

**ENIGMA VARIATIONS: REASSESSING  
THE KÔBAN**

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## **Enigma Variations: Reassessing the *Kôban***

*by*

**Christopher Aldous & Frank Leishman**

### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to illuminate the origins and evolution of the *kôban* system which remains something of an enigma to many Western criminologists and to others an uncritically accepted exemplar of community policing and reintegrative shaming practice. It contends that claims of Japanese police 'uniqueness' have been significantly overplayed and that a reassessment which focuses more on the evolution of the *kôban* and no policing 'universals' may reveal interesting similarities with Britain and elsewhere.

## Introduction

Japan's nation-wide network of some 6,500 urban police substations (*kôban*) has gained international currency as something of a by-word for all that is best in community policing. The *kôban*, with its reassuring red lamp (*akai montô*) has been the subject of countless celebratory articles, papers and books, frequently written by commentators who, in the words of Patricia Steinhoff (1993), are all too often looking for 'answers for America' and invariably they 'find' them. A relatively recent example came from Michael Janofsky of the *New York Times*, in a syndicated article reprinted in the *Guardian* (30 August, 1995), which refers to the *kôban* as an 'intimate window on the world' and states that 'the cosy *kôban*, Japan's answer to community policing, may be small but its potential is great - as America is discovering'. Such articles, which are typically ahistorical and frequently 'counter-intuitive', perpetuate a somewhat enigmatic image of the Japanese police and the reasons cultural and otherwise for Japan's famously low recorded crime rates.

After a prolonged period in which the police were regarded domestically and internationally as a repressive arm of the state, in the 1970s and 1980s, in both official and academic accounts, the Japanese police had come to be 'reinvented', and an aura of celebration began to permeate discussions of crime and policing in Japan (Aldous and Leishman, 1997, 1999). The focus for analysis seems to have shifted from surveillance to service, from state control to local responsiveness, and from dealing with disorder to keeping communities safe. Looming large over this period is the figure of Professor David Bayley whose work was pivotal in raising international awareness of the *kôban* and in securing its reputation as a kind of community policing exemplar. Bayley (1982) even went so far as to suggest as an ideal type, a distinctively 'oriental' model of policing, characterised by the kind of low level service-type interactions which have become synonymous with *kôban* and the archetypal avuncular *omawarisan* stationed at them. In our reinvention period, Japan becomes for Adler (1983) 'a nation not obsessed with crime' and is famously likened by Bayley (1976) himself to 'heaven for a cop'. This 'reinvention' reading still provides the basic frame of reference in the West not just for journalists such as Janofsky, but also for criminologists, including those interested in the potential application of Professor John Braithwaite's (1989) influential theory of reintegrative shaming, which developed in large part from a consideration of Japan as seen through the *kôban*'s 'intimate window'.

In this paper we propose to examine critically the Japanese police enigma, centred on the *kôban*. Firstly, we illuminate the models behind the 'myth' of the *kôban* as an institution focused on service and community policing by exploring its origins and evolution. Secondly, we challenge some of the myths that have grown up around this reinvented model of the *kôban* by addressing three fundamental propositions which surprisingly, Western criminologists have seemed reluctant to consider. What emerges in both cases is that claims of police uniqueness have been exaggerated.

## Enigma variations

### 1. *The model(s) behind the myth*

As has been mentioned, positive, sometimes surprisingly uncritical, appraisals of the Japanese police system amongst Western commentators since the 1970s have generally highlighted the *kôban* as the key to Japan's apparent success in law enforcement. The force of these arguments tends to be greatly weakened by a tendency to downplay the importance of the social environment in which *kôban* are located and, perhaps more importantly, a reluctance to explore its historical origins and development. Due regard for the historical context of the *kôban* and indeed the larger police system that it has come to represent, illuminates purposes other than the social service function that has come to dominate the celebratory thesis of our 'reinvention' period. By contrast, Yoshio Sugimoto (1997) is at pains to stress the importance of the *kôban* as a means for 'close surveillance on the private lives of individuals' despite its international reputation as 'a way of reducing crime rates' (Sugimoto, 1997, p. 250). Such critical appraisal of the *kôban* can be more readily reconciled with the history of the Japanese police system than the more laudatory and often ahistorical accounts, often found in the West. For that reason it is more convincing, not least because the structure and ethos of police systems tend to be peculiarly resistant to change, 'endur(ing) even across the divides of war, violent revolution and shattering economic and social change' (Bayley, 1976, p. 370). Thus, there is good reason to be sceptical of those interpretations amongst historians and social scientists who would argue that Japan's police system was truly 'democratised' in the wake of defeat in 1945 and Occupation by the US. The history of the modern Japanese police must be traced back much further than 1945, to the 1870s and 1880s, when a police system was established along Western lines: in other words to the original 'model', or more accurately, models.

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868 Japan's new rulers set out to catch up with those Western powers, whose superior strength was underlined by the 'unequal treaties' they had imposed on Japan. One of the more demeaning provisions of these treaties was that of extraterritoriality, whereby foreigners who committed crimes in Japan would be tried and punished according to the laws of their own country, the implication being that Japan was not sufficiently 'civilised' to be entrusted with prosecuting foreign nationals. Searching for suitable Western systems of criminal justice to emulate, the Meiji statesmen initially drew heavily on the French model, anticipating in particular the likely benefits of a policing set-up that was 'famous,...highly centralised, ...performed a wide range of administrative functions (including preventive policing and political surveillance)...' (Mitchell, 1992, p. 2). An active political role for the new police was the key requirement for a new regime anxious to consolidate its position and beyond that determined '...to impel Japan into the modern world by the creation of an effective national government' (Bayley, 1985, p. 69). Thus the establishment of a civil police system lay at the heart of the Meiji project, performing three crucial roles: helping to project the image of Japan as a modern, civilised nation, by implication in the Western mould; guaranteeing internal security in the early decades of the new regime; and, interestingly, enabling Japan to contemplate joining the ranks of the great powers. This interest in imperial expansion

comes across clearly in a report of 1873 written by Kawaji Toshiyoshi, the architect of the new police system:

‘The police are to protect good citizens and nurture the active force of a country. For this reason, those who desired to make their imperial powers glorious and extend their territories paid attention to these facts, Napoleon was one of them. To cite a more recent example, Prussia has been able to annex surrounding countries and display her glory over the world, because her police are capable of preserving peace within and around the country and exploring the internal condition and circumstances of foreign countries. Even the great power of France has not been her match because of this aptitude’ (Sugai, 1957, p. 2).

Kawaji’s sentiments were fully in accord with other members of the Meiji oligarchy, a small group of around 15-20 decision makers (Hackett, 1982, p. 243). They reflected above all a concern with consolidating and firmly entrenching the new government’s position, ensuring that it was able to hold its own both domestically and internationally. Calculations of great power status are also revealed in Kawaji’s indirect reference above to Prussia’s decisive defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

The attention paid to the Continental European model can be explained above all by the Meiji oligarchy’s determination to ensure that its writ ran throughout the country, that its political reach extended to every town, village and hamlet. The necessary precondition for such a blanket police presence covering the whole country was a high level of spatial dispersion of police personnel. Hence, the crucial importance of the neighbourhood police box - the urban *kôban* or rural *chûzaisho* - which has come to epitomise Japanese policing practices. However, just as its chief function and purpose have perhaps been misunderstood, so too have its origins been over-simplified. Essentially, the process by which concentrations of policemen were dispersed throughout the country by means of police stations and boxes consisted of at least two stages. The first stage incorporated the establishment of a metropolitan police force, modelled on that of Paris, in 1874. As Tokyo differed from Paris in term of its layout and administrative partitioning, it was seen fit by 1875 to have three levels of policing (district headquarters, stations and police boxes) subordinate to central headquarters rather than just the first two as in Paris (Westney, 1982, p. 326). Interestingly, the idea of a police box (*hashutsujo* or *kôban*) came indirectly from England: ‘The police box was in effect a consolidation of the beat system, a dominant feature of policing in Paris and other European cities. The beat had originated with the London police, and in 1854, when the Paris police reorganised, it took the London system as the model’ (Westney, 1987, pp. 55-56).

Perhaps the impact of English policing practices was more direct than this, given that the Japanese had already encountered them in Yokohama, a city in close proximity to Tokyo. From July 1859 foreigners were entitled to reside in Yokohama, and in 1867 a native police, established there in 1860, gave way to a joint British and French force, headed by an Englishman. From 1870 to 1872 ‘Yokohama’s Japanese patrolmen were wearing a semi-Western uniform with the English word “Police” painted on their

helmets and on their paper lanterns' (Leavell, 1984, p. 31). From 1871 until the establishment of the *Keishichô* in 1874, Tokyo was policed by means of a patrol system (*rasotsu*) that owed much to the example of the English bobby (Katzenstein and Tsujinaka, 1991, p. 38). Also, throughout the Meiji period the *Keishichô* followed the lead of the London police in not carrying firearms - in both cases the baton was the principal instrument of enforcement, even after 1882 when Japanese patrolmen were permitted to wear swords (Westney, 1982, p. 328). All this demonstrates that English influence was perhaps more important in the early years of the new police system, particularly regarding the establishment of 'beat' policemen and police boxes, than has previously been recognised. Of course, influences from Continental Europe, particularly France, were more significant in terms of the system's overall structure and *raison d'être*, but these must not be allowed to obscure a complex process of change and adaptation that owed much to open-minded policy makers and, of course, changing circumstances. Regarding the former, perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the Meiji oligarchs was their flexibility and eclecticism.

As for circumstances, these had a direct bearing on the development of a modern police force beyond the new capital to other cities and towns and from there into the rural areas (the second and third phases of spatial dispersion). The key events in this regard were the outbreak of a serious rebellion in Satsuma in 1877 (*Seinan sensô*) and the emergence of the freedom and people's rights movement (*jiyû minken undô*) as a serious threat in 1881. These developments accelerated the centralisation of policing and brought stronger political controls. The positive trend towards greater standardisation of police forms and practices throughout the country, signalled by the promulgation of the Administrative Police Regulations (*gyôsei keisatsu kisoku*) in 1875, was evidenced by an emergent network of police stations (*keisatsusho*) and branch stations (*keisatsu bunsho*) by the end of 1877. In Okayama prefecture the number of police substations increased from 40 in 1876, when dispersion formally began there, to 44 on 10 February 1877 (just days before the outbreak of the Satsuma rebellion), the expansion occurring outside the prefectural capital. However, in March 1878, by which time the threat of widespread insurrection had passed, the number of branch stations throughout Okayama prefecture was reduced (Leavell, 1975, pp. 118, 134, 138). This shows that the process of spreading and diffusing police power began fitfully, reflecting the political instability that attended the humbling of the former samurai ruling class.

1881 represents a turning point in several respects. Largely as a result of pressure exerted by the freedom and people's rights movement, the government decreed that a constitution and national assembly would operate from 1890. This was followed by the establishment of a new police post - *keibuchô* (chief inspector) - that ensured tighter control of prefectural police. A key agent of standardisation and centralisation, the *keibuchô* enforced national police regulations and 'in connection with political cases...took orders from the Home Ministry' (Mitchell, 1992, p. 3). In October 1881 the Jiyûtô (Liberal Party) was founded by Itagaki Taisuke, a figure derided by Yamagata Aritomo as a subversive in 1879 (Bowen, 1980, p. 287). Four years later, Yamagata, now Home Minister (1883-90), called for harsher laws to contain the threat posed by political parties, without which 'it will prove hopeless to attempt to achieve the goal of preserving the independence of our imperial nation' (quoted in

Bowen, 1980, p. 287). Such anxieties and predilections caused Yamagata to be drawn to the Prussian model, 'to turn his eyes to Germany' (Obinata, 1987, p. 84). German police officials, most notably Wilhelm Höhn of the Berlin police, assisted Yamagata in strengthening the existing police structure. Höhn, who worked in Japan from 1885 to 1891, lectured on subjects relating to police practice and administration at the national Police Officers' Academy and advised the head of the Police Bureau, Kiyoura Keigo. In this latter capacity, Höhn toured police jurisdictions from Aomori prefecture to Kagoshima and, expressing the need for more effective surveillance, recommended a wider diffusion of police power (Obinata, 1987, pp. 83-86; Tipton, 1990, pp. 41-43; Westney, 1987, pp. 77-80). As a result, a new two-tiered structure of policing (police station/branch station and residential police post/*chûzaisho*) was established throughout rural areas, 'making it possible for the central government rapidly to reach into the smallest village to enforce its laws.' This mesh of surveillance typified 'a government deeply suspicious of any activity which might be interpreted as injurious to the state' (Hackett, 1971, p. 104). Indeed Höhn conjured up the image of a 'snail's feelers' (*katatsumuri no shokkaku*) - alert and sensitive to any danger - as a metaphor for the neighbourhood policeman (Obinata, 1987, p. 87).

'In 1930, at its peak, the Japanese police system consisted of 1,207 police stations, 4,847 police boxes and 14,324 residential police boxes' (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 51). It is clear that the police box, whether in the urban or rural context, was seen as the state's grass roots agency, ensuring that Japanese people were properly mobilized behind their government's policies and that political activity was effectively monitored. These safeguards were particularly important in the face of rapid socio-economic change. The fact that the process of industrialisation was so compressed in Japan made its potential for disruption all the more explosive.

Indeed, the twentieth century opened with the so-called 'era of popular violence', beginning with the Hibiya riot of 1905 (marked by the destruction of 70% of the capital's *kôban*), and concluding with the rice riots of 1918 (Gordon, 1988, p. 141). These crowd disturbances then gave way to 'the post-World War 1 surge in labour organisation and popular dissatisfaction', causing officials in the Home Ministry (*Naimushô*) to rethink policing methods, the belief being that more sensitive, less intrusive policing might weaken political opposition. Interestingly, again, 'an English model stood out as the direct inspiration during 1919 and 1920' for 'an internal campaign to democratize the police...' (Garon, 1987, p. 89). Matsui Shigeru, director of the Police Training School and a keen reformer, stated that 'Our Imperial Police have sinned in their excessive role as a political police. This has unquestionably obstructed the progressive development of other police functions [including social policy]. Did not the same thing happen to the police of [Imperial] Russia?' (Garon, 1987, p. 89).

Matsui's views were expressed in the context of a debate between reformers and conservatives within the police establishment, essentially between advocates of English and Continental European styles of policing respectively. The debate highlights the diverse origins of the Japanese police - the mix of foreign (and of course native) influences - and the running tension between two visions of policing, one emphasizing the police as agents of the state, monitoring society from

neighbourhood police boxes, the other portraying them as public servants, always on hand to assist those in need. Matsui Shigeru's reference to the police of Imperial Russia, extinct in 1920, was typical of a sense of profound unease affecting reformers and conservatives alike.

Despite his concerns, the political powers of the police were increased in 1925 with the passage of the infamous Peace Preservation Law. This coincided with the passage of the universal male suffrage bill, and represented 'a counterweight with which conservative forces sought to buttress the emperor system and a capitalist economy' (Katzenstein and Tsujinaka, 1991, p. 37). From the late 1920s the network of *kôban* (and rural *chûzaisho*) served as crucial local agencies for surveillance and control, swiftly alerting such elite groups as the Special Higher Police (or 'thought police') to sources of political opposition and resistance. The police became more intrusive, more repressive and more determined than ever to ensure order and compliance in the face of Japan's increasing isolation. As Carol Gluck explains, 'during the years of militarism and increasing state control in the 1930s the content and apparatus of state ideology reached an intensity that required police enforcement and culminated in the "spiritual mobilization" for war' (Gluck, 1985, p. 279).

Revisiting the origins of the Japanese *kôban* system thus reveals a complex, if rapid, period of policing evolution and adaptation, which may serve to counter some contemporary myths and misconceptions.

## 2. *The myths behind the model*

As we noted in an earlier paper (Aldous and Leishman, 1997), the 'reinvented' image of policing in the 1970s and 1980s approximates very closely to the *bokuminkan* (Good Shepherd) ideal of Chinese mythology. It is an image which the Japanese police officials themselves have been assiduous in cultivating, and which Western celebrants have succeeded in consolidating. We would suggest that a number of 'myths' about policing and law enforcement in Japan have been allowed to develop or at least go relatively unchallenged. Let us briefly consider three propositions in this connection.

### Proposition 1

'The Japanese police, through the *kôban* system are uniquely in touch with the public'.

The linkage of Japan's apparently low crime rates with the cosy neighbourhood orientation of the *kôban* has become a commonplace and often uncritically accepted assertion. The official celebratory thesis has long emphasised the image of the friendly *omawari-san* (literally 'honourable Mr/s Go-Around') patrolling on foot and regulation pedal cycles, visiting households, shops and companies on their patch and maintaining uniquely close tabs on the local community. The official line was that all premises were visited twice a year (*junkai renraku*). However, as Professor Murayama's (1990) study of patrol policing suggested, this system has fallen into desuetude. Changing family and work patterns, not to mention increased social

mobility and urban anonymity have made it difficult for *kôban* officers to retain the continuity of contact that was possible in earlier decades. Though it is probably still fair to say, as Sugimoto and others have argued, that the *kôban* remain rich repositories of data on the local population, their efficacy in preventing and detecting crime, has recently been called into question. A series of distressing child murders in the late 1980s and early 1990s, followed by a post-war peak in 1993 of 1.8 million recorded penal code offences, concentrated many minds on the criminogenic consequences of Japan's 'thinning' social relations. In this connection, a senior official of the National Police Agency conceded in 1995 that:

'..the demise of the sort of society based on shared territorial bonds has undermined the effectiveness of the *kôban* system. Also, given the concern for protecting the privacy of individuals, it is now difficult to maintain the same kind of close relationship that used to exist...'. (Cited in Leishman, 1999, p. 115).

Against this backdrop, a raft of reform measures aimed at 'rebranding' *kôban* as 'community safety centres' has been put in place in an apparent attempt to regenerate community involvement in policing in an age in which 'the number of households irresponsive to door-to-door inquiries is on the increase' (NPA, 1993, p.13). Efforts also appear to be underway to raise the status of patrol work within the police organisation, to improve co-ordination between adjacent groups of *kôban*, and to augment *kôban* resources through the re-employment of retired officers as '*kôban* counsellors' (Leishman, 1999, pp. 115-6). However, it is rather ironic that, in the same year as writers like Janofsky were emphasising the positives of the *kôban* model for Western consumption, the Japanese police, shaken by the activities of the Aum cult and other instances of social fragmentation, were seriously considering adopting more centralised and covert crime investigation methods such as those employed in Britain, as a means of compensating for the perceived limitations of the *kôban* as a preventive policing institution (Aldous and Leishman, 1997). So, a century on from the image conjured by Höhn, it would appear that the 'snail's feelers' are no longer as sensitive to danger as they once were.

### Proposition 2.

'Japanese police have a uniquely different core philosophy and values from their Western counterparts'

Throughout the 1990s greater attention has been focused on such controversial areas of Japanese police practice as interrogation and the rights (or relative lack thereof) of suspects during pre-trial detention. Though their empirical research was conducted during our 'reinvention' period, the relatively recently published findings of Professor Setsuo Miyazawa (1992) and Professor Masayuki Murayama (1990) paint a more subtly textured portrait of policing than does our dominant celebratory account. Both authors hint at the existence of a police occupational culture in Japan that prizes 'crime fighting' over community service and which - just like cop culture in other parts of the world - exhibits Jerome Skolnick's (1966) core characteristics of suspiciousness, internal solidarity coupled with social isolation, and moral and social

conservatism. This finds a degree of corroborative support in Walter Ames's excellent (1981) observational study in which he likens the Japanese police to a 'total institution', commenting perceptively on the social distance between 'police society' (*keisatsu shakai*) and the wider public in Japan. Ames also draws attention to a kind of samurai machismo particularly associated with specialist police work: 'the image.. is not only strongly masculine, it is almost elitely so'(ibid, p. 155). In recent years, there has been growing debate about the extent of rape and sexual assault against women in Japan and the capacity of Japan's (96% male) police establishment to deal effectively and sympathetically with cases reported to them. Recently another senior official of the National Police Agency publicly acknowledged serious shortcomings in the police's handling of sexual assault investigations when he noted:

'We were guilty of invading the victim's privacy and submitting them to a second victimization. We had a stereotyped negative image of the kind of woman who was likely to be raped, a loose immoral woman, which we now know to be wrong. We regret it and we are trying to improve'.  
(Cited in Aldous and Leishman, 1999, p. 29)

The National Police Agency's commitment to improve victim support and other aspects of police investigative practice is to be welcomed. However, experience from Britain in the 1980s would suggest that success in implementing reform will require a significant shift in rank and file police attitudes. The problem of 'cop culture's' resistance to policy-makers' efforts to change, could be inferred from Ames's detection of a ripple of resentment between regular Japanese police officers and the high-flying administrative elite, a finding redolent of the American writers Ianni and Ianni's (1983) two cultures of policing, the 'street cops' and the 'management cops'.

Though our second proposition would seem to capture a common underlying assumption about the *kôban* 'model' of our reinvention period, one can recognise in more critical accounts of Japanese policing many points of similarity with the wider established sociological literature on cop culture, a finding which clearly has implications for contemporary theorising about communitarianism and crime control.

As the current vogue for 'restorative justice' would suggest, Braithwaite's brand of 'republican criminology' has had considerable influence in shaping the contemporary criminal justice agenda. Braithwaite's theory as set out in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, posits that shaming in Japan occurs in an optimal way: potent enough to prevent repeat offending, but not sufficient to stigmatise and push offenders into subcultural deviance and social exclusion. However, as Miyazawa (1997, p. 201) has noted

'Braithwaite (1989, p. 61-5) cites examples of reintegrative shaming practised by the Japanese police which were reported by Bayley (1976). However, on the basis of our own research (Miyazawa, 1992), we do not believe that the police are more interested in reintegrating the suspect into society than in finding evidence to justify longer detention and heavier penalties, nor that the police actually provide assistance to the suspect to make it easier for him or her to return to normal life'.

Miyazawa is similarly sceptical about the ‘reintegrativeness’ of other Japanese criminal justice and social institutions, and more recently Nelken (1998) has suggested that Braithwaite’s thesis may have relied on a rather idealised reading of Japan, one which we would suggest corresponds closely to the *kôban* of our ‘reinvention’ period.

### Proposition 3

‘Japanese crime statistics are more reliable indicators of police efficiency than those of other jurisdictions.’

For most self-respecting criminologists, the proposition that recorded crime statistics *per se* are reliable indicators of anything, let alone police efficiency, would generally be regarded as quite preposterous! There is, after all, an extensive literature on the shortcomings of official statistics and clear-up rates and the well-known police strategies for massaging them in a number of different directions (see, for instance, Coleman and Moynihan, 1996). Nevertheless, our reinvention image is predicated to a significant degree on the notion that Japanese crime statistics are the product of singularly “scrupulous record-keeping” (Finch, 1999, p. 501). As Finch notes in his excellent critical review, this counter-intuitive claim is frequently backed up by an assertion made in the first edition of Bayley’s *Forces of Order* to the effect that there had been no suggestions of falsification. However, Finch draws our attention to the case of Chiba-ken in the 1980s, where it was discovered that police stations in that prefecture were under-recording reported crimes in order to inflate the clear-up rate. Given the observations of the centrality of ‘crime-fighting’ to the Japanese police ‘mission’ (Murayama (1990) refers to *kensûshugi* among patrol officers, while Miyazawa (1992) alludes to the pressures of *zenken kaiketsu* faced by detectives), it would be remarkable indeed if the *Chiba jiken* were an isolated phenomenon.

Regrettably, Japan does not conduct systematic victimisation surveys on the scale or with the regularity of other jurisdictions and there is thus little objective evidence with which to compare and contrast the official crime count with patterns of public reporting and police recording behaviour. However, there is growing recognition of substantial ‘dark figures’ of crime in Japan, particularly in areas where - universally - reporting by victims is low, such as white collar crime, domestic violence and sexual assault. A recent study by Kitamura *et al* (1999) also suggests that child abuse in Japan ‘is no less prevalent than in Western countries and that most abuse cases are unidentified and therefore go unrelieved by intervention’. Interestingly, the National Police Agency’s own research group on victim assistance (*higaisha taisaku*) reached not dissimilar conclusions, observing that ‘police tend not to interfere in domestic matters’ and ‘there is a strong tendency to keep domestic problems inside [the household] and to avoid those outside knowing about them’ (Keisatsu no ‘higaisha taisaku’ ni kansuru kenkyûkai, 1996, pp. 14-16). There is thus good reason for questioning, as Fujimoto and Park (1994) have done, the degree to which Japan’s low crime reputation can be taken for granted as an accurate reflection of overall risks to public safety in Japan. We would certainly endorse Fujimoto and Park’s conclusion that ‘it is now time for researchers to look beyond cultural uniqueness and to probe the phenomenon of Japan’s low crime rates in a scientific and empirical manner’

(ibid., p. 121). Notwithstanding this emergent realism surrounding the interpretation of recorded crime rates and the extent of hidden crime in Japan, Finch is correct to conclude that ‘much of the statistical evidence can be viewed as misleading or questionable, particularly when it is used to make international comparisons’ (ibid. p. 510).

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to challenge the favoured image of Japanese policing amongst Western commentators that centres on the *kôban* as an essentially unique policing institution. The main contentions being advanced are that

- (1) once placed in its proper historical context, the *kôban* can be seen more clearly as primarily an agency of surveillance, rather than one concerned more with social service and
- (2) international regard for the *kôban* has more to do with nostalgia and easy ‘answers for America’ than with critical evaluation of the evidence.

Indeed, the enthusiasm for *kôban* transplants as a means of catalysing the development of community policing would seem also to extend to police institutions and societies making transitions from conflict to democracy. It is known for example, that officials working to reform police in both South Africa and in Northern Ireland spent time studying arrangements in Japan. But Professor Mike Brogden of Queen’s University, Belfast for one is sceptical about the *kôban*’s suitability for transplantation:

‘There is no evidence that the Kôban actually results in decreased burglary rates. In reality, there is no mobilization of local people or communities in the Anglo-American community policing sense. The police are unwilling to reveal much about themselves to community...The Kôban is often staffed largely with elderly officers, those who have failed in other sections, and young probationers. In sum the Japanese model may suffer, in the Western commentaries, from a confusion between rhetoric and practice’. (Brogden, 1999, p. 179)

It would further appear that Western admiration for the *kôban*, often ahistorical, uncritical and counter-intuitive as it is, may to a significant extent have convinced Japanese police officials of the uniqueness and merits of their own system - so much so, that in a period of major social upheaval, the *kôban* of our reinvention period has paradoxically come to be associated with a mythical golden age of policing.

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