It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England….
Continents are unable to be butlers because they are as a
breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the
English race is capable of. Continentals…are as a rule unable
to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are
thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than
in the least challenging of situations. (Ishiguro 1989: 44)

Introduction

The disaster was “divine retribution (tenbatsu),” proclaimed Tokyo
Governor Shintaro Ishihara just days after the March 11 2011 Tohoku
Earthquake (Asahi Shimbun 2011a): “The Japanese people have become
a selfish (gayoku) people. We need to use the tsunami to wash away this
egoism, to wash away the grime accumulated over many years in the
Japanese heart.” At first glance, Ishihara’s words seem to have much in
common with those uttered by U.S. religious conservatives in the wake
of natural disasters. For example, in 2005, Pat Robertson and others
portrayed Hurricane Katrina as God’s punishment for America’s sins
(Media Matters for America 2005). In actual fact, Ishihara was not really
talking about God at all; he was talking about Japanese national identity.
His words can be seen as criticism of what he perceives as a growing self-
centredness and materialism in Japanese society, particularly amongst
the younger generation. “American identity is freedom,” he explained
in the same remarks, “French identity is freedom and philanthropy. But
Japan has nothing like that. Just selfishness, materialism, and a desire for
money” (Asahi Shimbun 2011a).

This paper looks at the issue of national identity in the aftermath of the Tohoku Earthquake, a time when many commentators – both inside and outside Japan – spent many column inches describing the Japanese character. It asks not only whether national character actually exists but in particular how it is constructed, reinforced, and re-constructed over time. The paper proceeds as follows. First, I define and explain the two theoretical concepts used, namely print and electronic capitalism. Second, I examine and analyse the occurrence of the keyword *gaman* in the international English language media in the aftermath of the March 2011 Tohoku Earthquake. Third, I identify some of the problems with such national character stereotypes. In the conclusion, I argue that while having social reality, national character (re)construction is more than purely an internal ideological construct: individual, regional, and international factors need also to be considered.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 *Print Capitalism*

The modern nation-state, whether Japan or anywhere else, relies for its very existence on the construction of a coherent set of national traits, traits that allow countries to function as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991). Certainly, there are many possible types of imagined community, and not all stress ethnic or cultural homogeneity. Nevertheless, as Gluck (1990: 1) has described, each country weaves a national ‘mythistory’, a myth of common descent which forms a potent mix of stories and history “in which the myths are as important as the history and both are continually reworked.” Importantly, these ‘invented traditions’ are never completely invented; rather, they almost always need to resonate with the inherited experiences and memories of ordinary people if they are to be accepted and internalised (Notehelfer 1999: 436).

In his ground-breaking *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991) argues that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. According
to Anderson (1983: 14), “nation-ness” is a cultural artifact that was created towards the end of the eighteenth century, an artifact made possible by “print capitalism”, that is mass access to newspaper and books by a literate populace. “Print-capitalism,” writes Anderson (1983: 40), “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways.” Thus, despite never having met, fellow members came to have a deep mental image of their communion – of what they share as a nation (Anderson 1983: 15). Appadurai (1996: 8) calls such groups ‘communities of sentiment’, groups that begin to “imagine and feel things together.” Importantly, these mental images are more than mere internal perceptions: as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 13, 27, 37) argue, subjective meanings become objective facts, i.e. form the building blocks that compose social reality. In this sense, national character can be said to have real substance if one views it as a discourse, a system of knowledge or a world-view that people internalise:

In a way, the persistence of discourse indeed preserves national character as a real substance, no matter how ideological such a substance may be. Discourse, as it were, both reflects and constitutes the reality. Just as no nation is free from nationalism, national myth, and self-righteous raison d’etre, the discourse of national character is inevitably fed back to the everyday life of individuals in a given nation. In this sense, we must treat national character as an ideological discursive formation – real it may be, but perhaps not entirely true…As long as we attribute a reality to ideology – ideology not as false consciousness but as a real system of thought – and insofar as there is a broad milieu of production, reception, and exchange of ideas and discourses about ‘who we are and what makes us such and such a nationality’, national character, understood as an ideological discursive field in which scholars and lay-people alike widely participate – that is, an historical product of the national-state system – does exist. (Ryang 2005: 45)

Ryang, like Hall (1992b: 292), recognises that a national culture
is a discourse. Newspapers, books, magazines, and other printed media support a process common to all nation-states, namely:

the use of history in order to construct and legitimize a sense of a commonly shared culture...there is not much difference between the manner in which the national identity is constructed in Japan and how it is constructed in other nation-states...What, of course, is unique is the material each can draw on to construct its sense of national identity. (Goodman 2005: 69)

Certainly, most countries have cultural models or systems of ideas about what it means and, even more importantly, what it does not mean, to be a national. In America, a clear example of the latter was The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was active until 1975. A more recent example is the use of terms like 'un-American' or 'un-Australian' to describe anti-globalisation or anti-war protestors. The particular brand of cultural nationalism (Yoshino 1992) found in Japan, however, is unusual in the sense that it has its own name: Nihonjinron or discussions on Japanese identity (Befu 2001: 14).

1.2 Japanese Print Capitalism: Nihonjinron

Nihonjinron is an extremely diverse genre of writing discussing Japanese (cultural) uniqueness. If defined broadly as “a discussion on national identity” (Dale 1986: 119), many of its major themes can be traced back to the Tokugawa period, although these only really begin to take hold during the period of nation-building following the Meiji Restoration (Kawamura 1980: 44; Pyle 1969: 53-5). Defined narrowly, however, Nihonjinron is a post-war product (Oguma 1995), one shorn of the imperialistic symbolism found in pre-war discussions (Befu 2001: 140). This post-war version of Nihonjinron reflected not only the need to recover a sense of identity and pride amongst the Japanese after the loss of empire and the experience of occupation but also the increased visibility of the ‘Other’, particularly resident Koreans. The central premise of post-war Nihonjinron writings, most of which were published in the 1970s and 1980s, is that the Japanese are a homogeneous people
(tan’itsu minzoku) who constitute a racially unified nation (tan’itsu minzoku kokka) (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 406).

Whether defined broadly or narrowly, Nihonjinron has two key features. First, it attempts to portray a holistic picture of Japan, particularly through generalisations about national character, although this ‘whole picture’ (zentaishō) changes over time in response to Japan’s relations with the outside world (Aoki 1990: 23). Second, Nihonjinron is a hugely popular consumer item (taishūshōhizai), one that has been so widely disseminated, embodied, internalised, and regurgitated by ordinary Japanese that it has contributed to the creation of a particular worldview (Goodman 1992: 5). One study found that over eighty percent of respondents were interested in the genre and had read about it in newspapers, estimating that at least one-quarter of the Japanese population have read one or more books in this category (Befu and Manabe 1990: 125-6). Perhaps the most widely read is Ruth Benedict’s Chrysanthemum and the Sword which has sold around 2.3 million copies in Japanese (Ryang 2005a: 29, chapter 2). Other examples include Nakane’s Tate Shakai and Doi’s Amae no Kōzō, both of which figure in the Japan Foundations list of the 100 most influential books for understanding Japan.

Although Anderson highlighted the key role played by print capitalism – the novel and the newspaper – in the construction of national identity, for him it was an internal process enjoyed by the members of a particular imagined community. However, one of the features of Nihonjinron is that many of the publications were originally written by non-Japanese and translated, thereafter becoming equally if not more popular than the original. Benedict’s Chrysanthemum together with Vogel’s (1979) Japan as Number One are two examples of works written on Japan looking from outside that become part of the worldview of ordinary Japanese. Conversely, the works by Nakane and Doi mentioned above were translated and widely promoted abroad to enable non-Japanese to better understand Japanese society. An unusual example was Nitobe Inazō’s Bushido: The Soul of Japan (2002 [1900]) which was originally written in English for Western readers and only later translated into Japanese. Nitobe’s work was interesting since it presented Bushido not just as the way of the samurai but as a system
of ethics and morals for a whole nation, stressing qualities such as courage, magnanimity, sincerity, patience, and loyalty. Nitobe and later Nihonjinron books illustrate the back and forth nature of national identity (re)construction:

As a result of the efforts of the Japanese power bloc to disseminate Nihonjinron overseas, books such as Nakane...have been influential on the shaping of American images of Japan. And in turn, Japan’s own image of itself has been influenced by the American view. Here we see clearly the complicit relationship between Japan and the West. (Iwabuchi 1994)

In such a symbiotic “circular” model of national identity construction, external images and expectations influence the Japanese self-image and come to be used by Japanese themselves when explaining their culture and character to foreigners (Goodman 1992:5).

1.3 Electronic Capitalism

In emphasizing the role of print capitalism in the emergence of nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century, Anderson was really highlighting the crucial role of a common language in the development of a national consciousness or identity. But whereas Anderson focused on the idea of disparate individuals “connected through print” (Anderson 1991: 44) in recent years advances in technology have opened up more possibilities for connecting that go beyond the printed page – what we may call “electronic capitalism.” Today, electronic media, from TV and film to the internet and social networking, has transformed everyday discourse by offering “new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds” (Appadurai 1996: 3).

In terms of the old media – pre-internet forms of communication – Anderson paid little attention to TV, radio, and film. One example of the influence of electronic media on national images was the popularity of the 1980s Japanese TV game show Za Gaman (literally The Endurance) in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. Although not well known in Japan, it became famous in Britain, where audiences were fascinated by – and also
mocked – the perseverance of the Japanese contestants who had to endure various unpleasant experiences (Wikipedia 2011a). Thus, the image of endurance as a national characteristic of the Japanese became firmly fixed in the minds of British audiences. Turning to film, the influence of Hollywood movies in constructing and reinforcing national stereotypes – both inside and outside Japan – cannot be ignored. The two major blockbusters about Japan in recent years – The Last Samurai (2003) and Memoirs of a Geisha (2005) – while taking historical liberties, both emphasised perseverance and personal sacrifice. These films had an impact on both non-Japanese and Japanese audiences: box office receipts for The Last Samurai were higher in Japan than the US, while Memoirs of a Geisha (Sayuri in Japan) grossed almost 11 million dollars in Japan despite controversy over casting (Box Office Mojo 2011b; 2011a).

In contrast to the old media, new media – that is digital communication media, particularly the internet – have, due to their participatory, interactive nature, even more potential to connect and engage people across borders. This would suggest a crucial role in the development of national consciousness or identity. In terms of digital media, Japan has strongly embraced the internet. For example, Twitter has become extremely popular in Japan – at the time of writing the world record for tweets per second was after the FIFA women’s world cup final won by Japan (ESPN 2011) – while at one point Japanese was the most common language used in worldwide blog posts (37%), eclipsing English (36%) (Daily Yomiuri 2008). Digital media in particular are able to travel more easily and more quickly across borders than traditional analogue or paper-based media. Moreover, freely available translation software has made language differences less of a barrier. As interaction deepens between societies, national identity images are more freely exchanged and stereotypes become more widely known and reinforced.

As Goodman wrote above, nations draw on different material for the images, narratives, and stories used in the construction of national identity. Hobsbawm (1983) describes this process of social construction as the ‘invention of tradition’, a process which is more likely at times of rapid social change – and presumably also at times of national crisis.
The following section looks at international English media coverage of the March 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, examining how Japanese national character was portrayed outside Japan in the aftermath of the disaster.

2. *Gaman* in the English International Media following the Tohoku Earthquake

1995 marked fifty years since the end of the Pacific War. Despite five decades passing since Second World War Allied propaganda which portrayed the Japanese as a sub-human species (Dower 1986), Hammond (1997: xii) notes the apparent continuity in western portrayals of the Japanese, describing the 1995 media coverage as “a media deluge of anti-Japanese chauvinism.” The Japan bashing9 of 1995 is perhaps more surprising given the tragedies which unfolded in Japan that same year, including the Great Hanshin Earthquake and a poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway. It is therefore interesting to note that the “loud proclamation of Western moral superiority” characteristic of 1995 was replaced by outpourings of sympathy for the Japanese in the international media following the Tohoku Earthquake of March 2011. Of particular interest was the number of articles expressing admiration for the Japanese national character, specifically the quality of perseverance or endurance which often appeared in the English press in its original Japanese form, *gaman*.

*Gaman* ( 我慢), originally a Zen Buddhist concept with a rather different meaning (Gogen Yurai Jiten 2011), has been variously translated as stoicism, tolerance, self-denial, forbearance, patience, perseverance, and poise in the face of events beyond one’s control. A recent example of the use of the term in English was in Hirasuna’s (2005) book (and later exhibition) *The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps 1942-1946*. Hirasunsa (2005: inside cover) defines *gaman* as “enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity.” The 150 examples of art created from scrap and found materials are said to be ‘testament to the perseverance, resourcefulness, and human spirit of the internees’ (Hirasuna 2005: 7). *Gaman* is closely related to that other ubiquitous Japanese term *ganbaru* ( 頑張る), meaning to do one’s...
best or hold up under pressure, as in the phrase *ganbarō Nippon* (Don’t give up/Keep on going Japan).

### 2.1 International English Media

Whereas the Japanese term *gaman* featured only eight times in major world publications (one article was reprinted elsewhere) in the six months after the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, there were 30 distinct references in earthquake related articles (four published in multiple sources) in the six months following the March 11th Tohoku Earthquake (Lexis Nexis Academic Database). These are broken down in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>HEADLINE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. March 12</td>
<td>BBC Worldwide</td>
<td>Kyodo: NY times runs column for quake-hit Japan by ex-Tokyo bureau chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. March 13</td>
<td>Sunday Herald (UK)</td>
<td>How Japan Lives with the Constant Threat of Disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. March 15</td>
<td>Daily Telegraph (UK)</td>
<td>Each Time they Rebuild. Bigger and Better; The Japanese love of order and ability to start anew will help them confront the earthquake crisis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A common Japanese word, "*gaman,*" that he said “does not really have an English equivalent, but is something like 'toughing it out’”

The shared suffering brought by natural disasters...has fed the mentality of *gaman,* a grim determination and sense of urgency that at best has led to staggering economic achievements and at worst to reckless wartime adventurism.

Another concept that springs to mind in the context of the earthquake is *gaman* - enduring. In the depths of winter in many provincial homes, the only heating is a *kotatsu,* a low table with an electric heater underneath and a quilt over the top, under which you put your legs...Perhaps this orderliness goes some way towards explaining why there have been no scenes of shouting, anguish or disorder coming out of northern Japan, and certainly no scenes of looting.
**4. March 15**
The Times  
**Why quakes leave the Japanese unshakeable; They call it 'gaman' - the unflappable stoicism that helps this nation survive whatever nature throws at it**

**March 16**  
The Australian  
**Crushed, but true to law of 'gaman'**

This extraordinary stoicism can be summed up by the Japanese word **gaman**, a concept that defies easy translation but broadly means calm forbearance, perseverance and poise in the face of adverse events beyond one's control. **Gaman** reflects a distinctively Japanese mentality, the direct consequence of geography and history in a country where the cycle of destruction and renewal is embedded in the national psyche... When the Japanese Prime Minister described Friday's earthquake as "our worst crisis since the war", he was deliberately invoking **gaman**: "In the past we have overcome all kinds of hardships. Each of you should accept the responsibility to overcome this crisis and try to create a new Japan."

**Gaman** is part of the glue that holds Japanese society together, a way of thought instilled from an early age. It implies self-restraint, suffering in silence, denying oneself gratification and self-expression to fit in with the greater good. Originally a Buddhist term, it has come to signify self-denial, solidarity and a certain patient fatalism.

**5. March 16**  
Daily Telegraph (OZ)  
**Samurai doctor perseveres in the candlelit gloom**

When asked how he was coping, he says: "**Gaman** [perseverance]. I am a Japanese samurai doctor you see," he said, with a laugh.

**6. March 16**  
Korea Times  
**Feel, Pray, and Hope for Japan**

The Japanese traits of learning to accept the inevitable with the mantra of 'shoganai,' and endure or **gaman** are noticeable in the collective response of the Japanese people in the face of this catastrophe.

**7. March 16**  
Evening Times (Glasgow)  
**Japanese people pull together after horror; Survivors helping others in need**
Two phrases offer some insight into the Japanese psyche. One is *shikata ga nai*, which roughly translates as it can’t be helped, and is a common reaction to situations beyond one’s control. The other is *gaman* considered a virtue. It means to be patient and persevere in the face of suffering.

Academics have several explanations as to why the Japanese are resilient and disposed to group work. Some suggest the work needed to grow rice on a crowded archipelago prone to natural disasters forced them to learn how to work together. Glenda Roberts, an anthropology professor at Tokyo’s Waseda University, said: It strikes me as a Buddhist attitude. Westerners might tend to see it as passivity, but it’s not that. It takes a lot of strength to stay calm in the face of terror.

| 8. March 16 | National Post (Canada) | For centuries, Japanese have faced down adversity with stoic resolve |
| "There’s even a word for quietly enduring difficult situations: *Gaman.*" *Gaman* broadly means a calm endurance, and as a cultural concept dates back to the medieval period, when Japan faced a smattering of regime changes, social disruptions and civil wars |
| 9. March 16 | National Post (Canada) | Culture of Endurance |
| Another concept is *gaman* - enduring. In the depth of winter in many provincial homes, the only heating is a *kotatsu*, a low table with an electric heater underneath and a quilt over the top, under which you put your legs. The theory is that if your legs and stomach are warm, the rest of you will be fine. And in summer people roast. If the weather is cold, you are cold; if the weather is hot, you are hot. This orderliness goes some way towards explaining why there have been no scenes of shouting, anguish or disorder coming out of northern Japan, and certainly no scenes of looting |
| 10. March 16 | New York Times | As Routines Falter, So Does National Confidence |
| March 17 | The International Herald Tribune | Japanese, stoic and precise, face a world of uncertainty; Citizens try to uphold country-first ethic amid warnings about radiation |
Experts predicted that despite Japan’s ethos of "gaman," or endurance, signs of trauma would surface, particularly among those who saw relatives washed away by the tsunami.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. March 16</td>
<td>The Straits Times</td>
<td>Awed by a nation’s quiet dignity: World watches amazed at survivors’ civility and patience amid the ruins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Much talk has drifted back to the word <strong>gaman</strong>, which is not easily decoded. Interpretations range from 'toughing it out', to 'bearing the unbearable with dignity', to the 'display of poise in adversity'.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perhaps it simply refers to an ability to endure, to wear hardship with character. They will need it, for in a collapsed world it is the only thing keeping their land upright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. March 17</td>
<td>The Christian Science Monitor</td>
<td>Japanese character shines in the face of disaster; Amid massive destruction in Japan, the Japanese have remained almost unflinchingly respectful, honest, and conscientious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The notion of <strong>gaman</strong>, to endure or tolerate, is also a core value for the Japanese, and the trait of continuing to show high levels of consideration for others, even when the pressure is on, is often a surprise to outsiders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At the long lines for gas stations and supermarkets that have spread across the country as far as Tokyo, raised voices or heated tempers are a rarity. People leave gaps for other cars to get through and nobody attempts to cut lines…. It was the spirit of the people that built this resource-poor and overcrowded land up from the ashes of its post-World War II devastation to one of the world’s most advanced nations. And it will likely be that, more than anything else, that will help it recover from one of the worst disasters in living memory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. March 17</td>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>Foreigners flee Japan, but some U.S.-born linger</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“…the Japanese ethos of <strong>gaman</strong>, a resilient spirit of endurance, will help the country rebuild.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. March 17</td>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>No donor rush to aid Japan; Response subdued as country seen as self-sufficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the most commonly heard expressions there, are *gaman*, to persevere or tough it out; *gambaru*, to do your best, to be strong; and *shoganai*, it cannot be helped, which expresses a sense of fatalism.

Fatalism is not an American cultural characteristic, however.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15. March 19</th>
<th>Belfast Telegraph</th>
<th>No going home after 13 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like many times before though, people will undoubtedly rebound and rebuild a country where one of the highest virtues is <em>gaman</em> (perseverance).</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>16. March 19</th>
<th>The Christian Science Monitor</th>
<th>Japan earthquake: Why the Asian nation will rebound from temblor and tsunami; The Japan earthquake and tsunami will take years to recover from. But few peoples are as resilient and socially cohesive as the Japanese.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Deep in the soul of the Japanese lies the spirit of *gaman*. Central to the nation's image of itself, it means "toughing it out, taking whatever comes at you and enduring," says Roland Kelts, an author who drew on his mixed Japanese and American heritage to write "Japanamerica." "There is an enormous amount of cultural DNA about being under siege that goes back centuries."

It's a spirit that the Japanese people have been forced to draw on often in the past in the face of natural and human-caused disasters. From the great Tokyo earthquake in 1923, through World War II to the Kobe quake in 1995, "circumstances have differed, but there has been one constant," says Merry White, an anthropologist specializing in Japan at Boston University. "There has been relatively little wallowing and much more mobilization."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>17. March 19</th>
<th>Weekend Australian</th>
<th>Crucible of Calamity: Japan Earthquake: Special Inquirer Wraparound –Japan's crucible of calamity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This spirit, which the Japanese call <em>gaman</em>, has infused society for hundreds of years. Its characteristics are self-restraint, suffering in silence and subordinating oneself and one's ambition to the common good. Now embedded in Japanese culture, it was instrumental in the nation's extraordinary post-war rebuilding and economic revival, and then again in the reconstruction of the important and historic port city of Kobe after a 1995 earthquake.</td>
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</table>
**The Japanese Could Teach Us a Thing or Two**

Learning from the Japanese

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**Granted, Japan’s ethic of uncomplaining perseverance -- *gaman*, in Japanese -- may also explain why the country settles for third-rate leaders.***

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19. March 20

**Sunday Age (Oz)**

Expats unite, doing whatever they can, wherever they are; Crisis in Japan

"No one's in chaos, there's absolutely no confusion. People are just waiting. We have this word in Japanese, *gaman*. I tried to look for a definition in English and couldn't find it. Apparently, it's just a particularly Japanese word. It's more about holding on, resilience, patience. Endurance. So we here also have to do the same," she says. "It's almost like a motto for all of us, *gaman*. It's a word that means a lot to us at the moment."

---

20. March 21

**The Straits Times**

Japan: Grace under pressure

No wonder, analysts and scholars have invoked *gaman* to describe the inimitable spirit of the Japanese - an ability to endure pressure, with poise and dignity. *Gaman* may be a natural consequence of history, besieged as Japan has been throughout its existence, be it by foreign invaders such as the Mongols, various earthquakes, and the shame associated to its forced opening by the Black Ships led by American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853.

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21. March 25

**The Straits Times**

Japan has what it takes to bounce back

The best example of *gaman* - Japanese for responding to pressure with endurance, poise and dignity - is that of the Fukushima 50, a group of workers struggling to prevent a meltdown at the country's damaged nuclear power plant, risking their health and even lives. Such resilience in the face of crushing disaster is something other countries can learn from.

Following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, widespread looting and violence erupted. Looting - even rape - followed an earthquake in Haiti last year. In Japan, people stranded by the quake and tsunami stoically queued up for food supplies.

History suggests that Japanese fraternity and *gaman* will enable Japan to recover quicker than expected. In 1853…
Elsewhere in Japan, people from this part of the country have long been known as "gaman zuyoi", roughly, "tough people". The winters are brutally cold, especially along the coast. Such an environment bred resilience and tight-knit communities.

The reverence for perseverance—gaman—was then piped back into Japan by foreign journalists commenting on the stoicism. When I asked the people I met why Japan had seen so little looting, they offered cultural analogies from far afield: the rigorous discipline of ikebana, the art of flower arranging; the elaborate rituals of kendo, Japanese fencing.

True to a Japanese ethos of "gaman," or endurance, they are maintaining a cheerful stoicism that cloaks deep anxiety. "When I see the older folks, and how happy they are to get even one meal a day, I can't complain," said Ms. Taira, 54, who kept a determined smile on her face. "In this part of Japan, we are strong in persevering."

A core value in Japan is **gaman**, "patience and perseverance," which is expressed in a high level of consideration for others, even under great stress. It helps explain how this country recovered so dramatically from the devastation of World War II.
Today, one tree stands...."It is a symbol for us *gaman* zuyoi," the "tough people" living in this part of Japan, says housewife Yoko Kumagai, 59, whose family is among thousands in this fishing town whose homes were demolished. "We are tough under adversity, strong and able to persevere. That's famous throughout Japan," she says...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>27. April 25</th>
<th>The Nation (Thailand)</th>
<th>Japan, a unique survivor, needs to reinvent itself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Everywhere one goes inside Japan, there are two words "*gaman*" and "*gambare*" leitmotifs which one often hears and reads. The first means forbearance and the second the fighting spirit of the Japanese people. The combination of these two national attributes defines Japan's uniqueness and the determination that has enabled it to cope with all diversities throughout history. Japan will certainly rise again like a phoenix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>28. April 25</th>
<th>The Nikkei Weekly</th>
<th>Unpacking the cultural 'baggage' laid bare by Japan's nuclear crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Japan's citizens - more Imperial subjects than empowered individuals, really - were expected to "trust" their higher-ups. The same qualities of forbearance, discipline and *gaman*, or perseverance, which shaped so much of the public's praiseworthy response to this natural disaster, also affected how institutions offered up information. While Americans might believe in a "right to know," Japanese, for the most part, believe the responsible parties will tell them what they "need" to know.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>29. May 23</th>
<th>Business World</th>
<th>Wealth Manager; Success Plus!: Exchange deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

"*Gaman*," or the spirit of long suffering. "Inconveniencing one's self for the convenience of others,"...I am both inspired and challenged by the account of a Vietnamese police officer stationed in Japan who gave a piece of bread to a nine-year-old shivering boy at the back of a food line only to see him go to the front of the line to return the bread so all can have equal share. And to think, this was a boy who apparently just witnessed his family in a car get carried away by raging tsunami waters!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>30. June 4</th>
<th>The Business Times Singapore</th>
<th>Japan's crisis opportunity; The March catastrophes could provide the impetus for sweeping reform of the political system, corporate behaviour and the labour market.</th>
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Summoning their traditional spirit of *gaman* - enduring the unendurable - the Japanese have united to persevere and rebuild. Yet even as Tokyoites trudge into their dimly lit offices to endure a sweltering summer without air-conditioning, elevators or escalators to prevent power shortages, the risk is that they cope without changing, rebuild without renovating.

Source: Lexis Nexis Academic Database (excluding readers’ letters)

Several common threads emerge from Table 1. One of the key themes is the argument that *gaman* is “embedded in the national psyche” (#4) or “cultural DNA” (#16), being one of the highest (#15) or “core” values (#12, #25). This is supported by the claim that *gaman* is the product of a long history (#4, #17), dating back even to the medieval period (#8). Its origins are explained both in terms of climate and culture – “growing rice on a crowded archipelago” (#7) – and historical events, specifically its experience of being ‘under siege’ by foreign invaders (#16, #20, #27). In terms of explanatory power, *gaman* is used to explain everything from Japan’s wartime adventures (#2) to post-war rebuilding and economic success (#3, #12, #13, #14, #15, #17, #25, #27) – indeed, it was the ‘key’ to this rebuilding. *Gaman* was also frequently used as an explanation for the lack of ‘chaos, confusion, disorder, shouting, anguish’ and, in particular the lack of looting in the aftermath of the quake (#3, #12, #19).

Of course many of these claims can be disputed. As Nitobe’s work illustrated, *gaman* is a relatively recent ideological construction that emerged during the period of modernisation and industrialisation in the Meiji period. Indeed, tracing the concept back to the medieval period is disingenuous: only with the Meiji assimilation policy did a collective, unified national identity begin to emerge. “Japan in its present form,” notes Morris-Suzuki (1998: 9), “is a modern artifact.” That today the notion of "Japaneseness" seems natural and indispensable is a testament to the ideological success of a nationwide education system established during Japan’s rush to modernise. Japan, as a single unified entity, is a relatively modern concept; even in the 1870s, "Japanese" would not have referred to themselves as a collective, especially culturally (Burgess 2010b). Even the evidence for the ubiquity of *gaman* following the
earthquake was questionable: there were certainly cases of voices being raised, notably towards TEPCO (CNN 2011) and the government (Sankei News 2011), while in September 2011 60,000 gathered in Yoyogi Park “to vent their anger about the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant crisis and demand the abolition of atomic power” (Japan Times 2011b). Moreover, claims that there was no looting or robberies are wide of the mark (Asahi Shimbum 2011b; Asahi.com 2011; Japan Times 2011a).

In sum, the media’s reliance on simple one-word generalisations to describe and explain Japanese culture led to claims which were exaggerated, often wildly, in order to conform with the story angle adopted. However, perhaps what is important is not so much the accuracy of the evidence presented for *gaman* as a ‘core value’ in the international media but the role the international media plays in building its believability, that is, in the (re)construction of national character. At the same time, there are other important – but oft neglected – factors in the development of national character. These are discussed in more detail below.

3. Problems with National Identity Stereotypes

3.1 Self-perception

Since March 11, the world media may have come to see the Japanese people as a particularly *gaman-zuyoi* (persevering) people, but how do the Japanese see themselves? Citing the Institute of Statistical Mathematics survey, carried out every five years since 1958, Yoshio Sugimoto (2010: 15) notes that “the Japanese regard themselves, more or less unchangingly over the last five decades, as industrious, well-mannered, generous, and patient, while being uncreative and cheerless.”

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As Table 2 shows, diligence (kinben) has consistently been cited as the trait which best represents the Japanese character, 67% of respondents selecting this in the most recent poll (Sugimoto 2010: 15). “Persevering” was also popular with around 50% of respondents selecting this amongst other choices (Table 2). On the other hand, it is also possible to say that in 2008, more than half of Japanese did not choose to select gaman as one of the words which best represent the Japanese national character, suggesting far less consensus than the international media make out.

Other surveys echo Ishihara’s gayoku remarks. For example, in the 2007 Asahi Shimbun Annual Public Consciousness Survey, the word considered most fitting to describe contemporary society was “selfishness” (mikatte) at 21%, with confusion (konmei) second and inequality (fukōhei) third (Asahi Shimbun 2007). This was confirmed in a Yomiuri Shimbun survey in which 72% said they felt economic inequality (Yomiuri Shimbun 2009) and reflected in a kakusa shakai (unequal society) publishing boom (e.g. Kikkawa 2006; Sato 2000; Tachibanaki 1998; 2006). This perception shift suggests that growing numbers of Japanese are unwilling or unable to tolerate what is increasingly seen as an unequal and unfair society – a society of selfish

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winners and helpless losers. Although the international media framing of *gaman* as the national discourse has tended to blank out other alternative discourses, there are signs at the grassroots level that people may have had enough: “People in Japan are beginning to resent the phrase [Ganbaro Nippon]”, notes *The Economist* (2011), “because it sounds like a demand to endure even more.”

### 3.2 Uniqueness

One of the features of Nihonjinron is to paint Japan and the Japanese as “uniquely” unique – completely unlike any other society or culture. The sense that *gaman* is an impossible-to-translate Japan-only trait also comes across in the international media data. For example, in Table 1 (#4) above, *The Times* described *gaman* as a “distinctively Japanese mentality, the direct consequence of geography and history.” However, the term does bear a striking resemblance to that peculiarly British trait of the ‘stiff upper lip’. The idea of emotional self-restraint and maintaining one’s composure in adversity which gained popularity in the Victorian era is often used to explain the spirit of national solidarity and community said to be evident during the Blitz. Then, for a period of eight months from September 1940 to May 1941, London was subjected to almost daily German bombing that saw some 40,000 civilian deaths and perhaps 100,000 houses damaged or destroyed. Some have suggested that the British remain an extremely tenacious people. Anthropologist Brian Moeran (1990: 34-35), with tongue firmly in cheek, argues that the Japanese do not seem particularly persevering in contrast to the English:

> the idea of a Japanese spirit originally came from *bushido*...[it] has been put forward as an ideology of behaviour for the nation as a whole...but the Japanese do not seem particularly persevering... the English, on the other hand, are an extremely tenacious people...forming an orderly queue a bus stop, for example, waiting as long as half an hour or more for a bus that never comes.

In actual fact, the concept of the ‘stiff upper lip’ is rather outdated
in Britain today (Daily Telegraph 2010), though older British (like older Japanese) occasionally bemoan the loss of such ‘traditional’ virtues amongst the young. Even the image of Londoners enduring the Blitz with reserve and stoicism has come in for attack by historians in recent years who have challenged the ‘mythical’ image of national solidarity, unity, and pulling together (Calder 1992; Richards 2011). Nevertheless, the important thing to note here is that we are dealing with images, deep-rooted self-perceptions about how a people both believe themselves to be and think they (and others around them) should be. This is not necessarily the same thing as how they actually are, although beliefs can become strong enough to influence behaviour, creating a self-fulfilling social reality.11

3.3 Regional Stereotypes

In her PhD thesis on press images of Japan and the United States, Luther (1999: 35) criticises the tendency of many researchers to conflate national identity with cultural identity. The problem with this, she argues, is that “it negates the potential existence of several cultural identities” within the nation-state (Luther 1999: 36). In fact, in contrast to local community identities, practices, and values grounded at the grassroots level, she (1999: 36) argues that identity at the national level “may be more abstract in nature and hold a different degree of meaning.” Thus, compared to Anderson’s millions who will never see, meet, or talk to one another, identities at the local level are more likely to be based on face-to-face interaction. Put another way, national identity is more ideological, more political – which is not to say it is necessarily less real or meaningful to those involved. Nevertheless, in our discussion on whether gaman is a national characteristic, it is important to examine regional stereotypes as well.

On July 5 2011, after only one week in the job, Reconstruction Minister Ryu Matsumoto quit following insulting comments he had made to two governors in the disaster-hit Tohoku region (Japan Times 2011c). At a news conference following his resignation, Matsumoto, using local dialect, blamed his behaviour on his Fukuoka background: Kyushu no hito dakara goki ga arai (I’m from Kyushu, so the way I
speak is rough). Although using local character – as well as blood type – as an excuse for his behaviour failed to impress many observers, Matsumoto’s resignation did highlight the importance regional background has for many Japanese. Sugimoto (2010: 63-64) notes that historically Japan developed as a nation with distinct internal “nations” (kuni) containing multiple climatic, geographical, and cultural differences; even today, many “emigrants” maintain social ties with their localities through kenjin-kai (prefectural associations) while some academics find regional (chīki-sei) or prefectural character (kenmin-sei) a more useful concept than national character (Sahara and Tanaka 1999; Sofue 1971; Toneri 1980). “While these descriptions may be speculative, impressionistic, and stereotypical,” writes Sugimoto (2010: 63), “the point remains that these prefectural character-types are so diverse, and often contradictory, that one can hardly speak of the national character of the Japanese as though it were cast from a single mold.”

While the most stark regional differences in Japan, particularly in terms of personality, social structure, and even food taste, are commonly portrayed as those between eastern (Kantō) and western (Kansai) Japan, the Tohoku region also had its own set of regional characteristics. Foremost amongst these is the trait of gaman, arising from the harsh climate, particularly the freezing winters, remote location, and economic deprivation in comparison to eastern and western Japan. “In a nation of stoics,” writes The Economist (2011), “the most patient sufferers – by common consent – are those from Tohoku” (See also Table 1 #22, #24, #26). Personifying the Tohoku spirit is the poem Ame ni mo Makezu (Be not defeated by the rain) written by Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933), one of the region’s most famous writers and poets who was born and died in Iwate. The fact that gaman was much less trumpeted in coverage of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake undoubtedly reflects not only the scale of the disaster but the fact that Kansai people are not renowned for their patience. Thus, it is necessary to add an important qualification to all the talk of gaman as a Japanese national trait: one, national identity is not the same thing as cultural identity which can differ significantly between regions; and two, local identities are less abstract and more concrete than national ones, rooted as they are in the local climatic, geographic,
economic, and historical situation.

4. Conclusion: Overcoming the Emphasis on National Character as a Purely Internal Ideological Construct

Mouer and Sugimoto (1986), in their *Images of Japanese Society*, argue that many of the ideas central to Nihonjinron function as tools for the elite to manage and control Japanese society in a system of “friendly authoritarianism” (Sugimoto 2010: chapter 10). Befu (2001: 78-80) concurs, seeing Nihonjinron as a prescriptive model that not only describes how Japan is but also says how that society *should* be. In this way, the suggestion that *gaman* is (should be) a national characteristic, could function, as *The Economist* (2011) suggests, as a means to discourage criticism, stifle debate, and silence critics. Just as Orientalist images of a passive, inscrutable, emotionless Other reflected a relationship of Western power and control, it is no coincidence that qualities such as *gaman* posited by Nihonjinron as characteristic of the Japanese are also qualities that make a populace easy to control. Indeed, one of the main processes through which modern Japanese identity came to be accepted as social reality was known as ‘samuraisation’. Through this process, characteristics such as loyalty, perseverance, and diligence said to be held by a small (but elite) segment of the population – the samurai – were gradually extended through propaganda, education, and regulation to cover the whole of the population:

Japan's modernization coincided with the samuraization process – the spread of the ideology of the ruling warrior class. Through introduction of the warrior ideology in a modified form in the Civil Code and through incorporation of this ideology in a modified form in the school curricula, the prestigious warrior... customs began to supplant the local peasant forms...the values and institutions of the warrior caste permeated the common people (Befu 1971: 50, 52).
Of course, it was no coincidence that the traits associated with the samurai highlighted loyalty and obedience; in other words, samuraisation imposed a model of behavior—a discourse—on peasants and workers that, in the name of national unity, made control and coercion easier. Comments like those from Ishihara on gayoku—the exact opposite of gaman—are merely the latest in a long line of ideological pronouncements by the power elite on the “ideal” that is the most easily governable—Japanese.

An important question, however, is how much influence top-down pronouncements on national identity actually have. In the literature, perhaps too much emphasis has been put on national identity as a internal ideological construction—"a conspiracy of the power bloc" as Iwabuchi (1994) puts it. In fact, cultural industries playing to the ‘capitalist logic of the market’ have had little interest in ideology and much interest in making a profit from Nihonjinron type publications. Moreover, the fact that the word gaman has suddenly become a staple of international media reports on Japan in the aftermath of the Tohoku Earthquake suggests that discussions on Japanese identity are not under the sole control of Japanese power-holders—although these discussions may contain some of the ideological elements pushed by the Japanese elite (Yoshino 1992). Nevertheless, in a rapidly globalising world, one where electronic capitalism reaches further and connects deeper than print capitalism ever did, national images bounce back and forth across national borders, at times reproducing and reinforcing but also changing and mutating in unpredictable and unforeseen ways.

Another element which has not been considered well in previous studies of national images—but which has been discussed in detail here—are regional identities. As Luther commented earlier, cultural identity has far too frequently been equated with national identity, the result being a failure to recognise the existence of multiple and distinct local cultures. The fact that gaman was rather less common in international media reports of the Great Hanshin Earthquake compared with the Tohoku Earthquake might suggest that it would be worthwhile to consider the interaction between national identities and local identities, the later being far less abstract and ideological (and therefore less easy
to manipulate) than the former. In sum, future research would do well to focus not only on national ideological machinations but also on the role of individual, regional, and international factors in studying the development of national identity.

Notes

1 The ideas in this article were first explored in Burgess (2011).
2 Much of the material in this section comes from Burgess (2010a).
3 For a more detailed discussion of Nihonjinron see Burgess (2004).
4 Revell (1997) goes as far as to say that Nihonjinron – the emphasis on Japanese cultural difference – is a Western (American) invention. Certainly, there is an almost obsessive interest in (debunking) Nihonjinron in the English Japanese studies literature (Burgess 2007) despite many Japanese not even being aware that this is a definable body of literature (Revell 1997: 74). Nevertheless, while recognising The Chrysanthemum and the Sword as a pioneering Nihonjinron text, it is important to note that the vast bulk of the Nihonjinron literature is produced not by Westerners but by Japanese themselves.
5 These qualities stand in stark contrast to those found in wartime propaganda which portrayed the Japanese as child-like, immature, and emotionally unstable/dependent (Dower 1986: chapter 6).
6 The American equivalent was the reality TV show I Survived a Japanese Game Show, which enjoyed two seasons in 2008-2009 and various prizes and awards. Rather than just showing clips of actual Japanese shows, though, in I Survived American contestants were transported to Japan to compete in a Japanese-style game show. Interestingly, the international reality television franchise I’m a Celebrity…Get me out of Here! uses tasks similar to Za Gaman (Wikipedia 2011a). However, unlike Za Gaman and I Survived, which certainly influenced Western images of Japanese national character, no conclusions about British character appear to have been drawn from I’m a Celebrity. Orientalism has been used to explain the way that simplistic/holistic generalisations tend to be drawn of Asian societies by Western observers (Hammond 1997; Minear 1980). Ryang (2005: 158, 184) notes that just as it should be deemed nonsensical to make general theories on, say, the US, based on micro-empirical studies so it should be to present a view of Japan under one all-embracing principle or keyword – as Western anthropologists often do for Japan. On this point, see also Raz and Raz (1996: 168).
7 Ed Zwick, the director of The Last Samurai, admits embracing idealism over reality in his movie: "We're inspired by the mythologizing of the samurai as heroes" (Lovgren 2003). He acknowledges his debt to Akira Kurosawa’s The Seven Samurai, a film also steeped in an idealised/mythologised image of the samurai. Zwick notes how Kurosawa was in turn influenced by the American director John Ford and the American Western: "It's a kind of fusion of Western and Eastern culture," observes Zwick, “that's bouncing back and forth" (Lovgren 2003). These comments capture well the circular nature of national identity construction as discussed in section earlier 1·2.

8 Surveys (e.g. telecomasia.net 2007) have shown that older Japanese spend as much time online as the young, with blogging reportedly increasingly popular among housewives.

9 According to Narelle Morris (2011) Japan bashing peaked in the early 1990s, gradually declining in the late 1990s. This may partly explain – together with the scale of the disaster – why coverage of the 1995 Hanshin Earthquake appeared rather less sympathetic in the English international media than coverage of the 2011 quake. Nevertheless, regional differences in the two quakes also need to be taken into consideration (3.3).

10 Before the kakusa shakai discourse, the Japanese media lamented the increase in kireru kodomo, students unable to control their emotions and temper who wander around “collapsing” classrooms (gakkyū hōkai) (Burgess 1998). These discussions contrast starkly with the gaman discourse and suggest that although gaman may be a characteristic of those who grew up in the harsh post-war years it is no longer a trait of the younger generation who have never experienced such hardship. For example, suggestions that the Japanese endure extremes of hot and cold (Table 1 #3 and #9) contrast sharply with the widespread usage of air conditioning and heating in Japan. In fact, claims that the Japanese endured “a sweltering summer without air-conditioning, elevators, or escalators” (Table 1 #30) were grossly inaccurate, suggesting some commentators had become carried away with the gaman stereotype.

11 Such beliefs can also influence the traits that are evaluated highly in a society. For example, when Prime Minister Noda came to office, the Yomiuri Shimbun asked five commentators to gauge the premier in terms of five qualities: sense of responsibility (sekininkan), the ability to put plans into action (jitsugenryoku), inspiration (hassōryoku), fashion sense, and perseverance (nintairyoku) (Yomiuri Shimbun 2011).

12 The first seven lines of the poem capture both the harsh climatic conditions in Tohoku and the importance of gaman as a virtue (Wikipedia 2011b):
not losing to the rain
not losing to the wind
not losing to the snow nor to summer’s heat
with a strong body
unfettered by desire
never losing temper
cultivating a quiet joy

13 Ting-Toomey (1999: 115) notes that while it may be true, as Paul Ekman’s experiments suggest, that Japanese can identify fewer negative emotions than US counterparts this is not due to some inherent predisposition but simply because they have less practice in identifying negative emotions in a society where overt displays of strong emotion are frowned upon.

14 Similarly, Koichi Iwabuchi (1994) has shown how the Japanese were described as lazy and incapable of systematic work by Western missionaries around the turn of the last century. But an emphasis on “Japaneseness” – traits such as loyalty to or devotion to country and company – during the process of modernisation succeeded in maximising national interests and minimising individualism. “Clearly, this myth of ‘Japaneseness’ was utilised,” writes Iwabuchi (1994), “to repress people’s demands for ‘democracy’ or human rights.” The success of this ideological indoctrination can be seen by the fact that today diligence (kinben) has been consistently cited over the last five decades in surveys by the Japanese as the word which best represents the Japanese character (Table 2).

15 After his tenbatsu outburst, Ishihara went on to encourage jishuku: a mood of austerity and self-restraint characterised by the quietening of lights and noise, frugality and energy saving, and the cancellation of ‘extravagant’ events like cherry blossom viewing parties and firework festivals. In particular, Ishihara criticised vending machines and brightly lit pachinko parlours for wasting energy (Wall Street Journal 2011). As a corollary of gaman – jishuku is effectively gaman in practice – the term was also widely picked up in the international media (e.g. New York Times 2011; The Times 2011). Interestingly, Ishihara’s pronouncement about how Japanese should behave were not universally welcomed: in one survey 78% of respondents felt that the current jishuku mood was excessive (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2011).
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