

Changes in the Meaning of Work in Japan: A Cross-National Comparison between Developed Countries

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This study aims to clarify how the meaning of work has changed for the Japanese over the past twenty years by examining the data of a cross-national comparison between developed countries. Using data from the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Programme, it focuses on a number of indicators that include work centrality, employment commitment, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, and summarizes the characteristics of work values and work attitudes as follows. (1) For the Japanese, work centrality was extremely high compared to other countries until the early 1980s but subsequently declined. In recent years, Japan's Absolute Work Centrality has ranked around the middle among developed countries, while its Relative Work Centrality has been slightly low. (2) Employment commitment in Japan was high in the 1990s in terms of both financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation. However, in the 2010s, financial/instrumental work orientation remained consistently high but non-financial work orientation fell markedly. (3) Looking at organizational commitment, consistently strong willingness to stay (low inclination to change employment) was observed in Japan, despite weakness in terms of wanting to make efforts for the organization. Job satisfaction has been consistently extremely low, and fell even further in the 2010s. And (4), the Japanese do not have a particularly diligent work ethic, and they show a strong tendency to stress the comfort of workplace relationships as a condition of work. The study draws the conclusion that work is no longer as central to people's lives as it once was; that the fulfillment that comes from working, which was low to begin with, has fallen even further; and that there is a growing tendency to accept that "a job is a way of earning money" as people have more difficulty finding positive meaning in work. This represents a change not seen in other developed countries. Indeed, it can be said that the intrinsic value of work has become diluted for the Japanese people in the past twenty years.

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I. Introduction

In this study, I will attempt to delineate how the meaning of work has changed for the Japanese over the past twenty years based on data obtained from international comparison. International comparison is essential not only for getting a picture of other countries, but also for stepping away from the self-righteous prejudices that one tends to hold about one's own country and seeing it correctly (Pirenne, 1931).

Japan was the first country outside of Europe and the United States to achieve economic success and join the ranks of advanced nations. Indeed, up until a certain point in time, Japan drew attention in Western society as a truly "special" country. International comparative studies were conducted to attempt to understand Japan, and numerous theories concerning the Japanese people and Japanese-style management were produced. However, as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, East Asian countries followed Japan to also attain economic progress, Japan lost its exceptional stature as the one successful non-Western country. Meanwhile, Japan's economy has been stagnant since the 1990s, which has diminished the amount of international attention it receives, while the growing availability of survey data for international comparisons has led to an increase in the number of comparable countries. As a result, Japan is no longer a unique country, and its characteristics are relativized as mere differences in degree. This same process also made it harder to find clear analytical focus points (point for discussion) for delineating Japan's characteristics.

In this paper, I would like to examine a number of points based on the background described above. In particular, (1) I wish to present a number of findings that are considered to be characteristic of Japanese values

Table 1. Variables used for work values and work attitudes

Work centrality (WVS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolute Work Centrality For each of the following, indicate how important it is in your life. Would you say it is: E) Work: 1. Very important / 2. Rather important (<i>yaya juyo</i>, or "Fairly important (<i>kanari juyo</i>)" only in the Wave 2 (1990) survey with a different translation in nuance) / 3. Not very important / 4. Not at all important • Relative Work Centrality The result obtained when the average Leisure Centrality score is subtracted from the average Absolute Work Centrality score (Hikspoors, Bjarnason and Håkansson, 2012). (Leisure Centrality is the option "C) Leisure time" of the same question.) (The averages of Table 2 are calculated after inverting the values of the options so that more important selections have higher scores.)
Employment commitment (ISSP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial/instrumental work orientation A job is just a way of earning money—no more. 1. Strongly agree / 2. Agree / 3. Neither agree nor disagree / 4. Disagree / 5. Strongly disagree • Non-financial work orientation I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money. 1. Strongly agree / 2. Agree / 3. Neither agree nor disagree / 4. Disagree / 5. Strongly disagree (The averages of Table 3 are calculated after inverting the values of the options so that selections indicating higher levels of agreement have higher scores.)
Organizational commitment (ISSP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effort I am willing to work harder than I have to in order to help the firm or organization I work for succeed. (“I am willing to work harder than I have to in order to help the workplace I work for succeed” in the 1997 and 2005 surveys with a slight difference seen in translation.) 1. Strongly agree / 2. Agree / 3. Neither agree nor disagree / 4. Disagree / 5. Strongly disagree • Willingness to stay I would turn down another job that offered quite a bit more pay in order to stay with this organization. 1. Strongly agree / 2. Agree / 3. Neither agree nor disagree / 4. Disagree / 5. Strongly disagree (The averages of Table 4 are calculated after inverting the values of the options so that selections indicating higher levels of agreement have higher scores.)
Job satisfaction (ISSP)	<p>How satisfied are you in your [main] job?</p> <p>1. Completely satisfied / 2. Very Satisfied / 3. Fairly satisfied / 4. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied / 5. Fairly dissatisfied / 6. Very dissatisfied / 7. Completely dissatisfied (The averages of Table 5 are calculated after inverting the values of the options so that selections indicating higher levels of satisfaction have higher scores.)</p>

and attitudes toward work from various existing international comparative surveys. From there, (2) I would like to examine the extent to which the characteristics of Japanese values and attitudes toward work that were discussed when theories on the Japanese people and Japanese-style management were the rage in the early-1990s—such as the “high importance of work in daily life,” “high commitment to work,” and “low organizational commitment and job satisfaction”—still apply today based on data. Specifically, I will use data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to make international and intertemporal comparisons among developed countries.¹

I have summarized details concerning the variables for work values and attitudes that appear in this paper in Table 1. There are several points that deserve attention when looking at international comparison data. First, there is the problem that the circumstances of each country make it impossible to standardize survey and sampling methods. Also, there are differences in nuance arise as a result of language translation. Thus, it must be recognized that limits exist with respect to the strict comparison of numerical values, and that only general trends can be grasped.

II. Work centrality and trends

1. Findings of previous surveys

It has often been said that “work is a highly important part of Japanese people’s daily lives” and that “work is at the center of their lives.” This findings of an international comparative study called *The Meaning of Working* (1982) (abbreviated as “MOW”) are well known with respect to this (MOW International Research Team 1987: ch 5; Misumi, 1987). The survey was conducted in eight countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Yugoslavia, Israel, and Japan). Using two methods, it asked people about “work centrality,” which is an indicator of the general importance that work has in daily life. The first method was to ask people to assign points indicating the importance of each of five domains (leisure, community, work, religion, and family), making a point total of 100% (i.e., work centrality seen in relative terms). The other was to ask people to rate the importance of work in their overall lives (Absolute Work Centrality) on a seven-point scale. In both cases, Japan was found to have the highest work centrality among the seven countries.² Additionally, a remarkable trend was observed only among Japanese males: While work centrality was not particularly high among those in their teens, it rose dramatically among men in their 20s (England and Misumi, 1987; Misumi, 1987). This means that men’s work-centered attitudes are formed through their working lives after entering the workforce, and it indicates how large the socialization function of Japanese firms is (England and Misumi, 1987).³

The MOW survey was followed by a second survey (1989-1991) in four countries (Japan, the United States, West Germany, and Belgium). This survey revealed that work centrality declined in all countries over a period of about 10 years. In Japan, work centrality declined more steeply with younger age groups. Among the four countries, Japan could be said to have the highest work centrality only among those in their 40s or older (Misumi, 1994; Misumi and Yamori, 1993).

Entering the 2000s, data from the WVS indicated that the work centrality of Japanese people was rather low internationally (Nippon Research Center, Dentsu Institute (ed.), 2004; Dentsu Institute and Doshisha University, 2021; etc.). However, work centrality is related to economic affluence, and therefore I will limit my comparisons below to developed countries.

2. Recent trends

Let us take a look at medium- and long-term trends using WVS data (Table 2). Here, I use a questionnaire item for which respondents were asked to rate the importance of different areas of their daily lives (work, leisure, family, religion, and politics) on a four-point scale (absolute centrality scores of work, leisure, family, religion, and politics). In addition, following the lead of previous studies that used the same WVS data, I use results

Table 2. Trends in work centrality: absolute and relative (WVS)

	Average values and changes of “absolute work centrality”							Average values and changes of “relative work centrality”						
	Wave 2 1989-93	Wave 3 1994-98	Wave 4 1999-04	Wave 5 2005-09	Wave 6 2010-14	Wave 7 2017-20	Change	Wave 2 1989-93	Wave 3 1994-98	Wave 4 1999-04	Wave 5 2005-09	Wave 6 2010-14	Wave 7 2017-20	Change
United States	3.41	3.30	3.40	3.03	3.05	3.15	-0.26	0.14	0.01	0.07	-0.22	-0.26	-0.12	-0.26
Australia	—	3.34	—	3.13	3.03	3.00	-0.34	—	0.00	—	-0.26	-0.29	-0.36	-0.36
Canada	3.42	—	3.37	3.28	—	3.01	-0.41	0.13	—	0.12	-0.03	—	-0.46	-0.59
New Zealand	—	3.35	—	3.20	3.18	3.02	-0.33	—	-0.04	—	-0.21	-0.24	-0.41	-0.37
United Kingdom	—	—	—	3.02	—	3.16	0.14	—	—	—	-0.31	—	-0.19	0.12
Sweden	—	3.58	3.42	3.42	3.40	3.52	-0.06	—	0.13	-0.06	-0.07	-0.10	-0.09	-0.22
Norway	—	3.50	—	3.43	—	3.52	0.02	—	0.21	—	0.00	—	0.05	-0.16
Netherlands	—	—	—	3.02	3.07	3.13	0.11	—	—	—	-0.48	-0.28	-0.36	0.12
Switzerland	3.40	3.37	—	3.46	—	3.39	-0.01	0.09	0.11	—	0.19	—	0.02	-0.07
Germany	—	3.35	—	3.24	3.19	3.20	-0.15	—	0.16	—	0.16	0.00	-0.09	-0.25
France	—	—	—	3.59	—	3.52	-0.07	—	—	—	0.35	—	0.33	-0.02
Italy	—	—	—	3.57	—	3.69	0.12	—	—	—	0.40	—	0.42	0.02
Spain	3.58	3.46	3.41	3.55	3.44	3.65	0.07	0.35	0.34	0.17	0.03	0.07	0.26	-0.09
Japan	(3.22)	3.44	3.36	3.36	3.42	3.19	-0.25	0.18	0.13	0.00	0.02	0.07	-0.18	-0.31
South Korea	3.64	3.49	3.53	3.53	3.47	3.26	-0.38	0.61	0.41	0.46	0.41	0.29	0.10	-0.51
Taiwan	—	3.34	—	3.49	3.49	3.49	0.15	—	0.32	—	0.31	0.26	0.16	-0.15
Hong Kong	—	—	—	3.08	3.07	3.09	0.01	—	—	—	-0.02	-0.14	-0.07	-0.05
Singapore	—	—	3.51	—	3.26	3.13	-0.38	—	—	0.36	—	-0.02	-0.02	-0.41
Ranking of Japan	(6/6)	5/11	7/7	8/17	4/12	10/18		3/6	6/11	6/7	8/17	3/12	13/18	

Notes: 1. The average values are calculated as follows: “Very important” = 4 points, “Rather important” = 3 points, “Not very important” = 2 points, “Not at all important” = 1 point

2. Note that the option “Rather important” (*yaya juyo* in Japanese) was “Fairly important” (*kanari juyo*) with a slightly different translation only in the Wave 2 (1990) survey.

3. “Change” is calculated as the difference between the figure for the earliest survey and that for the latest Wave 7 survey of each country.

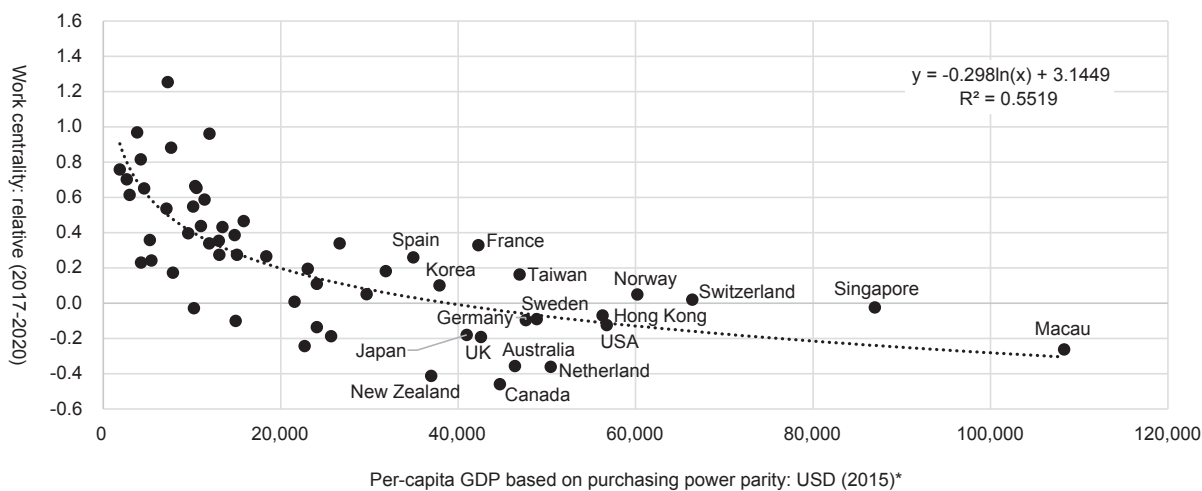
4. The Wave 7 survey figures for the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Norway were calculated based on aggregations by the Dentsu Institute and Doshisha University (2021).

obtained by subtracting “leisure centrality” scores from work centrality scores as an indicator of Relative Work Centrality (Bjarnason and Håkansson, 2020; Hikspoors, Bjarnason and Håkansson, 2012).⁴ This is to examine the possibility that (as has been said with respect to European young people) the relative importance of work decreases as the importance of leisure increases, even if the importance of work itself has not decreased (Méda and Vendramin, 2017).

Table 2 shows changes over the past thirty years or so. We can see that the importance of work has declined in Japan over the past thirty years in both absolute and relative terms. In Japan’s case, the relative decline that is attributable to increased importance of leisure is slight, while the decline in the importance of work in absolute terms is much larger.

Other countries for which changes since the 1990s can be observed have also seen general declines in work centrality. If viewed in terms of type based on the production regimes and employment regimes of capitalism, the degree of decline tends to be larger in countries with “liberal market economies” (Hall and Soskice, 2001-2007) and “market employment regimes” (Gallie, 2007) (the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and in East Asian countries, and smaller in European countries. Incidentally, among countries with liberal market economies, work centrality appears not to have declined exceptionally in the United Kingdom. However, according to the European Values Survey (EVS), which allows comparison from the 1990s, it has in fact declined in the United Kingdom as well (Hikspoors, Bjarnason and Håkansson, 2012).

There are several possible reasons why work centrality is declining in many developed countries, including Japan. For example, advancing industrialization, better accessibility to education, and growing inequality have been found to be factors that reduce work centrality (Parboteeah and Cullen, 2003). If we apply these factors to the Japan of the past few decades, we see all of these factors may have affected the decline in work centrality.



*Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database

Figure 1. The relationship between economic affluence and work centrality (relative)

Thus, identifying factors becomes a task that should be tackled in the future.

Looking again at Table 2, we see that Japan’s ranking among developed countries fluctuates widely depending on the time of the survey, and that the work centrality of the Japanese is neither particularly high nor low. The reasons for the large fluctuations in ranking may include wavering due to temporary “period effects” inherent to each country, differences in comparable countries at each survey point in time, and changes within the margin of error. In any event, the results of the latest Wave 7 survey (2017-20) show that the Absolute Work Centrality of the Japanese ranks at around the middle of developed countries, while their Relative Work Centrality is somewhat on the low side. In terms of the aforementioned capitalism types, Relative Work Centrality tends to be low in countries with liberal market economies and market employment regimes, followed by Japan. In Europe, the Netherlands is an exception in that its Relative Work Centrality is lower than that of Japan.

Figure 1 plots the relationship between economic affluence and work centrality (relative) in terms of per-capita GDP. A tendency for work centrality to decrease with higher economic affluence is apparent up to a certain point. The high level of work centrality of the Japanese does not deviate significantly from the level that could be expected from their economic affluence, being neither particularly high nor low. In fact, if anything, it seems to be somewhat low among developed countries.

III. Employment commitment and trends

1. Findings of previous surveys

Another characteristic of the Japanese people that has been mentioned repeatedly is a high motivation with respect to work. It has been said that Japanese people do not see work as a mere means of earning a living, but rather find “meaning” in work itself, and that they have a strong tendency to seek internal fulfillment through their working lives.

According to “A Cross-National Survey of Seven Countries” (1985-1993)⁵ conducted by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, when survey respondents were asked whether they would continue to work even if they had enough money to live comfortably throughout their lives, Japan had the highest percentage (64.1%) of the seven surveyed countries that answered “continue to work.” Japan also had the highest percentage of respondents (72.8%) who thought that “No matter how much money you have, life without work is unfulfilling” (Hayashi,

1998). This result means that the non-financial employment commitment of the Japanese was extremely high by international standards.

The Japanese tendency to find meaning in work itself, rather than viewing it merely as a means of earning a living, is also shown in the MOW International Comparison Survey discussed in section II above. In response to the so-called “lottery question,” which asked respondents whether they would work even if they won the lottery or inherited a large fortune and could live comfortably without working, Japan had the lowest percentage (7%) of the seven countries that answered they would quit working, while the percentage answering they would keep their current job (66%) was the highest (Misumi, 1987).

When the MOW survey asked respondents what they value in a job, Japan ranked second among the eight countries (behind the Netherlands) with respect to valuing the “expressive dimension” of a job, such as that the job “matches” personal abilities and experience, is interesting, or provides a high degree of autonomy (MOW International Research Team 1987: ch7). Viewed in terms of the commonly used “work values” classification, this means that the Japanese tended to emphasize the intrinsic values of work.

It must be noted here that the latter result of the MOW survey above indicates a trend that emerged from a response method that involved choosing priority based on an ordinal scale. When respondents were asked to rate individual items on a scale indicating job desirability, as is the case with the ISSP survey, Japan of recent years has been lower than the average for almost all items. In other words, not a great deal of importance was given to either external values (such as high salary and job security) or intrinsic values (such as being interesting and providing opportunities to help others) relative to other countries (Nishi and Aramaki, 2009; Volk and Hadler, 2018). Various other surveys also exist, but their results are often inconsistent. The causes for this can be difficult to pinpoint: Is such inconsistency due to differences in the way the questions are prepared or changes in attitudes over time? Or is it due to differences in the countries being compared or differences in the survey targets (for examples, workers in specific companies or factories, or subjects selected through random sampling)? Thus, careful interpretation is necessary.

Returning to the topic of employment commitment, an international comparison based on the ISSP 1997 survey reveals that, subsequently, Japan, despite its economic affluence, has the strong financial/instrumental work orientation of “A job is just a way of earning money—no more” (71% of “strongly agree” and “agree” combined). On the other hand, the non-financial work orientation “I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money” was also relatively strong at 69% (Onodera, 2001). The fact that both financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation are high suggests after all that Japanese people have high employment commitment and find considerable meaning in working.

2. Recent trends

Let us look at more recent trends based on the above previous studies. Looking at ISSP work-themed surveys conducted in 1997, 2005, and 2015 allows us to see changes over a period of about twenty years. Table 3 summarizes trends in employment commitment from two aspects: financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation. In the original sense, the term “employment commitment” refers to “non-financial” commitment and means an orientation that finds meaning in work itself. Conversely, high financial/instrumental work orientation has been viewed as implying “low” employment commitment (Hult, 2004). Certainly, two questions that are used in the ISSP surveys appear to be expressible along a one-dimensional axis of instrumental/financial orientation versus non-financial orientation, as they ask the same thing from opposite angles and the correlation between them is strong. However, as the aforementioned previous studies have shown, it is possible to have both high financial/instrumental work orientation and high non-financial work orientation, and therefore I am taking the step of treating them as independent dimensions in this paper.

Looking at Table 3, the two indicators of financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation are moving in contrasting directions in Japan. From 1997 to 2015, financial/instrumental work orientation was showing slight increases and consistently ranked high among developed countries. On the other

Table 3. Trends in employment commitment: financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation (ISSP)

	Average values and changes of “financial/instrumental work orientation”				Average values and changes of “non-financial work orientation”			
	1997	2005	2015	Change	1997	2005	2015	Change
United States	2.56	2.57	2.66	0.10	3.44	3.51	3.66	0.22
New Zealand	2.49	2.55	2.38	-0.12	3.57	3.62	3.69	0.13
Australia	—	2.64	2.28	-0.36	—	3.47	3.72	0.24
Canada	2.50	2.43	—	-0.07	3.32	3.40	—	0.07
United Kingdom	2.80	2.76	2.67	-0.12	3.31	3.35	3.68	0.36
Norway	2.10	2.07	1.90	-0.20	3.71	3.78	3.94	0.24
Sweden	2.41	2.43	2.36	-0.05	3.74	3.62	3.78	0.05
Denmark	2.18	2.27	—	0.08	4.04	3.92	—	-0.12
Finland	—	2.75	2.70	-0.05	—	2.83	2.93	0.10
Belgium	—	2.51	2.52	0.01	—	3.28	3.56	0.29
Netherlands	2.39	2.35	—	-0.04	3.27	3.28	—	0.00
Switzerland	2.27	2.26	2.42	0.15	3.59	3.70	3.81	0.22
Germany (former West Germany)	2.64	2.69	2.59	-0.05	3.52	3.55	3.82	0.30
France	2.75	2.63	2.69	-0.06	3.21	3.32	3.36	0.15
Spain	3.04	3.52	2.77	-0.27	3.19	3.03	3.28	0.08
Portugal	3.00	2.86	—	-0.14	3.54	3.40	—	-0.14
Japan	2.85	2.92	2.93	0.08	3.84	3.78	3.55	-0.29
Taiwan	—	3.03	3.15	0.13	—	3.85	3.89	0.04
Ranking of Japan	3/14	2/18	2/14		2/14	4/18	11/14	

Notes: 1. Ages between 18 and 69.

2. Figures for countries that were left out of the analysis in certain instances due to low response collection rates or other reasons are provided for reference.

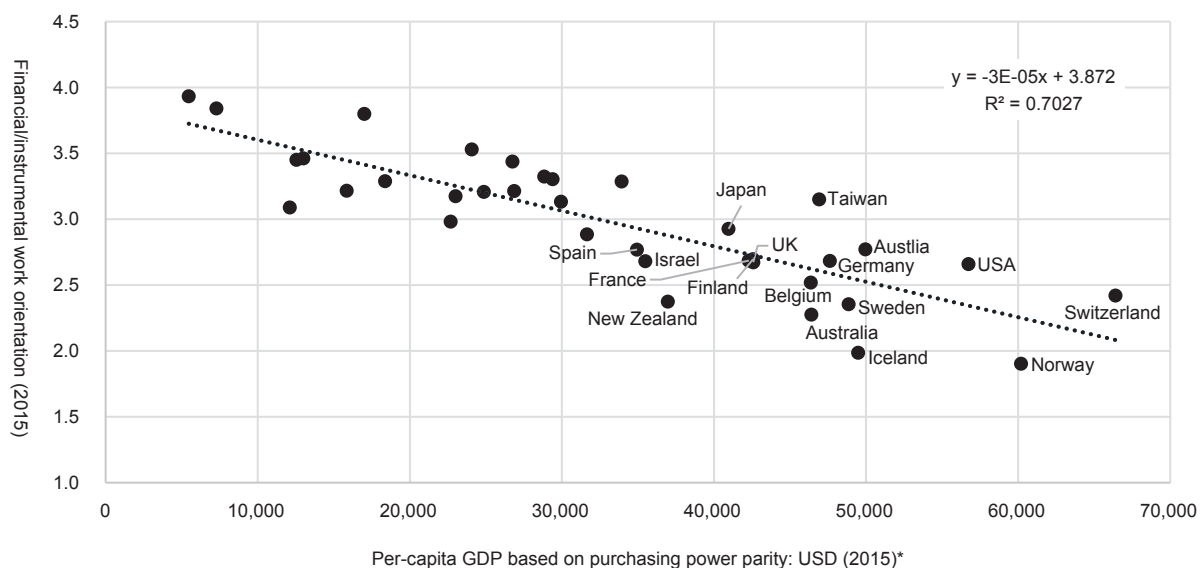
3. For Germany, figures for the former West Germany are used to maintain commonality across time points.

4. Figures are rounded to the nearest two decimal places. Consequently, the results of change calculations may differ slightly from the figures appearing in the table.

hand, non-financial work orientation declined to a large degree not seen in other countries. As a result, the non-financial work orientation of Japanese people, which had been among the highest in the 1997 survey, fell significantly to the lower group in the 2015 survey. In other developed countries, movement that could be interpreted as strengthening postmaterialist values in the form of “weakening financial/instrumental orientation and strengthening non-financial orientation” became the mainstream during the same period of about twenty years. Japan is moving in the opposite direction to the main trends of other developed countries.⁶

Studies in Europe and the United States have pointed out that financial/instrumental work orientation tends to be higher in countries with “liberal market economies” and “market employment regimes” (more or less the Anglo-Saxon countries), where the tendency to depend on paid work for livelihood is strong, and that non-financial work orientation tends to be higher in Nordic countries, which have more well-developed welfare systems (Esser, 2009; Furåker, 2020; Hult and Svallfors, 2002). Such a tendency is apparent if we look at Table 3. However, there are some aspects that do not fit this scheme, such as the stronger financial/instrumental orientation in Spain and Portugal. In addition, there is an analysis indicating that in East Asia, such as in South Korea, the financial/instrumental orientation is stronger than in countries with market employment regimes (Kim, 2008).

According to these types, Japan was once a rare country where both financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation were high. However, the Japanese people’s attitudes vis-à-vis work changed dramatically as they experienced the Japanese economy’s “two lost decades.” Today’s Japan is a country with a strong orientation toward seeing work as “a way of earning money” and a weak non-financial work orientation. It is moving closer to the characteristics of countries with “liberal market economies” and a “market employment regimes.” Table 3 shows that Taiwan has a high employment orientation resembling that of Japan as it used to be.



*Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database

Figure 2. The relationship between economic affluence and financial/instrumental work orientation

As Figure 2 shows, financial/instrumental work orientation has a fairly strong correlation with economic affluence (per-capita GDP). The figure shows that the more economically affluent a country is, the less likely it is that its people will work solely for monetary motives. This fits well with the argument put forth by Inglehart (2018-2019) of a shift in values from “materialism to postmaterialism” or from “survival to self-expression.” Although Japan has been described as “having a stronger financial/instrumental work orientation than a developed country typically has,” the figure shows that Japan is simply maintaining a level that is roughly commensurate with its economic affluence. It deserves noting that non-financial work orientation does not show such a clear relationship with economic affluence (figure omitted).

IV. Organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and trends

1. Findings of previous surveys: Low organizational commitment and job satisfaction

The third characteristic that has often been mentioned as a characteristic of Japanese people’s values and attitudes toward work is their somewhat low organizational commitment and extremely low job satisfaction. This view became well known particularly through several comparative surveys of company workers in Japan and the United States (Cole, 1979; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1985, 1990).⁷

At first glance, this fact seems to contradict findings indicating a significantly high level of commitment at the behavioral level, such as low absenteeism rates, high retention rates in companies (low job change rate), and long working hours. The contradictory fact of “high behavioral level” and “low attitude level” in organizational commitment may have puzzled Western researchers who have tried to find the strength of Japanese-style management in measures that elicit “loyalty to the organization” and “voluntary diligence” from workers.

In explaining the low levels of Japanese organizational commitment and attitude with respect to job satisfaction, Cole (1979) and Lincoln and Kalleberg (1985, 1990) give as reasons the national character of Japanese people to be reserved in their responses and the high expectations Japanese have for their jobs (unlike Americans, who simply view their jobs as instrumental). Focusing on the fact that the difference in organizational commitment between Japan and the U.S. is small but the difference in job satisfaction is large, they point out that

there is a strong positive correlation in that job satisfaction leads to higher organizational commitment. However, the relationship is more complex in Japan, where substantial commitment is higher. That commitment creates higher expectations for work, making it more difficult to achieve job satisfaction, which in turn holds down satisfaction.

On the other hand, Besser (1993) and Suzuki (1994), who criticized these interpretations, attempt different explanations for the gap between “low attitude level” and “high behavioral level.” Put simply, unlike American workers who actively change jobs in search of a satisfactory workplace, workers in Japan often find it difficult and disadvantageous to change jobs and therefore they tend to stay put even if they are dissatisfied. Consequently, their commitment to and satisfaction with the organization tend to be low at the attitude level. At the same time, because workers cannot easily move, they must show a high level of commitment at the behavioral level to ensure that their position in the workplace does not deteriorate.

Both interpretations likely have some validity. There is another suggestive study on Japanese organizational commitment from more recent times. The study conducted an analysis of 17 countries using ISSP data and found that, after controlling for all factors (such as job quality, workplace relationships, unemployment risk, and job satisfaction), Japan’s organizational commitment was the highest (Furåker and Håkansson, 2020). According to this finding, the “apparent” low organizational commitment of the Japanese is commensurate with the inferior quality of various conditions in their workplaces (and low job satisfaction). Considering this, their organizational commitment is actually at a high level. The same explanation may partially explain the low level of job satisfaction among the Japanese.

2. Findings of previous surveys: Strong willingness to stay with organization

The characteristics of Japanese people’s organizational commitment can also be revealed by looking at “the strength of willingness to stay with employer (weakness of inclination to change jobs).”⁸ A comparative survey of Japanese and U.S. factory workers (1975) that was introduced in Whitehill and Takezawa (1981) provides such a look. When the survey asked workers what they would do if their company were in a long-term slump and another employer doing good business was out there, the most common response among American workers was “leave the company and take the job with the more prosperous company” (36%). In contrast, the most common response among Japanese workers was “stay with the company provided management pledges to try to keep you employed and not reduce your pay” (45%).

Willingness to stay among the Japanese people is also consistently demonstrated in the International Survey of Youth Attitude (1972-2008), which targets young people between the ages of 18 and 24 (based on each year’s survey report; e.g., Director-General for Policy Planning, Cabinet Office, 2009). However, it should be noted here that active willingness to stay is weak. When the survey asked whether respondents want to continue working at their current job, the response rate for the negative-leaning option of “I will probably continue, although sometimes I think about changing” (this option was available from the second through fifth surveys)—rather than “I want to continue”—was higher for Japan than other countries. This indicated a conspicuous tendency for Japanese respondents to stay with their organizations even when they are dissatisfied. Similarly, in the sixth through eighth surveys, when the response options were changed, the response rate for “It is better to change jobs if one feels dissatisfaction with one’s place of work” was low, while the response rate for the negative option “Changing jobs is unavoidable if one feels strong dissatisfaction with one’s place of work” was consistently high.

A survey called *Soshiki de Hataraku Seishonen no Ishiki Chosa* (survey of the attitudes of youth working in organizations) (1976), which was a three-country comparison between Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom, asked respondents about their intentions with respect to changing jobs and then asked them to provide their “reasons for wanting to continue working.” In Japan, the most common reasons given were, in order, “my job is worthwhile” (35.8%), “there is no other place I can work” (34.4%), and “it would be the same if I went elsewhere” (33.3%). The latter two negative-leaning options had higher response rates in Japan compared to the

U.S. and U.K. This is in contrast to the more positive-leaning reasons given by many respondents in the U.K. and the U.S.; namely, “my job is rewarding” (U.K. 52.1%, U.S. 60.6%), “I am satisfied with my salary and position” (55.2%, 50.1%, respectively), and “I have good colleagues” (44.8%, 40.1%, respectively) (Youth Development Headquarters, Prime Minister’s Office (ed.), 1979). It is clear that in Japan, where changing jobs is often disadvantageous, people have a strong inclination to maintain the status quo by choosing to stay with their current organization even when dissatisfied with it.

3. Recent trends

The trend of “low organizational commitment and job satisfaction, but strong willingness to stay with the organization (weak inclination to change jobs),” which has been found in several surveys, was also confirmed in the 1997 and 2005 ISSP surveys (Onodera, 2001; Nishi and Aramaki, 2009). The same trend did not change significantly even in the most recent ISSP 2015 survey (Table 4). As for organizational commitment (effort), this was originally somewhat low and appears to have declined even further. However, this cannot be determined with certainty, as the Japanese wording was changed (see Table 1). In any case, all three time points share the fact that Japan does not rank highly among developed countries.

A slight change can be seen in the height of figures for the willingness to stay with employer. In the 1997 and 2005 surveys, the Japanese ranked first in terms of the level of their willingness to stay, showing figures that are by far the highest among the comparator countries. However, in the 2015 survey, the number has dropped significantly, and it is no longer at a noteworthy level though it still remains in the upper group.

Looking at job satisfaction (Table 5), Japanese people’s job satisfaction is consistently at the bottom among the developed countries that are used for comparison. Moreover, its decline has been more severe in Japan than in any other country over the past two decades, with job satisfaction among the Japanese reaching an exceptionally low level in the most recent 2015 survey.

Table 4. Trends in organizational commitment: effort and willingness to stay (ISSP)

	Average values and changes of “organizational commitment: effort”				Average values and changes of “organizational commitment: willingness to stay”			
	1997	2005	2015	Change	1997	2005	2015	Change
United States	3.94	4.09	4.11	0.17	2.55	2.76	2.65	0.1
New Zealand	3.72	3.74	3.94	0.23	2.54	2.71	2.83	0.29
Australia	—	3.58	3.69	0.11	—	2.70	2.61	-0.09
Canada	3.71	3.65	—	-0.05	2.37	2.75	—	0.38
United Kingdom	3.63	3.70	3.83	0.19	2.45	2.63	2.76	0.31
Norway	3.57	3.57	3.72	0.15	2.60	2.66	2.84	0.24
Sweden	3.40	3.29	3.45	0.04	2.36	2.28	2.41	0.04
Denmark	3.62	3.66	—	0.04	2.67	2.63	—	-0.05
Finland	—	2.94	3.18	0.24	—	2.90	3.13	0.23
Belgium	—	3.34	3.23	-0.12	—	2.94	2.68	-0.25
Netherlands	3.63	3.57	—	-0.06	2.62	2.76	—	0.14
Switzerland	3.65	3.85	3.84	0.19	2.82	3.20	3.23	0.41
Germany (former West Germany)	3.52	3.63	3.51	-0.01	2.63	2.92	2.91	0.28
France	2.80	2.61	2.79	-0.02	2.40	2.23	2.45	-0.05
Spain	3.35	2.97	3.53	0.18	2.50	2.51	2.53	0.03
Portugal	3.71	3.58	—	-0.13	3.06	3.11	—	0.05
Japan	(3.62)	(3.65)	3.34	(-0.28)	3.12	3.44	2.88	-0.25
Taiwan	—	3.89	3.90	0.01	—	2.86	2.80	-0.06
Ranking of Japan	9/14	8/18	11/14		1/14	1/18	4/14	

Notes: 1. Employed people between the ages of 18 and 69. The other notes of Table 3 also apply here.

2. The wording of the question for “organizational commitment: effort” was changed in the 2015 survey for Japan (see Table 1).

Table 5. Trends in job satisfaction (ISSP)

	Average values and changes of "job satisfaction"			
	1997	2005	2015	Change
United States	5.34	5.46	5.44	0.11
New Zealand	5.26	5.23	5.32	0.06
Australia	—	5.17	5.16	-0.01
Canada	5.12	5.30	—	0.18
United Kingdom	5.12	5.27	5.35	0.23
Norway	5.22	5.27	5.42	0.20
Sweden	5.25	5.16	5.20	-0.05
Denmark	5.69	5.51	—	-0.18
Finland	—	5.30	5.43	0.13
Belgium	—	4.96	5.23	0.27
Netherlands	5.43	5.26	—	-0.17
Switzerland	5.48	5.70	5.75	0.27
Germany (former West Germany)	5.21	5.41	5.44	0.22
France	5.08	4.97	5.12	0.04
Spain	5.40	5.24	5.51	0.11
Portugal	5.17	5.28	—	0.11
Japan	4.83	4.90	4.44	-0.39
Taiwan	—	5.00	5.24	0.24
Ranking of Japan	14/14	18/18	14/14	

Note: Employed people between the ages of 18 and 69. The other notes of Table 3 also apply here.

V. Other indicators: Work ethic and workplace relationships

1. Work ethic

In this section, I will take a supplementary look at data that I believe are important for understanding the meaning of work for the Japanese. These data are outside of the indicators that I have discussed thus far. Here, I will draw attention to and briefly discuss two areas: diligent work ethic and human relations in the workplace.

A "diligent work ethic" is sometimes cited as a characteristic of Japanese work values. However, a multifaceted study comparing Japan, the U.S., the U.K., and West Germany that was edited by the Work Ethics Research Committee (1985) concluded that the work ethic of the Japanese was not particularly strong. But what about more recent years? Let us look at three questions taken from the latest Wave 7 of the WVS (conducted in Japan in 2019) (Dentsu Institute and Doshisha University, 2021).

(1) The Japanese view that "People who don't work become lazy" is quite strong among developed countries.

(2) The Japanese view that "Work should always come first, even if it means less free time work should always come first, even if it means less free time" is extremely weak among developed countries. The strong resistance to sacrificing leisure time may be due to the fact that Japanese people already work long hours.

(3) The Japanese view that "work is a duty toward society" ranks around the middle among developed countries. In a past survey of Japanese, American, and British young people (aged 18 to 24 years), the percentage of Japanese who selected "working is a fulfillment of one's duty to society" (24.8%) was far exceeded the percentages of those who selected the same response in the U.S. and U.K. (15.4% and 16.0%, respectively) (Youth Development Headquarters, Prime Minister's Office (ed.), 1979). The recent survey addressed this question in a completely different manner and targeted a different age range. Nonetheless, it is possible that the work ethic of the Japanese has changed significantly over the past 40 years in that they now feel less of a social obligation to work than their counterparts do in the U.S. and the U.K.

To summarize, the Japanese have a strong resistance to not working in itself, but that does not mean they think that work should be prioritized at the expense of leisure time. The Japanese have a moderate sense of social obligation to work. From the above, it cannot be said that the Japanese people of recent years have a particularly strong diligent work ethic. But by the same token, their diligent work ethic cannot be described as particularly weak either.

2. Interpersonal relationships in workplace

Finally, let us look at how people are placing more importance on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. In some years, the WVS has asked respondents about the conditions they stress when looking for a job. When the Wave 5 survey (conducted in Japan in 2005) asked what respondents stressed, the percentage of Japanese respondents who chose “working with people you like” was 25.6%, the second highest percentage after Sweden (27.2%). Dentsu Institute and Japan Research Center (ed.), 2008). Although not an international comparison, the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute conducts a survey called Japanese Value Orientations (conducted since 1973). Since the 1983 survey, the top ideal job condition chosen by respondents has consistently been “a job where I can enjoy working with my colleagues” (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute (ed.), 2020). One reason why Japanese people are compelled to stress human relations in the workplace is thought to be a lack of clarity in Japanese workplaces with respect to individuals’ duties and authorities. Such ambiguity makes it difficult for individuals to work autonomously on their own (Murata, 2018). Additionally, Nishi and Aramaki (2009) point out the possibility that under Japanese employment practices (such as lifelong employment and seniority by length of service), the atmosphere of the workplace and human relationships become more important than the conditions of the work itself.⁹

In the past, the communal nature of the Japanese workplace produced “a strong sense of camaraderie” (Hazama, 1979). Even without an intrinsic work ethic or desire to work, the Japanese workplace also brought out diligent work behavior through “a combination of coercion and voluntarism” (Suzuki, 1994). However, it has been pointed out that, since the 1990s, the communal nature of the workplace has become an impediment in terms of both increasing corporate productivity and motivating individuals (Ota, 2017). Moreover, one analysis shows that the low level of individual autonomy brought by the Japanese workplace’s communal nature is a primary cause of job stress (Murata, 2018). Clarifying how Japanese-style employment and Japanese-style organizations are related to the work quality and deteriorating work attitudes will likely be an important issue going forward.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavored to clarify the meaning of work for Japanese people based on the findings of international comparative surveys. While admitting that there are some points and issues that I did not address, I used the findings of previous studies as a basis for focusing on four indicators—work centrality, employment commitment, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction—and summarized the characteristics of Japanese work values and work attitudes through comparisons with other developed countries. As a result, I observed that some of the characteristics that were once considered to be characteristic of the Japanese are no longer applicable.

(1) Japan’s work centrality was the highest among developed countries until the early 1980s but subsequently declined. It is observed that, to some extent, more economically affluent countries have lower job centrality, and, accordingly, the low level of job centrality among the Japanese is generally commensurate with their affluence. According to recent surveys conducted in the 2010s, the Japanese people’s work centrality cannot be described as particularly high or low when viewed in absolute terms. It is somewhat low among developed countries when viewed in relative terms.

(2) Employment commitment in Japan was high among developed countries from the standpoints of both financial/instrumental work orientation and non-financial work orientation until around the late 1990s, and overall desire to work was high. However, in the 2010s, financial/instrumental work orientation remained high but non-financial work orientation declined markedly, falling to the lower group among developed countries. Together with its decline in work centrality, Japan’s recent tendency toward strong financial/instrumental work orientation and weak non-financial work orientation approaches the characteristics of countries with “liberal market economies” and “market employment regimes.”

(3) Looking at organizational commitment, consistently strong willingness to stay with employers (weak

inclination to change jobs) was observed in Japan, despite weakness in terms of wanting to make efforts for employers, and no change has been observed in this tendency in recent years. However, willingness to stay is growing weaker in Japan, and it is not conspicuously high among developed countries like it once was. Japan's job satisfaction has consistently been the lowest among developed countries, and it has fallen even further in recent years.

(4) The Japanese do not have a particularly high or low work ethic, and they show a strong tendency to stress the comfort of workplace relationships as a condition of work.

Table 6 summarizes these findings. Some of the characteristics that were once considered characteristic of the Japanese no longer apply. A number of shifts have occurred over the past twenty years: Work is no longer as central to people's lives as it once was. The fulfillment that comes from working, which was low to begin with, has fallen even further. And there is a growing tendency to accept that "a job is a way of earning money" as people have more difficulty finding positive meaning in working. Those twenty years were a period of economic stagnation that became known as the Japanese economy's "two lost decades," and they were a time when the intrinsic meaning of work was also lost. Perhaps "lost" is too strong a word, but we can at least say that the meaning of work's intrinsic value has become diluted over the past twenty years.

The exploration of factors that have led to this decline in Japan's work values and work attitudes, which is unparalleled in other developed countries, is a task to tackle going forward. Among those factors will likely be the facts that, when viewed in comparison with other countries, Japan has low job autonomy, high job stress, a low percentage of people who find their jobs interesting, and not so good interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Murata, 2018). It will be necessary to examine how these conditions are related to Japanese-style employment and Japanese-style organizations and how they are (or are not) linked to the various aspects in the deterioration of work attitudes.

Survey data for international comparisons have become more complete, and as a result more overseas analyses are being conducted with focus on East Asian countries (such as Japan and South Korea) in addition to Western countries as targets for comparison. Yet, it still cannot be said that international comparisons of work values and work attitudes are actively underway in Japan. Since 2000, successive international comparative surveys have focused on regions ranging from East Asia, whose countries have close similarities to Japan, to the Pacific Rim, India, and Southeast Asia.¹⁰ New attempts to shed light on Japan's occupational and labor views through comparisons with neighboring countries are also emerging (Miyoshi and Yoshino, 2005; Shibai and Yoshino, 2013). I look forward to seeing further progress in these studies.

Table 6. Trends in work values and work attitudes of the Japanese in comparison with other developed countries

	Past (up to the 1990s)	The present (2010s)	Change
Work centrality	Very high until the early 1980s	Neither particularly high nor low, but somewhat low on the relative side	↘
Employment commitment: financial/instrumental work orientation	Fairly high	Fairly high	↗
Employment commitment: non-financial work orientation	Fairly high	Fairly low	↘
Organizational commitment: effort	Somewhat low	Fairly low	↘ ?
Organizational commitment: willingness to stay	Very high	Fairly high	↘
Job satisfaction	Very low	Conspicuously low	↘
Other (from the 2000s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diligent work ethic cannot be described as either particularly strong or particularly weak. • The comfort of workplace relationships is stressed as a work condition. 		

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Notes

1. See Ikeda (2016) for an overview of the WVS and Murata (2020) for an overview of the ISSP. For the public data that was used, see Inglehart et al. (eds.) (2020) and ISSP Research Group (1999, 2013, and 2017). Note that no weighting adjustment was applied to the analysis.
2. Misumi (1987) omitted Yugoslavia from comparison in MOW International Research Team (1987) found that Japan’s work centrality was the highest in an analysis of eight countries that included Yugoslavia.
3. Incidentally, the work centrality of Japanese women was generally high from their teens and beyond (Misumi, 1987).
4. Because leisure time is not the only area of life that is outside of work, the criticism could be made that simply subtracting leisure centrality is not sufficient. Undoubtedly there is room for further study of this indicator.
5. The specific survey years of the seven countries are as follows: Germany: 1987; France: 1987; United Kingdom: 1987; United States: 1988; Japan: 1988; Italy: 1992; Netherlands: 1993.
6. Although not involving international comparison, there is a finding from a cohort analysis showing that there is a swing back to materialistic values among Japan’s younger generation within the context of “work values,” which refers to what people value in terms of work conditions (Tanami and Miyata, 2015).
7. The low degree of job satisfaction among Japanese people has been observed repeatedly in international comparative surveys conducted by the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union (All Japan Federation of Electric Machine Workers Unions) (1984-85, 1994-96, 1999-2001) and the International Survey of Youth Attitude (1972-2008) (Ishikawa and Shiraishi, 2005; Director-General for Policy Planning, Cabinet Office, 2009). For instance, the surveys of the above union asked about overall satisfaction with working life, and the results of its third survey (1999-2001) showed that Japan ranked ninth out of 13 countries in this respect. In general, job satisfaction tends to be higher in Western Europe and lower in East Asia.
8. It should be noted that Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) found almost no difference between Japan and the United States in terms of willingness to stay with employers.
9. Although not an international comparison, Yamamoto (2010) demonstrates empirically the importance that interpersonal relationships in the workplace have in Japan.
10. A list of just the major surveys includes the following: Asia Barometer Survey (2003-present), East Asia Value Survey (2002–2005), Pacific Rim Values Survey (PRVS: 2004–2009), Asia Pacific Values Survey (APVS: 2010–2014), and East Asian Social Surveys (EASS: 2006-present).

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