

Japanese Civilization (Part 17)

– Avoiding the Clash: Building a Civilization of Peace and Harmony –

By Kawakatsu Heita

THE end of the cold war brought détente to two continental powers that had championed different, confrontational ideologies. Now we are in a period of regional rivalry. The planet has many regions, with certain specific characteristics, whether environmental, socio-cultural or political. Since the end of the cold war, regional alignments have been defined primarily by culture and civilization (ignoring for the moment the role of individual states).

Samuel P. Huntington provoked much thought in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington envisions seven civilizations in the modern world, eight if African civilization is included. Four of these civilizations are in Asia: Japanese, Chinese, Hindu and Islamic. Since his thesis of a clash between civilizations has been highlighted, calamitous occurrences such as the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the Iraq war have been broken up and the clash between Western and Eastern civilizations and especially the confrontation between Western Christendom and the Islamic world, including the clash of civilizations between Russian Orthodoxy and Islam in Chechnya, are frequently happening. The challenge facing the world is to develop a new civilization of peace and harmony where cultures coexist without strife.

Huntington recognized that Japan has its own distinct civilization, and he was certainly not the only scholar to do so. Practically all have shared this view.

In the preface he wrote that Japanese civilization is fundamentally different from the Chinese one, and remains different from the Western model as well. When Japan modernized, he wrote, it did not become part of the West. Just because Japan and China are geographically close, and just because their writing system and racial types somewhat resemble one another, it would be a jump in logic to assume that they come from the

same cultural mold. And just because Japan has taken on many of the modern trappings of the West, it would be wrong to assume it is a branch of Western civilization. Scholars are quick to agree that Japanese civilization is different from that of China or any other.

Korean culture is different from that of China, even though the two share a common border. It is therefore perfectly natural that Japan, separated by the sea from these two, developed a culture that was different from them both. We could illustrate these differences for example by their love of different flowers. For the Japanese, the epitome of floral beauty is the cherry blossom; for the Koreans, the rose of Sharon; and for the Chinese, the peony, and now, they are respectively named as national flowers. Friendship among Japanese, Koreans and Chinese would flourish more if people, rather than facetiously pointing out their similarities, used their differences as a starting point to help each other and further develop, in harmony, their respective strong points. This approach would be more constructive, and would lead to a flowering of a truly civilized group of societies in Northeast Asia.

China developed on a continent, Korea on a peninsula, and Japan on an archipelago. With different natural surroundings, it is not surprising that they developed continental, peninsular and maritime cultures, respectively. Continental cultures are sometimes hostile to maritime cultures, but the peninsular culture of South Korea, which has been influenced by the unique features of the other two, is well placed to step in and promote approaches that eliminate the potential for hostility.

This is illustrated by the children's game, Rock, Paper and Scissors. In a game with two players, if one makes a Rock with his hand while the other makes Paper, the Rock loses because it can be covered with paper. But if the game has three players and the third play-

er makes Scissors, there is no winner nor loser. All three cultures share a common saying, "A wise man cultivates harmony among others without losing sight of himself." The challenge is for all three to translate their unique cultural attributes into a peace that embraces all.

Korea introduced ideas from China, while Japan absorbed ideas from both. In the Asuka period (538-710), Japan welcomed the knowledge and techniques brought by immigrants from the Korean peninsula. In the Nara period (710-784), the street layout for the capital city of Nara was modeled after that of Chang'an, the imperial city of Tang China. The next capital of Japan, Kyoto, was planned following the same model in the subsequent Heian period (794-1192). During all this time, Japan introduced many attributes of Chinese civilization. In the Kamakura period (1192-1333), Japan was influenced by Sung China (especially the Southern Sung), which was based at Hangzhou (called Linan at the time). Scholars fleeing China after the Mongols destroyed the Sung dynasty migrated to Japan under the permission of the Kamakura military government. During the Muromachi period (1338-1573), Japan used coins minted in China for its own currency. Thus, it is indisputable that the Japanese adopted many aspects of Chinese culture.

But Chinese influence ended in the Muromachi period. After large quantities of gold, silver and copper were discovered and mined in the 16th century, the Japanese had the funds to buy all of the trappings of Chinese civilization that they needed.

In the subsequent Edo period (1603-1867), Japan showed itself to be independent of Chinese civilization, both politically and economically. It had developed its own civilization. The Jurchen tribe invaded China and founded the Qing dynasty (1616-1912) around this time. With the Han the dominant ethnic group in China being ruled by a foreign

Photos : Mobara Peony Garden (left) / @Tsukuba Botanical Garden (center)



dynasty, the Japanese forged their own way, developing a mindset in which their country became, for them, the center of their world.

With China occupied by a foreign power, the Yi dynasty of Korea (1392-1910) developed its own, smaller version of this same mindset, developing cultural systems – not to mention political and economic systems – that became increasingly independent from Chinese civilization. Emissaries were sent from Korea to Japan on more than 10 occasions during the Edo period. These emissaries were learned people and brought more cultural influences. The result was that the Japanese people came to view themselves with even more confidence.

Thus, paradoxically, the people of Qing dynasty China, the Korean Kingdom and Edo period Japan all shared a worldview in which they regarded themselves as a center of civilization. This lasted until Northeast Asia was confronted by Western civilization in the 19th century.

This worldview is, in more modern terminology, a nation's expression of faith in its own civilization. At the heart of the civilizations of China, Korea and Japan were concepts from the Confucian Four Books. These four, which were studied by the educated class throughout Northeast Asia, are *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of*

the Mean.

People were expected to understand and embrace these precepts found in *The Great Learning*:

“Those who wish to show the kingdom that they have the same illustrious virtue as the ancients should first rule their own states virtuously. Those who wish to rule their own states virtuously should first ensure that their family members live in harmony. Those who wish that their family members live in harmony should first cultivate themselves. Those who wish to cultivate themselves should first ensure that their minds are in order. Those who wish to ensure that their minds are in order should first be sincere in their thoughts. Those who wish to be sincere in their thoughts should first increase their knowledge as much as possible. Knowledge is increased by examining things.”

Thus, the civilization shared by the three Northeast Asian countries fostered the belief that a government should be run not by the military but by virtuous people who increase their knowledge through the examination of things. This ideal – a country guided by learning and governed by a righteous government – created conditions that made it possible for Northeast Asia to experience a Pax Sinaica (peace under the Qing), Pax Koreana and Pax Japonica, lasting from the mid-1600s to around the end of the

1800s. We could even label the centuries of peace Japan experienced under the Tokugawa Shogunate as the “Pax Tokugawana.” The people of Northeast Asia have every reason to be proud of this traditional ideal of peace grounded on virtue, and should work to ensure that the ideal is translated into a Pax Asiana for the 21st century and beyond.

This culture of virtue stands in contrast to the European approach of the 17th century and later. Hugo Grotius, reputed to be the father of international law, wrote in *On the Law of War and Peace* that one sovereign right of a king is to wage a defensive war. This principle was embodied in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), and for many years thereafter the European countries fought war after war under the pretext of defense. History shows that there was hardly a year without a war in Europe. The power of each European state was based on its military power, and the overt use of that was considered a basic right of the state.

Thus, in the 17th century and for centuries after, Northeast Asia was guided by moral politics based on virtue, while Europe developed a system of power politics, and peace was only achieved through a balance of power.

From the mid-1600s to the end of the 1800s a common goal in the three Northeast Asian countries was a government based on virtue and the education and training of individuals. As Confucius says in *The Great Learning*:

“A ruler must first cultivate his own virtue. Possessing virtue will give him the people. Possessing the people will give him the territory. Possessing the territory will give him its wealth. Possessing its wealth will give him resources for expenditure. Virtue is the root; wealth is the result. If he makes virtue his secondary object, and wealth his primary object, he will only wrangle with his people and teach them violence.”

Virtuous people are the source of wealth, and thus, cultivation of virtuous people is needed. Cultivating virtue will make a country prosperous. This ideal is in sharp contrast to that of European nations at the time. The countries of

Northeast Asia enjoyed many years of Pax Asiana precisely based on their idea of a country rich in virtue and wealth.

In the decades leading up to World War II, Japan introduced various aspects of Western civilization and switched to a very different approach called *fukoku kyōhei*: “Enrich the country and strengthen the military.” This led to the rise of a military government whose object was to make Japan equal to any of the Western powers, and this in turn led to a Japanese imperial structure modeled after the British Empire. By the end of the war, Japan had inflicted great suffering and damage on its neighbors.

One way we Japanese can show remorse for this unfortunate past is to base our prosperous country on a foundation of virtue and cooperate with others to achieve a Pax Asiana in Northeast Asia.

Recent discussions have focused on establishing the “East Asia” group of nations, encompassing Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea and China) and Southeast Asia. A similar approach, the ASEAN+3, represents the growing global presence of these countries. Economic ties among them are strengthening yearly, and they are now working to develop political and cultural ties as well. East Asia is evolving into a group of nations forming one pole in the 21st-century tripolar world order, with the other two poles of EU and North America.

There is no doubt that East Asian countries will continue to strengthen their economic interdependence through FTAs. ASEAN began as a political group, so it naturally developed political ties, but the group’s main purpose is the establishment of economic ties. In Northeast Asia, political relations between Japan and South Korea are favorable, but relations between Japan and China, and between South Korea and China, are still not stable. The Chinese government’s educational policy for its citizens, including school curricula, has an anti-Japanese bias, and this is one factor hampering bilateral cultural ties. Cultural exchanges between Japan and South Korea are very active at the present time (2004). Of

course, this is still a new phenomenon, kicked off by the co-hosting of the World Cup soccer finals in 2002. This success led both countries to declare 2005 the Japan-Korea Friendship Year, and South Koreans now appear more prepared to accept elements of Japan’s mass culture.

Let us now examine some major attributes of the civilization that East Asia could develop in the 21st century. We will take into account these recent developments and past history, and will draw a little on the example of Japanese civilization.

Contact between the civilizations of East Asia and Western Europe goes back many centuries to the Silk Road. But East Asia only came to the immediate attention of Europeans after the publication of *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Much of the book describes China, and Japan appears in only about 1% of the entire book. But that small 1% spurred the Genovese Christopher Columbus to sail off in search of the reputed golden island of *Zipangu*. He set the stage for the Age of Discovery of the 16th century.

This new age of maritime navigation happened to coincide with an unprecedented boom in mining development in Japan, which yielded a large amount of gold in the 16th century. Stories bandied about during the Age of Discovery were still being told when Commodore Matthew C. Perry demanded that Japan open up to trade. In the preface to his *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, he wrote that the United States had unintentionally achieved part of what Columbus had planned, and that he had fulfilled Columbus’ desire to bring the fabled *Zipangu* under the influence of European civilization.

Perry of course considered the United States to be part of European civilization. But was he implying that Japan was barbaric? Not at all – in fact, he wrote in the same preface that in spite of the Japanese government having prohibited commerce with other countries, the people enjoyed a certain degree of civilization, refinement and intellectual ability.

But this was quite different from the image many other 19th-century Westerners had of Asia. Just three of the many people in the West who disparaged Asian civilization were: the philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel, who complained that “the Orientals only knew that a single man was free... but we know that all men are free”; Karl Marx, who wrote, “In the ancient Asiatic... mode of production, the transformation of the product into a commodity... plays a subordinate role”; and the historian Leopold von Ranke, who tried to convince his readers that Asian (Chinese) culture had reached its peak in ancient times, and that the invasion of barbarian tribes (the Mongolians) had brought Asian culture to a dead end.

And yet, before the 18th century, Europeans idealized Asia. Middle Eastern Islamic culture was a model. Europeans especially admired the Ottoman Empire’s cultural aspects, with its tulips, landscape gardening, cult of coffee, and traditions of diplomacy. Mozart’s *Turkish March* is one example of the attraction of “exotic” Asia. Most French people in the Enlightenment movement admired China, and Chinoiserie was in vogue among the upper ranks of society. In 17th century Europe, products from India were all the rage. In the previous century, explorers set out for the East Indies (East Asia in today’s terminology) in search of easy riches. Thus, until around 1800, Asia inspired admiration and envy in the hearts of Westerners.

Then around 1800, Asia began to be viewed negatively. These were transitional days leading to more modern times – an industrial revolution in Britain, a political revolution in France, a cultural revolution in Germany and a revolution for independence in much of British North America. This was a time when Westerners developed a strong pride in their own civilization, and began looking down on other parts of the world.

The only Asian country able to stand up to this critical view was Japan. Japan viewed Western countries as Great

Powers whose civilization was based on military force. Japanese civilization did not make an ostentatious display of economic and coercive force, but flowered through the intellectual abilities and its refined lifestyle, as Perry had observed. After Perry, many other Westerners recorded their impressions of Japan. They were almost universal in their praise of the natural beauty and refined lifestyles that existed before the Restoration, and the change in political bases in 1868. Japan's civilization was a treasure trove of beauty, in contrast to the Western powers' civilization of military force. Around the end of the 19th century, the beauty of Japanese civilization greatly influenced aesthetics in the West and created a fad for things Japanese. Paradoxically, it was around this time that Japan, enamored by the military force of the Western great powers, began its drive to "enrich the country and strengthen the military."

Where did Japan get its inspiration for cultivating beauty? The history of other civilizations is marked by their mastery over the environment. Japan being different, developed a civilization that used forests and watercourses without greatly altering them. By conserving mountain woodlands, the people prevented flooding and ensured a good supply of clean water. By channeling river water to their fields, they raised agricultural productivity to the highest level in the world. The mixture of fresh and salt water at the mouths of rivers became an excellent place to raise and catch fish. Some of the many river mouths developed into ports, which were connected to other ports via a maritime transportation system. These many harbors, linked by navigable coastal waters, were another element creating a uniquely Japanese landscape.

The ASEAN+3 countries are linked together geographically much like old Japan's harbors and coastal waters. East Asia includes Japan, South Korea on the Korean peninsula, China and the island nations and sea-facing countries of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the other two members of the tripolar world order, the EU and North America, are primarily continental in orientation.

The term "East Asia" evokes the idea of a continental landmass, because this is what China is. But the areas in East Asia where economic ties are growing are not in the interior of the continent but on or near the coast. We can call this region Maritime East Asia.

To the south of Maritime East Asia is Western Oceania, the center of which is Australia. Australia is presently strengthening its economic ties with Maritime East Asia, and the entire West Pacific coastal zone is gradually integrating economically. The thousands of islands, from Japan in the north to Western Oceania in the south, extend in the shape of a crescent. The Aegean Sea is justly famous for its beautiful islands, but the archipelago along the Western Pacific has far more of them, and it is the greatest archipelago in the world. The countries' diversity – whether racial, religious, ethnic or cultural – is great, but they have one thing in common: the ocean. And because this archipelago forms an arc with rich potential, we can call it "the Fertile Crescent of the Sea."

The sea today is no longer regarded as a mere part of the natural environment – it is a base for commercial activities and has great economic significance. One common interest can be marine conservation to protect maritime and seabed resources. From the viewpoint of both environmental conservation and economic development, it would be worthwhile to establish a network of harbors and coastal waters, from Maritime East Asia to Oceania. Ancient Mesopotamia, the home of an ancient land-based civilization in a part of the Fertile Crescent, is now beset by tension and war. All the more reason for us to promote the concept of Pax Marina, or a maritime civilization of peace in the Fertile Crescent of the Sea.

An Asian civilization existing in peace and harmony will remain only an alluring dream unless it is supported politically with economic powers. And the politics to establish such a civilization will not last without cultural ideals. Japan, South Korea and China, while remaining different from one another, should stay true to their Northeast Asian roots, fostering

studies, culture, and the training of human resources. I would like to suggest one way to promote these goals.

I have mentioned the differences between Europe and Northeast Asia. However, there are things that can be learned from Europe. The EU fosters harmony among the ethnic groups it encompasses, and these ethnic groups are very numerous, especially after the expansion to include 25 countries in May 2004. One thing that Northeast Asia can learn from the EU is its practice of designating one city as the EU Capital of Culture for one year, then moving the "capital" to another city the following year. Each year, from spring to fall, people representing their respective EU countries gather in the designated city to participate in a cultural "Olympics." The idea was proposed by Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister for Culture at the time, and the "capital" has been moved from city to city since 1985.

This example illustrates that culture and the ever-popular performing arts extend beyond national borders. Artists and performers from throughout the EU show their talents and try to outdo one another in the city designated as the EU Capital of Culture. This presents a great educational opportunity, especially impressionable young people. And because the "capital" moves each year, those active in cultural fields and involved in the program develop a network of contacts. The program also offers economic spin-offs. We in Northeast Asia would do well to develop our own version of the Capital of Culture program, as another way to promote peace and harmony in the region.

JS

(Continued in Part 18)

Kawakatsu Heita is a professor of economic history at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. His books and articles have been published in both English and Japanese. He also serves as an advisor for various governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.