KARAOKE LEARNING IN JAPAN:
INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION IN A GROUP CONTEXT

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The Problem of *Naraigoto*

There has been a dramatic jump in the number and the extent of the involvement of Japanese adults studying karaoke in the last decade. Housewives and retired people enjoy learning karaoke at community centers, private institutions, and karaoke bars. Many karaoke "circles" or clubs are organized by students and they practice singing with or without teachers. Some students take their karaoke practice more seriously and even take private lessons. These students participate in karaoke contests or shows in full costume. Such learning activities experienced outside of formal schooling are called *naraigoto*, which is similar to adult learning (or continuing education) in America.

Traditional forms of *naraigoto* have a long tradition in Japan and are often represented by tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Although learning karaoke, which is a newer form of *naraigoto,* is founded on the customs of traditional forms of learning, it is different in many ways. Karaoke learning offers more freedom and is self-directed. As a multi-purpose activity, it allows students many individual benefits. Karaoke learning functions in a traditional learning system, which is based on a group environment, while students' behavior tends to be individualistic.

Nowadays, Japanese adults enjoy private time, individual expression, and self realization. This individualized pastime has a close connection with the postwar prevalence of individualism in Japan. Thus it is worth examining the emergence of karaoke learning in light of the historical debate of the group versus the individual. This study begins by addressing the following major themes: groupism versus individualism, traditional forms of *naraigoto*, and a newer form of *naraigoto* or karaoke learning. It continues with a variety of fieldwork observations on self-expression and the role of karaoke in releasing individual forms of conveying feelings and attitude among, for example, elderly Japanese. I argue that karaoke *naraigoto* is a tool for students to attain their individual goals and represents a successful reconciliation of individual expression with social dependency.

Groupism versus Individualism

David Matsumoto mentions that groupism versus individualism is a frequently-cited cross-cultural indicator, in referring to an article written by H. R. Markus and S. Kitayama[1]:

> Individualistic cultures encourage their members to be unique. Individual goals, values, behavior, and self expression take precedence over the group's collective needs. Collective cultures, by contrast, emphasize the needs of groups, and individual goals are subordinated to group goals. Individual identification in collective cultures comes through group affiliation.[2]

Many scholars have generalized the Japanese and described Japan as a group-oriented society as opposed to the individualistic society of the United States. Takeo Doi argues that *amae* (dependence) is the unique characteristic of the Japanese people and writes,

> The Japanese are often said to be group-minded, to be strong as a group but weak as individuals. It is also said that the freedom of the individual is still not firmly established in Japanese society. Where general trends are concerned, these statements would seem to be true, and they accord well with, the prominence of *amae* in Japanese society.[3]

Although Edwin Reischauer mentions that group orientation cannot be overstressed in understanding Japanese society, his basic stance acknowledges and accepts the duality of group and individual: "The group emphasis has affected the whole style of interpersonal relations in Japan….Whereas the American may seek to emphasize his independence and originality, the Japanese will do the reverse."[4]

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[1] H. R. Markus & S. Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98 (1991), pp. 224-253.

[2] David Matsumoto, *Unmasking Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 132.

[3] Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1973), p. 173.

[4] Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today* (Cambridge, MA: The

Joy Hendry regards *han* (a working group) as a group activity that characterizes Japanese school activities: "Throughout the school system classes are divided up into small groups, which are collectively responsible for various tasks. The behavior of each member therefore contributes to the overall ability of the group, and the children learn to help one another."[5]

This dichotomy seems to be an accepted notion among scholars; however, some scholars studying Japan question the duality by pointing out its shortcomings and limitations. Harumi Befu argues,

> The group model of Japanese society compares an American definition of Western individualism with a Japanese cultural definition on the collectivity; however, such a contrast is seen as being a non-parallel comparison which totally ignores interpersonal relationships in the U.S. or in Japan.[6]

He emphasizes that there is in fact a very strong sense of personhood in Japan which is expressed as *seishin* (spirituality) or *jinkaku* (individuality).

Nancy Sato argues for a relations orientation. A relations orientation emphasizes the importance of one's relational situation in the world, but the relation is not always to the group. The relation can be with one or more persons, with the surrounding environment, with aspects of oneself, and with experiences….Within this framework, I argue that individual and group dimensions are complementary aspects of teaching-learning processes in Japan, and that both individual and group orientations are nurtured in Japanese elementary classrooms.[7]

I examine karaoke learning in the case of Japanese adults from the viewpoint of groupism versus individualism, but it does not fit this simple dichotomy. The rise of the blended culture makes it more difficult to believe the stereotype that Japanese are group-oriented and Westerners are individualistic. The scenes I encountered in my fieldwork indicate that self

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Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 136.

[5] Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 100.

[6] Harumi Befu, "A Critique of the Group Model of Japanese Society," *Social Analysis* 2 (1980), p. 40.

[7] Nancy Sato, "Honoring the Individual," *Teaching and Learning in Japan*, eds. Thomas P. Rohlen and Gerald K. LeTendre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 119.

expression is a basic desire of all human beings, and fear of embarrassment and consideration of others are universal human attributes.

One day, I came across a group of Americans singing karaoke in Japan. One took the microphone in hand and sang, and the rest sang along and danced disco.[8] When I encountered the scene, I thought that Americans were more group-oriented than Japanese. Later I found out that the Westerners were too timid to risk demonstrating their individual singing in public, and by participating in the group, they didn't have to worry about embarrassing themselves and losing their self-esteem. Since it is uncommon for Japanese to sing karaoke in a group like the Americans did, it could be argued that self-expression by some Japanese may be more individualistic and intense than by some Americans.

Experiencing various situations like the scene above, I believe that differentiating between Japanese and Westerners based on groupism versus individualism is not applicable to the karaoke cultural context. Japan is a collective entity of distinct individuals and cannot be explained by either groupism or individualism. Both collectivity and individuality are interactive in Japan and they are essential elements that constitute Japanese society.

Traditional Forms of *Naraigoto*

Naraigoto was initially called *okeikogoto* and became prevalent among common people in the Edo period (1600-1868).[9] The postwar economic affluence has greatly affected Japanese lifestyles, and qualitative and quantitative changes are seen in the educational sphere. Learning is no longer limited to school and Japanese adults have come to regard education as their lifework. In 1988, about ninety percent of Japanese adults wanted to participate in further study, and about forty-five percent of them took part in

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[8] I was surprised that this scene was very similar to Kōichi Ichikawa's description of karaoke scenes in the West, in "Karaoke kōdō ni miru nihonjin no taijin hairyo" [Japanese Concern for Others in Karaoke Behaviors], *Gendai no esupuri*: *Jōhōka to taishū Japan,* [Contemporary Esprit: Informationalization and Popular Culture], vol. 312 (Tokyo: Shibundo, 1993), pp. 192-193.

[9] Hideo Watanabe, "Japanese Adult Learning: Karaoke *Naraigoto*," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Pittsburgh, 2000), p. 109.

learning activities.[10] *Naraigoto* is a substantial source of Japanese adult learning and has been widely practiced at culture centers, community centers, and private homes. A variety of adult learning activities and newer courses came into being and more people became interested in *naraigoto*. Popular children's *naraigoto* are piano, swimming, and calligraphy, while golf, social dance, and English conversation are prevalent among adults.

Millions of Japanese also find self-expression through traditional dancing, music, and other art forms. The various types of dance associated with the premodern theater and with geishas are the focus for numerous well-organized schools of instruction, each with an ardent group of devotees. The same is true of all types of traditional music, and many more people acquire skills in the various instruments and forms of Western music.[11]

Traditional forms of *naraigoto* have been portrayed in previous research as the typical style of Japanese learning. Imitation and repetition are known to be the usual learning styles in many traditional forms of learning. Ikuta Kumiko describes how Japanese dance students reach the stage of mastery by copying and repetition, and this type of practice is basically true to the process of learning other traditional techniques (*waza*).[12] Jennifer Anderson observes that there is very little variation in the way in which individual tea-serving manners (*otemae*) are performed. *Otemae* have been created by the *iemoto* (the grand master) and cannot be altered by anyone else. Every hand movement and the placement of each utensil are strictly prescribed.[13]

Kata (form) is another feature of traditional *naraigoto*.[14] The observance of *kata* has contributed to the preservation of standards allowing students to study more efficiently and prevented them from being overly adventurous learners who try to develop original styles outside the

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[10] NHK Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūjō [The Japan Broadcasting Culture Research Institute] ed., *Nihonjin no gakushū* [Japanese Learning] (Tokyo: Daiichi hōki shuppan, 1990), pp. 4-5.

[11] Reischauer, *The Japanese Today*, p. 165.

[12] Ikuta Kumiko, *Waza no rikai* [Understanding *waza*], in *Karada to kyōiku* [Body and Education] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1987), pp. 90-92.

[13] Jennifer L. Anderson, *An Introduction to Japanese Tea Ritual* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 100.

[14] *Kata* refers to the stylized gestures or movements observed in Japanese traditional art and martial arts.

mainstream. Ryōen Minamoto discusses the positive and negative aspects of *kata*, which is both a model and a restriction to learners. It adds functionality, rationality and beauty to their behavior, and gives order and function to their social life, while it also creates pressures and constraints.[15]

Gail Benjamin explains the role of the *iemoto,* which is another major feature of traditional *naraigoto*.[16] Many groups in Japan are organized quite self-consciously on the model of the family. Within an organization following this pattern, each member has a strong relationship to the next higher link in the hierarchy. The lower-ranking member is bound to show deference to the higher; the higher is required to take care of the lower.[17] Under this structure, students are expected to obey exactly the standard set by the *iemoto*. The organization nurtures the relationship between students and teachers, but tends to force student conformity and suppresses spontaneity, self-initiative, and individual talents.

A Newer Form of *Naraigoto*: Karaoke Learning

Karaoke is prerecorded instrumental accompaniment. Typically, it provides music and visuals for a singer via an on-line system or compact laser disks. The word "karaoke" is a combination of the Japanese word for *kara* (empty) and *oke* (a contraction of the Japanese loan-word for orchestra). This section explores how karaoke and karaoke *naraigoto* have developed.

Prior to the birth of karaoke (before 1972)

Even before karaoke appeared in Japan, the Japanese enjoyed both singing and listening to music. In 1925, the Japanese radio service started, and in 1953, TV began broadcast service. These forms of media contributed much to introducing popular music into Japanese homes. Juke boxes were popular at amusement centers, and the peak of juke boxes in Japan seems to have been in 1968. Cable radio (*yūsen* in Japanese) is a system where stations provide music non-stop to bars and restaurants upon the customers'

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[15] Ryōen Minamoto, *Kata to Nihon bunka* [*Kata* (Form) and Japanese Culture], author's translation (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1992), p. 12.

[16] *Iemoto* is a hierarchical social structure of classical arts under which various disciples are interlinked with other disciples through their masters.

[17] Gail R. Benjamin, *Japanese Lessons* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 71.

requests. Cable radio first appeared around 1955, and since then, customers have enjoyed listening to it and many hits later sung by karaoke singers were born from it.

Some Japanese people began to take an active role by singing in public in the postwar period. The amateur singing contest by the name of *NHK Nodojiman Shiroto Ongakukai* started in 1946, which marked the beginning of Japanese public singing with professional accompaniment. Strolling musicians called *nagashi* were seen at downtown bars, and customers enjoyed singing to the *nagashi*'s guitar or accordion accompaniment. *Utagoe kissa*, which are cafes where customers sing together with someone leading the singing, appeared in 1961.[18] Although *utagoe kissa* had some political associations, being linked to the activities of trade unions and leftist groups, the existence of the cafes shows that many Japanese gained experience in group singing at that time. In addition, the Japanese sang at drinking parties and other social gatherings, such as bus tours and wedding receptions.

All of these connected Japanese life with popular music and helped form the foundation for the acceptance of karaoke. According to Toshihiro Tsuganesawa, "One reason that karaoke achieved instant popularity in Japan is that public singing already had been established as a form of leisure. Years before karaoke appeared, public singing had been obligatory at many festivals and social gatherings."[19]

The birth of karaoke (the 1970s)

There are several theories regarding the origin of karaoke, but the explanation that karaoke was invented by a bartender living in Kobe, located in southwest Japan, is widely accepted. According to Toshihiro Tsuganesawa, "In 1972, Inoue and his colleagues recorded their own musical performances without vocals on 8-track tapes as accompaniment for amateur singers and manufactured ten tape juke boxes for those

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[18] Toshihiro Tsuganesawa, "Taishū bunka toshiteno karaoke" [Karaoke as Popular Culture], *Gendai no esupuri*: *Jōhōka to taishū bunka*, vol. 312 (Tokyo: Shibundo, 1993), pp. 99-101.

[19] Robert S. Drew, "Embracing the Role of Amateur: How Karaoke Bar Patrons Become Regular Performers," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 25/4 (1997): 449-468.

recorded tapes." [20] In 1976, a manufacturer of car audio equipment commercially produced eight-track tapes of voiceless background music. The company named the device "karaoke" and began selling it. The merchandise was a big hit and spread throughout Japan instantly. Karaoke frequently drew middle-aged men to bars and became an essential entertainment form in Japanese nightlife. Every evening, neighbors were annoyed by amplified sound from karaoke bars, and karaoke noise became a social problem. Some karaoke addicts asked bar owners to teach them karaoke singing informally, and this is how karaoke *naraigoto* began.[21]

The first karaoke boom (the early half of the 1980s)

The first boom in karaoke was brought about by the technical improvement of karaoke equipment. In 1978 "a home karaoke" unit was created and was used as a means of family entertainment and individual practice. In the 1980s, video discs and compact laser disks appeared, and these accompaniments gave karaoke appealing visual effects. The words could now be displayed on a television screen, which freed the singers from dependence on lyric sheets. At the same time, video scenes were provided along with the songs, and this gave the singer and listeners information about the songs. For example, the monitor may show a broken-hearted woman traveling in Kyoto, trying to forget her lost love. While watching the scenery of Kyoto on the screen, the karaoke participants unconsciously learn about temples and gardens without visiting the city. This effect helped learners develop an image of the songs and was particularly useful for karaoke *naraigoto*.

The second karaoke boom (the latter half of the 1980s)

The second boom was the expansion of karaoke's popularity in terms of gender and generation, and was brought about by the appearance of "karaoke boxes" (sometimes called karaoke rooms), which are small private rooms equipped with compact laser disks (or on-line units), and tables and chairs where customers enjoy singing over food and drinks. "It is said that the earliest 'boxes' appeared in 1985 on a vacant lot in Okayama as

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[20] Tōru Mitsui and Shūhei Hosokawa, ed., *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 38.
[21] One of my karaoke teachers started teaching karaoke as a bartender in 1980.

converted large trucks."[22] Previously, karaoke implied drinking at bars at night and thus was limited to male drinkers; however, since this new type of karaoke space was available even during the day and did not require alcohol, it was widely accepted for housewives, office ladies and students.

Nowadays, the use of karaoke boxes is varied. They often function as a party room, where customers enjoy drinks and food. They are also used for karaoke *naraigoto*. In fact, karaoke is not only taught in schools and regional centers, but many karaoke boxes are also used for private lessons. It is also common that karaoke students, who worry about noise in their houses, rent karaoke boxes for their personal practice.

The third karaoke boom (the early half of the 1990s)

During this period, the karaoke industry enjoyed prosperity and stability. At its peak, karaoke goers numbered 58.9 million in 1994, which means that nearly half the nation's population of 125 million enjoyed karaoke that year. There were 160,680 boxes in 1996.[23] The primary reason for this growth was technological development.

Technologically, the laser CD disks had two problems: space and speedy availability for required songs. These disks required extra space in tiny karaoke bars and small private houses. Karaoke practitioners demanded a wider selection of songs, especially in wanting to sing the latest hit songs. The introduction of "on-line" karaoke (*tsūshin*) solved both problems. By 1994, about 30% to 40% of the CD systems in approximately 115,000 karaoke boxes in Japan had been replaced by the on-line system.[24]

Another reason for this craze may be a social change that is closely related to karaoke *naraigoto*. Japanese society has been aging – seniors over 65 years old were 5% of the population around 1950, but that number more than doubled by 1985. Furthermore, this number increased to 16.7% in 1999.[25] To think about leading a meaningful life in one's old age has become an issue for the individual senior citizen and for the nation.

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[22] Mitsui and Hosokawa, *Karaoke around the World*, p. 11.

[23] *See* http://ad@japan-karaoke.com/05hakusyo/index.html, Zenkoku karaoke jigyō kyōkai [All-Japan Karaoke Industrialist Association], *Karaoke jigyō no gaiyō to shijō kibo* [The Outline and Market Size of Karaoke Industry] (2004).

[24] *Asahi Shinbun* (5/7/1994).

[25] *Asahi Shinbun* (9/15/1999).

Based on the national policy of lifelong education (*shōgai kyōiku*) or lifelong learning (*shōgai gakushū*), local governments began to treat karaoke as a means to enrich elderly people's lives. Public halls (*kōminkan*) and regional centers (*chiku senta-*) attempted to offer karaoke facilities. This ignited the fever for karaoke *naraigoto* among senior citizens. A lot of karaoke clubs were formed by seniors in the early 1990s, and karaoke contests and recitals started to take place in many communities. It is important to note that this karaoke popularity was sustained by a broad range of the population from younger people to the elderly. Furthermore, karaoke singing was practiced in every corner of Japan, including mountain and fishing villages, and was a major attraction at festivals and events in these local areas.

The declining popularity of karaoke (the latter half of the 1990s)

In 1991, Japan's Bubble Economy collapsed, and this calamity turned Japanese society upside down. The economy plunged into a long recession, and the karaoke industry went through a gradual, but serious, depression. As companies and individuals cut back on leisure expenses, karaoke bars and boxes began to lose their customers. Statistically the karaoke population declined to 48.2 million in 2003, and the number of karaoke boxes also showed a decrease to 135,400 in 2003.[26] Thus, all karaoke-related businesses had to undergo stiff competition for survival, and many karaoke bars and boxes went bankrupt.

This depression also had some influence on karaoke *naraigoto*. Judging from the karaoke students at my field sites, the decrease in karaoke customers had not immediately led to a decrease in interest in karaoke *naraigoto*, but some students avoided expensive schools and culture centers and moved to inexpensive institutions or student-run clubs in regional centers. Despite the long economic recession, the *Asahi* newspaper reported on the current boom of karaoke learning in late 1999, saying that a certain karaoke school had 150 classes and its membership was about 320,000.[27]

Findings from Fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork on karaoke *naraigoto* for 15 months, mainly

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[26] See "Zenkoku karaoke jigyō kyōkai,"
http://ad@japan-karaoke.com/05hakusyo/index.html, (2004).
[27] *Asahi Shinbun* (11/15/2003).

in the city of Yokohama. During my fieldwork, I studied eight karaoke learning groups, structured and unstructured, by participant-observation. I also conducted a quantitative survey of over 370 informants for the purpose of measuring their commitment to karaoke and karaoke *naraigoto*. Data was collected in Yokohama, a big city with a population of three million, and Nishio, a small city with 110,000 people located in southwest Aichi Prefecture. Most informants were housewives or retired people in their fifties or over, many of which were women.

The fieldwork showed that karaoke learning is an individualized multipurpose activity in which students participate for various reasons. Good health, not acquisition of skills, is the top reason for karaoke students' membership according to Table 1. They have their own definition of *naraigoto* and find their karaoke *naraigoto* significant for other reasons, such as social integration or a change of atmosphere.

Table 1. Reasons for studying karaoke

Why are you studying karaoke?	
80%	Singing is good for my health.
68%	I want to become better at karaoke.
55%	I want to make sure I learn the basics well.
49%	Karaoke is less expensive and easier than other *naraigoto*.

As a result of studying karaoke, individual students learn a variety of things, according to the responses recorded in Table 2. What they learn is not limited to technical knowledge and skills, but is broader and more comprehensive. For example, some students gained a sense of identity, worldly knowledge, or a feeling of physical and mental health. Eighty-eight percent of students chose "how to sing," which means that other students continue to study karaoke even if not primarily to learn.

Table 2. What students have learned through karaoke *naraigoto*

What have you learned through studying karaoke?	
88%	How to sing.
46%	How to communicate with others.
38%	About myself (personality, ability, etc.)
30%	About the world (culture, history, geography, people's hearts, etc.) as the background of songs.

I also realized that karaoke learning is self-directed and is based on students' own interests and needs. My surveys reported that ninety-five percent of students began learning karaoke because they wanted to.[28] Typically there are about ten or twenty students and one instructor in one karaoke class when it is not a private lesson. Although the class has many students, lessons basically proceed on an individual basis. Each individual student demonstrates his/her song and sings in front of the class. The rest of the students sit and listen to the song and the instructor gives comments on the singing. Therefore, this learning style is individualized and is different from rehearsals of a chorus group.

Generally, the instructors' teaching methods do not attempt to mold the students but are quite flexible. The instructors function as facilitators of the group and encourage students to express themselves. Students are often free to choose songs and organizational rules are lenient.

Karaoke as Self-expression

Self-expression of originality and creativity is crucial for measuring the degree of individualism. My informants were interested in expressing themselves, and karaoke learning is an accessible means of expression. However, self-expression through karaoke is debatable because karaoke is prerecorded background instrumentation and lacks flexibility. Christine Yano writes:

> The self-expression afforded through karaoke exists within preestablished *kata*. As mentioned previously, tempo, dynamics, orchestration are set. Within an unvarying accompaniment taken from the hit song upon which the karaoke recording is based, a person sings prewritten lyrics and melody to a preconceived style. The degree of self-expression is limited to what is permissible within a set from which includes ornamentation, dynamics, and, for some, even bodily gestures.[29]

Yano's comment is especially true when karaoke is compared with

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[28] Watanabe, "Japanese Adult Learning," p. 99.
[29] Christine Yano, "The Floating World of Karaoke in Japan," *Popular Music & Society* 20/2 (1996), p. 9.

live singing accompanied by piano; however, self-expression through karaoke can be assessed in other ways, too. It is important to examine how much karaoke increased opportunities for Japanese people to express themselves in the postwar period. It is also significant to compare the degree of self-expression in karaoke with traditional forms of singing. We could also argue how the technological innovation makes it easier for karaoke practitioners to realize self-expression.

Before the appearance of karaoke, it was less common for the Japanese to express themselves in public, particularly by means of solo singing. Certainly the Japanese sang together at weddings and other parties, clapping their hands, but that type of singing was group-oriented rather than individual-based self-expression, and it was more common among men rather than women. It was not until the appearance of karaoke that singing by Japanese women became prevalent in the public sphere. Of course, these comments do not mean that the Japanese did not have the desire to express themselves in public through singing, but that desire was suppressed under the social structure.

Whether or not "the preestablished *kata* of karaoke" limits self-expression, the reality is that numerous women and elderly persons actually stand on stage everywhere in Japan and reveal themselves through karaoke music. When I visited a senior citizen home, the karaoke instructor advised me to see how senior citizens enjoy karaoke in a big hall. The room is thirty square meters with big stage in the middle. A straw mat floor creates a traditional Japanese mood. In the hall, lots of seniors were chatting, drinking, and eating. I asked some how they felt about singing karaoke at this center. They replied, "It's fun, but since many people want to sing on the stage, we need to wait a few hours for our turn."

On stage, most people sang karaoke and some demonstrated Japanese dance, beautifully dressed. This scene convinced me that these senior citizens really wanted to sing, dance and express themselves, whether they were good performers or not. The traditional image of elderly Japanese people is that they are quiet, shy, and not very expressive, but this does not mean that they are born with an inability to be expressive. It simply means that they had limited opportunities to express themselves. Now, they have many more occasions to sing, dance and speak, etc. and enjoy expressing themselves.

Self-expression through karaoke singing becomes more meaningful when karaoke is compared with other forms of traditional singing, such as *utai* (Noh chanting), *nagauta* (the background song of

Kabuk*i*[30]), *shigin* (the chanting of Chinese epic poems), and *min'yō* (a regional folksong). When I asked traditional *naraigoto* informants about how they study, they uniformly said, "by copying and repetition." When I asked *nagauta* students, "How are originality and creativity treated in *nagauta*?" they replied, "When students become advanced, teachers will probably be more tolerant of each students' own singing style." My informants are over 60 years old and have experienced *nagauta* for more than thirty years. Even so, they still believe that they have not advanced enough to demonstrate their originality and creativity. It seemed to me that virtually no student would have an opportunity to perform as he/she likes at any time in his/her experience of *naraigoto*.

Compared with traditional singing, karaoke is much more tolerant of self-expression. The *kata* of traditional songs are the result of patterns which have been refined over a long history, but the songs sung in karaoke are much newer than the traditional songs – most were created in the postwar period. Karaoke students are allowed to sing in their own manner and it is easier to create their own original styles. They often do not know how to express their feelings, and so they just imitate professional singers' original songs. In this sense, originality and creativity are not their major concern. Those students are satisfied just by singing in public because they have never done so. The other type of student is more committed to karaoke singing. Many of them are advanced students, who take part in karaoke contests. In such contests, judges would not be satisfied with great singers who merely follow the conventional style. Originality and creativity are emphasized in this scene, and contestants are expected to show their own interpretation of songs and their own expression. One of my karaoke teachers, Mr. Suzuki, said:

> Mere production of melodies is not "expression" because there is no exposure of the singer's self. Expression is to convey oneself (one's feelings, emotions, thoughts, etc.) through one's performance, and that is the essence of art. Expression is not just production of sound but must be supported by controlled emotion and voice. One needs to express oneself properly and so it is necessary to acquire appropriate techniques. It is my role as a

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[30] Kabuki is a stylized traditional Japanese play with singing and dancing or the common people created in the seventeenth century.

karaoke instructor to help my students learn such techniques and express themselves. In short, I am supposed to teach how to express, i.e., techniques, rather than what to express, i.e., the singer's self.[31]

To measure the degree of self-expression, we should also note that the innovation of the high technology karaoke machines allows singers to sing with more variation and creativity, thus making self-expression easier. At the early stages in the development of karaoke, karaoke machines were not sophisticated and people's singing was largely controlled by the machines. They had to sing with a fixed tempo and pitch, and thus their originality was not attained as they wished. Their repertoire was also limited because the old karaoke tapes were designed with professional singers' pitch and amateurs had problems with the voice range. However, recent technological developments in karaoke equipment allow for changes in pitch, speed, and rhythm. In addition, karaoke plays the role of a partner in duets, and even the creation of harmony is possible. All this allows singers to create a broader range of singing styles.

A Blended Sense of Values

Typical karaoke students were born around the time of World War II and were brought up in the postwar educational system. Such a background led them to nourish a blended sense of values. Postwar teachers stressed the egalitarian, individualistic, and participatory orientations that constitute a democratic sentiment, reflecting modern Western trends. At the same time, they taught traditional Japanese values of friendship, cordiality, cooperation, and discipline.[32]

Harmony, cooperation, and solidarity are important values in which Japanese adults have been educated before, during, and after their school years.[33] They believe in established values such as conformity, compliance, and cooperation. Collectivity and group consciousness have been significant factors in determining people's ideas and behavior in

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[31] Interview (1999).

[32] William K. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 14.

[33] Thomas P. Rohlen, *For Harmony and Strength* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1974).

Japanese society. In most phases of Japanese daily life, group-focused behavior is more appreciated than individual-focused behavior, which is sometimes considered selfish.

On the other hand, the Japanese agree with the importance of newer values, such as freedom, equality, and individuality. A participatory orientation emphasizes association rather than authority and encourages an individual's critical attitude toward power and any form of collectivity. It leads one to challenge older patterns of hierarchical authority in the family, the work place, the community, and the polity.[34] Such an education has made Japanese adults develop the feeling that group life is not absolute, and that it may in fact rob them of their spontaneity and freedom. Actually my informants sometimes told me that their past lives were restrictive, boring, and banal. Realizing that each individual is different and worthy of his/her own lifestyle, they are pursuing a way of life that fits them.

Naturally, a conflict between traditional and contemporary values exists in people's minds. Many of the karaoke students I observed who are in their 60s, or over, believe that teachers should be respected and therefore behave with a sense of loyalty toward them. Mr. Osa said, "I don't think that Mr. Tomita is a great teacher, but since he is our teacher, we should follow his instruction." Ms. Shimizu said, "To be frank, I don't care for 'teachers,' but teachers are teachers and should be respected after all." In spite of their fidelity to their instructors, however, they don't suppress their individual desire to sing in any other place, and that drives them to study with other teachers as well. Although karaoke students are free in their choice of tutors, in reality they usually feel they are being unfaithful to their original teacher and attend other institutions secretly.

My data shows that more than one-third of karaoke students are affiliated with more than one karaoke group. This is a significant contrast with traditional forms of *naraigoto*, where students are discouraged from attending other schools due to the distinctiveness of school styles. Ms. Kubo, a *nagauta* instructor, told me, during an interview in 1998, about the teacher-student relationship in traditional *naraigoto*, based on her experience of *nagauta*. To study *nagauta* with more than one teacher is difficult because each teacher has his or her own style. *Naraigoto* is to study the teacher's style, and so if students study one style, they cannot study

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[34] Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan*, p. 178.

another style.[35] Teachers can easily tell whether their students are studying, or have studied, *nagauta* in other places, and to be dedicated to one school requires maintaining an unflawed relationship with the teacher.

Karaoke *Naraigoto* as a Tool for Individual Goals and Social Dependency

Many karaoke informants told me that they spent most of their time at their home or workplace but wanted to change their lifestyle. They study karaoke because that is how they believe that they can make their lives more worthwhile. Some students have a genuine interest in singing, and to them, studying karaoke itself is their objective. Others regard karaoke as a means to realize other goals. Older businessmen, made to feel segregated by retirement, regain a connection to the world through karaoke *naraigoto* and feel that they are still a part of the community.

During my fieldwork, I heard many informants comment on karaoke as a tool for participating in the social world. Ms. Takeda said, "I am a regular housewife. Before my husband died ten years ago, I didn't go out for *naraigoto*. But after his death, I began studying karaoke at the senior citizen home. I had never imagined that singing karaoke would be such fun." Ms. Minami also emphasized social integration as her objective for studying karaoke. "Particularly, I enjoy chatting after lessons with friends. For example, Mr. Nomura is knowledgeable and teaches me many things – karaoke, economics, politics, and even cooking. It is also fun to accompany Mr. Hosono. He has a sense of humor and makes us happy."

Karaoke students' objectives are varied and fall into several categories in terms of goals, including those who:
1) integrate socially and make a change in daily life
2) release stress and maintain physical and mental health
3) become better singers and hope to be socially recognized through their participation.

The human network of the *naraigoto* helps the members greatly in attaining individual goals. There are also specific reasons why Japanese adults study in a group. Some Japanese think that they can gain necessary skills, knowledge, and insight more easily by working with their teachers and friends. Some think that the learning they seek includes not only the

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[35] Watanabe, "Japanese Adult Learning," p. 318.

personal acquisition of skills and knowledge, but also a worldly connection, social integration, and a sense of physical and mental health. Some people find it easier to continue their studies in a group rather than to study by themselves. Involvement with others gives them joy, stimulation and even a sense of obligation, and their bond with others helps them continue their learning.

Since people usually do not expose their romantic feelings, this is not clearly expressed in my karaoke quantitative data. However, I assume that some people are looking for romance because I occasionally heard gossip about students in search of relationships. From a financial viewpoint, it is helpful for learners to study in a group. Regional centers provide local residents with good equipment at reasonable costs and group study makes reservations easier. Individual recitals are also simpler and less expensive as a group activity. Generally speaking, my informants are affiliated with a karaoke group because they think that the individual benefits are best achieved by studying in a group.

Thus far, I have argued that for Japanese adults, attaining individualized goals through karaoke learning and developing an appreciation of individual expression serve as the driving force for karaoke *naraigoto*. Thus, there is little doubt that private time, individual expression, and self-fulfillment are a significant part of Japanese adults' lives. The amount of individual action, creativity, originality, and other forms of individualism in Japan probably have been underestimated by outside observers. Nevertheless, the perception that Japanese are experiencing an increasing sense of individualism is pervasive among the Japanese themselves.

This emphasis on the individual, however, is not an imitation of the individualism of the West, which is based on the independent action of each human being. Individuals are more interdependent in Japanese society, therefore the group is indispensable. Japanese adults apply individual interests and benefits to collective contexts to amplify them. In this sense, karaoke *naraigoto* is an innovation by Japanese adults to make use of a group context.

Individual self-interest is the basic motivating force of human behavior, [36] and Japanese adults, men or women, young or old, are

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[36] Harumi Befu, "A Critique of the Group Model of Japanese Society," p. 39.

interested in self-expression. Personal expression blooms in a group environment in newer forms of Japanese adult learning. This is a successful reconciliation of individual expression with social dependency. This learning system closely meets Japanese adults' drive to make their lives more pleasant, meaningful, and rewarding. Such a development is highly valued at this point in history, when a great amount of attention is being paid to the individual in Japan.

Implications of this Study

What does karaoke *naraigoto* mean in a larger Japanese cultural context? A significant number of students have quit traditional forms of *naraigoto*, and the number of karaoke *naraigoto* students is on the rise. [37] This shift implies that Japanese adults are reluctant to confine themselves to a group which limits their individualized behavior, believing that individual performance adds meaning and enjoyment to their lives. The number of temporary workers who forsake full-time employment has been increasing in Japanese society, and this current phenomenon is related to the issue of karaoke learning. These temporary workers are called "*furi-ta-*," which is a combination of "free" and "part-timer." Typically *furi-ta-* are engaged in sales jobs like convenience store clerk and limit their working hours. According to the estimate in the labor force white paper, this number has increased about threefold over 15 years, from about 500,000 in 1982 to 1.51 million in 1997.[38]

One reason for this increase is that high school graduates have had a hard time finding jobs due to the ongoing economic depression. However, a more fundamental reason is derived from the characteristics of *furi-ta-,* which uniformly claims that they want to keep themselves free from social restrictions to seek what they want to do. They are more concerned about their personal growth and individual satisfaction than

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[37] *Nihonjin no gakushū*, pp. 54-55. Nationwide surveys on Japanese adult learning were conducted by NHK (the Japanese National Broadcasting Company) in 1982, 1985, and 1988. The findings of the surveys reveal that traditional forms of *naraigoto*, such as *min'yō*, tea ceremony, and flower arranging, are losing practitioners.

[38] Hideo Shimomura, "Chōsa kenkyū kara mita furi-ta-" [Free-ter Observed from Survey Research] *Gendai no esupuri: Furi-ta-* [Contemporary Esprit: Free-ter] 427 (Tokyo: Shibundō, 2003), p. 32.

public and social events; hence they are individualistic. Japanese adults, whether at work or off, young or old, all search for an environment that minimizes social constraints and maximizes the attainment of individual goals. In this sense, the phenomena of *furi-ta-* and *naraigoto* have the same root.

William K. Cummings wrote a book in 1980 entitled *Education and Equality in Japan*. His prediction about the Japanese society twenty years from now is very impressive:

> The new individualism does not mean a rejection of group participation; rather, it seems to involve a new orientation to the group. The group is viewed as a collection of individuals, each of whom is seeking self-fulfillment. A group is appreciated insofar as it is responsive to individual needs. In contrast, a group that imposes rigid and nonnegotiable demands on its individual members is disliked.[39]

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[39] Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan*, p. 197.