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THE COMPARATIVE TRADITION
IN JAPANESE CIVILIZATION

WILLIAM E. NAFF

It is sometimes alleged that the comparative approach to civilizational studies is a uniquely European undertaking. The implications may be either that comparative studies are bad and that they are an expression of cultural parochialism and imperialism or else that they are good and that only European civilization possesses the resources that make such an approach feasible. Neither argument will bear up under close examination. In the first instance, while intent may be an important datum about a piece of scholarship there is almost always more to be said about it after intent has been established. Even when motive and intent are clearly open to moral and intellectual question that fact does not necessarily negate all value in the work. Graham Greene is working a very old vein as he tells us in his novels of how weakness or evil can sometimes produce good results in spite of themselves and most of the roads leading to hell are of course paved with good intentions. Furthermore, even a biased scholar may be capable of actual learning as contrasted with a mere rehearsal of the forms of scholarship, and if so he is certain to have his views modified in the course of his studies. What a scholar sets out to prove is often quite different from what, if anything, is actually proven.¹

The allegations against comparative civilizational studies are made in the context of the unnatural and, on the scale of world history, ephemeral concentration of wealth and power in Europe and its cultural offshoots in the two centuries or so preceding 1945. It is not surprising that this phenomenon should have given rise to much that is self-serving and self-promoting in the scholarship of Europe and its cultural extensions. Among these is a great variety of civilizational taxonomies and typologies that either imply or attempt to demonstrate a hierarchy of cultures that have in common their ascription of an absolute preeminence in all fields of human endeavor for whatever form or proposed derivative of European civilization the writer identifies with or advocates. Yet even such works can still include much that is useful to the careful scholar. Nor does their existence prove European civilization to be unique in its parochialisms, its imperialistic proclivities or its comparative interests.
Those who would reject the idea of comparative studies as a unique and sinister European predilection are in fact attempting to argue the uniqueness of European civilization on an even more basic level than even its most parochial advocates are usually prepared to do. Such arguments break down at a very early stage, often that of claiming for the critic a degree of moral authority that is granted to very few people.

To state the problem at its simplest and most obvious level, it is quite impossible to imagine any kind of interaction between two or more different cultures and civilizations that does not involve a comparative element. The comparative element is present even at the very primitive level that simply notes that "they are different from us." It remains present whether the next step is friendly curiosity, wary rivalry, military confrontation, or rejection and withdrawal. The presence of a comparative element in any and all civilizational interactions is a truism and therefore not of itself profitable to discuss. What is useful to consider is the relative importance of the comparative element in any given case of civilizational interaction, its degree of self-consciousness and sophistication, the particular comparative strategies used and the relative success or failure of those strategies.

It would be possible in theory to write studies of every national or civilizational area on earth under titles similar to the present one. The significance of those studies might vary widely from one case to the next but valid scholarly discipline would in each case produce a valid study. I will concern myself with Japan for two reasons. First, it is a country in which I am particularly interested. Second, it offers an exceptionally clearcut tradition of comparative civilizational activities that was already long-established before any contact with Europe had occurred.

In the No play Haku Raku Ten, which was probably written in the fifteenth century, the great Chinese poet Po Chü-i (772-846) comes to Japan to judge its wisdom and learning. He is met by a humble fisherman who, as we might expect from the conventions of the No theatre, is a god in disguise, in this case, the god of Sumiyoshi, the tutelary deity of Japanese verse. The two have a poetry contest and the Chinese poet is defeated. It is impossible for an outsider not to observe that Po Chü-i might have done at least a little bit better if he had been permitted to use some of his own poetry. In any case he is humiliated. He gives up his plan to visit the capital and is instead blown back to China by a divine wind or kamikaze. The Japanese tradition posited human feeling as the ultimate measure of reality and poetry as the front-line discipline in dealing with the nature of reality and of experience.

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Raku Ten is saying that we in Japan have a poetry that deals with the central facts of human existence better and more effectively than it is done by anyone in the great and rich civilization of China, even by the Chinese poet who was then best known and best loved in Japan. This is a comparative statement, to be sure, but it is not a very useful one. The data have been cooked in much the same way that the data have often been cooked in European arguments of universal European preeminence.

Early in the play, the god of Sumiyoshi alludes to the famous passage in the Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Verse (Kokin-wakashu, 905 A.D.) which reminds us that "the nightingales singing among the blossoms, the frogs dwelling in the waters; among all living creatures there is none that does not sing its song." The outsider is not really prepared to accept the implication that this metaphor would not work as well outside Japan as it does within. But shortly after the two figures first meet, the god of Sumiyoshi delivers the following speech:

The Buddhist scriptures of India correspond to the long and short poetic forms of China, and the long and short poetic forms of China correspond to Japanese verse. Thus have we harmonized the heritages of the three countries. It is for that reason that we call our verse "Yamato-uta" or Yamato song, and that we write "Yamato" with the characters meaning "greatly to harmonize." You must have come to test us even though you know that full well.

In the fifteenth century the No theatre was already a theatre with a long tradition of rehearsing and reaffirming the values of Japanese culture. When one of its characters speaks with pride of "greatly harmonizing" the cultures of India, China, and Japan, he is expressing a widely-held perception already centuries old, whatever we may think of the accuracy of his explanations of the choice of characters for the poetic name of Japan. India has its Buddhist scriptures. China has Buddhism from India and it also has its own tradition. Japan has both Buddhism and the Chinese literary tradition at its disposal, but it also has the free and pure expression of the human heart that is Japanese verse. If it is true that the reality is somewhat more complex than this, it is also true that, given the knowledge of the world available to the Japanese in classical and medieval times, the argument is considerably less naive than it might appear to be at first glance and it is not altogether without significance from a twentieth-century point of view.

In both native and in world-wide consciousness, Japan is a country associated with the idea of cultural borrowing. It is this intense consciousness of Japanese cultural borrowing that is, more than anything else, at issue when discussing Japan in a comparative civilizational
context. It is not the relative proportion or absolute amount of cultural borrowing that is at issue; Japan's absolute quantity of cultural borrowing has at most stages been rather small for a culture of its size and level of development. 8 This is much as one might expect given Japan's geographic isolation. But this very isolation has contributed to making Japan, for as far back as we know anything about such matters, exceptionally conscious of what cultural borrowing did take place. In China and India, Japan had countries with traditions markedly older, larger, and richer than her own, but which did not present any direct threat to her. There developed a habit of thinking about other cultures in sharp contrast to that of Japan, an attitude which includes elements of both cosmopolitanism and insularity. It is in this sense that we can speak of a comparative tradition in Japan.

It is difficult to set a beginning for this tradition of cultural borrowing by the Japanese. There are some very provocative things being turned up by archaeologists but their interpretation remains a subject of fierce controversy. We can begin to document cultural borrowing with some degree of accuracy from the middle of the sixth century on. What these documentations tell us is, among other things, that the tradition of cultural borrowing as a matter of conscious policy among Japanese leaders seems already to be of such long standing as to be taken for granted. 9

There are many claims of uniqueness made for Japan. Most are of the level of truism and uselessness that can be made for characteristic products and practices of any culture. Others are without foundation in fact or reason. There is, however, at least one claim of uniqueness that can be validly made. This has to do with Japan's exceptional geographic isolation among the advanced cultures of the world. In some ways the situation of Japan off the eastern shore of the Eurasian land mass is comparable to that of the British Isles off its western shores. Yet this very comparability only underlines the differences. The Straits of Dover are some twenty-five miles wide. People regularly swim across them. The Korean Straits are about a hundred and thirty miles wide. Again, once across the Straits of Dover, one is in France and only about a hundred miles away from Paris, a major center of European culture since the early middle ages. Once across the Korean Straits, one is in Korea. It is not surprising that Korea provided the major route through which knowledge of high continental culture came to Japan, but the great metropolitan centers of Chinese culture are still many hundreds of miles away, far inland beyond the shores of the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea. A trip from the
Japanese capital to the metropolitan centers of China was an undertaking comparable to a trip from London to Athens before the time of the crusades. The land portions of the route lying within China were immeasurably more secure and better supplied with amenities for the traveller than were most routes in the Europe of the time but this was more than balanced by the much greater length and danger of the portions of the journey that had to be traversed by ship. It was not unusual for an embassy to make several false starts only to be turned back each time by unfavorable winds or shipwreck and more often than not only a fraction of the original party ever reached China. The voyage was of course equally difficult on the return. The Chinese monk Chien-chen (688-763), known in Japan as Ganjin, was invited to Japan to establish the Ritsu sect in 742. He quickly set out, but plagued by repeated shipwrecks, pirates, bureaucratic obstructions and illness, he did not reach Japan until 753, blind and in ill health.

If we pursue the comparison between the British Isles and Japan one step further we are reminded that the English language is a member of the Teutonic family of languages. Its affinities with the languages spoken on the opposite side of the North Sea are as obvious to the casual observer as they are beyond dispute to the scholar. Japanese, on the other hand, is probably related to the Altaic languages such as Manchu, Mongol, Turkish, etc., although not all the controversy concerning even this has been silenced. Korean probably belongs to the same family of languages but the exact character of the relationship between Korean and Japanese still does not seem to be settled to the complete satisfaction of many important students of the question. But the great classical language of East Asia is Chinese, and not only are Chinese and Japanese completely unrelated but their grammar, syntax, morphology and phonology are all of the most strongly contrasting characters. At the same time there has been a profound influence exerted by Chinese on the development of the Japanese language for a dozen centuries. The vocabulary of modern Japanese consists of about 75% Chinese loan vocabulary from various periods of borrowing and from various dialect areas of China.

The languages of northern Europe are related to the languages of the Mediterranean regions as Japanese and Chinese are not, but there is still a significant comparability between the vocabularies of modern Japanese and modern English. Like Japanese, the modern English language derives about three-quarters of its vocabulary from loan words. In the case of English these words come for the most part either directly from Greek or Latin or indirectly from those languages through French. But the
native speaker of English requires a certain minimal level of sophistica-
tion in order to be able to distinguish reliably between the original
Teutonic elements and the loan vocabulary in his language. In Japanese,
both Japanese predilections and the nature of the writing system keeps the
distinction between native and loan vocabulary obvious and straightforward in most cases. The most elementary level of skill in both reading and
writing already involves making clear and confident distinctions between
the two components of the vocabulary. The marked contrast in texture
between Chinese and Japanese vocabulary seems to have been a major
factor in helping to keep the Japanese highly conscious of their cultural
borrowing.

This combination of geographic, ethnic, and linguistic distance from
the sources of high culture on the continent meant that Japan could never
have the kind of almost matter-of-fact interaction that was continuously
taking place between the inhabitants of the British Isles and their conti-
nental neighbors, whether in trade, in warfare, or in religion. Nothing
was likely to reach Japan casually. Any product of alien culture that was
introduced was there because someone deliberately went after it and took
great risks in doing so. The importation of any exotic item of material or
intellectual culture into Japan was almost always a matter of public record
and so were at least the early stages of its dissemination in Japan.

Japan’s isolation from the continent was still further heightened by the
fact that it was never the object of aggressive designs by either Korea or
China. The attention of China was focused not on its seacoasts and the
lands beyond but rather on the vast reaches of Central Asia, the source of
most of its foreign problems. The Koreans early developed a consider-
able seafaring tradition but this was employed in coastal trade with
China. Internal disorders on the Korean peninsula combined with pres-
sures from China and Central Asia left the Koreans with no leisure for
overseas military adventures.

In the historical period Japanese importations of continental culture
originally sprang out of relations with the kingdom of Paekche which
occupied the west coast of the Korean peninsula between the fourth and
seventh centuries A.D. Paekche itself was in close contact with China,
not neighboring North China but the central region around Hangchow
and Soochow. During most of the lifetime of the kingdom of Paekche the
Japanese held a protectorate over the state of Mimana at the southern tip
of the Korean peninsula. There were ample avenues of approach to
ensure a more or less regular flow of scholars, scribes, artists, and
artisans to Japan, both from Korea and from China, which was in a state
of chronic upheaval between the fall of the Han dynasty in the early third century A.D. and the founding of the Sui dynasty in 589 A.D.\textsuperscript{12} Although a great deal of uncertainty surrounds the early development of the Japanese state, circumstantial evidence suggests that the earliest of these immigrants took advantage of their continental cultural and technical heritage either to establish themselves as local powers in their own right or else to accept the protection and sponsorship of powerful Japanese groups whose fortunes they would often be able to improve. At any rate, access to the technology and the refinements of high culture soon seem to have become necessary preconditions to gaining or retaining power in early Japan. These refinements and achievements were not, however, being brought by invading armies, the agents of most comparable processes elsewhere in the world, and no stigma of hostile alienness attached to them. They were the contributions of peaceful immigrants and could be viewed simply as practical aids to the acquisition and holding of power and to the full enjoyment of its fruits.

The artistic importations from Paekche are quite well known since they and the Japanese works directly inspired by them constitute the bulk of the early Japanese treasures of sculpture, painting, and metalworking, and Paekche was, as already noted, importing much of its culture from central China. Unfortunately this seems to be about all that is known with any degree of certainty at present. Paekche has so completely disappeared that scholars of early Korean history tell us that they lack even any direct evidence concerning the spoken language of Paekche although, as in the rest of East Asia, the written language was classical Chinese.

Aside from the obvious benefits directly conferred by access to the material products, techniques, and thought of high civilizations, three important lessons seem to have been learned by the early Japanese through their experience with Paekche. First, high civilization was very useful to those in power. Second, Paekche was only a middleman for the culture of central China so that there was no reason to stop importing high culture just because Paekche was no longer there. The final lesson, which followed from the first two, was the most telling for the character of subsequent Japanese civilization. This was the establishment of a deliberate and self-conscious importation of foreign culture as a purely pragmatic measure.

China was reunited under the short-lived Sui dynasty in 589. In 618 the Sui dynasty was succeeded by the T'ang, marking one of the most brilliant and creative periods in all human history. To touch on only one aspect, the poetry of the T'ang dynasty (which fell in 907) can not only
bear comparison with the finest in any other major literary language but exists on a scale overwhelmingly larger than that produced in the entire history of almost any other culture. Yet the limitless riches of Chinese poetry were only gradually grasped in Japan. In the beginning it was the Buddhist religion and the science of government that were most attractive among the importations from Paekche. In East Asia, China was the primary source of knowledge about both.

By 600 the first official Japanese embassy had been sent to Sui. This mission is clearly recorded in the Chinese records but not those of Japan and its precise status remains unclear. The Japanese records give the embassy of 607 as the first. Included in the party of the ambassador were scholars and monks, most of whom were there to learn more about Buddhism. Whatever their immediate interests, in China of the seventh century, as in China of the twentieth century, political theory was a part of the training of every educated person. The new Sui-T’ang administrative system, which was to prove its staying power by remaining intact in its essentials until 1912, had much to offer the nascent Japanese state. In a series of reforms in the early and mid-seventh centuries the Sui-T’ang system was adapted to Japanese needs and customs. This adaptation was not a total success; both the scale and the values of the two societies were too different, but it set the general direction for the evolution of Japanese political institutions down to the present day. Certain structural features as well as the very names of certain official posts can be traced back to the seventh century.13

All this is very familiar stuff, but the complexity and sophistication that must lie behind any successful venture in massive cultural and institutional borrowing is too often overlooked. Before any adaptation of Chinese institutions could take place there had to be thought about the nature and purposes of institutions, studies of Chinese practice and comparisons of Chinese and Japanese practice, decisions about what Chinese ideas could be used and what could not, and what the ultimate purpose of the entire procedure was. All of these considerations were thought of in terms different from what might be used today and even the ways of dividing up and defining the problems were often different, but the method worked, something which even twentieth-century methods by no means always do.14

The importation of Buddhism which to some degree preceded the importation of Chinese theories of statecraft followed much the same pattern as the importation of other products of high civilization. For several centuries it remained the exclusive possession of the court aristoc-
racy and their immediate associates. The glories of Buddhist art and of
the Buddhist scriptures informed the already rich aesthetic life of the
Japanese court. Sculpture, painting, architecture, music, dance, and
literature began to flourish with a brilliance that still dazzles a millenium
later. By the tenth century at the latest, the Japanese had indeed “greatly
harmonized” the Buddhist elements borrowed from India, the literary
and political values and techniques of China and the aesthetic preoccupa-
tions of the native culture.

The development of the Japanese writing system is a convenient case
in point. The Japanese first became literate through the medium of
classical Chinese and all early writings in Japan were in that language. By
the end of the seventh century there was an increasing sense among
Japanese participants in high culture that the essential Japanese culture
was about to be obliterated before the vast wave of continental culture that
was sweeping across the country. If the native culture was to be pre-
served, a way to write the native language was essential. An extremely
ingenious but maddeningly complex and irregular system of using
Chinese characters sometimes as phonetic symbols and sometimes as
logographs representing Japanese words was developed. The Kojiki, a
mythology cum history cum constitutional document completed in 710
and the Manyoshu, a great anthology of early Japanese verse still incom-
pletely edited when work was suspended on it around 756, were the major
products of this writing system.16 The Kojiki was only a partial success.
The sophistication of its goals and the levels of its failures were remarka-
bly high considering that it was the first sustained attempt to write in the
Japanese language, but the thought processes of the compilers were
already too deeply influenced by Chinese learning and the precise pur-
pose of the work never seems to have been brought into focus so that in
the end for all its treasures and for all its tantalizing suggestivity, the
Kojiki falls too consistently among a number of widely-scattered stools to
be really satisfactory as a record of pristine Japanese civilization. The
Manyoshu, on the other hand, provides the modern reader with a match-
less record of the transition of Japanese from a preliterate language to a
language of experimentation inspired by the profoundly different
Chinese models available to it to, by the beginning of the eighth century,
a literary language in its first vibrant maturity, the natural medium of
poets and poetry of world rank. Yet so complicated was the writing
system that within a century less than one poem in twenty could be read
and few of those without error. The Kojiki remained if anything even
more impenetrable and both awaited the powerful new philology of the
eighteenth century, itself an import from China, to become a living part of the Japanese heritage. The first attempt to create a writing system had created something not only almost impossibly difficult to write but even more nearly impossible to read.

As ideograms or, more properly, logograms, Chinese characters are a highly successful solution to the problem of visual representation of human thought but they could hardly be less suited to phonetic transcription. The attempt to put them to that use was made independently by several cultures on the periphery of Chinese civilization, but these attempts, of which the Japanese was the first, were never really successful. Each people had either to develop its own writing system or else be assimilated into Chinese culture. Much later the Mongols and the Manchus adapted Middle Eastern alphabets to their use while the Koreans developed an alphabet of their own in the fourteenth century.

At the beginning of the ninth century the priest Kukai brought back the first knowledge of Sanskrit and with it the first Japanese knowledge of a purely phonetic writing system. The line of influence from India was, however, very thin and tenuous and Chinese characters were by this time already a part of Japanese culture. The Indian alphabets with their strong horizontal bias were not readily compatible with Chinese characters. But, under inspiration from the Indian models, the Japanese began to develop a writing system based on cursive versions of Chinese characters divorced from their logographic function. These could readily and smoothly be combined with Chinese characters, which were used either to indicate Chinese loanwords, still few in number at this stage, or Japanese words, usually either nouns or verb stems. Phonetics were used to indicate particles, endings, and inflections as well as other vocabulary elements that did not have established Chinese character writings. Visual effects are also important in the finished product and the proportion of Chinese characters with their greater weight and solidity tends to be adjusted to provide an appearance consonant with the relative visual weight (which is not necessarily related to importance) desired for a given piece of writing.

The Japanese writing system was and is of great complexity and irregularity. It soon came to treat the entire vocabulary of classical Chinese, an almost inexhaustible category, as totally available. Chinese characters were to be read either as Chinese loanwords of any one of various levels of borrowing or as Japanese equivalents, depending on what was appropriate to the context. The reader had to make use of contextual cues and outside knowledge in order to decide upon an
appropriate reading for each character. This system was essentially complete by the end of the ninth century, although even more complex and irregular than the modern system. Yet for all its difficulty it was an immense improvement over the systems used in the *Kojiki* and the *Manyoshu*. Its existence made possible the literary renaissance of the tenth century and the very high level of Japanese literacy that has prevailed ever since.

That the Japanese writing system was a syllabary rather than an alphabet reflects both the ready divisibility of the Japanese language into a limited number of discrete and consistent syllables or morae and it also reflects the tendency of classical Indian culture to teach alphabets on a syllabic rather than a phonemic level. As a culture then less advanced than either China or India but not in direct competition with either, once Japan focused on the need for a writing system it compared its needs with the products of the two alien cultures, took hints from both, but in the end developed its own and distinctive system. This is a paradigmatic instance of Japanese cultural borrowing which is in turn one of the most basic patterns of Japanese culture itself.

Within a century of the development of the new writing system, there was a second great wave of literary productivity in Japanese court culture. As one of the world’s most intensely literary and literate cultures, the literary product of that court culture is also inspired in part by Chinese and, to a much lesser extent, by Indian models, but it is as original and distinct from its models as it is distinguished in its own right. In studying its “model nations” Japan had found its way to the development of models that enabled it to turn back to its own culture and to realize the ideals of that culture at a much higher level than was previously possible. This renewed realization of native cultural values at a higher level was not simply a product of the mechanical ability to record the Japanese language in writing. It was equally a product of the greatly increased level of sophistication with which its own values were perceived by its own creative people. If those values were transformed in many cases by their incorporation into a world view that was now informed by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, that only brings us back once again to the type of transformation under outside influences that we have already remarked upon as being one of the more conspicuous characteristics of Japanese civilization.

This kind of pragmatic and goal-oriented cultural comparison was not, of course, brought about by setting up a governmental commission on cultural priorities which then engaged in conscious comparative civiliza-
tional studies although it does come close at times. It was rather a consequence of Japan’s having access to and significant immigration from highly advanced cultures that remained at a comforting distance offering no direct threat to Japan. If in the sixth through the eighth centuries, again to a lesser degree in the twelfth and sixteenth centuries and most recently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan has proved itself to be particularly open and accessible to foreign ideas as a matter of official policy, this is a consequence, not a cause, of basic Japanese cultural attitudes.

Many scholars of Japanese history have pointed out the rhythm of intense cultural borrowing alternating with periods of isolation and assimilation. This rhythm is real enough but it does not stem from some mystical imperative hidden deep within the Japanese psyche. It has manifested itself for historical reasons and its sources are by no means confined to Japan alone. The Chinese dynastic cycle is the most conspicuous of outside contributors to the Japanese rhythm. Even a cursory glance reveals a general, although imprecise, correlation between the two rhythms and that correlation bears up well under closer examination. In each instance, however, internal conditions in Japan had much to do with determining the intensity of the borrowing phase.

Still, it remains the borrowing itself that is of overriding importance. That borrowing continued even through periods of apparent isolation. The primary difference was that in periods of active contact there was a relatively contemporaneous response to Chinese developments, the lag in practice being anything from a few years to a century or so while in periods of isolation there would be a more diffuse and indirect Japanese response to the broad range of Chinese history. For the thirteen centuries that it is possible to trace the existence of a Japanese intelligentsia, that group has had as its major stock in trade its expertise in foreign and presumably superior cultures. Every domestic issue tended to be discussed in terms of Chinese successes to be emulated or Chinese disasters to be avoided. Often, to be sure, the comparative gesture was empty and perfunctory, a ritualistic nod to some Chinese text or authority, but it often had an important role in defining the terms in which a problem was to be discussed and in which both methods and goals were defined. The adaptation of the neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi to serve as the official ideology was a conspicuous instance. This was no simple-minded attempt to don borrowed robes unaltered but rather a careful reworking of foreign materials to fit native needs as perceived by a not overwhelmingly powerful central authority attempting to put an end to centuries of internal
warfare and to preserve its own rather fragile hegemony. Whatever its flaws, this adaptation was able to lay the foundations for two and a half centuries of relative peace and stability, a record not often equalled in world history. The process through which the adaptation was carried out was far more complex and subtle than the one which had given Japan a writing system a millennium earlier yet remarkably similar in its essentials.

Throughout the centuries, Japan has habitually modelled itself on other countries. It did not so much try to become like them as to make use of the experience, techniques, and insights that comes out of the experience of others in exploring the possibilities inherent in its own cultural outlook. In early times the models were China, and to a lesser extent, India. In the sixteenth century Europe provided models in everything from castle architecture and firearms to painting and medicine. The Tokugawa turned back to the China of an earlier age while the past century’s models have been the advanced industrial nations of Europe and America.

Now Japan is in many ways the most advanced nation on the planet. Where the technology and culture gradient between Japan and other nations exists at all or is not actually running in favor of Japan, it has ceased to be steep enough to power any of the spectacular spurts of progress that Japan has experienced from time to time over the past twelve hundred years. Now, as a part of the world-wide, information-intensive, electronic culture of the late twentieth century, Japan stands in a transformed relation to her former models. This must necessarily lead to a modification of many deeply ingrained habits of thought in Japan. Past performance suggests that these changes might be very interesting, but what is more urgent at the moment is the great reluctance which Japan’s former European and American models have displayed when it comes to learning from Japan. The comparative approach as a tool for actively seeking out and bringing back useful cultural elements from the rest of the world, an approach so deeply rooted in Japanese practice, has in the European world been restricted almost entirely to certain areas of religious inquiry where its results are notably difficult to evaluate objectively.

Japan has always been open and self-aware in its cultural borrowings, however controversial the details of any particular campaign of cultural borrowing might have been at the time, but Europe, like Japan a culture of the continental periphery, habitually tended either to deny its outside cultural debts or, when it does recognize them, to downplay their significance. As we have attempted to demonstrate in this brief examination of
the question, both the Japanese and the European styles of cultural borrowing are rooted in the deepest strata of their cultures. In Europe, cultural interactions across the vast scale of Eurasia and Africa have led to the loss of identity of countless ethnic groups and the threatened or subordinate status of others. In such a context the preservation of cultural identity on the part of any particular group was a very different kind of problem from any that Japan has faced in its cultural borrowing. Still, it is now past time when we should have recognized that comparative civilizational studies have important practical implications as well as an inexhaustible array of problems for pure scholarship. When that recognition comes it will announce itself in part by an increase in comparative studies not only between Europe and other regions of the world but between and among cultures and regions outside of Europe.

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NOTES

1. The most powerful and provocative discussion of European scholarship concerned with the non-European world to date is Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1979). Its primary focus is on studies of the Islamic world. I have no expertise in this field and am therefore unable to evaluate any of the attacks on particular scholars since I do not know enough of any of their work. But, since “the Orient” tends in European usage to be applied to all non-European portions of the world, Orientalism cannot be ignored by anyone interested in any part of Asia. On almost every page we meet still another characteristic European disability in coming to grips with other parts of Asia and Africa that are rooted in habits of mind formed long ago in interactions with the Islamic world. The idea of “the Orient,” so all-pervasive in the culture of Europe and its offshoots, so condescending and so trivializing, is the product of a grotesquely twisted perspective. A part of the world many times the size of Europe and encompassing a number of cultural entities many of which are as large or larger than Europe and many of which are as distinct from each other as each is from Europe is filed away under a simplistic directional reference that is itself valid only from the relatively tiny and restricted vantage point of Western Europe.

The “didactic quality of the Oriental representation,” as described on pp. 66-67, is almost as familiar in writings about East Asia as it is in those about Islam. Anyone concerned with any non-European part of the world (which is likely to be called “Oriental” whatever its compass bearing from Europe) is well-acquainted with the anti-empirical qualities of this outlook as Said describes them on p. 69. These didactic and fantastical formulations about “the Orient,” usually immune to all argument based on empirical data, are a part of the basic recognition signals which many traditional European humanists routinely exchange with each other in establishing their bona fides. But there are European humanists who are capable of looking beyond the cliche when dealing with the
non-European world and this is true of those professionally concerned with the non-European world and of those whose interests lie primarily within some branch of European culture. The very existence of Orientalism is a tacit admission that such people exist; without them there would be no point in creating such a book in any European language. Yet on the surface one has as sweeping a denial of the possibility of sound character and intellect in any scholar produced by the European tradition or in anyone sympathetic to that tradition as any European bigot ever made in relation to the character and intellect of "Orientals."

Among Said's most powerful arguments are those which deal with the evils of "too close a relationship between the scholar and the state," a problem which underlies much of the discussion and which he defines in those terms on p. 326. Like all such strictures this one either works both ways or not at all. There is overwhelming empirical evidence that it does work. Yet, for completely understandable human reasons which are nevertheless at odds with the demands of rigorous scholarship, the current political situation in that part of the world for which Said is such a brilliant and impassioned advocate often lie very close to the surface of this work. (Many of the European biases Said so penetratingly and so correctly attacks also have completely understandable human reasons for their existence as well. As Said repeatedly and convincingly demonstrates, that does not make them intellectually defensible.)

In the end, given the almost endless list of grievances that the Islamic world can raise against Europe, it would seem almost impossible to overstate the case against the "Orientalist" frame of mind. But Orientalism does just that in a way that will unfortunately make it less effective in reaching those crucial few who are neither already converted nor altogether unteachable. In launching its all-out attack on a monolithic European intellectual world the book in the end displays the same profoundly anti-empirical bias toward European culture that it quite correctly accuses much of European culture in general of holding against non-European culture. By imputing total evil to the one party in the confrontation it makes an implicit claim of total virtue for the other. Neither case will hold up, and Said's brilliance and erudition seem to be directed toward the self-defeating proposition that what he is doing is an exercise in futility; one more vain casting of pearls. The book as a whole is unsatisfactory precisely to the extent that one is in agreement with most of its premises and the way in which most of them are first formulated.

Richard Minear has taken up the same question in his "Orientalism in Japanese Studies," Journal of Asian Studies, 393 (May, 1980), pp. 507-517 and, on a somewhat broader scale, in "Cross-Cultural Perception and World War II," International Studies Quarterly, 24: 4 (December, 1980), pp. 555-580. These are articles of impeccable scholarship containing some important insights and illuminating some dark and untidy corners. They also share some of the tendency to overstate a position almost impossible to overstate that is found in Said's Orientalism, to which they are a response.

2. Throughout I use the masculine third person singular pronoun to indicate common gender. Familiarity with the Japanese and Chinese languages, both of which are free from any grammatical involvement with gender, made me painfully aware from an early date of the grave defects of English in this respect. Unfortunately all the ways of evading the problem that have so far been proposed

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are so cumbersome and unnatural that they are even more inhibiting to orderly thought processes than the original defect once it is clearly defined and confronted.

3. Sanari Kentaro, editor, *Yokkyoku Taikan* (Conspectus of No Texts) (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1954), Vol. 4, p. 2469, attributes the play to Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1443), the most important individual in the history of the No theatre. Although he was certainly a prolific playwright, among other things, many of the traditional attributions are now in question. Sanari gives the first recorded performance as taking place in 1464.


6. Sanari Kentaro, 1961, p. 2475. I have taken some liberties in order to emphasize allusions and implications. A more literal version would read: “As the holy texts are to India so the shih and fu are to China and as the shih and fu are to China so Japanese verse is in our land. That being the case we have made a practice of harmonizing the three countries and so we write ‘Yamato-uta’ with characters meaning ‘greatly to harmonize.’ It would seem that though you know this full well you have come to examine our hearts.” A literary translation would be yet another matter.

7. As is well known, the actual derivation of the writing is somewhat more complex. The early Chinese accounts customarily refer to Japan as “Wa,” using a character signifying “polite and obedient.” The implications of subordinate status in this writing were not pleasing to the Japanese who soon replaced it with a homophonous character meaning “harmonious.” It was customary in Japan to give either Chinese character the Japanese reading “Yamato,” the name for the old province in which Nara, the first capital city, is located. The name Yamato is also used synecdochally for Japan as a whole. It soon became customary under the tendency in Chinese for place names to consist of two or more elements, to prefix the character meaning “great” to the one meaning “harmonious” while retaining the Japanese reading “Yamato” for the resulting compound. There is some uncertainty about the etymology of the place name Yamato but there is absolute certainty about its lack of connection with the literal meaning of either or both of the two characters with which it is customarily written. Such arcane relationships between Japanese words, particularly proper nouns, and the characters used to write them are quite commonplace.

8. This subject is addressed with the grace and elegance that was the trademark of Arthur Waley in his brief essay “The Originality of Japanese Civilization” which was originally published in 1941. It is most readily accessible in Ivan Morris, editor, *Madly Singing in the Mountains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 333-340.
There is, of course, an immense Japanese literature on this subject. A useful summarization of recent Japanese scholarship is to be found in Ito Shuntaro *et al.*, *Koza: Hikakubunka* (Tokyo, Kenkyusha, 1975-1977, 8 volumes). *Volume I*, Inoue, Haga, and Hayashiya, *Nippon Retto Bunkashi* (The Cultural History of the Japanese Archipelago), particularly Chapter I, Inoue Mitsusada and Saeki Arikiyo "'Nippon' no Seiritsu" (The Formation of "Japan"), pp. 3-32 and Chapter II, "Suito Bunka to Nihon" (Sui-T'ang Culture and Japan) by Aoki Kazuo on pp. 33-60 have a direct bearing on the beginnings of Japanese cultural borrowing as now understood. *Volume I*, *Kodai Kokka* (The State in Antiquity) of *Koza Nihonshi* (Lectures in Japanese History), jointly edited by Rekishigaku Kenkyukai and Nihonshikenkyukai and published in ten volumes by Tokyo Daigaku Shuppanbu in 1970 places less emphasis on the comparative aspects of early institutional development but is useful in outlining current Marxist thought on early Japan. Among the many studies of the early Japanese state and society are Yagi Atsuru *Ritsuryo Kokka Seiritsu Katei no Kenkyu* (A Study of the Process of Establishment of the *Ritsuryo* State) (Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo, 1969). (*Ritsu* is the criminal code and *ryo* the administrative code under which the Sui-T'ang system operated. *'Ritsuryo state'* is the term by which the Japanese state following the reforms of the seventh century is usually called.) Hirano Kunio *Taikazen-dai Shakai Soshiki no Kenkyu* (A Study of the Social Structure before the Taika Reforms) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1969), Ueda Masaaki, *Nihon Kodai Kokkaronkyu* (An Examination of the Theory of the Early Japanese State) (Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo, 1969), Ishimoda Sho, *Nihon no Kodai Kokka* (The Ancient Japanese State) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), and Saeki Arikiyo, *Nihon Kodai no Seiji to Shakai* (Politics and Society in Ancient Japan) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1970). These works have as their focus a field about which there is a great deal of uncertainty and controversy but they do collectively remind us that there was some kind of early administrative system and a fairly complex social structure already in place by the time intensive and systematic cultural borrowing from the continent began in the last half of the sixth century. They also remind us of the importance of the external element in Japanese culture and of the very particular way in which that element is handled in early Japanese historical writings. For example, Yagi notes (pp. 64-65) the paradoxical way in which Japanese historiography has tended to divide Japanese history, the history of the neighboring countries of Asia, and the history of Japanese interaction with these countries as three separate and distinct fields of inquiry having little to do with each other so that Japanese scholarship in each of the three fields has often suffered from lack of awareness of discoveries in the other two.

10. See Roy Andrew Miller, *Japanese and the Other Altaic Languages*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971). The foreword by the great Altaicist Nicholas Poppe touches on the nature of some of the remaining controversies, most of which seem still to be around a decade later.

11. I am indebted to Paul Dull, Professor Emeritus of Japanese History at the University of Oregon, for introducing me to the very useful metaphor of "lamination" in describing the way that Japanese culture assimilates exotic elements. These elements tend to retain their own distinct identity and exotic quality while now bridging gaps and now reinforcing thin spots in the Japanese cultural
heritage. This practice strongly contrasts with the "‘melting-pot’ style of cultural borrowing most characteristic of European practice.

12. Inoue and Saeki, "‘Nippon’ no Seiritsu," already cited, give a general survey of the subject on pp. 22-29. More than a quarter of Hirano’s bulky monograph is devoted to the question of immigrant talent, identifying the various waves of immigration in historic times. On pp. 144-145 is a table listing the major skill groups in each layer of immigration and the institutions to which they attached themselves. Skills listed include scribes, copyists, paper makers, writing-brush makers, ink makers, armorers, hawk trainers, weavers, dyers, tailors, woodworkers, blacksmiths, potters, and breeders and handlers of horses. The first of four chapters in Ishimoda’s monograph has to do with the international aspects of the beginnings of the Japanese state, while Saeki’s monograph takes us into another dimension as he discusses the likelihood that the title ‘sukuri’, an early term for ‘village headman’ may have a Korean source. Of immense importance to any student of this period is Nakamura Hidetaka’s massive three-volume study Nissen Kankeishi no Kenkyu (A Study of the History of Relations between Korea and Japan) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, second printing, 1969).

13. For a general discussion of the early Japanese missions to China and a detailed look at one of the most important early Japanese travellers, see Edwin O. Reischauer, Ennin’s Travels in T’ang China, and Ennin’s Diary, both (New York: Ronald Press, 1955). The first of these volumes is an extended commentary setting Ennin’s diary in its historical and intellectual context. The second is a copiously annotated translation of the diary.

Ennin spent the years 838-847 in China, going there with the last Japanese embassy of classical times. The T’ang dynasty was well into its last century, clearly on the wane but still intact in all its essentials. In the travels, Reischauer makes an interesting comparison between Ennin and Marco Polo, noting that the Italian, for all the value of his story, was an illiterate adventurer who made little real contact with the intensely literate Chinese culture and who dictated his story from memory many years later to a cellmate in prison. He was in China during the Mongol dynasty, a period of importance and interest but in many ways a low point in Chinese history. Ennin, on the other hand, was a man of sophistication and intellectual attainment who went on to become one of the great figures in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Literacy in Chinese had been a prerequisite for his training as a priest long before going to China and internal evidence in the Diary shows that he soon acquired a workable command of spoken Chinese once in the country. He was in China late in one of the greatest of Chinese dynasties and he was an eyewitness to the persecutions of 842-846 from which Chinese Buddhism never fully recovered. He spent eight months in Yangchou and has far more to tell us about the city than Marco Polo did after three years there. As Reischauer notes, Ennin lived at the end of the period in which the higher civilizations spread to the limits of the old world.

While Mediterranean civilization was seeping northward into North Europe, Chinese civilization was spreading southward into South China and parts of Southeast Asia and northeastward into Manchuria, Korea, and Japan. In Europe the process was slow and at times hardly perceptible; in Japan it was
rapid and clearly discernible—a great flood of cultural influences flowing strongly throughout the period from the late sixth century until the middle of the ninth. Coming at the end of this era, Ennin stands out as one of the last great individuals in this phase of history of East Asia. (Travels, p. 5)

Ennin was a sharp-eyed and sophisticated visitor to the most advanced and best organized nation on earth at that time. The value of his diary is well summarized on p. 12 of the Travels where Reischauer tells us that “His work is not only the first great diary by a Japanese; it is also the earliest intimate account of life in China.”

14. Of the sources listed above, note 9, the essay by Hara Hidesaburo, Ritsuryo Taisei no Seiritsu (The Establishment of the Ritsuryo Structure), pp. 149-180, and that by Sato Jun, “Ritsuryo Kokka no Henbo”, pp. 265-312 in Koza Nihonshi, Vol. I, are of interest. A convenient English-language discussion of the reforms, generally known as the Taika reforms from the era name of an important period of their institution, is Sir George Sansom, A History of Japan to 1334 (Stanford, 1958), pp. 60-66. The relationships between the continent and Japan in the early seventh century were, however, somewhat more richer and more complex than the scholarship of Sansom’s time could make clear. In his discussion of Sui and T’ang culture cited above, Aoki Kazuo speaks of the intellectual difficulties experienced by those who attempted to translate the new learning into Japanese terms. He points out (p. 47) that a man like Kibi no Makibi (693-775), one of the leading intellectual figures a century after the reforms could still argue that Confucianism and Buddhism were the same doctrine. Where Sansom places the beginning of the reforms at 645, Aoki reflects the current view that they began at the latest with the recommendation in 623 by the Chinese scholar monks accompanying the mission of that year from the Korean state of Silla. They told the empress Suiko that China was a “wondrous land ruled by law” (hoshiki bitei no chinkoku nari) (p. 46). Another aspect of the relationship is explored in Kojima Noriyuki Jodai Nihonbungaku to Chugokubungaku (Early Japanese Literature and Chinese Literature), 3 volumes (Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo, 1962).


16. The Kojiki became an active part of the Japanese intellectual heritage only with the completion of the Kojikiden (Commentaries on the Kojiki) by the great eighteenth century scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801). Published in fragments between 1790 and 1822, this is Norinaga’s most important single work and he spent more than thirty years on it. It is the point of departure for all subsequent scholarship on the text. The Manyoshu was studied more continuously throughout Japanese history; those who wanted to read early Japanese history could
ignore the difficulties of the *Kojiki* and read instead the Chinese-language *Nihongi* of 720. There was no substitute for those wanting access to early Japanese poetry, but it was again the philology of the eighteenth century that for the first time made the *Manyoshu* a fully living part of the Japanese literary heritage. This new philology was itself in part a product of the intellectual response in China to the Manchu conquest in 1644. Its first products in Japan were sinological studies of improved quality, but the nativist sentiments that inspired its rise in China also found a fertile field in Japan, where they were a major force in the *Kokugaku* or National Learning movement. Norinaga was the preeminent intellectual figure of this movement which attempted to rid Japanese culture of foreign elements and to recover the pristine Japan which presumably had existed before the dissemination of Buddhism and Confucianism in Japan. It combined religious (the Shinto revival) and political (anti-shogunal, pro-emperor) interests with a systematic study of Nara and Heian texts in an effort to define both a Shinto scripture and a national constitution. Both attempts were unsuccessful but their byproducts were invaluable to subsequent generations.

17. The first great period of borrowing from the continent in historical times was in the seventh and eighth centuries, which coincided with the time of greatest vigor and creativity of the T'ang dynasty. As T'ang declined the Japanese embassies became less frequent and the embassy of 838 was the last in this cycle. The next great wave of influence, particularly important in the field of religion, appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the Sung dynasty was at its height. There was relatively little interchange with China during the Mongol dynasty, but there were again important intellectual influences during the Ming dynasty. This wave reached its peak with the fall of the Ming in 1644 when Chinese intellectuals came to Japan in sufficient numbers to exert considerable influence on Japanese intellectual life for a generation or more. When Tokugawa Mitsukuni initiated his *Dai Nihonshi* (Great History of Japan) project in 1657, he put a Chinese scholar in charge. Direct contacts were tightly controlled after the promulgation of the Japanese exclusion policy of 1637, and when Japan once more began to take increasing notice of the outside world in the eighteenth century attention was increasingly directed toward Europe and America.

There was a last sunset glow of influence in Japan by the classic tradition of Chinese arts and letters in the final years of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth century when there was for the first time in history a relatively free and large-scale intermingling of Chinese and Japanese intellectuals. Among the generation of Japanese writers who were intellectually formed in this period there is a notable refinement in the range and precision of the Chinese loan vocabulary that they used in their Japanese writings and a certain intimacy and currency with Chinese intellectual currents which the earlier intense but sparse contacts could not bring about. Some of these writers also achieved a distinguished style in classical Chinese at the very time that the language was beginning to be deemphasized in Japanese schools. Mori Ogai, whose style was even more heavily influenced by his early exposure to Chinese models than it was by his deep knowledge of German language and culture, and Natsume Soseki, whose Chinese verse was well-received in China, are leading examples. Another is Nagai Kafu who came from a family background of Chinese scholarship.
although his father had successfully made the transition from Confucian scholar to modern banker. The Chinese allusions of these and other writers of the period were not infrequently made for purposes of cultural comparison or contrast. A useful study from a particularly interesting perspective on the role of Chinese culture in this crucial period of modern Japanese literary development is to be found in Ching-mao Cheng, *Nagai Kafu and the Chinese Tradition*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1970.

The interweaving of Chinese and Japanese sensibility often leaves few clear traces in English translation. A notable exception and a delight in itself is Edward Seidensticker's translation of Kafu's lovely *Quiet Rain* (Ame Shosho) in *Kafu the Scribbler* (Stanford, 1965), pp. 253-277.