

Watch Modernizing Japan rather than Noh or Kabuki

By Iokibe Makoto



MANY Japanese people have moved away from their hometowns in recent decades. In the small towns of Japan where traditional society still remains, you can find many long-established customs and social networks, and yet opportunities to come through are rare there. Young people take off to the industrialized society of the big city, where freedom, diversity and opportunities exist. People today are leaving behind their hometowns to find jobs and follow their dreams in the cities.

However, can people really find satisfaction in a city? A city provides not only the freedom to succeed, but also the freedom to fail. Opportunities for self-realization are also opportunities for self-loss. Although there are fewer constraints on people's lives than in traditional society, people must experience the loneliness of being in a crowd of strangers in a city.

When people are suffering in modern cities, they remember with fondness the mountains and the rivers of their hometowns, and the blanket of close ties in a large extended family. Modern people are a race torn apart by homesickness for what they have left behind, while longing to take it back. Above all, Japan is a country that has madly dashed from a non-Western traditional society to a modern society using Western civilization as its guide. In this process, it has been easy for the Japanese to lose sight of their identity, and to be torn between traditional and modern lifestyles.

For example, when abroad, we are often asked to introduce Japanese culture, and events and exhibitions on Japan are often held as part of "Year of Japan" programs. In a sense, it is the Japanese identity that is being expressed through these activities.

Performances of traditional Japanese arts, such as *noh* and *kabuki*, as well as the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, make up one pattern. These activities are not meaningless. This shows that contemporary Japan has not lost the elegance of its classical discreet culture, despite its mad dash to modernity. I think we should recreate the essence of our traditional arts, provide the people of the world with an awareness of Japanese culture, and if possible, increase awareness of its refined level. However, while the classical Japanese arts may attract certain experts and enthusiasts, they often end up leaving the average person with the impression that Japanese culture is hard to understand. It is questionable whether we should introduce foreigners to cultural forms that even the Japanese public has lost contact with, and then tell them that this is what Japan is about. These activities are part of Japan's rich cultural heritage, but they do not give a complete picture of today's Japanese life.

There are lots of things loved by the Japanese that are always well received around the world today. For example, through Japanese film directors from Kurosawa Akira and Ozu Yasujiro to Miyazaki Hayao, and TV series like *Oshin* and *Pokémon*, Japan has produced global cultural assets that are widely appreciated. These have a universal appeal, while also thoroughly promoting the uniqueness of Japanese culture.

Film is, of course, not an invention of Japanese culture but a recent

Western form of expression that the Japanese have learned to master. Outstanding Japanese movies for general audiences have received international praise. From globally admired animations to authentic Japanese movies like Ozu's, which are highly acclaimed in the West, our movies are actually a synthesis of the Japanese and Western cultures. A pure dichotomy of Western technology and Japanese content cannot fully explain Japanese films, which are a deeply rooted fusion of technique and subject matter.

I think this is a good symbol of the entire Japanese culture. Although it is an isolated island country, Japan has received a lot of stimulus through contact with outside cultures since ancient times, and by learning from other civilizations, it has developed a rich culture of its own. From the Taika Reforms to the Meiji Restoration, Japanese history rapidly developed in the period when the country encountered great foreign cultures. As in the case of an individual, a culture is able to develop its own latent possibilities through contact with different and developed cultures, and can achieve growth in a very vigorous way.

Considering this, there are a lot of misunderstandings among Japanese people concerning their identity. Some people reason that since the Japanese identity should not be something that came from overseas, they must exclude anything that was introduced from the West, and go back to Japan before the Meiji period. However, just returning to the Edo period does not mean that everything will be of pure Japanese origin. *Kanji*, or Chinese characters, Confucianism and Buddhism all came from the Chinese continent. Just like peeling off the layers of an onion, when all the wonderful things of foreign origin are stripped away, we are left with animism and the culture of the Stone Age. Whether the Stone Age culture of Japan is purely native or not would not matter here because we would just go back to the stage when we lived as a part of nature giving up culture and civilization.

It is important not to confuse cultural identity with cultural roots. Finding a country's roots involves going back into the past, while finding an identity involves recognizing the country's present character. While taking a fusion of the past as its legacy, identity includes the intention for self-realization in the future. Breaking down the cultural origin does not mean anything because the integration of the best of Japanese culture and foreign culture builds a new today. The main brilliance lies in a willingness to be exposed to the challenge posed by different foreign civilizations, to be attracted and repelled by them, and to grapple and adopt those influences. Our identity comes from the will to integrate outside influences, and to create a new culture for ourselves.

I mentioned that Japanese film is a combination of Western and Japanese cultures. It actually represents the participation of Japanese people on a Western stage, and the creation of cultural products with an infusion of Japanese personality. This is the way of modern Japanese culture.

You can say the same thing about the international success of Japanese musicians and artists, as well as Japanese fashion designers

like Mori Hanae and Miyake Issei. In contrast to such works, there is also a type of cultural product that exposes traditional Japanese culture to the world, while also letting itself develop more by adopting the new cultures. Judo is an example of this. I was deeply impressed when I met Yamashita Yasuhiro, an eighth-dan judo master, on a cultural exchange and dialogue mission to the Middle East last autumn. He did not simply give a technical Judo demonstration, but also conveyed the spirit of judo, a martial art form developed in Japan.

In modern Japan, where things Japanese and Western, or traditional and modern, tend to be clearly separated, there are several different types of efforts being made to bring these dichotomies together. These are all achievements of Japanese civilization.

When talking about cultural exchange or cultural promotion in Japan today, there are often important aspects that Japanese people tend to ignore or pay less attention to. These are the development of modern Japanese politics, economics and society. In actuality, people in other countries take an interest in the modernization of Japan itself. Meanwhile, the Japanese are busy trying to sell romantic images of classical Japanese culture. They do not have a lot of interest in how Japanese political and economic systems have been formatted, and consequently they do not try and explain them to the world. Although the world is interested in the civilization that Japan has developed in modern times, the Japanese always fob them off with soft cultural products that do not adequately reflect Japanese civilization today.

As Japanese, we need to talk about the main currents that created modern Japan. Okubo Toshimichi was a part of the 1871-73 Iwakura Mission to Europe and North America, and when he returned to Japan he opposed the *Seikanron* policy of military intervention in Korea, and set his sights on the fundamental goals of industrialization and modernization reforms. These efforts were then carried on by Ito Hirobumi and Hara Takashi, who subsequently became prime ministers and helped to create a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party political system. After World War II, Yoshida Shigeru set out a political course in harmony with the international environment, and helped bring about the peaceful development of Japan. As Japanese we should be proud of such histories, especially since there are very few non-Western societies that have achieved such rapid modernization.

There are many private citizens of the Meiji period that we should take pride in: Fukuzawa Yukichi, who promoted revolutionary ideas of human rights, and established a private university, or Shibusawa Eiichi, who set up over 500 prosperous companies and social projects. Sakamoto Ryoma led the Meiji Restoration and conceived of Japan as a commercial nation that could prosper through global trade. We should not forget that his thought has come to fruition as a method for survival after World War II. When talking about Japanese identity, we need to go back and revisit the starting point of the modern Japanese identity, the conception of the Japanese nation and its national role, as well as the path that the country actually took. JS

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