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The Japanese Idea

Abstract

We cannot understand a civilization unless we identify an *idea* that characterizes it, despite all risk of generalization. If there is no idea behind a civilization, there is no distinctive identity and every one is just like everybody else. Our (Hegelian) thesis is that history provides the phenomenological material where such an idea unfolds. A proper understanding of history will therefore provide retroactive access to the *idea* – the vocation, spirit or character – that somehow concentrates *the original decision for a specific type of civilization*.

Japan remains a mysterious land. One way to perhaps capture what we could call „the Japanese idea” is to understand that, from the very beginning, Japan confronts its Western side wherefrom threats as well as civilization arise. Insularity is an efficient barrier against invasions, but a source of isolation from the natural diffusion of innovations as well. This isolation, in turn, dialectically encourages an inventive spirit.

1. The Original Articulation of the State

The Japanese state results from a unification of warring clans. While the Chinese *Shang* founded the state through a violent elimination of opposition, *Yamato* results from the *absorption of opposing clans into the system*. From the very inception, therefore, a duality of

forces is legitimized. This original opposition is archetypal for the entire subsequent Japanese history. It opposed partisans of the opening to the partisans of isolation. The former endeavor to model Japan on a Chinese-inspired imperial Buddhism. The later accuse a `blasphemy and insolent defiance of ancient tutelary *Shinto* gods`¹. The first Constitution was therefore a religious and political compromise with a centralized Government inspired by the Chinese imperial architecture. Japan emerges as a *Shinto-Buddhist* synthesis where the state is predominantly *Buddhist*, while society remains predominantly *Shinto*. The *Shinto* establishes the divine origin of the Emperor as well the consanguinity of the emperor with the Nippon people. The Emperor is thus intercessor and Great Priest. Mythical genealogy fuses with historical genealogy. Thus, even if the imperial institutions are reinforced in a Chinese vein, the Emperor himself embodies the Nippon nation – the imitation only serves to reinforce one's own identity.

The systematic *sinicization* (sinification) of Japan culminates in the attempt to centralize the Government by imperial decree. The *Taika Reform* (645) establishes imperial absolutism by the instoration of state control over all land and peoples. Just like in the Chinese model, land would be periodically attributed by the state bureaucracy. This was a blow to local landlords and to the emerging feudal relations. Local hereditary aristocracies are subverted by Government functionaries. In a Nippon language, the centralist reform converted *shoen* (private domains) into *handen* (state-distributed domains). The Court imposes itself as an instance of last resort and people are subjected to state fiscal control.

2. The *Heian* „Revolution”

But as soon as the centralized system triumphed in the grounding of the Nara capital, the construction of the imperial palace and the *Todaij* temple, the germs of dissolution already appear. Firstly, the combination of high taxes and low stimulation entailed a generalized flight from the land. Practically the existence of a minimal `fiscal competition` and people's refusal to adapt brings the centralized system down. Secondly, the population growth combined with Japan's scarce cultivable land persuaded imperial authorities to encourage individual deforestation. This was the proper solution. However, it undermined the system of authoritarian repartition of land.

¹ Vadime & Danielle Elisséeff, *Civilizația japoneză*, Ed. Meridiane, 1996, pg. 33.

„The Government aimed to encourage deforestation of unpopulated areas in order to add more resources. It succeeded in this, but at the cost of renouncing the imposition of the law of public attribution and even property of the land. Private property was born, opening a breach in the homogeneity of the despotic state – a disruption full of future consequences. Monasteries, numerous families grounded domains in distant regions where they were sole masters. The 743 executive order acknowledged as *private* (for perpetuity - *tenden einen shizai ho*) all the land recently gained for agriculture”².

This mutation grows irreversible when the Emperor realizes *he will not be able to rule Japan as a Chinese sovereign*. This acknowledgement of private property generalized the flight from the land to the proportion of a massive internal migration. Courageous people leave overpopulated cities and practically engage into a vast civilizing work of pioneering pushing ahead the frontier of civilization by building great land properties, exploitation, houses, castles, hereby creating a *new people* – rough, virile, rich and free. This new class will soon become a free aristocracy, a rival power for the court nobility. This makes Japan exceptional on an Asian scale – as the sole Asian country to have produces something akin to Western feudalism - as a basis for a future division power, decentralization and economic prosperity.

3. The Genesis of Nippon Feudality

3.1. An Emerging Warrior Aristocracy

The aforementioned Japanese exception, as institutional acknowledgement and enforcement of „private property” slowly began to generate consequences: capital accumulation as well as the genesis of a disseminated class of free local landlords. But this economical mutation only came to display political effects with the occasion of the first „barbarian invasion”³ (1019). The Emperor and the court nobility had no reaction, fact which entailed the collapse of the frontier and state authority. It was the occasion for local aristocrats to associate, take action and defend the country - because they had *something* to defend. The Imperial power was discredited and therefore marginalized. This is the origin of the Japanese *imperial symbolism* (as opposed to the Chinese *imperial absolutism*). The concrete power will be slowly taken over by the warrior leagues in opposition with the atrophied court aristocracy:

² Vadime & Danielle Elisséeff, op. cit., p.47.

³ Pirates anchored in Manchuria and Korea (*djurtchat*) landed in 1019 in Heian Japan.

„The authority of these warriors only emerged in the tumultuous and dramatic events. The official hierarchy ignores them and everything happens as if a parallel administration gradually double and then substitutes the official cadres by opposing them their own, more efficient, hierarchy”⁴.

3.2. The Officialization of Private Property

This coincides with the advent of the Japanese feudal state. The Court is forced to accept the enactment of a comprehensive *cadaster* („feudal” and „European” institution of recording, officializing and guaranteeing real-estate and land property). This is a condition of a (relatively) free and prosperous economy as well as an economical evolution that makes Japan an „anomaly” at an Asian scale, but this will have lasting positive consequences⁵. In order to grasp the importance of this, it has to be contrasted with Chinese imperial absolutism that has emerged through a huge process of state expropriation of local land-owners.

3.3. An Endurant Division of Powers

This division of powers would eventually culminate with the instoration of the *Shogunate*. The Emperor, the *Mikado*, still holds his symbolic power and theological prestige. However it is the *Shogun* that becomes the political and executive power and nobody reaches the Emperor except through him.

3.4. Abdicating the Chinese Model

All these changes culminated with the complete abandonment of the Chinese model and a prodigious process of decentralization leading to feudal concentration of power and the consecutive limitation of the Imperial power and bureaucracy⁶. This decentralization reaches even a point of „*anarchy*” which is generally resented by historians, but during which it is important to mention that the economy continuously grew. Which means that even in times of local wars, the feudal model was prospering steadily. Eventually the warring clans are unified under a *Shogun*. The Emperor is marginalized as a symbol without effective power. This new centralization is however accomplished without expropriation and can be therefore

⁴ Vadime & Danielle Elliseeff, op.cit.,58.

⁵ „The power seizure by the warriors was a landmark in the slow process that has rendered Japan a feudal state. Crushed under the weight of economical forces that overweight it, the Court was compelled to acknowledge a state of fact. In 1069 the Emperor Go instituted an office for the inscription and delimitation of real estate and domains; this was, in principle, the constitution of property titles and of a cadaster”, Daniele & Vadime Elliseeff, p. 58.

⁶ Octavian Simu, *Civilizația tradițională japoneză*, Ed. Științifică și enciclopedică, București, 1984, pg. 146

regarded as *feudal synthesis of central power with local powers, and not as a despotic nationalization*. Very peculiar for Japan is that the new „bureaucracy” is actually the standing army itself (the *samurai*) recruited by hereditary extraction – which means they had a relative autonomy from central power.

3.6. The Closing of the Japanese Mind

The accomplishment of the new state form was going to be soon challenged by the „first wave” of globalization in the shape of Western contacts. The Japanese reaction to this was *Saikoku* (the closing of the land) in the name of *Pax Tokugawa*. However we might judge the radical idea of a complete closing of the land, we can say that it has eventually worked. We believe it is not adequate to say that it is only through the *Meiji* opening of the land that Japan eventually progressed. Many other countries were completely open and did not achieve the same result. Our thesis is that the preliminary closing of the Japanese land amounted to „a closing of the Japanese mind”. But we believe this to have been a `positive closure` since a strong identity is the very condition for a successful confrontation of otherness in view of a dialectical synthesis. The epoch of *Saikoku* was the beneficial preliminary deepening and self-assertion of a Japanese identity prior to the full contact with the virulent Western frontier.

4. The Meiji Revolution

Japan got consequently mentally strong when the Americans succeeded into forcing the seclusion. The epochal decision of *Kaikoku* (the opening of the land) can be understood as a true revolution since it destroyed the *Shogunate* and restored the *Emperor* as the head of modernizing forces. The opening of the frontiers was now meant as an *active opening*, oriented to the positive and selective assimilation of Western innovation in a dialectical equilibrium with Japanese traditions.

„This is how, after many tribulations, Japan accepted the West the same way it followed China – as a student, but never as a slave (...). Brutally confronted with an alien civilization, the Japanese strength lay in believing in its own talen and final victory, beyond passing models. Even if they sometimes acknowledged their weaknesses, the sons of the *samurai* never declared themselves defeated in advance. The reforms that succeeded derived from the original belief that the technical development required a cultural transformation. Contrary to appearances, this meeting of the West and the East was not so much a brutal fight between cannons and swords as a fight between two modes of being, and, despite all their hate or

natural suspicion towards some possible invaders, the Japanese people always respected the spirit of a civilization they had the intelligence to assimilate”⁷.

But there is something vital to say about the authentic heroes behind this revolution. The warrior aristocrats have effectively taken a grandiose decision completely against their class-interest and in the name of the country: „Paradoxically, the core of the renewal movement it triggered, the *bushi* class, deprived of its own *raison d'être*, lost all power”⁸.

This is politically utterly irrational unless we understand the visionary and sacrificial spirit of the *samurai*. We can describe this as an authentic sacrifice of an entire elite for a new country project, a sacrifice motivated by a vision. The samurai fidelity towards the Shogun was to become fidelity towards the Emperor⁹. The greatness of abdicating their privileges can be described as a *collective political seppuku* or as an honourable sacrifice of the military caste in order to grant the triumph of Japan in the future confrontation with the West. This is how it was possible not only to avoid Western colonization, but also to build the first modern Asian empire capable to defeat a Western power.

5. *Awase* (合わせる): the Japanese Idea and the Nippon Dialectic

A careful look at Japanese history will be able to identify some phenomenological constants. These, we claim, contain what we can call `the Japanese idea` - a certain „national character” or vocation presiding over a pattern in important historical decisions. Just like in the case of a person, *character* can be retroactively deduced from the dominant tendency of the subject’s actions. In order to essentialize, we hold this idea and its inner dialectic to be reflected in the Japanese term *Awase* (合わせる). One translation is „amalgamation” or „adaption” but it aspires to capture form of engaging something by articulating with or by assuming something. The ability to negotiate, adapt and absorb we already put into evidence is superbly captured in the notion of *Awase*:

„The tactic of incorporating a powerful threat rather than directly confronting it, and of drawing on a potential opponent’s strengths rather than trying simply to destroy them, is still widely seen today as a basic Japanese preference. Its identification at such an early stage of Japanese history is testimony to the depth of such a tradition” (...) Kitahara (a psychologist)

⁷ Vadime & Danielle Elisséeff, pg. 111.

⁸ Vadime & Danielle Elisséeff, pg. 112.

⁹ Yoshio Sugimoto, *Making Sense of Nihonjinron*, Thesis eleven, n.57, 1999, p. 81.

describes the preferred Japanese attitude towards potential threat—throughout history—as one of ‘*identification with the aggressor*’, attempting to *incorporate* rather than confront any strong point of that threat. On the other hand, Japanese history also shows that when a foe was considered weak, little if any attempt was made to avoid confrontation.”¹⁰

5.1. The Buddhist *versus* Shinto Dialectic

The very first inception of a Japanese state, the *Yamato* state, exhibits already the dialectical tension that characterized the entire history of Japan: an opposition and a dualism that is resolved through the implicit acknowledgement of two official powers.

„In this they relied heavily on negotiation and persuasion - and no doubt threat and coercion - rather than simple military confrontation. Their preferred method seems to have been to incorporate local chiefdoms already established in Yayoi times, and give the chieftains themselves places within the Yamato hierarchy. Ranks and titles were used by the Yamato court to give potentially troublesome members of formerly independent local regimes a personal stake in the emerging imperial system”¹¹.

This was not only about two rival clans, but the conflict was further elaborated since the Imperial faction envisaged a „sinicization” of the state through the import of (Chinese-style) Buddhism in a civilizatory impulse. The compromise between the Sinocentric (*Buddhist*) pole and the Nipponocentric (*Shinto*) pole resulted in the articulation in the spirit of *Awase* of a (mostly) *Buddhist* state with a (mostly) *Shinto* society, that is as a first compromise between the inner tradition and the external innovation.

5.2. The *Taika* versus *Sengoku* Dialectic

Very ample oscillations between centralization and decentralization also mark Japanese history. Beginning with *Taika* Reform (as superconcentration of state power) and ending with *Sengoku* (as feudal anarchy), Japan oscillates between the emulation of China and the self-assertion of its own local powers. The Shogunal resolution of this antinomy displays a typical Japanese way of negotiating between the (Chinese-style) *Taika* centripetal State-monism and *Sengoku* centrifugal pluralism as a dialectical synthesis of extremes. The resulting authority is central but legitimized by feudal local powers: this means the central power adapted to, consecrated and absorbed local powers in the spirit, once again, of *Awase*. The *Shogunate* is therefore a stable equilibrium between centripetal and centrifugal forces.

¹⁰ Kenneth G. Henshall, *A History of Japan. From Stonage to Superpower*, Palgrave MacMillan, 1999, p. 12; p. 189.

¹¹ Kenneth G. Henshall, op.cit, p. 12.

5.3. The *Tenno* versus *Shogun* Dialectic

As a result of the split of powers, the Emperor is not completely displaced but rather replaced. The Emperor stands as symbolic, transcendent and charismatic power, whereas the Shogun takes over the effective, executive use of power. Historically this has alternated but in opposition with the Chinese imperial absolutism and hieratic power monism, the Japanese idea (*Awase*) has, once again, adapted and adopted divisions and oppositions into a concrete rather than abstract unity, as a secret of the Japanese enduring historical success.

5.4. The *Sakoku* versus *Kaikoku* Dialectic

The series of previous oppositions repeats itself in the dilemma opposing partisans of the closing of the country (*Sakoku*) and partisans of its opening (*Kaikoku*). Despite a radical closing, Japan dialectically converted to a symmetrically radical opening. The extreme refusal of Westernization dialectically converted into an extreme adoption of Westernization. What provides however a dialectical unity to this alternation is, again, the spirit of *Awase* that granted a successful final compromise between *Sakoku* and *Kaikoku* in the guise of an adaption and adoption of a selective opening, which is the middle term between complete closing or complete opening.

5.5. The *Wakon* versus *Yosai* Dialectic

More concretely, the samurai scholar Sakuma Shozan has formulated this dialectical synthesis as “Eastern ethics (*Wakon*), Western science (*Yosai*)” as the exemplary formula of Japan’s selective opening. Persistence into the closure would have meant defeat. Complete opening would have meant dissolution of the self. Yet again the spirit of *Awase* inspired the adoption of otherness, as *Yosai* absorbed and subordinated in the interest of *Wakon*. The end is *Wakon*, while the means is *Yosai* – absorption through incorporation¹².

The Nippon renaissance is therefore grounded in a mechanism of selective cultural import, or articulation of Western infrastructure with Eastern suprastructure. A successful emulation of Western model can only make sense if your identity is preserved. The soul of Japan cannot be abolished. The glory of the *samurai*, the code of honour and rigor still stand as immortally inspiring models. If Japan abdicates these values, Japan abdicates itself. This is

¹² John E. Van Sant, *Sakuma Shozan’s Hegelian Vision for Japan*, Asian Philosophy, No. 3, November 2004, p. 277-292

why what really grants success is the continuing celebration of its identity as a solid ground that justifies any cultural assimilation.

5.6. *Awase* as dialectical resolution of oppositions

A conflict of self-interpretations is the result of such historical antagonisms. Conceptions inquiring into the „Japanese Idea” comprise self-interpretations such as:

1. *Japan is a small, marginal and dispersed country.* Initially, Japanese are called, from a sinocentric standpoint, „barbarians from the East”. Japan appears as peripheral as opposed to the Chinese matrix of civilization. Later authors such as Asami Keisai insist that, no matter how inferiority or superiority are perceived, Japan is the real *Middle Kingdom*, by using a sort of *a priori centrality*, without external comparison. Asami Keisai argues that: „small does not mean inferior. Quite the contrary: if your father is small, than is a small man inferior as father? Our country is small, but brilliant people can sometimes appear from time to time”.

„Japan is an ingenious country (*Katsube seygio*)”. „Even though we cannot invent anything new, we do excel at taking something that someone else has made, utilizing it fully and adding our own ingenuity to it” (Hattori Taiho). Or in the same sense: „Strong at emulating others but weak at creating things herself, being expert in imitation”¹³ (Nishi Amane).

2. *Martial Arts and Valor:* „Our Japan truly excels all other nations in the martial valor of its people” (Fujii Ransai). This martial consciousness triumphs over the old China-complex. „Our country is a nation of *arms*. The land to the west (China) is a nation of *letters*. Nations of letters value the pen. Nations of arms value the sword”. (Nakamura Motosune, 1843). This „overemphasis on sword rather than a pen”¹⁴ decisively marked national pride – in opposition to the Chinese one.

3. *Substance and Straightforwardness.* 1. „Some thinkers saw Japan to be a nation of substance, or the solid qualities alluded by Confucius: uncultivated, even barbaric from one perspective, but honest and straightforward from another”¹⁵. The substance does not need ornaments, and Japan takes exception from the Oriental fast by being an austere civilization.

¹³ Watanabe Hiroshi, *A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901*, International Library Trust / International House of Japan, p. 281-282

¹⁴ Watanabe Hiroshi, op.cit., p. 284

¹⁵ Watanabe Hiroshi, op.cit., p. 285

2. „The people of China value empty words, and as a result, they are naturally tending to deceit.... Our country values plain speaking and thus people are naturally honest”¹⁶ (Sakuma Taika, 1778).

4. Gods and Emperors. *Shinkoku* is celebrated as a land of gods, protected by thousands of gods (*Nihon Shoki*). „Japan is by origin the land of gods. The unfathomable functioning of *yin* and *yang*, given a name is called *god*. Who could fail to hallow and revere the sacredness of the sacred, the spirituality of the spirit? Japan is also called the land of *buddhas*, and not without a reason...” (*Konchiin Suden*).

The imperial political theology articulated the celestial forefather with his descendants, as well as with the entire Japanese nation. The imperial intercession connects the sacred and the profane, the land of gods and the land of humans, thus justifying the perennity of imperial loyalism. The consequence was the continuity of the dynastic line - in utter opposition to the cycle of dynastic violence in China. This constitutes a source of national pride: the national Shintoists say that if the Emperor would be treated in Japan the same way he was treated in China, even children would cry.

Every time Japan confronted an opposition, the solution was not the *elimination* of one term, nor their *fusion*, but their *articulation through incorporation*: that is the creation of a concrete, integrative, unity. *This is why we take Awase to be the Japanese idea itself, the unique idea that best captures the Nippon spirit.*

A Japanese self-interpretive metaphor of this *souplesse d'esprit* can help us better understand this Nippon dialectic of incorporation: it is the image of the *bambus*, as sapiential metaphor of elasticity. The *bambus* is antinomian - it is the souple middle term between stonelike rigidity and waterlike fluidity. The apogee of the Nippon idea (implicit in the *Awase* concept) was prodigiously verified in the crucial moment of the dialectical transition from *Shogunat* to *Meiji*. The imperial restoration successfully accomplished the resolution of the Western challenge that triggered the Nippon dialectic of the closing and the opening. The inner scission entailed by external pressure was resolved through incorporation (*Awase*) of the external as resolution of the scission itself. Or: *Awase* operated the dialectical synthesis between *Sakoku* and *Kaikoku*. A total closure in its own identity is unilateral. A total opening towards its otherness is unilateral. It is however the Nippon spirit of *Awase*

¹⁶ Watanabe Hiroshi, op.cit., p. 286

that presided over the dialectical resolution of the opposition between *Sakoku* and *Kaikoku*. The alternation of the closing and the opening envisaged and – on a long term – produced the *Awase synthesis*, the selective incorporation of alterity into identity, the assimilation of Western otherness into the Nippon identity without the consequent abdication from its own identity.

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