

**Selves in the Cultural Supermarket:  
Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Cultural Identity**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I seek to combine the traditional anthropological idea of culture as "the way of life of a people" with the contemporary idea of culture as "the identities proffered in the 'cultural supermarket'": the array of worldwide cultural forms through which people pick and choose aspects of who they are. I seek to combine these conceptions of culture through a phenomenologically-based theory of cultural identity: on the basis of an underlying taken-for-granted cultural shaping, and the ongoing pressures of one's social world, culturally shaped selves shape themselves from the cultural supermarket. I examine the competing efforts of state and market to mold cultural identities; and I discuss the illusion of freedom that the cultural supermarket provides. I then use these theoretical musings to compare the cultural identities of three self-conscious people in different societies: a Japanese painter considering the "Japaneseness" of his work, an American Christian struggling to reconcile his faith and his social world, and a Hong Kong university teacher feeling culturally homeless in the shadow of 1997.

## **Selves in the Cultural Supermarket:**

### **Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Cultural Identity**

#### Introduction

Cultural identity has become an important topic in anthropology exactly as traditional concepts of culture are seen to be inadequate to grasp how people culturally conceive of themselves today. In this paper I seek to combine the traditional anthropological idea of culture as “the way of life of a people” with the contemporary idea of culture as “the identities proffered in the ‘cultural supermarket’”: the array of worldwide cultural forms through which people in today’s mass-mediated world pick and choose aspects of who they are.<sup>1</sup> I seek to combine these conceptions of culture through a phenomenologically-based theory of cultural identity. On the basis of an underlying taken-for-granted cultural shaping, as well as the ongoing pressures of one’s social world, culturally shaped selves shape themselves from the cultural supermarket. I examine in this context the competing efforts of state and market to mold the cultural identities of selves; and I discuss the illusory freedom the cultural supermarket provides to selves, who consume cultural brand names for performance to the social world around them. I then use these theoretical musings to compare the senses of cultural identity of three self-conscious people in different societies: a Japanese painter considering the “Japaneseness” of his work, an American Christian struggling to reconcile his faith and his social world, and a Hong Kong university teacher feeling culturally homeless in the shadow of 1997.

### The Problem of "Culture"

The term culture, as thinkers such as Raymond Williams (1976) have noted, is extraordinarily complex. This is all the more the case over the last few years: in the multidisciplinary swirl of the contemporary academy, culture has come to mean markedly different things within different disciplines, so that a book on cultural theory written from a sociological standpoint might have only minimal common assumptions with a similar book written from an anthropological standpoint, or a cultural studies standpoint. One reason for this conceptual Babel is that culture as the foundational term of American anthropology has of late lost its conceptual mooring within the discipline (Abu-Lughod 1991, Brightman 1995); culture is up for grabs.

Anthropologists over the history of the discipline have frequently debated the subtleties of the culture concept; but underlying these debates, one basic definition of culture has traditionally been adhered to. "Culture," this definition has it, is "the way of life of a people" (Herskovits 1948: 29). For all the differences in formulations of culture between, say, David Schneider and Clifford Geertz in the 1960s, the common assumption held by both was that culture consisted of bounded units, enabling Schneider to write of American kinship (1968) and Geertz of the contrasting Javanese, Balinese, and Moroccan concepts of self (1974), just as Benedict, forty years earlier, had so distinctly portrayed the cultural values of the Zuñi, the Dobu, and the Kwakiutl (1934). The assumption common to all of these works is that there are discrete patterns

of cognition, value, and behavior that members of each of these groups share in common, in contrast to members of other groups.

This concept of culture continues to be held by some anthropologists, but is being abandoned by many more. As Robert Brightman notes (1995: 510), in today's anthropological writing, "While the adjective 'cultural' continues as an acceptable predicate...such phrases as 'culture' or 'Kwakiutl culture' or 'the culture of the Nuer' are of increasingly infrequent occurrence....When the word 'culture' does occur, it frequently bears the stigmata of quotation marks...indexing the writer's ambivalence, self-consciousness, or censure." Among the interlocking theoretical reasons why the concept has come to be seen as problematic, perhaps the most pivotal is that in today's world of massive global flows of people, capital, and ideas (Appadurai 1989), culture cannot be thought of as something that a group of people in a certain place on the globe have or are in common, in contradistinction to other peoples elsewhere. In Ulf Hannerz's words (1992: 218), it is now "more difficult than ever...to see the world...as a cultural mosaic, of separate pieces with hard well-defined edges. Cultural interconnections reach across the world. More than ever, there is a global ecumene."

Nonetheless, there clearly remain elements of a "shared way of life" in different societies in the world. Language shapes the thinking of members of these societies in different ways; there remain distinct patterns of childrearing that to a degree, anyway, shape distinct ways of thinking; national government shapes the thinking of their citizens through public schooling; mass media in

different societies serve to create their "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) as opposed to those of other societies. The nationally-shaped cultures of societies such as Japan, China, and the United States do indeed exist, indubitably. And yet, at the same time, it is also true that there is so much diversity and interrelation within these different societies that we can no longer easily speak of "Japanese culture" or "American culture" or "Chinese culture" as unified, distinctive wholes, as opposed to other unified distinctive wholes. What values do the Japanese college professor, laborer, housewife, feminist, and punk rocker all share, as opposed to all of their American counterparts? What values do the American fundamentalist Christian, lesbian separatist, inner-city drug dealer, yuppie stockbroker, Vietnamese immigrant, and Hasidic Jew all share, as opposed to all Japanese or Chinese? Might it not be, in a sense, that the Shanghai rock musician has more, culturally, in common with his counterpart in Seattle than with his own grandparents? That two New York and Beijing executives linked together through their internet connections share more of a common culture than either has with the janitors that clean her office? Perhaps not; but the very fact that these questions can seriously be posed reveals the erosion of culture as the way of life of a particular people in a particular place, as opposed to other people in other places. Yes, that level of culture continues to exist; but so too does the level of culture as a matter of personal taste (as conditioned by age, class, and level of affluence, among many other social factors): the world-wide cultures of rock aficionados or computer devotees or mystery readers or Scientologists. These worldwide

cultures of personal interest groups crosscut and perhaps to a degree transcend cultures in the traditional sense of the term.

According to some contemporary commentators--often from the field of cultural studies rather than from anthropology--we have come to live in a world of culture as fashion, in which each of us pick and choose cultural identities like we pick and choose suits of clothes. As the philosopher of postmodernism Jean-François Lyotard has written (1984: 76), "Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games." Embodying these claims, a Hong Kong newspaper article describes members of a motorcycle gang in China as obsessed by Harley Davidsons and the American dream of freedom. When the reporter asks why, he is told, "Cultures...are like the dishes on a table. You just pick up what you like" (Forrester 1994). From a slightly different angle, Stuart Hall (1992: 277) has written that in today's world, "Identity becomes a 'moveable feast,' formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us."

Lyotard's above words imply individual choice; Hall's words imply a lack of such choice. But both formulations, in their emphasis on cultural identity in flux, may be criticized for their lack of emphasis on ongoing social context, shaping us in an enduring way as to who we think we are. As Hannerz has tartly put it (1992: 35), "When it is claimed...that identities become nothing but



assemblages from whatever imagery is for the moment marketed through the media, then I wonder what kind of people the commentators on postmodernism know; I myself know hardly anybody of whom this would seem true." Despite such objections, however, there is a degree of validity to this concept of culture: there is a sense in which we who live among the affluent ten or fifteen percent of the world's population do indeed wander through the "cultural supermarket," choosing, albeit in a highly culturally and socially conditioned way, the identities that we perform within our social worlds.

These two concepts of culture--culture as "the shared way of life of a people" and culture as "the information and identities proffered by the worldwide cultural supermarket"--both serve to describe aspects of today's world, but neither is of itself sufficient. I seek to combine these conceptions by examining selves' senses of themselves: how do selves comprehend their world as both given and chosen? What sense do we make of ourselves as beings both free and constrained, both culturally shaped and culturally shaping? This issue of constraint and choice, structure and agency, is a major focus of contemporary social theory (Giddens 1979, Bourdieu 1977, Ortner 1984). Unlike these thinkers, however, my approach is phenomenological, dealing with selves' own consciousness of self and world<sup>2</sup>: my concern is less with actual constraint and choice than with selves' perceptions of constraint and choice.<sup>3</sup> I seek in my work to understand, in a second-hand way, selves as they understand themselves first-hand, and extrapolate from what they tell me to build a theoretical structure that can serve to analyze their lived--or at least

told--experience.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, let me now turn to a theory of the cultural shaping of selves.

### The Cultural Shaping of Self

Just as culture is a problematic concept today, so too is self. Clifford Geertz (1983: 59), in one of the most famous anthropological statements on the matter, argues that the Western conception of the person as an independent, bounded, unique being as contrasted with other such beings, is "a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures." Dorinne Kondo (1990: 26, 37) writes of "seemingly incorrigible Western assumptions about...the boundedness and fixity of personal identity....Contemporary anthropologists...myself included, are in the process of grappling with the difficulties and paradoxes of demonstrating the cultural specificity of selfhood, thereby de-essentializing the category." Different cultures have different selves, she is arguing, but Western anthropologists, trapped in their ethnocentric assumptions about the nature of the self, have failed fully to comprehend that up until now.

However, other thinkers of late have focused on a "postmodern" self unbounded by specific cultural construction. Robert Jay Lifton (1993: 1, 16, 17), has written of "the protean self," whereby we endlessly shift and weave and recreate ourselves: "We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time....Any one of us can, at any moment, have

access to any image or idea originating anywhere in the contemporary world, or from any cultural moment of the entire human past,” through the power of mass and can shape ourselves accordingly. Madan Sarup (1996: 125) has written of how, in today’s postmodern world, “through the market, one can put together elements of the complete ‘Identikit’ of a DIY [do-it-yourself] self.”

These two ideas of self echo our concepts of culture: both self and culture are seen by some as belonging to a particular place, bounding and shaping the beings therein, and by others as radically open and free. This contradiction can best be resolved by considering self and culture in a common framework--by considering the cultural shaping of self. Let me now offer a rough theory of the cultural shaping of self that can enable us to combine these two concepts of culture, and two concepts of self.

I define self in a universal sense, as “locus of consciousness”--I maintain that selves of different societies may be compared as physically separate consciousnesses experiencing the world in part through that separation. This selfhood is rooted in the fundamental physiological separateness and social connectedness of human beings. There is no doubt that selves are fundamentally culturally shaped: selves of different cultural backgrounds do very clearly have different ways of experiencing the world. It also seems true that the fragmented postmodern self discussed by so many analysts is to a degree empirically true in the world today. Beyond this, the self’s experience is very much shaped by one’s position within fields of power (Grossberg 1996: 99). However, I argue that underlying these formulations there is a universal

basis of self, as both interdependent and independent, as a part of and apart from other selves.

The cultural shapings of self occur at what may be analytically viewed as three separate levels of consciousness. There is, most deeply, what might be called the taken-for-granted level of shaping: our shaping by a particular language and set of social practices that condition us as to how we comprehend self and world. This level of shaping is for the most part below the level of consciousness: because we think in language, we cannot easily comprehend how that language shapes our thinking; because we live through taken-for-granted social practices we see as being natural, we cannot easily comprehend how they mold us; because self and world are mutually shaped/shaping through the workings of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), we cannot fully see beyond that shaping.

However, this level becomes apparent when the taken-for-granted is breached. In the interviews I conducted in Japan on selves' sense of what makes life worth living (Mathews 1996a, 1996c), people would occasionally say, "it's only natural that we take care of parents when they're old/work hard for the company/worship the ancestors." One reason for asserting such "naturalness" was that my presence as a foreigner served to remind the people I spoke with that their "naturalness" was not natural but cultural: my presence may have brought their taken-for-granted level into consciousness, where it had to be defended, at least obliquely. A key basis for anthropology's traditional formulations of culture has been that the anthropologist, doing fieldwork in a society beyond his own, can apprehend the taken-for-granted

that the society's natives cannot--and may thereby unwittingly threaten that society's taken-for-granted realm, serving to erode its unquestioned assumptions, and thus, to a degree, its prospects for cultural survival. The history of social science, from Marx and Freud to Pierre Bourdieu and Ernest Becker, has been one of progressively uncovering the taken-for-granted of contemporary society; and yet an inevitable residual taken-for-granted realm seems to remain.<sup>5</sup>

A second, middle level of the self's cultural shaping is at what I call the *shikata ga nai* level. *Shikata ga nai* is a Japanese phrase meaning "it can't be helped"; "there's nothing I can do about it." This level is that at which we do as we must as members of our societies whether we like it or not: go to work, pay our taxes, act like "men" and "women," retire at the appropriate age, and stop at stoplights. This level of cultural shaping is experienced by the self not as underlying the conscious self, known only as it is forced into consciousness, but as extrinsic to the self: the institutional and social pressures upon the self of which the self is aware but which it cannot fully resist. Indeed, whereas the taken-for-granted level can only be indirectly approached phenomenologically, since once it is touched upon it is no longer fully taken-for granted, the *shikata ga nai* level is ubiquitous in the accounts of selves of three societies I have interviewed--the very terms *shikata ga nai* (Japanese), *mouh baahnfaat la* (Cantonese), "There's nothing I can do about it," indicate how readily this realm is recognized: "I don't like having to push my kids to study all the time/kiss up to the boss/listen meekly to my father's complaining about how I

live...but *shikata ga nai/ mouh baahmfaat la!* that's life." This level of cultural shaping is more important than traditionally-minded analysts of culture have tended to recognize. To take just one example, the Japanese company worker reputed to live for the sake of his company may work until late every night not because of his undying love for his work, but because it would be bad for his human relations in the company if he left before his coworkers did; so *shikata ga nai*--he stays. Much of human behavior is based not on the underlying values we hold, but on our compliance to the pressures exerted by the social and institutional world, which can be resisted only at a high price.<sup>6</sup>

A third, most shallow and most fully conscious level of the self's cultural shaping involves what I call, after Stuart Hall (1992: 303), "the cultural supermarket." This is the level at which selves sense that they freely pick and choose the ideas they want to live by. In a given (affluent) society, one person may be devoted to Western classical music, another to Indian ragas, a third to grunge rock, and a fourth to reggae; one person may become a political conservative, another a liberal, another a fascist, and still another, an anarchist; one person may become a Christian, another a Buddhist, a third an atheist, and a fourth a believer in a UFO cult.<sup>7</sup> Of course, as I will later discuss, this choice of interests, values, and identities is not really free. People pick and choose themselves in accordance with their class and gender and other social factors, from a cultural supermarket that heavily advertises some choices and suppresses others; they pick and choose themselves in negotiation with and performance for others. Choice is not free, but it seems to selves to be free: as

if, from the vast array of available cultural choices as to how one might believe and live, we make our choices and live and believe accordingly. For the most part, we shape ourselves in ways close to home, in congruence with our membership in our home societies. However, we may, to a degree, anyway, also shape ourselves from beyond those bounds: the cultural supermarket and the identities it offers is global.

These three levels of the self's cultural shaping may be thought of very broadly as (1) deep shaping taking place beyond the self's control and beyond all but indirect comprehension; (2) middle-level shaping taking place beyond the self's control but within its comprehension; and (3) shallow shaping taking place with what the self sees as full control and comprehension. These levels are too simple, in that people often do not make these distinctions quite as clearly as the theory sets them forth; yet people do recognize their use of these distinctions once they are pointed out: the distinction between what you do without thinking, what you do because you have to, and what you do because you choose. Each of these levels shapes the levels above it. On the basis of their deepest level of cultural shaping, selves more or less accept the coercions of the middle level of shaping; having been shaped at these two deeper levels of shaping, selves at the shallowest level, to a degree culturally shape themselves.

In terms of our two conceptions of culture and of self, it is, if not typical, at least stereotypical that culture as "the way of life of a people" is to be found at the two deepest levels of the self's cultural shaping, and culture as "the global cultural supermarket" at the shallowest level; people growing up in

traditional societies who then become exposed to the cultural supermarket--the tribesman or peasant who acquires a transistor radio and a taste for Coca Cola--illustrate this pattern. However, for many people within today's affluent world, it may be the realm of the cultural supermarket which is taken-for-granted: not in terms of the self's actual choices, which are at the more or less fully conscious level, but in terms of the underlying assumption of free choice of cultural identity. For such people, "the way of life of a people" may lie not at the deepest but at the shallowest level of the self's cultural molding: the search for "roots" may involve not the rediscovery of a once taken-for-granted identity, but the construction of such an identity from the materials of the cultural supermarket, an identity then perhaps labeled as primordial.

In order to more deeply discuss the complexities of this matter, let us turn to issues of cultural identity.

### Cultural Identity

Dictionary definitions refer to identity as "the condition of being a specified person or thing"; in contrast to this, postmodern discussions define identity in a far looser way: "Identities are...points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall 1996: 6)--fixed identities do not exist. I formulate identity between these two extremes: identity is neither as essentialized as the dictionaries claim (one's "specified person" containing, beneath the veneer of name, a multitude of contradictions, aporias, and shadows) nor as flimsy as the postmodernists claim



(each of us being not just the temporary inhabitant of discursively constructed subject positions, but more, the repositories of our own unique sets of memories and hopes, that we may ever reconstruct in our minds' ongoing shifts and weaves, but that nonetheless subjectively define each of us as distinct, self-conscious beings). I define identity, after Giddens (1991: 53, 54), as the ongoing sense one has of who one is, as conditioned through one's ongoing interactions with others. In terms of our above analysis, we can think of cultural identity as a matter of how people conceive of who, culturally, they are through their choices on the cultural supermarket level on the basis of their shaping at the two deeper levels of cultural molding.

One of the most essential elements of cultural identity is that of national identity: almost all people in today's world are socialized and propagandized to hold a national cultural identity. "The idea of a man without a nation seems to impose a strain on the modern imagination," writes Ernest Gellner (1983: 6). "A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose....Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, states throughout recent history have culturally shaped their citizens to believe that state and citizen are one, and that the citizen should be willing to sacrifice his or her life for the state. That well over a hundred million people have died this century fighting wars for their countries indicates the power of this molding; "suppose they gave a war and nobody came" was a wishful 1960s slogan and no more.

But the state has been far from all-powerful in its molding of cultural identity to fit its dictates. Today, across the globe--from the Ainu to the Zulu, from the Hutu to the Quebequois--we see the reemergence of senses of ethnic identity apart from the state. "For a long time it appeared that ethnic groups were slowly being absorbed into the nations in which they lived. They were viewed as holdovers from another era, and it was thought that gradually as the people modernized, they would naturally abandon their ethnic identity in favor of a national one....Instead, ethnic identities have grown stronger in the modern world" (Weatherford 1994: 236)--grown stronger as people strive to claim identities not subsumed by the state. But it is not ethnic identity, but identity as proffered through the market that is the greatest force eroding national identity in our world. That the possibilities of cultural identity have exploded in the contemporary world is due to the endlessly market-seeking propensities of capitalism, as linked to, although not isomorphic with, the explosion of mass media, bringing images of rich societies into the watching faces of all the world's societies--and, to a lesser degree, bringing images of all the world's societies into the living rooms of rich societies. Cultural identity has, accordingly, become in varying degrees open and problematic.

What would appear to signify the infringement of the market upon national cultural identity is readily visible and audible throughout the world: the American pop tunes on radios across the globe, the Ecuadorians and Pakistanis watching *Dynasty* or *Baywatch* on their TV sets, the Japanese comics sweeping East Asia, Walkman, Coca-Cola and McDonald's as

worldwide icons. But it is not at all clear what the relation of these market and media products are to their consumers' senses of who they are. Let us consider this in terms of food. The large majority of eaters of, for example, sushi in America and McDonald's hamburgers in Japan, Hong Kong, and mainland Chinese cities, may have little sense of making any statements about cultural identity through their consumption. However, at least some of these consumers very definitely are making such statements. I have sat in a Japanese restaurant in the United States with a young woman telling me of her love for "the Orient"--she felt she had been born in the wrong society, of the wrong ethnicity; being all too blonde, she contented herself with studying Japanese pottery and eating sashimi once a week. And I have sat in McDonald's in a provincial Chinese city trying to read a book, only to be interrupted first by hamburger-chomping high-school girls and then by McDonald's employees, telling me that they longed to go to Hong Kong and then to the United States, to find more "free" identities than they felt they could find in China.

Most people eating foreign foods bring no such intensity of feeling to their gustatory pleasures; most, it seems, have no particular dream of a foreign place that accompanies the falafel or tortillas or lasagna they consume. But the very fact of consuming foreign foods--the fact that some people seek out foreign tastes, while others shun them--is itself at least an implicit statement concerning cultural identity, of belonging to a worldwide cultural supermarket, as opposed to a single culture and cuisine. This is probably all the more true for consumers of foreign mass media. The Japanese aficionado of American

jazz, or the American fan of Japanese *anime* (animation) would certainly not assert that they are not Japanese or American, respectively. But the very fact that they choose these forms to follow rather than those of their home societies indicates their status as sophisticated consumers from the world cultural supermarket, and thus an erosion of national identity as the hegemonic shaper of cultural identity.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of our three levels of cultural shaping, nations attempt to inculcate national identity at the taken-for-granted level; mostly they more or less succeed, but to the extent that they fail, national identity becomes a matter of the *shikata ga nai* level, an identity that, given this world, you have no choice but to affirm at certain points--passport controls, draft board summonses, patriotic rallies, perhaps--rather than an identity you adhere to as "natural." Ethnic identity is often asserted as being more natural than national identity: "The government and schools tell us that we're Spanish/Nigerian/Japanese, but really we're Basque/Ibo/Ainu." However, in at least some cases, that ethnic identity is not an identity into which one was raised, but is instead one that is subsequently assumed. To take just one example, some of those who assert Ainu identity in Japan today were brought up with minimal consciousness of being Ainu, have distant Ainu ancestry, and speak only a few words of the Ainu language; their assertion of being Ainu is part of the "ethnic boom" that has swept Japan over the past few years: it is an identity chosen from the cultural supermarket.

The cultural supermarket level of shaping may in turn, as earlier discussed, serve to undermine and replace senses of national and ethnic identity at the taken-for-granted level. What this may mean is that the realm of the taken-for-granted is to some degree shrinking, but for the assumption of the naturalness of consumer choice, and the realm of the cultural supermarket is expanding, as the cultural identity "naturally" given one becomes increasingly conscious--no longer "natural"--and as the cultural identity one can construct and consume from the cultural supermarket becomes, correspondingly, more wide open, and rife with possibilities. But this does not mean that one's choice from the cultural supermarket is "free"; on the contrary, that choice is heavily constrained, as I will shortly discuss.

### The Cultural Supermarket

The cultural supermarket bears some resemblance to its metaphorical root, the material supermarket. Just as the material supermarket has been transformed as to the scope of its goods in recent years--David Harvey (1989: 299-300) has written that "the food market...looks very different from what it was twenty years ago. Kenyan haricot beans, California celery and avocados, North African potatoes, Canadian apples, and Chilean grapes all sit side by side in a British [or American or Japanese or any other affluent nation's] supermarket"--so too the cultural supermarket, thanks to television and computers and other media. And just as in the material supermarket, shelf space is unequally distributed--products like Coca-Cola being on the easily

seen shelves, other, less heavily advertised products being above her head, and less noticeable--so too, in the cultural supermarket. Those societies whose material goods are readily available in the world also have greater cultural influence in the world. "The United States," writes Robert Bocoock (1993: 10), "...has come to epitomize the modern [worldwide] consumer's dreamland," and certainly the world's cultural supermarket is more than its share American, in the influences of movies, music, and sports such as basketball--America's celebrity culture, spread worldwide.

However, the structure of the cultural supermarket is far more complex than this metaphor indicates; in its far-flung intangibility, it is more like a vast library than like a grocery store, more like the internet than like the map of nations of the world. A key difference between the material supermarket and the cultural supermarket is that while in the former money is absolutely essential in order to partake of its goods, for the latter, money, while highly important in enabling one to obtain the necessary cultural context, is not, strictly speaking, required in order to consume. The goods in the cultural supermarket may be commodities, bought and sold, but they need not be: one may be profoundly influenced by a book or a television program despite, to a degree, the money one may or may not possess. Popular culture as broadcast and vended throughout the world is indeed disproportionately American, and yet one can find in the large record stores of wealthier societies the seldom-browsed bins containing Bolivian panpipes and Sufi chants; one can find in the largest bookstores books from the world over, at least to the extent that they

have been translated. Yes, the shelves of the cultural supermarket are arranged in terms of money; but a multiplicity of information and potential identities can also be found there. Every tome gathering dust in a library, every shortwave radio broadcast and internet homepage, every T-shirt slogan, is potential material for the cultural supermarket: all can provide a basis for the construction of one's cultural identity.

The information within the cultural supermarket may be categorized by its users in a number of different ways, but the two most readily available are 1) region of origin, and 2) realm of use. For most of the information in the cultural supermarket, we have some idea of where it comes from. This tends to correspond to culture as "the way of life of a people," as embodied in national culture: we refer to Indian music, Brazilian samba, French cuisine, and so on, in order to have a shorthand way with which to refer to these entities. These represent aisle signs, often of questionable validity but of great convenience, labeling and dividing up the vast array of materials in the cultural supermarket for consumers' ease. There is also the realm of use. We fashion ourselves from the cultural supermarket in a number of areas, among them our choices in home decor, our choices of food and clothing, our choices in what we read, watch, and listen to in music and art and popular culture, our choices of religious belief, and our choices of ethnic and national identity itself: whether, in the United States, to identify oneself as Asian-American or American; whether, in Hong Kong, to be Chinese or Hongkongese. These different shapings bear differing degrees of personal significance: one's choice of home

decor, for example ("That Buddhist mandala in the living room? No, of course I don't believe in that stuff. I just thought it looked neat.") may be of considerably less significance for one's sense of cultural identity than one's choice of religion or of ethnic identity, which may lie at the core of who one senses oneself to be.

The foregoing should not, however, be taken to mean that our choices from the cultural supermarket are free; rather, choices are restricted in a number of different senses. There is first of all the differential in receiving equipment for the cultural supermarket. One who is educated and affluent may possess optimal receiving equipment: access to and ability to make use of the repository of human thought contained in libraries, and access as well to the contemporary repositories of thought in the internet and in mass media--the world assortment of newspapers, magazines, and compact disks available at key outlets throughout the world. A person with such advantages may make full use of the cultural supermarket, but most of the people in the world cannot: their access to the cultural supermarket is more limited, confined to whatever echoes of the cultural supermarket may reach their particular corner of the world. Probably more people from rich societies than poor societies have this optimal receiving equipment; and probably more people from the affluent, educated classes in every society than the lower, poorer, less educated classes have this equipment. It may be that the less sophisticated the receiving equipment you have, the more likely that you will be manipulated down the standard paths of Coca-Cola, Marlboro, Rambo, Doraemon, although there are



certainly exceptions to this; and as anthropologists note (see, for example Watson's 1997 edited collection on McDonald's in East Asia), how consumers in different societies actually interpret these different products may differ substantially from the plans of marketers.

Beyond this, there is the fact that the choices each of us make as to cultural identity are made not for ourselves but for performance for and in negotiation with others. One neither meditates nor listens to hiphop nor dresses up in Parisian fashions in a vacuum; rather these things are done, if not directly to impress others, then at least in conjunction with others, whose eyes and opinions one cannot help but pay heed to. One's cultural identity is performed in that one must convince others as to its validity, its genuineness: one must have the knowledge and social grace to convince others that one is not an imposter. Efforts to this effect may be seen in many different social milieux, from the young New York student expounding upon the latest avant-garde art to her date and getting nowhere, to the Japanese salaryman/rock musician who wears a short-hair wig to his office rather than get his hair cut, so that he can convince his fellow rock musicians that he is "for real," to the young Chinese woman wearing expensive fashions but not with quite enough of a sense of style to disguise her mainland origins from the disdainful eyes of some Hongkongese. A wide range of cultural identities in this world are available for appropriation; but although culturally the world may be wide open, socially it is not--one's cultural choices must fit within one's social world, which is more limited. In a typical middle-class white American neighborhood, I could

probably become a Buddhist without alarming my neighbors, but I could not become an Islamic fundamentalist; I may study the Mbuti pygmies in an anthropology text, but were I to express beliefs such as theirs to my coworkers, I would at best be seen as highly eccentric, at worst a lunatic. It is one's social world--outside one's mind, and more, as resident within one's mind--that acts as a censor and gatekeeper, selecting from the range of possible cultural ideas one might appropriate only those that seem plausible and acceptable within one's social world.

They seem plausible and acceptable in part to the extent that they can serve as, in Pierre Bourdieu's term, "cultural capital": knowledge that one can display to one's credit in one's social world. One's interest, at least within American society, in Indian ragas as opposed to top forty hits, or in Tibetan Buddhist writings as opposed to evangelical Christian tracts, is a way of advertising one's cosmopolitan discernment: my far-flung tastes may well be the servant of my distinctly local strategy of impressing the people around me. Ulf Hannerz (1990) has written of "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture" with cosmopolitans being those who are at home in world culture rather than stuck at home in their own particular culture. In many although far from all social worlds, being perceived as cosmopolitan carries with it more social cachet than being merely local. The cultural supermarket is regularly trolled for "cultural capital"; in some settings anyway, the farther from home the better.<sup>10</sup>

But all this is not to say that there is no room for individual choice from the cultural supermarket. Clearly there is--why does one middle-class

American become a Tibetan Buddhist, while another, very similar in background, a Unitarian or an agnostic? Why does one Japanese young person practice jazz piano, while another devotes himself to *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute)? Why does one Hong Kong intellectual devote his thought to Confucius and another to Heidegger? We are socially constrained but we are not entirely socially molded; we are not social slaves, but possess a certain degree of freedom in making our cultural choices as to who we are. This freedom may be highly limited, but it cannot be altogether denied.

### Selves in the Cultural Supermarket

I have strayed from the analysis of selves in the preceding section, to analyze in broader scope the structure of the cultural supermarket. Let me now, in the concluding section of this paper, return to selves: three people I interviewed in 1995-1996 as part of a long-term research project on national culture and the global cultural supermarket in three different societies: a Japanese artist, an American religious seeker, and a Hong Kong university teacher, all of whom struggle to culturally define and socially negotiate themselves between the claims of national culture and global culture. These people are privileged consumers in the cultural supermarket<sup>11</sup>; yet, within the realms of art, religion, and politics, they do perhaps bear a certain resonance to many people in the world today. The sketches I provide of them, although far too brief to do justice to their self-accountings, may nonetheless reveal how

this paper's theoretical sketch can shed insight into how actual people struggle with the complexities of cultural identity.

The Japanese painter is a man in his thirties, Shimizu Mitsuo,<sup>12</sup> who works part-time as an advertising designer to support his family. The walls of his apartment are covered with his oil paintings, of remarkable technical proficiency; but he has abandoned that pursuit, to concentrate on depicting the movements of avant-garde dancers in *sumi*, Japanese ink. He turned to *sumi* not to return to "Japaneseness," he says--"I was raised in Western art. That's my tradition. I don't like traditional Japanese art"--but for technical reasons: "I want to portray free dance, in all its motion--Japanese ink gives me the ability to depict motion in my work, because I can paint so quickly with it. That's the only reason I use it."

Indeed, "Japanese culture" is, at least at one level of Shimizu-san's words, dead: "Japanese talk about culture, but there's no natural feeling for that culture. Japanese culture is preserved simply to show tourists and foreigners." It is this "Japanese culture"--the weight of tradition--which, he says, prevents Japanese from understanding his art: "Many Japanese see my *sumie* [ink paintings] and look for the traditional images: mountains and rivers. They think it's strange when they don't see them. But foreigners don't have such preconceptions: maybe they can understand my work better than Japanese can, because they can look at it with a fresh eye." Shimizu-san struggles to exhibit and sell his art with little recognition for his efforts from the society around him, and even members of his own family don't understand his work: "My ten-

year-old son said to me, 'Dad, even though you know how to paint really good pictures, why do you paint such bad ones?'"

But despite the alienation he feels from traditional Japanese culture, and from contemporary Japan as well, he nonetheless insists on his fundamental underlying Japaneseness: "Sometimes when I draw, I draw *ojizo-san* [Buddhist figures], not consciously, but it comes out that way. Inevitably my Japaneseness shows itself in my work....Even if Japanese aren't conscious of it, they have a Japanese identity created over two thousand years of history, that remains in Japanese unconsciously, in the body." This is a cultural identity that is deeper than Japanese traditional art forms, an identity that lies at the very heart of who he is, he maintained--but that identity is threatened: "As Japan loses its natural features, becomes nothing but buildings, Japanese will become just like people in other countries....Maybe the art made by Japanese people like me will become indistinguishable from the art made anywhere in the world."

Shimizu-san was raised in Western art, and his taken-for-granted realm is artistically not Japanese--Japan, for him, seems most apparent at the *shikata ga nai* level, in his society's lack of recognition for his art. He chooses to work in *sumi* not because but in spite of the legacy of Japanese tradition; yet as an outcome of this choice, he comes to sense his Japaneseness at a level of himself deeper than the invasion of the cultural supermarket (which he called "Westernization"). The extent to which this cultural identity does indeed emerge from an as-yet-uncolonized unconscious (Jameson 1993: 36), as opposed to being a latter-day choice of identity from the cultural supermarket,

remains an open question. Is there really any such underlying Japaneseness, an identity not of the cultural supermarket but of underlying essence? This, anyway, is what he sought to believe in: an underlying Japaneseness that, although precarious, nonetheless still remained.

The American religious seeker, Phil O'Connor, is a computer salesman, married and in his thirties, and a deeply religious Christian; but the Christianity he adhered to as a youth is not quite the Christianity he adheres to today. "I grew up believing that America was 'one nation under God,' and that if you didn't believe in my God, you'd go to hell"; but the exposures of his adulthood --the coworkers and friends he has come to know, who he sees as good people, but who often have religious convictions very different from his--have tempered his views: "I can't pass judgment on people who don't believe as I do. That's up to God." At present, at least at some points of his self-explication, he feels unable to say with certainty that the path he follows is the one true path: "Thomas Merton wrote that a good Christian would be a good Hindu, a good Hindu a good Christian. Maybe once you get through all the differences in different faiths that seem so apparent on the ground, the differences don't matter: you simply rise up toward God." Indeed, his own wife, although still a Christian, has taken a course in Buddhism, and practices Buddhist meditation, and this has led him to try to believe that spirituality may be far more encompassing than his own particular religious upbringing would allow for.

At other points of our conversations, however, he seemed to doubt that there could be any such universal God, true for all the world's spiritual

searchers. "Finally...you have to go back to the one fundamental truth. If Christ did not rise from the dead, if He is not the son of God, then all our faith is in vain." This statement renders his Christianity not a universal but a particular faith, one which holds other faiths to be mistaken: his Buddhist and Mormon and agnostic coworkers--and perhaps his wife as well--for all their niceness as human beings, may be destined for some place other than the Christian heaven, for their beliefs are wrong. Mr. O'Connor wavered in this-- "Maybe if I'd grown up in a different family environment, I'd believe in something different....I can't believe that God would condemn a person for growing up in a family or a culture that didn't recognize Him"--but finally the singular truth of Christianity is what prevails in his account.

Mr. O'Connor's conflict is between his religious faith, with its claim to be the only true faith, and his social world, full of people with a multiplicity of faiths. It is also a matter of conflicting visions of "America": between the America of "one nation under God" proclaimed in the Pledge of Allegiance recited every school day of my own and Mr. O'Connor's childhood, and the America of "the pursuit of happiness" hailed in the Declaration of Independence, the America of individual freedom to believe and live as one chooses. This is a conflict between ultimate truth and personal taste as the basis for religious belief--between "America" as a land of the one true faith, and "America" as the cultural supermarket's home. Mr. O'Connor is caught between these views, and finally seeks to adhere to the particular truth of his Christian faith; but in a

pluralistic, culturally-supermarketed United States, this view cannot prevail in his dealings with his social world, or he may have no friends left.

The Hong Kong university teacher, Amanda Leung, grew up in Hong Kong but attended, as did almost all Hong Kong university teachers, graduate school overseas. "My first ten years of school, in a Catholic school in Hong Kong, gave me a worship of the West, and a total neglect of the Chinese part of my education. I still have no real understanding of Chinese literature, music, history." It was when she was in the United States studying in graduate school that a sense of herself as Chinese came to the fore, brought about in part by the Tiananmen Square incident, during which she felt a sense of shame at not being able to protest on the streets of Hong Kong, as did a fifth of Hong Kong's population, demanding a better China. Her widowed father urged her to stay in the United States but she insisted on returning to Hong Kong, to be with him as a filial daughter. Her dream continues to be one of finding a sense of Chinese identity--her roots, or in her metaphor, her mother: "Even though I'm ignorant about China, I feel like an abandoned child. I don't know who my mom is, but there's the longing to return to her. No my country's not China, but there is that dream." Yet the one time that she actually visited China, she was repelled by its filth and poverty, and by the preferential treatment given to non-Chinese nationals like her. That China was manifestly foreign to her--and treated her as manifestly foreign--profoundly disturbed her.

At present she teaches social work, based on the theory she learned in the United States--theory she believes is basically universal, but also at times



culturally insensitive and indeed, "imperialistic." She partakes of what she sees as "Chineseness" and "Westernness" in all aspects of her life, including her very name: as is common in Hong Kong, her family knows her by her Chinese name, her friends and colleagues by the Western name she gave herself in secondary school. She continues to dream of finding her Chinese cultural home; but detesting what she sees as the Chinese government's self-serving conception of Chineseness in the run-up to Hong Kong's handover, she wonders if she should emigrate: "I guess I have no home," she said.

For Ms. Leung, unlike Shimizu-san and Mr. O'Connor, there is no sense of any taken-for-granted national identity. "Hong Kong people are pragmatic and rootless...because we don't have any sense of belonging; we don't learn anything in school about national identity, citizenship, civics." She first longed for the West in her life, and later longed for China, but has felt throughout her life betwixt and between. For affluent, educated people in Hong Kong like her, the taken-for-granted realm is not that of the nation but rather the cultural supermarket: as a cosmopolitan in one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, she is free to pick and choose aspects of her identity as "Chinese" and as "Western," and define those terms as she may choose (see Mathews 1996d). But although many in Hong Kong celebrate this cosmopolitan freedom, she laments it--she feels stolen from her Chinese self, having been brainwashed by her colonial education. She also realizes, however, that there is no China she can return to as a cultural home, but only the claims of a political regime: the *shikata ga nai* of China's enforced definition of what Chineseness is in Hong

Kong after 1997. She is homeless; the cultural supermarket cannot provide a home, but only aisles offering costumes to be donned.

These three people illustrate in their different ways the difficulties of finding and negotiating a sense of home cultural identity in an increasingly culturally supermarketed world. Shimizu-san claims to find his Japanese home in the body and the unconscious underlying his "Westernized" art; but that home seems precarious to him, perhaps soon enough to be swept away. Mr. O'Connor is in conflict between his American home as home of Christianity's singular religious truth, or as home of the cultural supermarket's multiplicity of religious truths. Ms. Leung has no home, she tells us; being both "Western" and "Chinese" and at home in neither realm, she is bound to fashion herself from the cultural supermarket, and believe her constructed identity to be home as best she can. This tension between home and market, culture as given and culture as chosen, is ever more a part of our world; increasingly we are consumers in the cultural supermarket, and have as cultural home only home's witted or unwitted reconstruction. "Culture," writes Joel Kahn (1995: 128), "is a cultural construction": culture as "the way of life of a people" becomes, inexorably, one more self-conscious choice, as the cultural supermarket pervades all facets of existence. One may lament this or celebrate this; but this, increasingly, is the cultural fate of us all.

### Notes

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1. The term "cultural supermarket," the central term of this essay, was first used, to my knowledge, by Stuart Hall, in his essay, "The Question of Cultural Identity" (1992: 303). He does not, however, explicate the term, but uses it only in passing. In this essay, I have tried to analyze this term more explicitly.
2. My phenomenological approach is steeped in the writings of Schutz ([1940] 1978), Luckmann (1967), and Berger and Luckmann (1966), as well as Cohen (1994). My formulations of the cultural shaping of self are my own.
3. My previous work involves the accounts of selves discussing their experience of their lives (Mathews 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d), empirical data which is absent in this paper except in its concluding section. My theorizing in this paper is in a strict sense in violation of my phenomenological approach, which involves focusing on selves' accountings of themselves and

theorizing only on that empirical basis; but for reasons of space, I cannot here include, except in my concluding section, the words of selves in three societies from which my theorizing derives.

4. There is an ineradicable gap between selves' words and selves' experience of their lives. Goffman (1959) writes of "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"; Linde (1993) writes of life stories as "the creation of coherence," a coherence lacking in the ongoing flux of life. Finally, however, words are the only full way we have of knowing other human beings; while words are never wholly to be trusted, to spurn the data of words is to slip into solipsism.

5. The taken-for-granted realm necessarily remains, in that we come to full consciousness as children after we have been personally and culturally shaped. As Berger and Luckmann note (1966: 59), "language appears to the child as inherent in the nature of things, and he cannot grasp the notion of its conventionality"; as Becker writes (1971: 149-150), "since the child is partly conditioned before he can manipulate symbols, he is formed without being able to put any distance between himself and what is happening to him....The result is that the person acts out his hero-style automatically and uncritically for the rest of his life." We may, through the works of thinkers like these, intellectually come to understand the arbitrariness and conventionality of our taken-for-granted realm, but this may hardly alter the hold of that realm over our lives.

6. This compliance at the *shikata ga nai* level to the world's requirements is for the most part taken-for-granted, but in a conscious way. People stopping at stoplights, people paying sales taxes don't usually spend time pondering whether to resist or accede, but do what's expected of them: they stop and they pay. However, if you ask them why they do these things, they are able to give an answer: "we have to; that's the way this society works." They are aware that there is nothing "natural" about these acts, an awareness which removes them from the taken-for-granted level and places them at the *shikata ga nai* level.

7. Unlike one's interest in music or sports, one's political convictions and religious beliefs may not be seen as chosen; rather, "God chose this path for me," or "This is the truth, but those bastards are blind to it." A hobby is a matter of taste; a political conviction or religious belief may be seen as a matter of truth, not merely chosen but bestowed on one through God's grace. However, to the extent that one was not born into these convictions and beliefs but arrived at them consciously, then in a phenomenological sense they must be considered choices: despite all latter-day justifications, they represent one path taken out of many that might have been taken; one choice made out of many that might have been made from the cultural supermarket.

8. Gellner is exaggerating in this statement, but only a bit. I write this in Hong Kong, where national identity has long been problematic. As one Hong Kong resident told me, "Every time I travel to another country, I have to write down

my nationality. In the past, I wrote 'Hong Kong,' and they corrected me at customs; because I have a British National Overseas passport, I guess I'm supposed to write 'British,' even though I have no right to live in Britain. Lately, I've gotten even more confused; I ask the stewardess, 'what should I write for "nationality": "British," "British Hong Kong," "Hong Kong," or "Chinese"?' Those in Hong Kong who welcome the coming of Chinese control over Hong Kong after July 1, 1997 do so in part because they will finally then have a national identity: the "nose and two ears," in Gellner's words, that they feel has long been denied them.

9. Some nations--for example, Iran with its spiritual police in search of satellite dishes, and its diatribes against "Westernization"--set themselves in opposition to the cultural supermarket. Other nations--the United States, whose promise that every citizen has "certain inalienable Rights," among them "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" seems a template for consumer choice--set themselves in apparent congruence with the cultural supermarket. Despite this, however, I argue that there is an inevitable opposition between state and cultural supermarket, in that the latter inevitably works at some level to erode the former's attempted monopoly on its citizens' identity formation.

10. The matter of what from the cultural supermarket can provide status in a given social milieu is highly complex. Why, in many American Buddhist circles, does Zen Buddhism from Japan tend to evoke respect, but Sōka Gakkai

only disdain? Why, among Japanese teenagers, is American gangsta fashion hot, preppie fashion not? The answers are highly specific to these different social milieux. Each milieu has its rating system for information and identities from the cultural supermarket; individuals seek to attain maximum credit and credibility, not only through consumption within the existing cultural rating system, but also through bringing in new information and identities, whose high status they seek to establish. The criteria for the establishment of such status is highly specific and to a degree highly flexible.

11. It seems that most people--those who live for work or family--don't tend to think much about cultural identity; while they may avidly consume from the cultural supermarket, they do not deeply consider what this may mean for who they are: this is my impression from interviews. However, artists, religious seekers, and intellectuals must think about cultural identity: "Why do I create/believe/theorize as I do? Who am I, culturally?" This is not to privilege these already privileged people: I interview them not because they are generally more acute than other people, but because their lines of endeavor makes them easier to talk to than most people concerning my own research endeavor.

12. All names of my interviewees are aliases. I have also disguised other non-essential aspects of their identities in order to preserve their anonymity. All quotations are, however, taken verbatim from interview transcripts.

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