

Culture, Civilization and Globalization : A Theoretical Approach to Japanese Studies

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会議概要（会議名，開催地，会期，主催者等）	日本の文化と社会の潮流 Understanding Contemporary Japan, インドネシア大学, 2010年10月5日-7日
page range	17-24
year	2011-11-30
シリーズ	インドネシア・シンポジウム 2010 International Symposium in Indonesia 2010
図書名(英)	Understanding Contemporary Japan
URL	http://doi.org/10.15055/00001218

Culture, Civilization and Globalization: A Theoretical Approach to Japanese Studies¹

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Introduction

Academically, the study of Japan in Indonesia has developed through a number of relatively distinct periods: Japanese language education (1950s and 60s), Japanology (1960s and 70s) and Japanese studies (1970s to the present). As an academic field, Japanese studies can be seen as a kind of area studies. Theoretical approaches in Indonesia start from a mono-disciplinary perspective, and have evolved towards inter-disciplinary perspectives. These individual disciplines cover the study of culture, literature, linguistics, history, economics, politics, sociology, as applied to Japan on its own and also to comparative studies of Japan alongside other places, in particular in comparison with Indonesia. In Indonesia, the approach taken in Japanese studies, especially in Japanese studies programs, originates from the theory of *nihonjinron*, which is an approach originating in Japan itself, from cultural anthropology or ethnography and intercultural studies.

In Indonesia, Japanese studies from the perspective of civilization have not yet gained the status of a separate field of inquiry, even though the term “culture” is often associated with “civilization” in scientific works. This occurs in conceptual contexts or definitions of civilization, which tend towards enlightenment or urban culture. This is found frequently in scientific works that have originated in the West from as far back as the Industrial Revolution (17th century). In Japan itself, the term “civilization,” as discussed by Fukuzawa Yukichi in works such as his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (Outline of a Theory of Culture), has caught the attention of scholars in Japan since the time of the Meiji Restoration. Here, civilization is treated with a focus on definitions of “enlightenment,” or values, or advances in technology that set societies, which possess it, apart from those that do not. Culture is seen as something that initially precedes civilization, but later co-exists alongside it. In Indonesian academic circles, this view of civilization as a kind of enlightenment is fairly strong.

As far as I am aware, there is not yet a study program dealing exclusively with the concept of “globalization.” Nor is there any particular focus on investigations of the concept implied in this term. The concepts of culture, civilization, and globalization do, of course, frequently appear in scientific

¹ Keynote paper delivered at the International Symposium on Japanese Studies: Understanding Contemporary Japan, held jointly by Nichibunken (International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto) and the Japanese Area Studies Program, Universitas Indonesia (UI), with support from the Japan Foundation, and the Japanese Study Center, UI, 5–6 October 2010.

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discussions, but they tend to be defined and treated in isolation.

At present, civilization, globalization, and culture each have their own distinct but separate theories, areas of investigation and research methods, and each has independently produced many significant findings. The question can therefore be asked, whether it would be feasible to put together a study program in which civilization, globalization, and culture were treated together, in one new supra-discipline. We can also ask the question of whether it would be possible to use such a new supra-discipline involving civilization, globalization and culture could be used as the theoretical foundation for new work in Japanese area studies? There is always the risk that even asking such a question as this might seem “sensationalist” to some, a mere ploy to grab attention but something without any substance academically, and therefore of no significance whatsoever.

Be that as it may, as a researcher in the field of Japanese history, I feel a sense of responsibility to invite my colleagues in the field of Japanese studies here in Indonesia to grapple with, and to discuss, issues in just such a forum as the present symposium. I have spent about thirty years immersed in Japanese studies and have experienced in so doing the warmest of emotions. I have, though, never had occasion to bring up for discussion in any depth, the topic being raised here, whether theoretically or as a sketch for a methodology that might underlie such a project of creating this new academic study program.

Among the thousands of essays and other writings, the dozens of theses, and several dissertations in the field of Japanese studies that I have come across, which have been authored by the Indonesian “Japanese Studies” school, the vast majority are based on, or borrow heavily from, scientific approaches and methodologies found in already well established and distinct branches of science, namely culture, literature, economics, politics, and the like. Their references come primarily from Western scholars of Japan, while references from Japanese scholars are rather sparse. In particular, we find few references to works published in Japanese, and very few based on field research.

I would suggest that we need to think seriously and deeply about the kind of theory that might serve as a basis for developing a comprehensive understanding of Japan. How can we approach this so that we move from where we are now, with Japan as an object of study, to a position where we can say that our research methods are truly reliable and valid and that the approach we are taking is independent and free from all kinds of subjectivity and bias?

1. The Approach from Culture and Civilization

Over the past ten years I have pursued research from a historical perspective in order to investigate or discuss culture, civilization and globalization in Japan.³ Thirty years ago, an ethnographer and ecologist, Umesao Tadao, made something of a breakthrough in developing the discipline of civilization studies. For him, civilization was not merely a concept that existed only within cultural studies, but was a distinct academic discipline in its own right. Umesao promoted the discipline of civilization studies in

³ See I Ketut Surajaya. “Jepang dalam Proto Globalisasi dan Dinamika Globalisasi Baru di Asia Pasifik” (Proto-globalization in Japan and the New Globalization Dynamic in the Asia Pacific), a monograph to be published in *Kumpulan Tulisan Guru Besar* (Writings by Professors), Faculty of the Humanities, Universitas Indonesia.

a number of academic works.⁴

According to Umesao, the relationship between culture and civilization was essentially synchronic, as for example in the following:

I propose to define civilization as the entire system of daily life, a system which includes various devices and institutions. Culture on the other hand, would designate the system of values held by those living within this whole system of civilization. Human beings always attribute meaning and spirituality (*seishinteki*) value to their devices and institution. Culture in this sense is a projection of devices and institutions into the spiritual dimension.⁵

By taking this stance, Umesao was suggesting that civilization should be studied with empirical research, rather than by taking a more philosophical approach.⁶ If civilization studies are to be developed as a scientific discipline, then it is essential that the phenomenon is treated as a system. First, it should be analyzed as a “synchronic system,” and the basis of this analysis should be elaborated from historical change.

In history, the study of systems represents a relatively new discipline, which has evolved since the end of WWII. The study of civilization from a historical perspective can be seen as taking a diachronic perspective. In this way, a theoretical treatment of civilization can rely on these two methodologies, making it comprehensive, multi-dimensional and holistic.

According to Umesao, there is a significant difference between “fabricated systems”⁷ and “scientific systems.” While fabricated systems have concrete goals, scientific studies do not, and are more abstract in nature. In other words, scientific systems exist, but without concrete goals. A good example of a system without a goal is the “ecosystem.” If ecosystems have goals, then we would have to ask the question, “Do ecosystems possess concrete, practical goals?” An analogous question might also be leveled at civilization. Does civilization possess any practical meaning? According to Umesao, the answer to this question has to be that the goal of a system is “self-generating development,” which is a tautology, and because of that, cannot be said to possess any real meaning.⁸

⁴ Academic writings of Umesao Tadao including *Bunmei no seitaishi-kan* (An Ecological-Historical Approach to Civilization, 1974), “Seitaikei kara bunmeikei e” (From Ecological System to Civilization System, 1980), *Gengogaku no bunmei-ron* (A Linguistic Theory of Civilization), *Chikyū-jidai no Nihonjin* (The Japanese in the Global Age, 1980), *Kindai Nihon no bunmei gaku* (Japanese Civilization Studies in Today’s Japan, 1984), *Kindai sekai ni okeru Nihon bunmei* (Japanese Civilization in the Modern World, 2000), and others.

⁵ Umesao Tadao, in keynote address, “Japanese Civilization in the Modern World,” given at the opening of the first symposium on “Japanese Civilization in the Modern World: Life and Society,” 28 February to 7 March 1983, in *Senri Ethnological Studies*, vol.16 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ Fabricated systems (original: *sistem rekayasa*)

⁸ Umesao, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Ethnographic or cultural anthropological approaches have well-established methodologies that can provide powerful descriptions and analyses of the myriad cultures and societies that exist. However, my question is this: Can we reliably use these methods or tools to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the paradigm of civilization in general? While the methods of cultural anthropology are obviously well suited to the task of elucidating “cultural patterns” such as in the work of Ruth Benedict and her associates, we might think twice about applying them for the purpose of analyzing contemporary civilization. I believe that we need to search for another way of investigating civilization. The problem that we all, including myself, face is finding a suitable methodology for this task.

2. Civilization Studies and Globalization

Progress in science has led to the invention of technological innovations in transportation, telecommunications and computing. Together, they have triggered the post WWII information technology revolution and subsequently globalization. Definitions of “globalization” found in scientific works commonly refer to the rapid flow of goods, people, information, communication, business transactions and money, without being limited by geography, communities, peoples, and nations.⁹ These processes and phenomena can be described by the term “new globalization” or the paradigm of a new civilization. I use these terms to assert that I avoid discussions that involve similar phenomena brought about by the communications revolution in the immediate aftermath of WWII whose sub-systems were transportation, telecommunications and tourism (the so-called Triple T System).

An overview of globalization that uses a cultural approach as a new paradigm such as this can not, in my opinion, produce valuable scientific results. This is because changes in the dimensions of such detail, complexity and inter-relatedness, can not be captured by the independent methods of cultural studies, political science, psychology, economics or sociology. Only an approach that we might call “the science of civilization” can do this. On the other hand, this must remain somewhat hypothetical as the concept of “the science of civilization” still needs further discussion, and the methodologies it might use have still not been worked out or tested. Umesao, among others, has suggested that comparative studies among civilizations would be a useful way of going about such a project. I consider that the questions which Sepp Linhart has raised about Umesao’s idea are valid:

What is to be compared in this comparison? Is a region to be compared with a region, a period to a period, or a developmental stage to a developmental stage? To what discipline should civilization studies belong? Should it be a part of ethnology or apart of historiography as a total discipline? Or is the only way to realize this discipline to take an interdisciplinary approach?¹⁰

⁹ I Ketut Surajaya. “National Policies and Globalization.” In *TELSTRA (Telaah Strategis)*, no. 32, January–February 1995 (Jakarta: Lembaga Pertahanan Nasional).

¹⁰ Sepp Linhart. “The Family as a Constitutive Element of Japanese Civilization.” In *Senri Ethnological Studies*, vol.16, op. cit., pp. 51–59 ; Josef Kreiner. “The First Symposium on Civilization Studies.” *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Up to now, no one has come up with an adequate answer to these questions posed by Linhart. I would like, however, to attempt to throw some light on them, based on my own research. The study of civilization can be accomplished using a system-based approach. Civilization can be understood as a system in itself. Consequently, it is highly likely that the view of civilization as a system, and also that civilization can be described in the context of a system theory. This can result in a description of the characteristics, interactional processes, and modes of operation of civilization itself. In other words, this would be the description and analysis of a system and how that system works. Consequently, if we can use the definition of civilization put forward by Umesao, “the entire system of daily life, a system which includes various devices and institutions,” then globalization would represent a process of civilization which gives rise to a huge and complex system. A large-scale or global system comes from historical processes that take place over long periods of time, and which have both synchronic and diachronic aspects. So, analogously, approaches to the study of globalization can be performed using approaches based on civilization.

3. Japanology and Japanese Studies

Development and change in trends of the study of Japan can be understood from their history. At the end of the 19th century, the field of Japanology emerged in a number of countries in Europe. These studies mostly dealt with philology and the Japanese language, and most of the scholars had experienced living in Japan. Japanology and Sinology also took root in the USA. Most of these studies were based on sources in the Japanese and Chinese languages. The emergence of Japan as an important economic power in the 1960s saw the emergence of Japanese studies, which for the most part took a socio-cultural approach. Studies in Indonesia also tended to take this approach.

In the post WWII period, a number of competing schools of thought could be seen:

- a. Japanology¹¹ (*Nihonron*) emerged because of a “crisis of cultural identity,” and as a reaction against the dominance of Western culture since the Meiji Restoration. According to Harumi Befu, the cultural identity crisis was the trigger for the birth and development¹² of the rapid ascent of Japanese studies, which have been called Japanology.¹³ A number of concepts connected with *Nihonron* emerged, for example: *Nihon Bunkaron* (The theory of Japanese Culture), *Nihon Shakairon* (The theory of Japanese society) and *nihonjinron* (The theory of Japanese national character). All of these are concerned with the idea of a Japanese identity. I prefer to render *Nihonron* as Japanology since it better accommodates the idea of its association with praise for Japan’s success.
- b. Japanese studies emerged as result of the admiration and respect that was acknowledged in much of the world for Japan’s achievements in various areas, such as the economy, technology, science and

¹¹ *Nihonron*: alternative translation “A theory of Japan”

¹² As an example, a number of works oriented towards *Nihonron* include: in the field of business, Hazama (1971), Inuta (1977), Iwata(1978), Clark (1979), in the field of sociology and psychology, Chie Nakane (1967), Takeo Doi (1971).

¹³ See Harumi Befu. “Civilization and Culture: Japan in Search of Identity.” In *Senri Ethnological Studies*, vol. 16., op.cit. pp. 59–79.

culture. Examples of works in this vein include Edwin Reischauer's *The Japanese*, and Ezra F. Vogel's *Japan as Number One*, which appeared in Indonesian under the title *Jepang Jempol* (Thumbs up for Japan). Japanese studies tended to take a socio-cultural approach to their investigations.

- c. The study of the Japanese language, and of aspects of Japanese culture such as Japanese cuisine, has attained a huge popularity in many parts of the world, and this includes Indonesia. This has been spearheaded by the acceptance of such things as Japanese cartoons (anime), comics (manga), popular music (J-pop) and fashion trends, all of which are well-known to, and admired by, young people here. These cultural phenomena have all been motivators for young people who decide they want to learn Japanese.

I believe that we can conclude from a review of the various standpoints from which Japan is studied that Japan is indeed an extremely interesting object of study. The approaches based on *Nihonron* and those using a socio-cultural approach have been popular, and they continue to produce a rich vein of work up to the present.

4. Japanese studies and the study of civilization

In this section I would like to share my worry about whether the references that I have made in my own scientific work meet desirable academic standards. I would be glad to hear your opinion on this issue during the symposium. In a paper I delivered recently, "Japan in Proto Globalism and New Emerging Globalism in the Pacific Region."¹⁴ I received some positive feedback on my proposals for a "holistic" approach. This was gratifying as they were still at a stage where they could be called a sketch, or an outline that was being used as lecture notes.

I wrote the article with the intention of a civilization-based approach in studying globalization in Japan. However, on reflection, I began to think that the article had in fact leant too heavily on history, culture, religion and civilization over a rather long time scale, during which Japan might be characterized by its relations with its geographical neighbors. It might be possible to criticize the article as being a historical outline of Japanese civilization, covering all the ground in between its proto-historical emergence, up to modern and contemporary times.

Investigating proto-globalization, I begin with the interaction of the Japanese in the Kofun period with Japan's neighboring peoples, China and Korea. This is followed by the introduction of Buddhism via the Silk Road which stretched all the way to Europe by both land and sea routes. We can identify similarities in the artifacts that were produced in the Neolithic and Bronze ages, despite variations due to community and geography, but there is still quite a bit of disagreement about how these artifacts were made, what their exact functions were, what spiritual significance they had. I personally favor the view that the differences resulted from differences in the ecosystems. The differences indicate cultures. Meanwhile the similarities indicate civilizations. The field of archeology can tell us a great deal about the

¹⁴ Paper presented at the Second International Conference of the Japanese Studies Association in Southeast Asia, "Japanese Studies in Southeast Asia: The Past, Present and Future," Hanoi, 22–23 October 2008, hosted by the Vietnamese Academy of the Social Sciences.

people who produced and used these artifacts, their function, spiritual meaning and a great deal more about their daily life.

We can identify the similarities and differences from systems such as sociology, religion, politics, education, economics, and so on. Anthropological studies in particular are helpful. In the development and decline of civilizations, literary works, fine art, architecture and so on can provide excellent data. If we want to evaluate patterns of change over time, then the study of history is appropriate as its methodology is properly attuned to the kind of detail we need and to phenomena such as time, events, systems, thought, ideology, and agency, or even ecology and science. History of course cannot deal with the finest detail, and this can sometimes be problematic. This is one “blind spot” for this discipline.

Suzuki Sadami from Nichibunken proposes three scientific approaches for the study of Japan which he refers to as *gakujutsu sōgōka* (collaboration, or synthesis of sciences), and is composed of studies of a new life view, the study of genre or the history of ideas and the study of history in Imperial Japan.¹⁵

The study of a new life view can be done in collaboration with the humanities and the natural sciences. This involves the integration of ecology with contemporary problems of ethics, with theories of diversity, theories of ecosystems and theories of cloning. This field is still not integrated, however, with the study of civilization. Genre studies or the history of ideas are extremely important, according to Suzuki, because genres, taken as a whole, can form study systems or scientific knowledge. The study of the history of Imperial Japan has a strong relation with the history of area studies in East Asia, Korea, China, the countries of South-East Asia, and even parts of the world such as America, Italy, Britain, Germany, and Russia.

I consider Suzuki’s proposals to fall within the study of civilization. By employing a number of scientific disciplines as described above, it should be possible to study civilization properly. I would like to pose the question, however, of whether the combination of the methodologies mentioned constitutes in itself a methodology of civilization. I would be happy to hear the opinions of colleagues on this matter, because I personally have my doubts.

Despite this, I still feel that there is some merit in using both inter-disciplinary and comparative approaches to the study of civilization. This would involve the relativism of civilization, or help to improve mutual understanding among different civilizations, and even help to promote a supra-regional spirit of understanding.

A number of nagging questions remain. For example, should we attempt more of a partial integration of different strands of science or a more holistic one? Would it be useful for scholars from different disciplines to sit down together as a team with the intention of working out what civilization studies should be like? How, also, should we go about researching civilization as conceptualized here? I believe that questions such as this would best be answered if we did so together. The different branches of thought could inform and enrich and also challenge each other, using a nihonjinron approach, which

¹⁵ See Suzuki Sadami. “Nihon kokugai ni okeru Nihon kenkyū no genzai, soshite gakujutsu sōgōka ni mukete no mittsu no teian” (Paper delivered at the 11th national seminar on Japanese Studies and the 4th congress of ASJI, Japanese Study Center, UI, 21–23 July 2005, pp. 1–10).

implies that Japan indeed is a unique, independent culture.

I believe that all cultures have their own uniqueness, depending on how they develop. Perhaps the study of civilization would help to throw light on the many unanswered questions that I still have about these matters.

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Depok, 20 September 2010