

## To What Extent Are Japanese Aesthetics Asian? On the Self-Images of Modern Japan

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The aim of my paper is to present a general view of Japanese aesthetics. With an emphasis on the title of this panel discussion: "Diversified Asian Aesthetics," I would like to impart a framework within the characteristics of Japanese aesthetics with reference to Asian diversities for this discussion.

### 0. Establishment of the idea of "Asia"

For Asians, the idea of "Asia" was a foreign one. The word "Asia," which originated in Assyria, means etymologically the "region from which the sun rises." It was not until the 17th century that the Chinese and the Japanese began using the word "Asia." Namely, the Asians adopted this word from the Europeans. Moreover, in Europe, the word "Asia" already had a lot of connotations associated with it. Therefore, let me begin by considering how the idea of "Asia" was shaped in Europe.

#### 0.1. The Greco-Roman vision of "Asia"

The Greeks established the concept of "Asia." Plato contrasted Asia with Europe in various dialogues. Generally speaking, Plato's use of the word "Asia" is almost neutral, but in the *First Alcibiades*, he noted the inferiority of Europe (namely Greece) to Asia (namely the Persian Empire).<sup>1</sup> However, Aristotle's *Politics* changed the tone and determined the following European view of Asia: "Because the Asians are more servile in their nature than the Europeans, they endure despotic rule without any resentment."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the idea of "Asia" is not value-free, but has a negative connotation: servility.

The adjective "asiaticus" can be found in Roman rhetoric. It is in Cicero's later works that the word

"Asiatic" initially appears as a critical term.<sup>3</sup> In the latter half of the 1st century B. C., many Roman rhetoricians, following the "Attic" ideal, valued a simple and concise style, whereas those rhetoricians opposing this "Attic" ideal were called "Asiatic." Asiatic diction referred to a style full of bombast, which is peculiar to the rhetoricians from Asia Minor. This adjective, "asiaticus," shows the hostility of the Romans toward Asians, who were characterized by luxury and profligacy. However, it should be noted that in passing into the modern era, this historical background has been forgotten, and the word "Asiatic" is related to the Hebrew, in other words, to the style prior to the classical Greco-Roman.<sup>4</sup>

#### 0.2. The Christian conception of "Asia"

Let us move on to the Christian conception of "Asia."

In *Genesis*, the three sons of Noah are named: Shem, Japheth, and Ham. Although Shem, the elder son and the ancestor of Abraham, was blessed, Japheth, namely the second son, was doomed to be subordinate, and Ham, the younger son, was accursed.<sup>5</sup>

By the 5th century, these three races were already linked with three directions or continents: Shem with the orient or Asia, Japheth with the occident or Europe, and Ham with the meridional Africa. Augustine contrasted Japheth as a representative of the Gentiles or Christians with Shem as a representative of the Jews. In the Middle Ages, Asia was associated with Judaism. Figure 1 clearly shows the tripartite division of the world (Isidore of Seville (560?-636), *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, 1472). It is noteworthy that the Europeans in the Middle Ages called their

land Christianitas or Corpus Christianum, but not Europe.



**Figure 1.** Isidor of Seville. *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, 1472

### 0.3. The Modern idea of “Asia”

The establishment of the modern idea of “Asia,” which comprises not only of the Orient or Asia Minor, but the entire Asian continent, presupposes the establishment of the modern idea of “Europe.”

It is only by the end of the Enlightenment that the word “Europe” acquired its modern connotations. Friedrich Schlegel’s theory of Europe provides a typical example. In the “Introduction” to his lecture, *The History of European Literature* (1803/04), he argues that Europe is “both divided and combined in manifold ways” and is “the land of manifold, changeability, formability, and artificiality,” whereas Asia is the “land of repose” consisting of “various vast regions” “closed in themselves”: “Due to its abundance, Asia sinks in drowsy freedom and [...] is stiffened under the pressure of despotic politics.”<sup>6</sup> Following the Aristotelian tradition, Schlegel applies the word “despotic politics” to Asia. The idea of “Asia,” which lacks both an organic unity and historical development, prevailed in 19th century Europe. Neither Hegel nor Marx is free from this prejudice against Asia.

## 1. The establishment of the idea of “Asia” in Japan

### 1.1. The traditional Japanese world-view

How did the Japanese conceive Asia before the idea of Asia was introduced?

Generally speaking, the traditional Japanese world-view is based on Indian cosmology, according to which to the south of the central world-mountain called “Sumeru” (Sanskrit) lays the continent of “Jambu-dvipa,” the only continent inhabited by human beings. China is located at the northeast end of this continent, which represents India. Together with Buddhism, this Indo-central world-view was introduced via China into Japan. However, the Japanese modified this world-view and added Japan within it by insisting that the world consisted of three countries, namely India, China, and Japan (see Figure 2). Needless to say, this view was peculiar to Japan because it reflects the effort of the Japanese to map Japan on the periphery of the world map, which was made up by two huge countries.



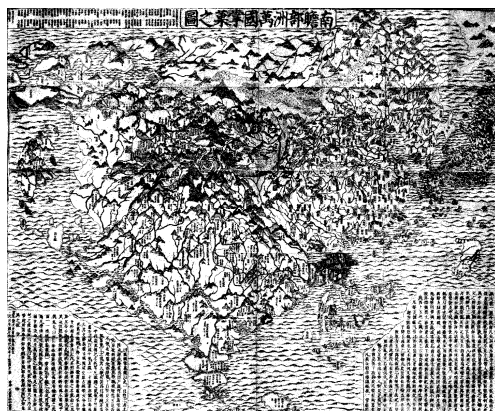
**Figure 2.** Map of Jambu-dvipa, ca. 1698 (Collection of N. Muroga) 138 x 154 cm

This was the underlying view prior to the encounter of the Japanese with the Europeans.

## 1.2. Introduction of the idea of “Asia”

Matteo Ricci (Pinyin: Li Madou, 1552-1610), an Italian missionary, introduced the word “Asia” to China. In his *World Map* of 1602, he described the Asian continent as “Asia” using phonetically three Chinese characters.

This *World Map* of 1602 greatly influenced Japan in the era of the shogunate. This means not only that the *World Map* acquainted the Japanese with the idea of “Asia,” but also opened their eyes to a world comprised of five continents. This is why the Japanese were conflicted by the traditional Buddhist world-view, which was that the world consisted only of India, China, and Japan. In the era of the shogunate, three types of world maps simultaneously existed: the traditional one, the western one influenced by Ricci’s *World Map*, and the western one imported from Holland. Figure 3, which is based on the traditional type but incorporates Europe at the northwestern end, clearly shows that the Buddhist world-view was forced to cope with Western scientific knowledge and remap Asia.



**Figure 3.** Map of Jambu-dvipa, ca. 1710 (Collection of N. Muroga) 121 x 144 cm

## 1.3. Call for “Leaving Asia”

The idea of “Asia,” which was bestowed to Japan from abroad, does not guarantee the socio-cultural unity of Asia. The Japanese only became conscious of “Asia” as a socio-cultural entity in the latter half of the 19th century. That is, in the era in which Japan was compelled into

modernization or westernization. Especially, the defeat of China in the Opium War (1842) and the opening of Japan (1854) led the Japanese to confront Asia. Most Japanese looked upon “Asia” as something behind in the history of civilization. Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835-1901) is a typical example.

Based on François Guizot’s *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (1824), Fukuzawa argues in his book, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (1875): “The peoples in Asia are constrained by their theocratic government, so that they lose their energy and fall into extreme servility.”<sup>7</sup> Presupposing Eurocentrism, Fukuzawa saw Asia through European eyes. Asia was, therefore, something from which Japan should free herself (see Yukichi Fukuzawa, *Argument for Leaving Asia*, 1885).

It is also in this era that “aesthetics” as a modern western discipline was introduced into Asia. In the 19th century, namely in the century of nationalism, the Japanese became accustomed to regarding Japan as a socio-cultural unity. This view also gave rise to a pair of concepts: “Japan and Asia” or “Japan and the East” as if Japan were not included in Asia.

## 2. Japan in the Sinitic civilization

### 2.1. Japan on the periphery

Generally speaking, Japan belonged to the Sinitic civilization, based on Confucianism and Buddhism. Because Japan was on the periphery of the East Asian cultural area with China as its centre, Japan devoted herself to importing, appropriating, and applying Chinese culture. Hence, the geographic environment of Japan has deeply determined her culture.

However, Japanese culture remained relatively independent. The first reason is a geopolitical one: Japan, which is an isolated island nation, has never been conquered by other Asian nations. Second, the lack of affinity between the Chinese and Japanese languages led the Japanese to invent their own peculiar system of writing, so that they simultaneously use two alphabets or scripts: namely, the Chinese characters and the Japanese ones. Furthermore, the Japanese language is

agglutinative, while Chinese is an isolating language. Therefore, the Japanese could graft Chinese nouns and verbs. Such a linguistic property also enabled Japan to keep her distance from China.

Taking China as her center, Japan has measured her position according to her distance from the center. Such duality underlies Japanese culture and it is this duality as the “weakness of subjectivity” that is often documented as a characteristic of Japanese culture; for example, by Augustin Berque (1942- ), a French Japanologist. It is also the reason why the field-dependent subject, and not the independent subject, is highly estimated in Japan.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.2. Japan as a “museum of Asiatic civilization”**

“Japan is the museum of Asiatic civilization.”<sup>9</sup> This well-known idea was pronounced by Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura (1863-1913) in his book, *The Ideals of the East*, which was published in 1903. Cultural treasures from Asia, namely from China, India, and Persia, which were lost in their original countries due to wars are present in Japan. The “Shosoin” treasure repository from the 7th century would be a good example. But why was Japan able to become the Asian “museum”?

“Light from the East (Ex oriente lux)”: this is verified only in the West. In the East, especially Japan, the reverse was the case; civilization always came from the West to the East. Because Japan was located at the eastern end of the Sinitic civilization, Japan, as an importer, could not be, or did not have to be, an exporter, and thus, Japan was able to build a “museum of Asiatic civilization.”

## **2.3. Multilayered structure of Japanese Culture**

Because Japan was an importer, often things, which belong to historically different eras and which could not co-exist in the cultural center, could co-exist in Japan. This “multilayered” structure of Japanese culture, which is why Japan is considered to be a “museum of Asiatic civilization,” is clearly illustrated by Tetsuro

Watsuji (1889-1960), a modern Japanese philosopher.

In his book, *Japanese Spirit* (1934), he argues: “One of the characteristics of the Japanese culture is that different moments lie in strata.” Watsuji takes an example: the “Tanka,” which is a “form of poetry completed 1200 years ago,” the “Yamato-e,” which is a “style of painting that dates from the 11th century, and the “No,” which is a “form of theatre established 500 years ago” all co-exist today “without changing their styles.”

This “multilayered” structure of Japanese culture is often attributed to the Japanese spirit or Japanese mentality. However, in my mind, it reflects the fate of the Japanese, who were, or still are, destined to be on the periphery. Because the Japanese imported Chinese culture, attention was almost exclusively paid to the products without regard to the process or context in which they were produced. It is due to this decontextualization that things, which cannot co-exist in their original context, coexist in Japan.<sup>10</sup>

## **3. Modern Japanese aesthetics and Asia – a case of Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura**

In the process of modernization or westernization, these characteristics of Japanese culture have not been extinguished. In the latter half of the 19th century, the Japanese freed themselves from the Sino-centric world-view and moved toward the Eurocentric one. In this section, I would like to focus on how modern Japanese aesthetics address modernization or westernization.

### **3.1. “Asianism” as reaction of Westernization**

In modern Japanese aesthetics, there are two antagonistic movements: one aimed at westernization by freeing itself from traditional Asian thought, while the other opposed westernization by innovating traditional Asian thought. Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura (1862-1913) is a representative of the second movement, which is often referred to as “Asianism.”

His book, *The Ideals of the East* (1903), was written in English during his stay in India and published in London. This is the first book written

by an Asian, which provides a systematic overview of Asian art. In this book, which is famous for its opening line, “Asia is One,” the Asian author, who has made the foreign idea of Asia his own, tries to legitimize Asia against the Great Powers.

During World War II, the Japanese military regime made use of the line, “Asia is One,” to justify the Japanese invasion and occupation of Korea, China, and other Southeast Asian countries. However, the original meaning of this line has nothing to do with such colonialism.

### 3.2. Unity and Diversity of Asia

The “Introduction” to *The Ideals of the East* is written by Nivedita, who appears to be Indian, but whose real name is Margaret Novel. Her “Introduction” clearly shows the intention of Okakura. As for Japanese art in the 9th century, Nivedita says:

[...] Mr. Okakura, in dealing with the subject of Japanese art in the ninth century, makes it abundantly clear that the whole mythology of the East, and not merely the personal doctrine of Buddha, was the subject of interchange.<sup>11</sup>

Nivedita and Okakura insist on a close cultural interchange between Asian peoples. Therefore, Asia does not consist of “various vast regions,” which are “closed in themselves,” as once pointed out by Friedrich Schlegel. The authors argue that such a European view of Asia reflects a distorted image of Asia.

Therefore it is worthwhile to make some effort to recall Asiatic peoples to the pursuit of those proper ends which have constituted their greatness in the past, and are capable of bringing about its restitution. Therefore it is of supreme value to show Asia, as Mr. Okakura does, not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life.<sup>12</sup>

As the phrase “the whole breathing a single complex life” shows, Okakura’s view of Asia is

based on the nondualism that he characterizes by the “spirit of living Advaitism.”<sup>13</sup> By the way, Okakura argues that Asia lost its original unity due to the “Musulman (sic!) conquest of India,” and thus, the Europeans regard “the whole East as but so many victims of an ‘arrested Development.’”<sup>14</sup> To follow up Okakura’s theory of the role of Islam in Asia, however, would take us beyond the scope of this presentation.

### 3.3. Historical Development of Asia

Furthermore, Okakura disputes the European prejudice that Asia lacks historical development.

As we have seen in 2.2, Okakura says that “Japan is the museum of Asiatic civilization.” The reason is that the “history of Japanese art” is “the history of Asiatic ideals – the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand-ripple as it beat against the national consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> In this museum, Asian art should be displayed historically. In other words, a systematic survey of Asian art presupposes the historical method:

The three terms by which European scholars love to distinguish the past development of art, though lacking perhaps in precision, have nevertheless an inevitable truth, since the fundamental law of life and progress underlies not only the history of art as a whole, but also the appearance and growth of individual artists and their schools.<sup>16</sup>

Based on Hegelian trichotomy “symbolic – classic – romantic,” Okakura reconstructs Asian art by dividing it into three stages, whereas Hegel himself allocates Asian art to the “symbolic” stage, which is overcome by the following Greek art. Okakura argues as follows: symbolic are the Chinese art of the Chou and Han dynasties (from 11th century B.C. to 220 A.D.) and the Japanese art from its birth to the beginning of the Nara era (ca. till the beginning of the 8th century); classic are the Chinese art of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and the Japanese art of the Nara era (the 8th century); while the Sung dynasty (960-1280) in China and the Ashikaga period (ca. 1400-1600) mark a new stage, i.e., “the Oriental Romantic ideal.”<sup>17</sup>

Here the question whether Hegelian trichotomy can be applied to Asian art may arise. However, what is important here is that Okakura, who was acquainted with Western aesthetics, contextualized Japanese art within an Asia that is simultaneously united and diverse. The reason why advocates of westernization in Japan often tended to convert to nationalism might have been that they lost sight of Asia. Okakura's argument still affords insight into our common topic: "Diversified Asian Aesthetics."

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *First Alcibiades*, 105B-C, 121A.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, with an English translation by H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1967), 249 (1285a 20).

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, 3, 43; 2, 95. See Art, "Asianism," in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, Tübingen 1992. 1: 1114.

<sup>4</sup> E. B. de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746). (Paris: Galilée, 1973), 226.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 10: 1-32.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Geschichte der europäischen Literatur. Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, München et al. 11: 4-17.

<sup>7</sup> Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (in Japanese) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1875), 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> See my paper, "Some Aspects of Japanese Aesthetics: How has it discussed 'Japanese Qualities,'" *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* 2 (1998): 63-80.

<sup>9</sup> Kakuzo Okakura, *Collected English Writings*, 3 vols. Tokyo: Kodan-sha, 1984. 1: 16.

<sup>10</sup> As for Watsuji, see my paper, "Die Entdeckung des Japanischen beim frühen Tetsuro Watsuji. Zur Hermeneutik der Kultur," *Jahrbuch für asiatische Philosophie* 1 (2006): 101-132.

<sup>11</sup> Okakura, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

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