

The European Palette

By Hisanori Isomura

Since the demolition of the Berlin Wall last year, there has been a steady movement away from the superpower dichotomy between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and toward a single world house. Unlike Asia, which is weighed down by China's dogmatic ideologists, Europe is ridding itself of ideological politics and is erasing the division between East and West. At least in Europe, we are moving to global unification. This is clearest in the cultural field. Until the recent changes, Europe was a simple dichromatism of red and white, but today's Europe has once again become a kaleidoscope of vying cultures—a resplendent patchwork of cultural hues.

This diversity of cultures is Europe's greatest asset. Having lived in Europe for a total of nine years and in America for over six years, I have learned to appreciate this diversity. The "American way of life" is admirable as a single, functional mass consumer society stretching from sea to shining sea. It is now possible to drive 200 kilometers in any direction from Washington D.C. without encountering substantial differences.

Driving the same distance from Paris, however, is likely to put you in a different country where a different language is spoken. And people like myself who enjoy good food are especially attracted by the delicious local specialties that these many regions have to offer. Europe offers a fuller table in this broad cultural sense. And the inclusion of the distinctive cultures of Eastern Europe and a unified Germany will further enhance this attraction in the 1990s.

Of course, Europe has yet to rid itself of numerous perennial problems, one of the biggest being nationalism. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the three Baltic states' pushes for independence, and similar stirrings in the Ukraine and Moldavia are some of the most recent signs of this "ethnic" nationalism. Yugoslavia is a striking example of a "mosaic" nation.

British Trade and Industry Secretary Nicholas Ridley's recent comments were criticized as indicative of the depth of nationalistic feelings, yet Ridley's intemperate words over German pre-unification euphoria were not an isolated case. The same sentiments were obvious in the secret study group set up by Prime Minister Thatcher this spring to discuss Germany's future. This became a *cause célèbre* when the *Independent on Sunday* scooped a top-secret memo summarizing the discussion. In this memo, some fairly outrageous views are expressed on the German national character, including statements about German aggressiveness and a supposed German need to compensate for massive inferiority complexes. A number of people have suggested that the things said at this meeting were more serious than Ridley's recent outburst. It is disconcerting that the British, who are supposed to be such worldly and unchauvinistic gentlemen, should react this way to developments in Germany.

More prejudiced

With the British reacting this way to countries right across the Channel, it is no wonder that Japanese attitudes toward Europe are even more prejudicial. Yet Japanese and British stereotypes are different. A recent NHK survey has shown that, far from taking a jaundiced view of Germany, Japanese associate Germany with the Mercedes Benz and see Germans as meticulous, hard-working and reliable. By contrast, while the Japanese are duly impressed by French artistic and creative achievements and rank France as one of the world's cultural meccas, they have an unwarranted disdain for French economic proficiency. Seen from the perspective of the workaholic Japanese, the French appear slothful in their addiction to *vacances*.

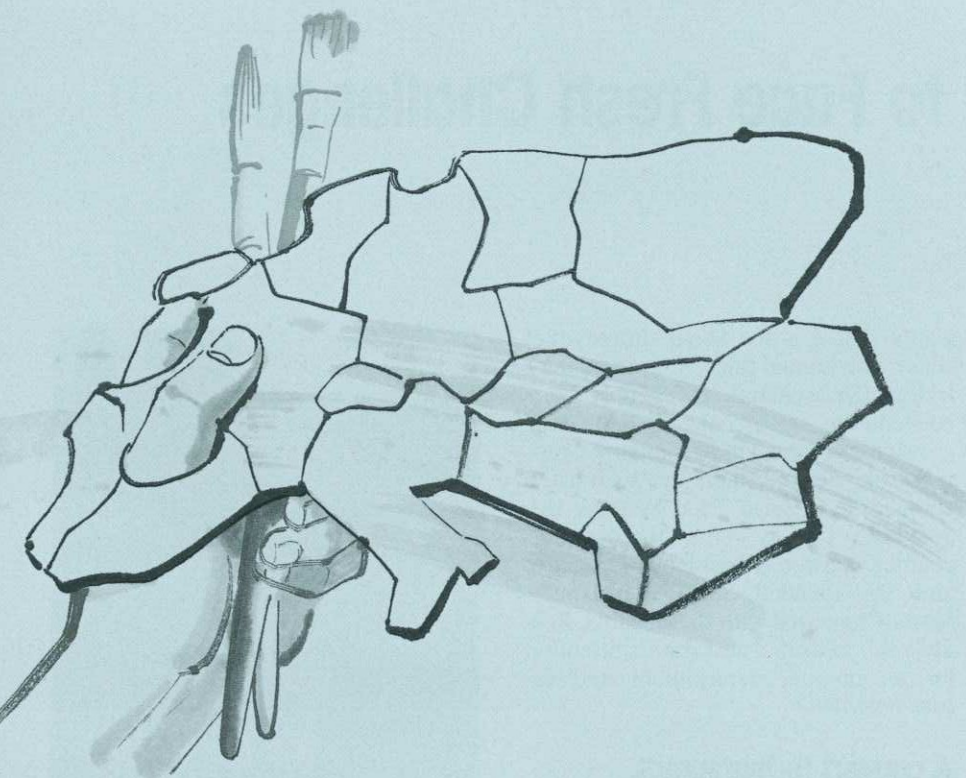
Stereotype perceptions of national character do not, however, exist in a vacu-

um. They also affect and are affected by behavior. For example, even though there are no import quotas, and even though BMW and Mercedes Benz sales are soaring, it is nearly impossible to spot a French car in Japan's big cities. Likewise, the Japanese stereotype of the refined British gentlemen received a rude awakening with the disruptive behavior of British hooligans at international soccer matches recently.

According to a 1984 NHK public opinion survey, the foreign country most liked by Japanese was Switzerland (49.1%). Switzerland topped the list for almost all age groups, reflecting the pervasiveness of this Japanese fondness. This is probably attributable to the natural beauty of Switzerland, the very popular television cartoon about Heidi, the hardy Swiss national character, Swiss neutrality, Swiss prosperity, the strength of the Swiss franc, and more. Second was the United States (33.2%). Japanese have a very ambivalent attitude toward the United States, but that is another article for another day. Usually, France appears third, but in 1984 Australia ranked third (30.7%) and France fourth (29.7%). Following in order were Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Greece, China and Sweden. West Germany was ranked 14th, well out of the top 10.

Analyzing the results more closely, Japanese women ranked France their second most popular country (led only by Switzerland), while few preferred West Germany. West Germany did make it into the top 10 for Japanese men, but Japanese women have a very low opinion of Germany.

A significant feature of Japanese opinion on foreign countries is the existence of a number of competing factions. Personally, I suspect this is the same mentality as the competing schools of tea ceremony, flower arranging and other art forms, and the Japanese tendency to cluster around certain well-defined schools of thought. Hence those who study French



flock to the French school (figuratively as well as literally) and cheer on France, and likewise those who study German land in the German school rooting for Germany. The famous French expression *plus royaliste que le roi* (more royalist than the king himself) succinctly captures this Japanese propensity to go overboard in identifying with the foreign country of choice.

One of the heavyweight monthly magazines recently carried a heated exchange between a famous Nietzsche scholar and a historian of France in the Middle Ages on the question of whether the focal point of an integrated Europe would be Paris or the newly dynamic Berlin. Even more, I was surprised by the sensational title "The German Victory" on an article in another popular monthly. On reading the article, I found that the author, a professor of German literature, was not arguing that students were neglecting the other European languages and flocking to German.

Fall in interest

The professor's point was that there had been a drop in Japanese interest in German culture after the war as French existentialist and structuralist philosophies took the lead and Germany was

unable to produce any writers of the Hermann Hesse caliber, and that this was reflected in the declining numbers of university students studying German. Given the choice between German and French, until recently, 60 to 70% of Japanese students have chosen French. With the breaching of the Berlin Wall and the German drive toward unification, this tendency is beginning to be reversed and the number of students selecting German is gradually starting to recover. However, the article does not really justify its eye-catching title about "The German Victory." There is clearly a Japanese tendency to latch on to stereotypes and to vigorously defend the pros and cons of their stereotypes in talking about the outside world.

Which country or people one likes is essentially a matter of personal taste and should not in itself occasion a long sermon. Yet when a like becomes a bias or even worse the center of contention between rival schools of thought, it takes on a more serious air. How does this manifest itself in Japan? In many ways. For example, the university student's decision whether to elect French or German as a second foreign language seems to divide people into two different personality types and two different schools

of thought. It is often rumored that the German school dominates the Foreign Ministry, the French school in finance and especially at the Ministry of Finance, and the English school the world of business.

This division is manifested in the fact that there is still no Japanese cultural institute in France, one of the world's cultural centers, while there are two in Germany—an impressive center in Berlin made possible with the backing of a German-faction vice foreign minister, and a cultural institute in Cologne. On the other side, a long list of Ministry of Finance administrative vice ministers and the two most recent governors of the Bank of Japan, S. Sumita and Y. Mieno, belong to the French faction. This inclination toward factions is a distinctive feature of Japanese politics.

Yet, in building better relations with this culturally diverse Europe, the most important factor is not the differences among the European countries but the economic integration scheduled to be completed by the end of next year and the potential political integration that looms ahead. As outsiders living east of the Urals, we must make every effort to avoid divide-and-rule tactics in our business and diplomatic relations with Europe. We must not let our domestic factionalism mislead us into believing that, for example, France can be played off against Germany or vice versa.

As Europe moves toward unification, Japan should instead focus on the universal elements binding Europe together, including the core Greco-Roman traditions, the ideals of the Renaissance, the enlightenment, and most of all the spiritual values of Christianity. Only then will the world truly be able to become one while sustaining its many different and resplendent cultures. ■

(This is the fourth of five essays by Hisanori Isomura.)

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