

## **A Socio-Cultural Explanation for the Difference Between Development Trends of Iran and Japan**

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### **Abstract**

In this study, to address the issue of underdevelopment in Iran, a comparison was made between Iranian and Japanese societies. Historical studies on the comparison of these two countries have shown that Iran had a higher level of internal development in terms of economy in Safavid dynasty than Japan, even in the 19th century. Now, the question that is raised is why development trend was cut and did not continue in Iran in the 18th century. The aim of this research was to present a socio-cultural explanation of growth and development trends in Japan. Results of this research indicated that certain cultural characteristics such as discipline-orientation, mass adherence, and primacy of qualification on kinship were the main and effective factors in the growth and development of Japan. Finally, Japan was introduced as an expert-driven, discipline-oriented, management-driven, and rule-based country.

Keywords: Iran, socio-cultural context, development, underdevelopment, comparative method, Japan

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## **Introduction**

Subject of this research was underdevelopment which have done by comparison of two countries of Iran and Japan. Formation of a trend called development requires a long-term social change, during which labor division, stratification, and political and cultural systems change. Thus, in its progress, practice of social agents, benefits of groups, strata and classes, their tendency to change or resist are involved. Accordingly, it can be said that development and underdevelopment have a resultant nature and their progress in every society has its own history.

Based on the measures by which development is evaluated, in the present century and different indicators of development, Japan has always been classified into the first group of developed countries and Iran into the second group of underdeveloped countries. However, these two societies have similarities in terms of their internal structure and standpoint in the international system (Rajabzadeh, 1999, 1, 2). In the comparison of these two societies, it is worth mentioning that Iran in Safavid dynasty had a higher level of internal development, especially in economy, than Japan under Tokugawa or even Japan in the 19th century. This issue can be tracked in the division and combination of exports and imports of these two countries. In the first half of the 19th century, commodities such as raw silk, cotton, and iron were among the main import items from China to Japan; but, Iran's business during Shah Abbas era with major items such as silk, carpet, handicrafts, and positive trade balance of payments for Iran could indicate higher levels of internal development in Iran than Japan. Given the development level of both countries and their comparison in Tokugawa and Safavid empires, a question is raised that why does development trend continue in Japan, but is stopped and discontinued in Iran in the 18th century? In other words, despite the similarities between Iran and Japan in terms of their internal structure and standpoint in the international system, why have changes in both societies in the 19th and 20th centuries led to two different development and underdevelopment path?

## **Methodology**

Method of the present research is comparison, which it's cases and time of comparison will be explained below.

## **Comparison cases**

To compare developed societies, those societies should be selected that would have a similar situation to Iran before beginning the changes leading to their development. For this purpose, it was necessary to classify developed societies to determine which of them had been traditionally more similar to Iranian society. Therefore, first, societies like the US, Canada, and Australia with the history of utmost several hundred years were excluded and classification of developed countries were performed among those with a long history. Also, it should be noted that structure of European feudal societies like England, France, and Germany is different from that of Asian empire countries such as Japan and Russia.

Moreover, Japan was a better option in terms of comparison with Iran than China, Russia, and India; although there is no doubt about development in Japan, in the case of China, there is no such assurance. Russia is more like European than Asian ones in

cultural and religious terms. Direct colonial history of India would make it inappropriate for comparison with Iran that have not had such an experience.

### **Comparison time**

Conception of development and underdevelopment as a structural change formed in the contact trend of world system in these societies will determine comparison time. World systems history conventionally starts since the 16th century; a period in which attempts for the combination and immerge of many societies. The 16th century was in fact the development period of Safavid dynasty in Iran and Tokugawa empire in Japan (ibid: 113).

### **Theoretical viewpoint**

Two theoretical frameworks of economic development and modernization in its varying forms have some common points; both of these developments are defined and investigated in a single framework of society analysis and considered as endogenous change that may be fulfilled in every society. In this viewpoint, a part of development barriers is attributed to traditional structures of these societies which are called "internal obstacles". On the other hand in dependency perspective, a close look at these obstacles and comparison of Third World societies with western societies before entering development trend indicate that these barriers do not merely belong to traditional, pre-modern structures, but some of them such as "unfavorable demographic situation" and "lack or shortage of capital" have been formed under the influence of growth and development of European societies and their roots must be searched in their relationship with developed societies. Failure of social and economic explanations for underdevelopment, especially in practice, and considering the realities which act like obstacles have drawn attention to transnational factors. These theories, in their raw forms, point to colonial relations, unequal trade, and plundering resources of Third World societies; but, in their expanded forms, they are not limited to underdevelopment investigation in these societies, and also, refer to the past to analyze and explain Western development and its endurance in certain international, especially business, relations. In sum, these theories tend to provide specific historical, instead of general, analyses. Thus, analysis unit is generally changed from society to inter-society relations level. However, in the world-systems viewpoint, transformations of societies in the past few centuries are defined in the light of expansion of capitalism in geographical areas with endogenous development. In this viewpoint, analysis unit is turned from government-nation and society into the world system. Generally, it may be said that a group defines and analyzes development based on cultural components and more abstract structures of the society, while other schools define and analyze development based on economic components and consider more concrete structures, relationships of groups, classes, and government in the society. Some consider development as an endogenous trend in societies, while others do not share this idea and also consider external factors (Pitt, 1999).

Considering the above-mentioned points, the present study as a historic research tried to present a combined theoretical framework in which both internal and external factors were considered. But, to escape from the lack of internal coherence in the presented framework and also the adequacy of views of international system in terms of historic explanation and the role and responsibility of the world system in the

development of studied societies, world-systems viewpoint was selected as the theoretic point of departure and internal factors were also get involved.

Concept of world system, as shaped by Wallerstein and experts of Global-systems school, provides several general approaches in terms of development and underdevelopment. It emphasizes the central and peripheral positions of societies in the definition of development and underdevelopment and defines it based on the structural situation. It considers the formation of development process in the context of societies' international relations and believes that underdevelopment is the product of historic process of integration in the world system which should be studied by investigating history of changes in societies with respect to the world system throughout the history. Therefore, it emphasizes the role and influence of international relations and integration in the world system as a critical factor (Wallerstein, 1974).

It is worth noting that countries which in world economies known as empires will follow different development paths based on their internal structure at the time of establishing a relationship with the world system.

Despite the primacy of politics on economic structures in empires, the process of development and underdevelopment begins and continues with the actions of political elites and change of political structure. Therefore, political structure of empires and their characteristics are among the major factors which influence development and underdevelopment. Indeed, considering that fundamental links of empires are political, political structure is influenced by the variety of cultures and communities in the imperial territories. Accordingly, it can be said that, in the reaction of empires to the expansion of world system, social and cultural cohesion of these societies is considered a major factor (Rajabzadeh, 1999: 76-88).

So, according to the above-mentioned factors in this study, on the one side; international relations, relations with other countries and, on the other, internal factors such as institutions and socio-cultural contexts were investigated.

### **External factors: International situation**

Geographical situation of Japan during Tokugawa period was so that nothing was threatening it. The only adjacent empire of Japan was China, which was not a threat to it, except during Mongols. Also, Sino-Japanese rival over Korea ended in peaceful relations. In contrast, Japan did not have high importance for the governments of the world system until the competitive environment became constrained for colonial countries. All of these factors led to 250 years of peace for Japan. In comparison, during Safavid dynasty, Iran's neighbor on the one side was Ottoman Empire which was trying to conquest Europe and did not care about the neighboring countries like Iran. Russian empire was also developing and had friendly relations with Iran. Also, other European countries did not have a great interest in Iran at that time and were rather interested in African countries, Atlantic islands, and the USA; additionally. All of these factors led to 100 years of peace for Iran, which was followed by the 80 years of chaos. All in all, compared with their neighboring countries, both Japan and Iran were important for colonists in strategic, rather than economic, terms. In general, it can be said that Iran and Japan had almost equal situations in terms of international situation.

According to Katouzian (2003), Iranian society is a short-term one and Iranian history has had no long-term sustainability despite being long and eventful; however, it contains a set of short interconnected periods. Also, since succession right has not been guaranteed by law or tradition, everyone could dethrone and substitute kings, usually by killing them. The result has been unpredictable and unusual insecurity at personal and social levels.

### **External factors: Interrupting any connection with the outside**

Another provision of Tokugawa government was cutting any contact with the outside. This decision was accompanied by banning Christianity inside Japan. Although if Japan had had open borders and a Japanese group (Hans) was in contact with capital centers outside Japan via business relations, it would have a fate like that of China and Iran and each part of this country was influenced by one of the capital centers. However, after the opening of Japanese gates and establishing a relation between its inside-formed trade network and the outside world, Japan assumed a central role in relation with the outside. Moreover, this arrangement prevented the expansion of the political influence of European governments on the elites of empire-centralized structure. As a result, at the time resistance of world system governments such as the USA with Japan, Japanese political elites had an equal reaction (ibid: 148-149).

### **Internal factors: Institutions**

#### **Family institution**

In contrast to some development analyses that associate it with the separation of kinship relations, especially family institution, from economic relations, further analyses on different countries including Japan (which are known by some as "new modernization studies" in contrast to classical ones) have demonstrated that the intervention of such relations in the labor division system is not always deterrent and can sometimes have a positive role as well. "Ye" (Japanese family) institution has always had a positive role in various aspects in terms of the development of Japan and its role in the surplus accumulation due to inheritance norms which will be mentioned later. When a "Ye" was formed from a married couple, it was continued during consecutive generations. Every family was only continued through a son, often the eldest one, and other sons and daughters had to leave home. If there was no son in the family, the son-in-law was accepted in the family and became the family heir. If a family did not have any children, a girl or boy was adopted by the family to continue it. Suitability of the candidates for family sustainability was the most important factor. Thus, in the families of business people, if a son were diagnosed to be inefficient for sustaining the family business, the family would be continued through the marriage of a worker capable of its sustainability to a daughter. In fact, "Ye" institution must be more considered as an organization than a family (Nakane 1990: 216, 217).

In villages, this institution constituted an agricultural labor organization. In cities, it was the houses of business people. Samurai privileges were also continued via these institutions. Once "Ye" institution was consolidated in rural and urban areas, after the death of fathers, their wealth would be left in "Ye", which was a kind of production plant and was not divided among children. Thus, it can be said that this institution not only was a sustainable economic organization in Tokugawa era, but also caused the

accumulation of capital in these units. Among the nobles who owned lands and fiefs, this process prevented from the segmentation of land and eternal property and spread of the nobles. Among samurais who constituted army and administration system, although administrative position of a person was transmitted by inheritance, it did not lead to an increase in the number of incompetent salary-earners, because competence of children in continuing "Ye" was also considered besides inheritance. Therefore, this institution led to a situation in which competence and inheritance acted beside each other and as a complement in all parts of social life in Japan (Rajabzadeh, 1999:150).

However, inheritance was not one-sided in Iranian families and resulted in increasing the number of salary-earners regardless of their competence in all administrative and economic affairs.

### **Education Institution**

To evaluate educational institutions in terms of development, education type which is associated with development trend should be considered in terms of objective and function. In an attempt for the typological presentation of types of education, Weber mentions three types of education as charismatic, educated, and expert. These three types of education correspond to three types of charismatic, traditional, and bureaucratic power and authority. In terms of education and training which result in educated people, Weber refers to the objective of education in China, ancient Greece and Rome, and Europe in the 18th century, which was to be a member of elites and high-ranking agents in China, prosperous class in Greece and Rome, and the noble class in the 18th century Europe. Education under religious institutions in Islamic, Christian, and Jewish societies is also classified into this category. In contrast, education with the aim of training professionals, which corresponds to bureaucratic structure and education type of new industrial society, is consistent with bureaucratic authority organization and industrial capitalism based on rational action. Monitoring educational institution by religion, family, and government does not have a substantial role in the consistency of this institution with the development process. The important point is that the mentioned institution in Japan is governed by the institution with developmental tendencies. Accordingly, while comparing two educational systems, Weber considers bureaucracy of all public authority and private relationships as the determining factor, in proportion to which knowledge and professional skill will gain increasing importance. In addition to the mentioned factor that education trend in Japan aimed to bring up professional, rather than charismatic people, another important factor for Japanese development has been comprehensive education of all the people, not a specific class (ibid: 108-109).

### **Opportunities (stratification) institution**

In order to limit samurais, they were ordered to settle in castle cities and were forbidden to engage in farming and business. They were paid a pension by the administrative system and had nothing to do with land and agriculture. They were also forbidden to trade. In contrast, all non-samurais were disarmed and only samurais were allowed to carry weapons. Samurais were banned from getting married to other classes. Thus, accumulation of opportunities was prevented. Separation of samurais from villages had another result in the samurai life. For elites of countries like Russia

and Iran, in which governmental services were associated with land ownership, such services were a means rather than a target by themselves; in contrast, in Japan, once samurais were separated from lands, governmental services would turn into a target by themselves. This issue made leaders apply more control on their subordinates and expect more loyalty than Russia, Iran, and other empires. Bureaucracy of Japanese governmental structures is another expression of the same issue. Separation of samurais from lands along with their high status led to losing land value as the symbol of prestige. During modernization process, this tendency caused merchants and traders to be prohibited from land-dependent groups and thus industrialization process in which economic concentration shifts from agriculture and land to industry becomes easier (ibid, 142-148).

### **Ownership**

Another effective institution for the internal development of Japan is ownership (surplus allocation). In this respect, methods of tax collection, its changes during Tokugawa era, and its impact on the Japanese economy, especially capital accumulation and trade growth, could be referred to. In the early Tokugawa period, about 60% of products were received as tax, which gradually decreased to 32%. Taxation method changed in this period; i.e. first, taxes were closed based on the estimated amount of products; later, a constant amount of tax was received. This issue further encouraged farmers to cultivate in new lands and use new tools for land fertilization and thus surplus accumulation in villages. The result was the formation of a group of prosperous and medium farmers in villages who allocated a part of surplus to the market (ibid, 188).

In sum, comparison and investigation of institutions in Iran and Japan will lead us to several points; first, long-term capital accumulation was not possible due to the short-term nature of society, because even if a businessman ran a long-term investment, his/her efforts would be interrupted during his/her life, after his/her death, or some time later as a result of looting, confiscation, or division. Naturally, investment was short-term and investors sought to achieve their capital and profit within one or two years. In technical terms, investment horizon did not normally exceed one or two years. Although educational institutions existed in any short period and sometimes made spectacular gains, they did not continue in a long run and should have resumed their activities during a short period. In general, the absence of long-term classes and institutions was remarkable in Iran's history. Thus, it was very unlikely to make decisions based on long-term considerations. General outlook toward time, planning, and prediction could be summarized in this Farsi statement: "Come on ... after six months, who is alive, who is dead?" Officials knew they would lose their positions suddenly and without any warning; so, they tried to take the most advantage of their positions; consequently, they treated people under their commands with extreme greed and avarice (Katouzian, 2009).

### **Internal factors: Socio-cultural context**

In addition to institutions, socio-cultural factor is considered one of the important internal factors in the growth and development of Japan. About Japan, some consider the return of Meiji as the political measure of a group in which Samurais were active. In the rational analysis, performance of Samurais after the return of Meiji, whether in

the government or economy, is attributed to Confucian ethics and its influence on Samurais. However, there is another view to reject this analysis, higher strength of Confucius ethics in China has been remarked, which has not had such consequences; instead, relying on virtues as a goal per se, it has made a barrier against the process of instrumental rationalism. It has been mentioned that characteristics such as discipline and following superiors without personal dependence, which is a feature of Samurais in the late Tokugawa era and Meiji order, has a bureaucratic origin rather than being a principle of Confucian ethics, because Confucian ethics has not had such outcomes in China (ibid: 281, 282).

If discipline and mass adherence are considered the outstanding Japanese culture, lawlessness and individualism are evident characteristics among Iranians. Lawlessness means that wealth and power of every member of the society, from princes and prime ministers to low-ranking ones, were in full royal control. As long as kings were at power, they could confiscate properties of any person. If not worshipping kings as heavenly creatures, people undoubtedly considered him as God's representative on the earth. It should be noted that Iranian kings did not receive their legitimacy from aristocratic or clergy classes, but directly through the divine power of God. This concept of monarchy continued into Islamic period (Katouzian, 2009; Katouzian, 2004).

Person-orientation is an Iranian concept and different from European individualism. This concept is an ancient phenomenon, not the product of recent European socio-cultural changes. Person-orientation has two procedures: one is that those Iranians with no family or friendly relations are separated from each other; senses of social cohesion and respect to unknown people are not very strong among Iranians in general; thus, collective activities, party politics, voluntary social institutions, and so on do not have strong roots in Iran. Another feature of person-orientation has a reverse tendency and emerges as abnormal attention or attachment to others. Iranians typically have extreme attachment to their family members, extended family, clan, and close friends and support and defend them and even sacrifices for them in case of need (Katouzian, 2009).

### **Iran, Japan, and modernizing governments**

In the early 19th century, Iran's development conditions were better than Japan's. In terms of internal factors, both Japan and Iran were weak in military at the time of establishing tariff conditions and could not cope with overseas attacks. Tariff trade conditions led to their integration into the world economy and formation of peripheral situations in both countries. Unlike Japan whose political elites have changed its peripheral circumstances during a quarter of century (until the early 20th century) and promoted its situation to a governmental semi-peripheral one, Iran's internal conditions have eliminated such a possibility. The most important effective factors in this regard were lack of socio-cultural cohesion of political elites in Iran and their strong attachment to land and assigned benefits, which was affected by the stratification institution in Iran. Iranian conditions in the 19th century were followed by numerous political transformations, during which political elites and educated bureaucrats established and consolidated their position in Iran's political structure. This group in the Iranian political structure was similar to Japanese Samurais in terms of bureaucratic situation. Therefore, after consolidation in the 19th century and in line



with the benefits of external forces and coup of high officials of Cossack forces, headed by Reza Khan, they completely took over power in Iran. At this stage a government similar to those of Japan and Russia was formed, which was self-relying in terms of legitimacy and power and, like Safavid and Qajar, did not need any outside groups like religious and tribal leaders. Similar to the Meiji government, this government started to reconstruct and renovate Iranian society under the slogan of powerful army and government. Existence of similar basis, ideology, and ideas of Pahlavi regime in Iran and the Meiji government in Japan and their similar performance in terms of modernization, international tendency including modeling Germany and alliance with it, are other similarities between these two governments. Interestingly, from different analytic perspectives, these two governments are classified to have similar titles including fascism, and evolutions of both countries have been identified as revolution from above. But, these two governments have been different in historical and international terms and proceeded their modernization trend in the light of different socio-cultural institutions, the result of which was transition of Japan to a semi-peripheral situation and then central position of capital after some decades; in contrast, foundations of peripheral situation were consolidated in Iran (Rajabzadeh, 1999: 273-275).

### **Measures of the Meiji environment**

In terms of the measures taken by the Meiji rulers, changes in political structure and infrastructural activities including lack of Japanese borrowing from abroad, tax increase, desire to obtain knowledge from abroad, use of foreign advisors and overseas groups, compulsory education, and governmental activities in foreign trade can be mentioned. While evaluating these factors and trying to find their origins, main institutions of Tokugawa era, which provided the possibility for relative economic independence from politics and economic growth, re-emerge. In another part, measures taken by Meiji rulers such as their activities in industry and trade and obtaining technology from overseas can be studied. Furthermore, the underlying transformation-talented conditions such as higher levels of education and population can be referred to. In this case, the comparison of Japan and China shows that the latter was not successful to change the peripheral relation although it had higher population and high education level in the mentioned period (the 19th and early 20th centuries); meaning that effect of these factors should be considered along with other factors, all of which are influential along with the measures taken by Meiji rulers and the will for industrialization of Japan that was itself affected by their competition with west and bourgeoisie (ibid: 291-292).

### **Different reactions of Meiji rulers and Reza Shah Government to foreign attacks**

Despite ideological similarity with Meiji rulers, his claims about modernization and progress Reza Shah followed an anti-modernization approach.

Meiji rulers tended to make investment in industry and follow supporting policies. Before this era, they had turned to trade and industry to compete with bourgeoisie and compensate for governmental weaknesses. When they took control of their country, they started to make a powerful army to deal with foreign invasion and resisted foreign economic invasion by their economic operation. In contrast, the forces that came to power along with Reza Shah in Iran did not have such attitude and

experience. Pahlavi rulers considered domestic bourgeoisie and landowners and foreign powers as their rivals; but, their understanding of power was political. Bureaucrat forces that came to power along with Reza Shah had a different experience which was coping with rivals through political-economic monopoly that demanded political intervention in economy. Therefore, their participation in economy was in the form of establishing governmental monopolies and contributing to economic operation with a reliance on political power. So, with getting closer to the end of Reza Shah's reign, power tends to get absolute and governmental tendency to becoming a place for surplus accumulation is increased. However, in Japan, relative independence of economy from politics had taken place under Tokugawa policy and with domestic mechanism and it continue when Meiji came to power (ibid: 294-298).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this study, to investigate the issue of underdevelopment in Iran, societies of Iran and Japan were examined. In this regard, it has been claimed that, although Iran and Japan are currently placed in different development classes based on the indicators which measure development, not so long ago, they were very similar to each other in terms of internal structure and position in the international system. Comparison between these two societies demonstrated that Iran had a high level of internal development, especially in economy, in Safavid dynasty compared to Japan in Tokugawa period and even in the 19th century.

By comparison, consolidated view of development, and reliance on the viewpoint of world system, some factors were identified as the possible factors for the development of Japan. In this regard, Japanese family institution known as "Ye" and primacy of qualification on kinship were discussed. Also, compulsory education in Japan aiming to train experts was mentioned; in contrast, educational institution in Iran which mostly aimed to train elites was run by religious institutions. Another point in Japan was opportunity break point that was against opportunity accumulation in Iran, which caused lack of expansion in trade and industry. Another case was discipline and adherence to superiors as a prominent feature of Samurais in the late Tokugawa era and discipline foundation of Meiji; this factor may be considered the most important development factor in Japan.

In addition to the mentioned cultural factors, other factors such as rulers' policy-making and their different measures could be discussed; but, it is worth noting that different measures and reactions of rulers in Iran and Japan have cultural and historical origins. Katouzian (2009) believes that Iranian society is totalitarian which is historically and culturally originated. On the other hand, he believes that deep person-orientation must be considered in any realistic analysis of Iranian society, because this feature generates two extremely strong feelings in every individual and reflects it in his/her behavior: sense of security and protection in the familiar environment of family and clan and that of insecurity and vulnerability out of that environment, among aliens and in a larger society.

In general, it can be mentioned that, in comparison to Iran, Japan has a disciplined, institution-oriented, law-abiding, and management-oriented society; in contrast, ethnicity and kinship are the most important factors in Iran.

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