

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE JAPANESE CIVILIZATION

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Introduction

The theme of this symposium is “Japanese civilization.” Prof. Eisenstadt of Hebrew University has provided us with the central issues for discussion. Unfortunately, I have not had a chance, up to now, to review his work. I understand that he is one of the most prominent sociologists of this century since his *Political Systems in Several Empires* was published in 1963.¹ Based on his broad perspective in terms of space and time, he has recently published a voluminous work focused on Japan entitled, *Japanese Civilization* (1995).² Taking this opportunity, I have begun to read this book but, I hesitate to say, I have only read its introduction and a few chapters at this point in time.

As the subtitle of the book — “a comparative view” — indicates, it is a theory of Japanese civilization based on the comparative civilization perspective of world history. The book provides us with numerous grounds for discussion at this symposium.

In this lecture, I would first like to raise some ideas in response to his lecture, and then would like to discuss my own view about the originality of Japanese civilization.

(1) What are “Axial Civilizations”?

The central terms of his lecture were “Axial and non-Axial civilizations.” “Axial civilization,” according to Prof. Eisenstadt, is the term borrowed from the central concept, *Achsenzeit* in Karl Jaspers’ *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*.³

The term *Achsenzeit* refers to the revolving axis of world history. In the West, the birth of Jesus Christ was regarded as the axis of world history and his birth marked the start of the calendar year. Jaspers tried to apply this special axis, in the Western perspective, to a generalized axis among humankind.

Once we move our perspective from Europe to other parts of the world

1 London: Free Press of Glencoe.

2 Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

3 Munich: Piper Verlag, 1949.

around the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, however, the appearance of the bearers of philosophy and religion which are qualified to be considered an axis in world history — Buddha in India, Confucius in China — can also be easily recognized. Jaspers considers that *Achsenzeit* emerged around 500B.C. or 800-200 B.C.

What does the concept of Prof. Eisenstadt's "Axial civilization" refer to? I believe that it refers to the civilizations which appeared in the *Achsenzeit* of Jaspers.

Prof. Eisenstadt defines Axial civilization as those "civilizations that crystallized during the period from 500B.C. to the first century of the Christian era, or even to the rise of Islam."⁴

(2) Japanese civilization is not an Axial civilization

Does Japanese civilization belong to the Axial civilization category? According to Prof. Eisenstadt, it does not. I have no objection to recognizing Japanese civilization as non-Axial civilization.

I believe that Japanese society started to transform itself as a civilized society with the systematic introduction of Chinese civilization around the year 700. The arrival of a civilization with distinctive characteristics, which could be later termed "Japanese civilization", had to wait yet another 200 years. Therefore, the emergence of the Japanese civilization is far from the period as defined for the Axial civilizations.

(3) Is European civilization an Axial civilization?

I would like to pose a question regarding the European civilization that was sustained by the so-called Germanic peoples and others located in the area north of the Alps. Does this belong to the Axial civilization?

Prof. Eisenstadt stated in his book that the Axial civilizations occurred in Israel, Greece, Iran, China, India, and Islam. He did not list the area of Europe located north of the Alps.

This list is similar to that created by Jaspers. Great reformation of religious and philosophical thoughts occurred in the areas located roughly in India, China and the West (*Abendland*). For the West, Jaspers only included Palestine and Greece, and not Europe north of the Alps.

What is more interesting to point out is Jasper's conception of people who

⁴ Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization*, p.13

were not in these three areas of the *Achsenzeit* (India, China, and the West). They were either isolated or came into contact with the spiritual radiation of these three civilizations. Jaspers particularly points out that the Germanic peoples and the Japanese exemplify those who received the spiritual radiation of these three civilizations.⁵

As I mentioned previously, Japan came under the influence of Chinese civilization around 700. This period is not too far from the time when the European civilization, sustained by the Germanic peoples and others, emerged with the influence of Greco-Roman civilizations. In terms of the period of the emergence of these two civilizations, therefore, European civilization, together with Japanese civilization, should be also termed non-Axial civilizations.

However, Prof. Eisenstadt regards Japan as the first and the only non-Axial civilization to modernize.⁶ He, therefore, does not regard European civilization to be a non-Axial civilization.

I would like to have a clear response from Prof. Eisenstadt regarding this point, as I believe it to be crucial to a true understanding of the central concepts, “Axial” and “non-Axial” civilizations.

(4) “Axial civilization” and Japanese civilization

Jaspers paid attention to the *Achsenzeit*, as he was strongly impressed with the synchronistic emergence of philosophical and religious thoughts in the three different regions of the world, all within a limited span of time.

Prof. Eisenstadt points out a characteristic shared by these Axial civilizations. That is, “a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders.” This characteristic presents us with a meaningful orientation that enables us to contrast the concepts of Axial and non-Axial civilization as analytical tools to study comparative civilizations.

Prof. Eisenstadt perceives the characteristics of Japanese civilization to be opposite from this characteristic of Axial civilizations. However, when he expresses it as a non-opposite form, he refers to settings “defined in some combination of primordial, sacral and natural terms”— a phrase he uses repeatedly.

I would like to see some explanations about the above mentioned phrase illustrated by some concrete examples.

5 Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Chapter 1.

6 Lecture note, p.3.

(5) Japanese civilization vs. European civilization

So far, I have briefly summarized my reactions to some of the main points made by Prof. Eisenstadt. I would now like to discuss my own views.

First of all, I would like to discuss how we can perceive Japanese and European civilizations. As I mentioned earlier, I suspect that Prof. Eisenstadt considers Japanese civilization to be non-Axial and European civilization to be Axial. However, I myself, consider both Japanese and European civilizations to be non-Axial civilizations.

The difference between the two civilizations does not lie in the contrast between Axial and non-Axial civilizations. Rather, I believe that the difference between the two civilizations should be considered in terms of the ecological environments in the respective areas, cultural differences in the group of people who sustain the civilization, and the difference between which Axial civilizations served as the model for the non-Axial civilization.

We can say that the Axial civilization Japan was greatly influenced by was the Chinese civilization transmitted by the Tang dynasty. For Europe, it was mainly the Greco-Roman civilization, transmitted by the Roman Empire.

It should be noted, however, that the Chinese civilization introduced to Japan, via the Tang dynasty, transmitted Buddhist philosophy which was born in the *Achsenzeit* of India; the Greco-Roman civilization, introduced to Europe via the Roman Empire, had already fully absorbed Christian philosophy born in the *Achsenzeit* of Israel.

I would now like to focus on the relationship between Chinese and Japanese civilizations. I want to discuss what kind of changes were brought about in the process of the “Japanization” of the Chinese civilization that was transmitted. Furthermore, I would like to investigate whether any form of originality emerged through these changes.

(6) From the “introduction of Tang civilization” to the “creation of Japanese civilization”

A systematic introduction of the Chinese civilization started in Japan around the year 700. Basic components of civilization — including Chinese characters (*kanji*), law (*Ritsuryo*), scholarship (Confucianism) and religion (Buddhism) — all came into Japan around this time.

The national title “Nippon” (Japan) and the unique sovereign title “Ten-no” (emperor) were born during this period as well. The first completion of the code of laws and ethics, *Taihoritsuryo* or Code of Taiho (701) and the first

official history, *Nihonshoki* or Chronicles of Japan (720) also appeared during this period. Thus the early eighth century marks the first step of Japan's start towards civilization by borrowing from the achievements of the Chinese civilization.

I put forward that from the "introduction of Tang civilization" which occurred during the eighth to the tenth centuries, as well as the period from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, served as the period for the "creation of Japanese civilization".⁷

Thus the theme of my lecture, the originality of Japanese civilization, is realized about one century after the transfer of the capital from Nara, the ancient capital where Tang civilization was introduced, to Kyoto.

(7) Chinese characters (*kanji*) and the Japanese syllabry (*kana*); Chinese poetry (*kanshi*) and Japanese poetry (*waka*)

Let us take as an example, the history of the characters introduced from China. Just like Europeans used Latin without any modification, Japanese adopted the Chinese language written in Chinese characters as it was introduced. This custom continued to be practiced among intellectuals until a much later time. Eventually, *kana* or Japanese syllabry was invented based on *manyo-kana*. The syllabry consists of phonetic symbols derived from Chinese characters, and with these symbols Japanese could be freely written by mixing both Chinese characters and Japanese syllabry.

I believe that it was around the year 900 when the Chinese characters were modified to fit Japanese needs and a new usage of Chinese characters — a mixture of Chinese and Japanese characters used to express Japanese — evolved. This very period directly coincides with the period of change which occurred from the time *Tang* civilization was introduced until the creation of Japanese civilization. It is during this transitional period that Japanese poetry, a type of poetry which can be considered to be a unique genre in Japanese literature began to flourish with the appearance of the *Manyoshu*.⁸ The first anthology was compiled by Imperial command, and this is known as the *Kokin-waka-shu*.⁹ The poems were written with a mixture of Chinese and Japanese characters and these were accompanied by beautiful blush-paint illustrations.

Wakashu, a collection of Japanese verse, took a completely Japanese style.

7 Ueyama, Shunpei *Nihonbunmei-shi no Koso* (The Conception of the History of Japanese Civilization), Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1990.

8 A collection of verse from earliest times to 760.

9 An ancient and modern collection of Japanese poetry — 905 selected.

Well before the start of the first imperial collection of Japanese poetry (*Kokin-waka-shu*), Chinese verse had been compiled by Imperial command from the beginning of the ninth century. The Imperial collection includes *Ryoun-shu* (c. 814), *Bunka shurei-shu* (c. 818), *Keikoku-shu* (827).

These Imperial collections of Chinese verse were created at the beginning of the ninth century when the capital was transferred from Nara to Kyoto. This was the golden age of Chinese poetry and writing. Emperors, themselves, also produced many Chinese poems. Saga Tenno, for example, who maintained a close relationship with Kukai (founder of the *Shingon* Buddhist sect) who was more than competent in Chinese poetry and writing, produced 22 poems for the *Ryoun-shu*, 34 for the *Bunka shurei-shu*, and 38 for *Keikoku-shu*.

However, this situation changed from the beginning of the tenth century when the first Imperial collection of Japanese poems was produced. Henceforth no more Chinese verse were commissioned for collection by Imperial command, but Japanese poems were collected from the first *Kokin waka-shu* until the midst of the fifteenth century, with the compilation of the *Shin-zoku-Kokin-Waka-Shu* (c. 1446) being the last. Altogether these collections of Japanese verse were to form twenty-one Imperial collections.

While the Chinese verse was all Chinese characters, Japanese poetry appeared to be sea of Japanese syllabry upon which floated the odd one or two Chinese characters. Japanese syllabry (*hiragana*) originally developed as a much easier and practical syllabry derived from an abbreviation of Chinese characters. *Kokin-waka-shu*, therefore, commands a significant place in history as the first official collection of poems expressed with both Chinese characters and Japanese syllabry.

(8) From Japanese verse to tales (*monogatari*)

Amongst the many types of expression of culture that form the matrix of Japanese civilization, I believe that Japanese verse represents most typically what can be called Japanese characteristics. This genre developed through a long history of oral tradition and was refined again through the written form of *Manyo* syllabry in the seventh and eighth centuries. The turning point of Japanese verse was *Kokin-waka-shu*, which appeared at the beginning of the tenth century, as verse written with a mixture of Chinese characters and Japanese syllabry. Once it reached this stage, the function of Japanese verse expanded its breadth of expression to give birth to the genre of *Uta-monogatari* — e.g. *Ise-monogatari*, *Yamato-monogatari*, *Heichu-monogatari*. This form of short tales centering around Japanese poetry, which appeared in the *Uta-monogatari*, formed the link

to the next stage of literary expression which was the long and voluminous novel *Genji-monogatari* or the Tales of Genji, a work that encompasses the characteristics of the psychological novel. Included in this voluminous work are tales which center around 795 Japanese poems. It is not difficult to trace this literary style back to the *Uta-monogatari*.

If I were asked to point out the classics of Japanese literature which could be said to represent the Japanese civilization, I would definitely list the *Tales of Genji*. Arthur Waley was the first to translate this book into English and make it known to the world. He also wrote a short book entitled, *The Originality of Japanese Civilization* (1929). At the beginning of this book, he writes that there is no originality in Japanese civilization yet goes on to provide examples which negate this statement. The examples he uses include *Manyoshu*, *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no Soshi*), *Noh*, picture scrolls (*Emaki*), and *Ukiyoe*. In addition to these examples, he assesses the *Tale of Genji* as being a 'most original work'.

(9) From official history to historical tales

Here I would like to pay particular attention to the introduction of history and law which came to Japan around the year 700 when Chinese civilization, in general, was introduced.

It is a well known fact that as part of an official and national project, China has continually produced a series in historiography which ultimately became the largest in the world. The series is known as both the *Twenty-four orthodox histories* (*Er shi si shi*) and the *Twenty-five orthodox histories* (*Er shi wu shi*) starting from *Shiji* to *Ming Shi*. These are official histories of China. In the case of Japan, the first official history, *Nihon-shoki* or Chronicles of Japan, was completed in 720.

This was modeled after the official history of China, and naturally, as the first official history of Japan, (written at the beginning of the eighth century) the *Nihon-shoki* also used Chinese writing. This tradition continued until the compilation of the sixth chronicle, *Sandai Jitsuroku*, in the beginning of the tenth century. Japanese historians call this series of Japanese official histories the *Rikoku shi* (Six National Chronicles).

The last volume of these chronicles, *Sandai Jitsuroku*, was completed in 901 which coincides with the period which I perceive as the turning point from the "introduction of Tang civilization" to "the creation of Japanese civilization."

The compilation of the Japanese historiography, however, did not end here. Just as the Imperial collection of verse switched from Chinese to Japanese verse, the style of historiography also changed from Chinese classic style to the

historical written style of Japanese. It is interesting to note that this new style of historiography is thought to have been modeled after the *Tale of Genji*, a classic recognized by many to represent Japanese civilization.

Some major pieces of historical tales include *Eiga monogatari*, *O-kagami*, *Ima-kagami*, *Mizu-kazami*, *Masu-kagami*. *Eiga Monogatari* (Tales of Power and Glory) is recognized as a prototype of the historical tales. This work is believed to have been completed around 1030 by Akazomeemon, a female poet who lived around the same time as Murasaki Shikibu, the author of the *Tale of Genji*.

Thus, the national chronicles started from the beginning of the eighth century, appearing in the Chinese classic style, but began to disappear at the beginning of the tenth century. However, they nevertheless reappeared at the beginning of eleventh century, taking on the form of a Japanese style of tales. The birth of this new style was inspired by the *Tale of Genji* which nobody doubts to be a proof of the originality of Japanese civilization. Therefore, we can thus suggest that the historical tales also demonstrate the originality of Japanese civilization.

(10) *Taiho Ritsuryo* (Code of Taiho)

From the view of the history of civilization, I hypothesized that the time frame for the beginning of Japanese civilization is marked by the year 700. I call the period before the year 700 'pre-civilization', and post 700 is labeled as the 'period of civilization'. Further I divide the post-700 period into two — the civilization of agricultural society (the first civilization) and industrial society (the second civilization). In this lecture, my focus has been only on the period of agricultural society, and in particular, 700-900, the period of the introduction of Chinese civilization, and 900-1200, the period of the creation of Japanese civilization.

The title of my lecture "The originality of Japanese civilization" may appear to refer only to the tenth century and after. However, the construction of conditions which gave rise to the originality in the latter period had already taken place in the eighth century when the introduction of Chinese civilization was taking place. In the latter part of my lecture, I would like to make this subject the topic of my discussion.

Here, I would like to focus on law and history (as I mentioned earlier) the roles of which were, at least, indispensable in the preparation of forming a civilization during the period of agricultural society. Dealing with law and history will throw light upon the structural and cultural aspects of the nation state.

As mentioned above, civilized society on the Japanese islands began in the

eighth century. The terms 'Nippon' and 'Tenno' also came into use during this century to refer to the state and its head. Moreover, the Code of Taiho was finalized as the first legal code in 701 and the first official history *Nihon-shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) soon followed in 720. Let us first start with the Code of Taiho.

I want to emphasize that when the Code of Taiho is compared with the law system of the Tang dynasty we see that the Japanese code is indeed a copy of the original structure present in the Chinese code. However it is also obvious that there are important differences in design. For example, Tang dynasty had three independent ministries under the emperor (*Zhong shu sheng*, *Men xia sheng*, and *Shang shu sheng*) while the Japanese combined all these functions into one ministry, the *Dajokan* (Cabinet) supreme political office representing the emperor. This change can be viewed as a contrast between the Chinese dictatorial tradition and the Japanese tradition of limiting the power of Tenno to ceremonial functions. This can be viewed as an original development on the part of the Japanese. I argue that this became the basis for the Tenno system in Japan.

The Heian period, after the ninth century, gave rise to a unique political system called *Sekkan seiji*. This is an original political system in which the function to represent monarchical government became hereditary by a specific genealogy. However, the Regent (*Sessho*) and the Chief Imperial Advisor (*Kanpaku*) had to be ministers or ex-ministers as the leading members of *Dajokan*. The Cabinet (*Dajokan*) system, based on the Taiho Code, was a necessary prerequisite for the *Sekkan* system.

From the point of view of Japanese civilization, the parallel developments of *Sekkan* politics and native literature (*monogatari* literature) are important indicators of the originality of Japanese civilization.

(11) *Nihon-Shoki*

The Taiho Code, as discussed above, was modeled after the codes of the Tang dynasty — but with innovation concerning crucial elements. A similar line of argument applies to the *Nihon-Shoki*. While *Nihon-Shoki*, the first official history, follows the construction and style of *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, the first and the second official histories in China, its central element has undergone some innovation. For example, let's look at *Shindai-ki* or the volumes about the genealogy of the gods described in the first two of the fifteen volumes of *Nihon-Shoki*. The *Nihon-Shoki* consist of two parts, the first part being the first two volumes concerning the genealogy of the gods and the latter thirteen volumes which begins with the volume on Yamato Iwarebiko (Jimmu Tenno) and continues on to

describe the subsequent imperial generations. This structure is similar to the first Chinese chronicle, *Shiji*. The depiction of imperial generations in *Nihon-Shoki* is equivalent to that found in the *Qin shi huang benji* (biography of *Qin shi huang*), the sixth volume of *Shiji* and after. Moreover, the genealogy of the gods in the *Nihon-Shoki* is similar to the pre-*Qin benji* or the period before the chronicle of the Qin state (i.e. the first to fifth volumes of *Shiji*).

In contrast to the genealogy of the gods in *Nihon-Shoki*, most of the major characters in the pre-*Qin benji* are rulers located with their feet firmly planted on the ground rather than painted as gods on high. Their activities are limited to the realms of this world, in other words, exclusive of heaven and hell. This contrasts with the Japanese idea of the Emperor emanating from the gods. Yet, in spite of this difference, I consider the two to be equivalent as they share an important point. That is, they both provide the structure for the ideology which is found in both official histories.

The ideology which I perceive here is that of *ge ming* (now translated as revolution) which is evident in *Shijing* or *Shujing*, which are parts of the basic five classics. *Ge ming* is not "revolution" as it is known in contemporary use. The word comes from a Chinese classic referring to the "shift of Heaven's mandate." The mandate of Heaven (*Tian ming*) is the order of god. Therefore, *ge ming* refers to the change of dynasties when the lord of heaven (*Shang di*) orders the emperor to retreat to make way for the new emperor who has been ordered to create the next dynasty.

The existence of god can be perceived in various parts of the *Shujing* and *Shijing*, which provided important materials for pre-*Qin benji* volumes in the *Shiji*. Thus, the order of the lord of heaven, whose existence is firmly believed, is thought to legitimize the reign of the dynasty and the change of emperor. I believe this thought became firm during the change from the Yin dynasty to the Zhou dynasty. That is, during the time Zhou Gong (who was the ideal figure of Confucius) was active (c. 1000B.C.). The *Zhou benji* in *Shiji* depicts the scene in which Wu Wang (the first emperor of Zhou dynasty) cuts off the head of the last emperor of Yin dynasty from his corpse after his suicide. Wu Wang, as a leader of a rebel army, overthrew the Yin dynasty with military power. However, Zhou Gong, the brother of Wu Wang, developed the idea that the shift of the dynasty from Yin to Zhou occurred not because of military power but, in fact, was dictated by the mandate of heaven: i.e. the lord of heaven gave up on Yin who lost the moral appropriateness to remain as a son of heaven (emperor), and therefore ordered Zhou to rule the whole land. This political ideology is clear in *Duo shi pian* in the *Shujing*.

The Japanese *Ritsuryo* state established at the beginning of the eighth

century, with the introduction of Tang civilization, was centralized and bureaucratic. This *Ritsuryo* state was based on the public law system of *Ritsu* (criminal law) and *Ryo* (administrative law). By carefully examining the *Da tang liu dian*, written by emperor Xuan Zhong huang di, we find that to look for the prototype, of *Ryo* we must go as far back as *Zhou li* (zhou order), a scripture produced by Zhou Gong. Therefore, Zhou Gong is believed to be the founder of the political ideology of *ge ming*, the principle for dynasty shifts in the *Ritsuryo* system. Moreover, he brought about the principles for administrative organizations in the system.

Thus far, I have summarized the gist of the political ideology, *ge ming*, as it can be understood from the volumes prior to *Qin benji* in *Shiji*. What type of political ideology do we then find in the Japanese equivalent writing about the age of the gods in the *Nihon-Shoki*?

In China, the relationship between the lord of heaven (*Shang di*) and monarch of this world (emperor or *Huang di*) is extremely tense. If the emperor becomes morally corrupt, he will be punished by the lord of heaven and thereby forfeit his dynasty. In contrast, god and emperor in Japan are almost identical. According to the first two documents (genealogy of the gods) in the *Nihon-Shoki*, the Tenno (ruler of this world) is a direct descendent of the gods (Ameterasu Omikami). Moreover, in the rules of *Ritsuryo*, the emperor himself is called god (*Aramikami* or *Akitsumikami--kami* meaning god) as he is the figure of god as he appears on earth. Thus the relationship between the lords of heaven and earth in Japan is one of two sides to the same identity whereas in China the relationship is that of one who judges and the one who is judged.

Thus, the ideology in pre-*Qin benji* can be summarized in the political ideology of *ge ming* or the change of supreme order rooted in the Chinese classics. In contrast, the ideology in the genealogy of the gods in the *Nihon-Shoki* can be characterized as "no-ge ming" (no change of order), and an abolishment of the tension between, what Prof. Eisenstadt called "the supreme order and mundane order."