funerals are some examples of 'whatever is expected'. Therefore, people 'take on' these things even if doing so contradicts values of punctuality and productivity.

Although sacrificing one's time for the collectivity may be highly regarded, the Japanese do not always meet this expectation willingly. Female office workers detest the tea-pouring task because it marks their loss of control over time and their subservient status (Ogasawara, 1998: 42), and sometimes rebel against it (Pharr, 1990). Many Japanese find ways to circumvent the temporal constraint of their workplace. Businessmen, for instance, go to a coffee shop with their customers, ostensibly for a business talk but in reality for a chat. Professors leave their office after telling the secretary that they are going to the library or a bookstore and so enjoy a break. To compensate for the lack of sleep at night, many male workers at Sean's Tokyo trading firm take a brief after-lunch nap, bending their heads over their desks. These behaviors are tolerated because, as Steger (2003: 182) argues, a release from duties is an important precondition for good work. Hence, where formal regulations are strict as in Japan, there are elaborate ways to circumvent them.

Appointments and time ownership

On the non-committal manner of Japanese appointments, Rob, one of the American students I taught in Japan in 2005, said, 'The Japanese sense of time is kind of weird.' He was puzzled when a Japanese family invited him to dinner on Saturday but he still had not heard from them on Wednesday about the time and place to meet.

The two facts, that the Japanese conception of time is closely tied to ongoing human relationships and that the boundary between one's time and others' time is not always clear, may give a clue as to why Japanese are reluctant to make a firm appointment and leave it subject to 'mutual adjustments, postponement, and compromises' (Smith, 1983: 85–6). I suggest that this way of making an

appointment may be a tactic to deal with the reality in which one does not always have control over one's time.

Two examples of the last-minute change of appointments illustrate the point. Kazuo, a young salaried man, had a dinner appointment with his friend on Friday but bowed out of it when his boss invited him to a mahjong game. Motoko, a career-track female worker at a trading firm, cancelled a family trip a week before the departure when her American business associate requested she see him during his brief stop in Japan. In both cases, individuals' 'private' time was taken by people they worked with and their previous 'commitment' was overruled. But these actions are not normally considered outrageous by the Japanese, who do not draw a clear line between individual time and collective time and between work and social life. On the contrary, the boss's involvement of Kazuo in after-hour activities may indicate his willingness to act as Kazuo's mentor, because such activities are an integral part of work for Japanese men (Allison, 1994). So, Kazuo found it difficult to decline his superior's invitation and postponed his outing with his friend. Motoko sacrificed a family trip to accommodate her American colleague's request because she is a dedicated worker and interpreted his request as a sign that he regarded her as an important business partner.

These examples disclose the hierarchy in time ownership based on one's commitment to work and relationships with others. In Kazuo's case, his boss's status, which is higher than that of Kazuo and his friend, allows him to have the first claim on Kazuo's time. Although an equal business partnership exists between Motoko and her American colleague, he is superior to her family in having access to her time because Japanese work ethics postulate work first, private life second. Kazuo's friend and Motoko's family understand this hierarchical order and its constraints, as well as the flexibility surrounding Japanese appointments. They were disappointed but accepted the change of the plan, saying, 'If it's a job, we have no choice.' Kazuo and Motoko relied on this shared understanding to solve their temporal conflict.

The same understanding about time may account for why Rob's host family waited until Thursday, two days before the dinner, to reconfirm their invitation. Their waiting minimized the need of rescheduling, because the shorter the time between the reconfirmation and the actual event was, the less likely it was that an unexpected demand on their time would occur. Rob, who did not share the Japanese view of appointments, wondered whether his host family really meant to invite him to dinner or whether their invitation was simply a polite gesture.

Although Japanese appointments may be subject to change, not everyone is equally entitled to change them. When two parties of different social statuses have an appointment, those with higher status have the freedom to change it but those with lower status do not. For the latter, the appointment is set in stone and punctuality is a must. My experience at a Japanese university provides a good

example. When those of us hired for the summer program met the president of the university, the program director ordered us to show up half an hour before the appointment time. The president, however, came 10 minutes late.

The temporal significance of social relationships and multiple ownership of one's time may also contribute to the fact that an appointment system is not as well established in Japan as in other post-industrial societies. To consider this phenomenon, I examine cases of hairdressers and doctors. These cases involve opposite hierarchies between the service provider and the service receiver and reveal that social hierarchy has a strong influence in determining who has the first claim on time.

As mentioned earlier, making an appointment with a beautician is becoming more common,¹² but many Japanese women still just show up and sometimes endure a long wait. Why do hairdressers waste customers' time? Why do they not accept appointments?

In the Japanese conception of time, asking customers to make an appointment may give the impression that the hairdressers' time belongs to them and customers have access to it only by pre-arrangement. This may violate the Japanese idea of good service that is summarized in 'customers are gods'. It may also indicate beauticians' superiority over customers and reverse the hierarchy between them.

By contrast, not requiring an appointment may indicate that the beauticians' time belongs to customers and they have easy access to it. At the same time, however, the absence of an appointment system does not allow beauticians to plan their time for swift service. They deal with this dilemma by minimizing customers' waiting time. For example, if the anticipated waiting time is long, they ask a customer if she will be able to return two hours later. If the person who needs to wait is a regular customer, they call her at home when her turn comes. Therefore, contrary to its appearance, making customers wait does not mean that the hairdressers have claims on the customers' time. Japanese women accept waiting as long as hairdressers follow the principle of first-come-first-served and do their best to provide good service. In short, sincerity of service providers buffers the inconvenience of waiting.

Much longer waiting is necessary to see doctors in Japan due to the absence of an appointment system.¹³ Seeing specialists at hospitals often entails a half-day of waiting. Midori, a middle-aged teacher, complains that she needs to take a day off work for her biannual check-up. 'I wait for three hours and see my doctor only for five minutes', she said. From early morning till lunch time, during outpatient clinic hours, lobbies at Japanese hospitals are packed with people like Midori. It is no wonder that some patients wait overnight to get in line to be treated at a well-reputed hospital (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984: 175-6). Why do Japanese hospitals make patients wait so long?

First, doctors are very busy. At large- or medium-sized hospitals, each doctor

treats more than 50 outpatients in the morning. Their afternoons are filled with medical tests and surgery. Thus, as Midori laments, Japanese doctors see their patients only briefly. The mass media have named this 'three-minute medical examination' (Esato, 2004). The name also indicates the strong temporal pressure experienced by Japanese doctors.

Second, I speculate that patients' subordinate status vis-à-vis doctors may have further impacts on their long waiting. As the cases of hairdressers and Kazuo, the young salaried man, showed, the hierarchy in social relationships is reflected in the hierarchy in time ownership. Because doctors' status is regarded as higher than that of patients, doctors may be allowed to make patients wait. This may explain why only 30 per cent of outpatients complained about the long waiting time and the medical cost in the 2002 survey by the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor (Esato, 2004).

It seems that the Japanese are resigned to hours of waiting to see a doctor. In addition to the hierarchy in doctor-patient relationships, multiple factors may be involved in this attitude. For example, people may understand the difficulty of changing the well-established system. They may like the current system that enables them to see a doctor whenever they want in exchange for long waiting periods. As Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) observes, 'as long as [patients] get to the receptionist within office hours, they are usually seen, even if their turn actually comes after the clinic hours are over' (p.175). They may even be sympathetic to doctors who work under such pressure of time and direct their annoyance to hospital administrators.

Japanese acceptance of the status quo may also be attributed to the fact that doctors make their time more easily accessible to patients if they have connections. Akiko, a Tokyoite in her fifties, says, 'No one in my family has ever waited at hospitals because two of my uncles are physicians and both work at well-known research hospitals.' Having connections also benefits those who do not have a doctor in their family. Hence, when they see a specialist at a hospital, many Japanese bring an 'introduction', a letter or a business card with a short note, from their doctor, a politician, or anyone of influence.

This 'introduction' creates an important change in the doctor-patient relationships. Even if a doctor has never met the patients, the 'introduction' incorporates them into the doctor's social networks and accords them a certain status based on the doctor's relationship with the 'introducers'. Consequently, doctors are obliged to give differential treatments to the 'introduction' holders. This widespread practice of using connections indicates that the nature of social relationships influences the temporal experience of Japanese. Another example supporting this statement is found in the government survey on medical treatments mentioned earlier. Among patients who had waited for more than three hours to see their doctors, 26.3 per cent answered that their hospital experience was satisfactory because doctors spent enough time examining them (Esato,

2004). The quality of service, whether it is medical or hair care, makes long waiting more tolerable.

In summary, the Japanese custom of making or not making appointments exemplifies social – in Hall's (1983) term, polychronic – time. People not only avoid firm planning, but also change plans, in order to accommodate others. Besides, social hierarchy has a significant impact on who controls whose time. There are occasions, however, when the Japanese plan ahead according to clock or monochronic time. For instance, many parents plan years in advance for their children's education by sending them to cram schools, sometimes even before they enter a kindergarten, for admission to a prestigious university. These parents follow the linear mode of clock time and view the present as a step to the future. The clock also establishes daily, weekly, and annual schedules for them and for their children by specifying the time and the date to attend cram schools, send applications, take entrance examinations, and so on.

Conclusion

The clock regiments Japanese lives, demanding punctuality, speed, and productivity. At the same time, the Japanese often ignore these values and handle time with seeming casualness and flexibility. This article has investigated such a paradox in the everyday use of time related to railways, work, and appointments. I searched for a clue to understand this paradox in temporal complexity and demonstrated that both the clock and social conventions play a vital role in the Japanese conception of time.

These two modes of time regulate people's lives in different ways. Clock time marks time with incessant ticking and measurable exactness. Social time is shaped by relationships with others and requires flexibility. The two modes of time emphasize different values that people are expected to follow. Clock time esteems strict adherence to schedule and abhors wasting time, whereas social time praises such values as group solidarity and commitment to work. Moreover, while social time creates hierarchy in time ownership, the clock equally subjects everyone to the constant, irreversible flow of time.

Clock time and social time may be comparable to monochronic time and polychronic time as postulated by Hall (1983). However, my findings differ from his observation in one important area. He writes, 'the Japanese are polychronic when looking and working inward, toward themselves' but 'shift to the monochronic mode' in dealing with the outside world (p. 58). Contrary to this statement, my research has shown that both modes of time are equally important in providing temporal guidance and pressure in Japanese daily life.

Although Hall (1983) is correct in saying that 'the two systems are logically and empirically quite distinct', in Japan they are not as mutually exclusive as oil

and water, which do not mix (pp. 45–6). Rather, monochronic time and polychronic time co-exist and interact. As I have illustrated in this article, social relationships have a significant impact on Japanese handling of clock time. At the same time, the clock offers ‘formalized reference points’ and ‘units’ of measuring temporal length (Hallowell, 1955: 216) when people deal with social time. Likewise, both clock time and social time imposed powerful pressure on the driver in the 2005 train accident near Osaka. He raced the clock to regain 90 seconds, ignoring the 60-kilometer speed limit and going over 100 kilometers an hour. But his action was also prompted by social pressures, such as disapproval, reprimand, or dismissal. These pressures were particularly strong for this driver who had been reprimanded previously and sent to the re-education program for overrunning a platform.¹⁴ This represents a case in which ‘human authority merges with the clock’s’ (O’Malley, 1990: 156).

The intimate interplay of the two modes of time may indicate that the Japanese do not necessarily see the clear boundary between them, and shift from one mode of time to another more unconsciously than consciously. In addition, what triggers this shift is not the distinction of the outside versus inside world as Hall proposes, but the change in the social context people are situated in. Therefore, a temporal shift occurs within the same organization, at work, for example, where clock time urges workers to arrive punctually in the morning and social time demands they ignore the clock in the evening. To put it another way, time is never conceptualized in a vacuum, but only in close connection to other facets of life: work, family, social status, and gender differences, to name a few. As Fortes (1959) comments, ‘time is an aspect of the occasion, the purpose, the need met, not something expendable in its own right’ (p. 86).

Consequently, a similar temporal experience may have different meanings. We have seen that waiting at a hospital may signify a patient’s subordinate status vis-à-vis a doctor but waiting at a beauty parlor does not lower a customer’s status below a hairdresser’s. Similarly, 90 seconds behind schedule means a serious delay in Japan but an on-time operation in Italy, France, and England (Mito, 2005b: 14–15).

The context-dependent conception of time also leads to different actions in different situations. Thus, dedicated Japanese workers occasionally escape from their employer’s grip on their time. Cases of a businessman going to a coffee shop and a professor to a bookstore for a break indicate that people deal with time not only with consent, but with negotiation and resistance (Tsuji, 2005). A similar inconsistency is found in planning. The Japanese may not plan ahead by making appointments with doctors and hairdressers, but they plan years in advance for their children’s education. This implies that the discourse of time (i.e., cultural model of planning) is not monolithic, but contains inconsistencies and contradictions. The wider prevalence of an appointment system today also reminds us that temporal frames regulating Japanese society have been changed

by formal adoptions of new systems and by people's adaptations to the changing social milieu.

In summary, the Japanese temporal experience is shaped by multiple discourses of time, an intricate interplay among them, and a complex interaction among time, people, and situations. Such temporality also changes over time. The paradox between railway time and rubber time in Japan is a part of this complexity.

Notes

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1. The JR was called the Japanese National Railways (JNR) until it was privatized and divided into six regional companies in 1987 (Noguchi, 1990: 33–8).
2. According to the JR East, the average delay of bullet trains was 0.3 minutes and other trains 1.0 minute in 1999 (Mito 2005b: 15). Bullet trains on the new Tōkaidō line boasted an average delay of 10 seconds in 2004 (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2004). Seichō Matsumoto's detective story, *Points and Lines* (1971), depends on this punctuality: there were only four minutes each day when no train stopped on track no. 13 at Tokyo Station and track no. 14 could be seen from track no. 12.
3. Being used to the Japanese way, the young Seiji Ozawa was struck by Leonard Bernstein's strict adherence to schedule. Not only was the Maestro's calendar filled with plans and commitments three years into the future, but he structured and compartmentalized time by marking the exact time and date to play the piano, to work on his book, and so on (Ozawa, 1980: 160–1).
4. In addition to the clock time and social time discussed here, nature plays an indispensable role in the Japanese reckoning of time.
5. At the castle, drums were often used instead of bells. One of Bashō's famous haiku, 'Bells heard over the clouds of flowers, are they coming from Ueno or Asakusa?' (my translation), indicates the ubiquitousness of temple bells in Edo (today's Tokyo).
6. In 1872, prior to changing the time system, the government also switched the official calendar from the traditional lunar-solar calendar to the Gregorian calendar (Hasegawa, 2001: 242).
7. Unlike railway stations in European cities, people must have a ticket to enter most Japanese stations.
8. Until 1995, Bullet trains on the new Tōkaidō line had no passenger fatalities although five maintenance workers were killed shortly after the opening of the line in 1964. In 1995, a boy was killed at Mishima Station. While he was running to catch a train, his arm got caught in the closing door and when the train started, he collided with the barrier at the end of the platform (Hood, 2006: 148).

9. Some Japanese who work late stay near their workplace. To accommodate their needs, various kinds of facilities proliferate in big cities. Among them are ‘capsule’ hotels and coffee shops with comic books. The former provide a capsule where a guest can sleep inexpensively. The latter, which allow patrons to stay for a long time, are used to rest or doze off until the morning.
10. Japanese consult the same almanac to determine the wedding or moving date. Consequently, many marry or move into a new house on *dai-an*, the most auspicious day.
11. On these morning meetings, Thomas Rohlen wrote in his 1974 book on a Japanese bank: ‘The singing of songs and recitation of creeds, while still found in most cases, is today publically regarded as old-fashioned, and among intellectuals as laughable’ (p. 35). Though over three decades have passed, Mitchell Sedgwick, a specialist on Japanese business culture, says, ‘while perhaps not a daily occurrence, Rohlen’s statement, as it regards major, large Japanese firms, still stands’ (personal communication, 7 March 2006).
12. Although many beauty parlors in big cities have adopted an appointment system, none has in the suburban community between Osaka and Kyoto, which is my primary research site. One beauty parlor opened in the 1970s with an appointment system but eventually abandoned it. Some beauty parlors in a provincial city where I taught in 2005 combine two systems: they accept customers with or without an appointment. If waiting is necessary, they give priority to those with an appointment.
13. As in the case of hairdressers, an appointment system is becoming more common for medical treatments. Also, appointments are necessary for some tests, such as an MRI or a CT scan.
14. Several minutes before the accident, this driver overran a platform again, and turning back the train caused the 90-second delay. This must have put him under tremendous pressure because the grilling in a re-education program is so harsh that another driver enrolled in it committed suicide in 2001 and his family sued the JR West. According to the family, he was forced to write a note of self-criticism under the watchful eyes of his superiors and was not allowed to go to the bathroom without permission (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2005).

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