

Japanese Civilization (Part 25)

Towards a Civilization Based on the Value of Beauty

– From the Values of Truth and Good –

By Kawakatsu Heita

Truth, Good and Beauty as Transversal Values

TRUTH, good and beauty are three transversal values. This is not an arbitrary choice, but is attributed to a German philosopher, Immanuel Kant's three critiques which had a great influence on European philosophy: *La Critica della Ragion Pura* (1781), *La Critica della Pratica* (1788), and *La Critica del Giudizio* (1790), which depicts "truth," "good" and "beauty."

Human beings enhanced humanity and enriched their intellectual heritage by increasingly acquiring these values.

The Changing Pattern of the Relative Importance of the Three Values in the West

It seems that none of these three values should be placed at a superior position. However, the modern civilization which emerged in the West and spread all over the world, has been witnessing a pattern change of relative importance for over 400 years.

In the 17th and 18th centuries when "the scientific revolution" took place and the philosophy of the Enlightenment prevailed, based on the discoveries by natural science which eliminated irrational superstitious thinking, the value of "truth" had the supreme importance.

Pursuing scientific "truth" undoubtedly became the basis of the Western civilization in the 19th and 20th centuries when the industrial revolution, or accumulative inventions through the application of scientific knowledge to industrial and military technology,

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Immanuel Kant

took place, immense wealth was accumulated but at the same time it was unequally distributed among people. The value of "good" then gained the utmost importance.

The criticism of the capitalists' exploitation by Marxism was one example based on the value of the moral term "good" rather than of "truth."

The development of nuclear physics made it possible to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which shows another example that pursuing scientific truth is not enough for human well-being. Moral checks had to be taken into account.

The cold war was a competition between two types of "good": the West believed in "freedom," while the East had "equality."

Both sides were commonly engaged

in the mass accumulation of economic wealth and military apparatus. In doing so, both revealed an unmistakable character of a "civilization of power," which was created on the combined values of "truth" and "good." At the same time, both had also commonly showed the limitation of further development by creating industrial waste on a gigantic scale and putting even global environment in danger.

In retrospect, "the Earth Summit," the UN Conference on Environment and Development, held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, was a watershed of modern civilization, from the power-oriented stage to new and higher level of human development.

The Summit, the largest gathering of world leaders in history, with 172 heads of states and representatives from 108 countries, showed great concern over the importance of "biodiversity": all forms of life on the Earth, whether useful or not for economic development. It surpassed the "Limits of Growth" report published by the Club of Rome in the beginning of 1972 that was mainly concerned with the limits of natural resources for economic growth.

Then, what is the main value which can assure environmental protection and biodiversity on the Earth? When we argue that the environment should be preserved, our value is based on beauty. What is beauty, then? The answer will be varied as an aesthetic sense is very much subjective and individual. What is important, however, is that every human being is endowed with a sense of beauty by nature and the value of beauty can be universal.

We can apply this value to the

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Earth, or global environmental matters. When we ask whether the Earth is “true” or not, the question does not make any sense. Neither does the question of whether the Earth is good or bad. The question whether the Earth is beautiful or not, however, makes sense, and we can answer clearly that “our planet is beautiful, indeed.”

The civilization of power has flourished only at the cost of the global environment. A new civilization or a global civilization based on the value of beauty must emerge.

Certainly, a sense of beauty is culturally different, but it is possible to have a diversify to create a “civilization of beauty” just like the Earth.

The Case of Japan: an Example of an Opposite Pattern from the West

For comparison, let us look at the experience of Japan as an instructive reference. Japan, one of the most advanced nations in the world, showed an original course in its value system. An overview of the last 400 years of Japanese history also shows a unmistakable changing pattern of the three values.

In the middle of the 19th century, Japan opened itself to the world, and followed the Western civilization of power by pursuing scientific truth and applying it to its economy and military technologies. Ever since the Meiji Restoration (1868), to be strong was “good” for the country.

Before then, however, in the 17th and 18th centuries, while Japan had been in seclusion, its dominant value was “beauty.”

Seclusion meant that there was no frontier to develop outside the country; natural resources was available only at home; the resources were not wasted, reused and recycled to sustain the economy. Nature was under the utmost care of the people, and kept



(From left) Rio de Janeiro Governor Leonel Brizola, Brazilian President Fernando Collor, Economy Minister Marques Moreira and Portuguese President Mario Soares plant trees for the Earth Summit in 1992 (at the previous event of the summit)

well under control. There was no wild nature in Japan and almost all the landscape was changed by human hands in the form of “gardens.”

Altering wild nature to a garden-like landscape had yielded economic fruits, and Japan’s agricultural productivity became the highest in the world. In economic history, the effort toward higher productivity equals to an industrious revolution. Industrious revolution was a capital saving and labor intensive type of production revolution. This pattern could be contrast with the Western industrial revolution which was a capital-intensive and labor saving of production revolution. Both revolutions took place almost at the same time, in the 18th century. As a result of the industrious revolution, Japan’s agricultural productivity became the highest in the world, while Britain enjoyed the highest productivity through the industrial revolution. Japanese have become industrious ever since.

As nature was carefully reserved and controlled, the Japanese people often have a perception of nature as “beauty.”

The value of “beauty” was closely

associated with the keen interest in keeping human life neat and clean. A growing sense of cleanliness was attributed to Zen Buddhism which became increasingly popular among samurai.

Zen Buddhism does not focus on the image of Buddha and it developed a new form of art through its emphasis on daily practice. The garden was one of its achievements and garden creation was a serious art. Zen was also associated with the tea-ceremony, which became very popular among samurai, as a ceremony to bring spiritual peace. Flower arrangements were indispensable elements for the tea ceremony, and it also helped to develop gardening techniques.

When the nation was united at the beginning of the 17th century by the Tokugawa shogunate and peace arrived after the long turbulence of civil wars, these aesthetic elements came into full bloom, and the value of beauty spread to the people.

Neo-Confucianism was adopted by the Tokugawa government as the official learning, which encouraged all the samurai to study. There was no illiteracy at all among the samurai class, both male and female. This con-



tributed to establishing a moral code, known as “Bushido” in the early period.

Neo-Confucianism emphasises on reason or truth. This in turn led to the development of a new form of learning known as Rangaku (Dutch learning) in the 18th century. This was associated with searching for truth. The Dutch learning introduced medical science and astronomy.

As we have seen, the Western values, moved from “truth,” in terms of relative importance through “good,” toward “beauty,” while those in Japan showed the opposite direction from “beauty,” through “good” to “truth.”

What happened to the society which valued “beauty”? First of all, there was virtually no war during the Edo period. Japan had produced and used more guns than any other nation in the 16th century, but abandoned the guns and enjoyed 270 years’ of lasting peace of the “Pax Tokugawana.”

After adopting Western values in the late 19th century, Japan became militarily and economically strong, waging a sequence of wars against other countries.

The value of “beauty” might have something to do with realizing peace for a society. Such a society regards violence as ugly and the antipole to violence is “beauty.”

■ For the Future

There is, however, no absolute truth nor absolute good. The “truth” argued here is the modern one and is very much a value for physical science, and we know that scientific truth is not absolute. Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* demolished the prevailing view of science as the acquisition of the objective knowledge of the truth, and argued that science was heavily influenced by non-rational factors. A

new theory that arose in the 20th century says that a spectator’s actions could influence the physical universe.

“Good” is very much related to value for social science. From Adam Smith to the Chicago School, there have been economists who believed in freedom as the utmost important element for human well-being, while Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong and others believed in equality.

These suggest that “truth” is reliant on human subjectivity, and “good” is, to a greater extent, conditional to subjectivity. “Beauty” is subjective indeed. We cannot be free from subjectivity in these values, especially in the case with “beauty.” For this reason, we must respect the cultural and biological diversity of people.



Conclusion

If “beauty” will become the main value for a human society in a new civilization, what kind of image can we envisage for the outlook of international communities?

For a reference, let us glance over the outlook in Edo period Japan when the main social value was characterized as “beauty.”

Quite a few Westerners visited Japan, Engelbert Kaempfer and Philipp Franz von Siebold to mention a few, and left their observations. They were all impressed by the gardens. Many Westerners visited after Japan opened to the world, and Rutherford Alcock, the first British diplomatic representative to Japan, mentioned that the Japanese land-

scape was comparable to the English garden, which he believed to be the best in the world. Heinrich Schliemann, an archaeologist who excavated Troy and Mycenae, visited Japan and mentioned that every Japanese house had a beautiful garden. A British plant hunter observed that “if love of flowers is taken as a yardstick to measure the level of cultural advancement, Japanese folks are higher than British.”

All the Westerners were impressed by the “beauty” Japan. Ukiyo-e, which depicted the daily folk life, fascinated Western artists such as Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas who created a new movement of Impressionism.

An ideal appearance of the Earth should be garden islands, in which diversified cultures are integrated and networked as one unit. Beauty is the transversal value, but as it is based on cultural diversity, its idea is not universal. It is

indeed based on biological diversification that is truth of the Earth. Making the garden islands will be a transversal objective of human beings. **JS**

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– This is the last article of the series –

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