

The Japanese juxtaposition

MARIO PERNIOLA

Università di Roma “Tor Vergata”, Dipartimento di Ricerche Filosofiche,
Via Columbia 1, 00133 Roma, Italy. E-mail: khaire@marioperniola.it

Taking its starting point from the distinction between axial and non-axial civilization, the article focuses on the peculiar aspects of the Japanese process of modernization, which has its roots in a historical experience in which the notions of hybridity and crossing were unsuitable. In fact, what we see in Japan is not the encounter and mixture of different and heterogeneous aspects, although there is hardly anything original or pure in it. There is a sort of Japanese uniqueness, that cannot be found in a specific content, but in a general attitude that consists of a sort of deconstruction of any type of content. This process enables one thing to be put next to another without leading to conflict, even if originally the two may have been antithetical. Therefore, *juxtaposition* is the notion that best explains the type of procedure employed by the Japanese when they deal with something that does not come from their culture.

Neither hybridity nor crossing

Although the Japanese civilization has often been seen as a culture in which there is hardly anything original or pure,¹ the concept of *hybridity* gives rise to a few problems when applied to the analysis of its main features. Originally, this notion was applied to nature and its proper meaning designates the cross-breeding between different species of plants or animals. The Latin word *hybrida* is used of a person who comes from two different races. The spread of the notion to the humanities conflicts with the conceptual horizons adopted more successfully by the concepts of *electicism* and *syncretism*. Although the etymology connecting it with the Greek word *ubris* (violence) is arbitrary, nevertheless the notion includes a reference to rape, to barbarian invasions and their biological effects. Even though the Japanese are made up of three different groups, each with their own distinctive physical features, the palaeo-anthropological approach is too weak an interpretation for the cultural purity of the Japanese civilization. Since historical times, the Japanese population has belonged to only one ethnic group, with the exception of the *ainu* who formed a tiny minority. Unlike western civilization, where barbarian invasion caused deep historical crises (according to Burckhardt this is

the only great historical crisis of the West²), Japan was never invaded³ and developed independently without any interruption; Japan is therefore a rare case in the history of humankind. As proof of this extraordinary continuity is the fact that Japan has been reigned by only one imperial dynasty, and the current *heisei* era started in 1989 when the 126th emperor was crowned. It is as if the ancient Roman empire still existed in the West!⁴ Nevertheless, through 15 centuries Japan has undergone continual transformations and innovations. This anomaly has become one of the features of the so-called ‘Japanese enigma’.⁵

The word *crossing* does not seem adequate in talking about Japan, and this is not only because the cross is the symbol of the west, the meeting point of its four main traditions: Greek, Roman, Jewish and German. Moreover, the cross is the axial symbol *par excellence*, where transcendence and immanence meet, but the Japanese civilization, as many scholars have pointed out, lacks transcendence. From the philosophical standpoint, the Japanese world does not recognize entities or values that transcend everyday matters, and therefore it differs somewhat from the Chinese mentality and radically from the Indian and Western ones.⁶

Axiality and non-axiality

This Japanese distinction stands out even more when compared with Karl Jaspers’ philosophy of civilization. According to him, a radical change occurred in the history of humankind around about 500 BC, when the ancient and practically static millennial civilizations collapsed. This happened because existing traditions were put in doubt and a new mentality based on the opposition between immanence and transcendence emerged. The epoch-making change took place in Greece due to the criticism of myth and the birth of tragedy and philosophy, in Palestine due to Jewish prophetism, in India due to Buddha’s preaching, and in China due to the teaching of Confucius and Lao-tse.⁷ Unlike Hegel, who saw Christ’s birth as the watershed moment in the history of humankind, thus retaining a Eurocentric perspective, Jaspers tries to introduce a truly universal approach in the philosophy of history by granting the same status to both Asian and Greek civilizations. The main feature of this transformation is the experience of conflict: according to Jaspers, freedom reveals itself in the perception of polarity and antithesis. Each position generates an opposite one and freedom shows itself when one can choose between two incompatible options. Freedom is lost when the consciousness of their incompatibility drops. The axial experience is therefore connected with the awareness of an *either-or*, of an alternative and the having to make unchangeable choices. One cannot have everything, freedom implies a unilateral decision, only the free can make decisions. The axial turn, which according to Jaspers generates civilization, recognizes the leading importance of

the irreversibility of choices and of coherence. It goes without saying that, in his perspective, whatever avoids choice becomes mixed and hybrid, does not really belong to history, and lacks any universal meaning and value. The epoch-making change that took place almost at the same time in 500 BC, later lost its main features. The axial moment often degenerated into anarchy, or became rigid as dogma (which is what happened in the Roman and Chinese empires). Up until now, according to Jaspers, there has not been another way and whoever was excluded from the axial turn (like the Germans and Slavs in the West and the Japanese, Malaysians and Thais in the East) had to adapt to it sooner or later.

This crucial interpretation of history is the starting point for the analysis of the Japanese civilization carried out by the Jewish sociologist, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt. According to him, Japan has always been and still is a non-axial society, notwithstanding the influence of western patterns after the Meiji renewal of 1868 and the American occupation of 1945–52.⁸ The spread of foreign patterns is not at all novel in Japan and can be indeed traced back to the origin of the country's history. From AD 552 onwards, Yamato's court adopted from China not only Buddhism, but also their writing, techniques, arts and many lifestyles. Since then the main trait of the Japanese historic experience would be the extraordinary receptiveness of foreign cultures alternating with long periods during which the country was closed to external contacts (during the Heian period and particularly during the Edo period). Although axial conceptions of the world such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Western philosophy (liberal, socialist or nationalist) were adopted, Japan brought about a 'de-axialization' of these religions and ideologies, emptying them entirely of their transcendental claims and channelling them into immanentist and particularist directions, in conformity with the only really authentic Japanese trait, i.e. Shintoism. In both public and private spheres (political, economic, family, connected with individual or collective cultural creativity) the Japanese have deconstructed axial civilization, by strengthening interdependent social structures based on mutual duties (*giri*) rather than authoritarian coercion, and aesthetic feelings rather than moral ones. This type of mentality would explain why wars of religion and social revolutions never took place in Japan: foreign influences would have been integrated into a context that emphasizes empirical situations at the cost of universally valid principles. This would also explain the lack of importance of ideologically leading intellectuals, who were never able to mobilize vast sections of the population. In other words, in Japan the axial dimension always underwent an immanent and particularist transformation, which has taken away any claim to absoluteness and exclusiveness.

A great deal of Japanese and foreign literature, known as *nihonjinron*, has underlined this unique trait of Japan. This has come up in philosophy (Watsuji Tetsuro), psychoanalysis (Doi Takeo), anthropology (Ruth Benedict), cultural

studies (Augustin Berque), sociology (Robert Bellah), linguistics (Suzuki Takao), and focuses on Japan as an exceptional case compared with the rest of the world. *Nihonjinron* however has been heavily criticized because of its arbitrariness.⁹ The emphatic praise of Japanese uniqueness has often been founded on the fact that Japan has adopted a Western myth, i.e. of an ethnic community (*gemeinschaft*) as opposed to a bourgeois society (*gesellschaft*), according to the antithesis that Ferdinand Tönnies had already clearly set up at the end of the 19th century. In Japan the revolt against the West has heavily drawn on this ideology, leading to the nationalist fanaticism of *kokutai*.¹⁰ It has been rightly said that the struggle against the West has often found its roots in European conservative thought and the hostility towards urbanization, rationalism, welfare and the foreigner.¹¹ Eisenstadt's idea of Japan does not belong to the *nihonjinron* framework and is not to be considered as a type of occidentalism (i.e. a type of traditionalism born in the West and used against the West). According to Eisenstadt, globalization implies that all the societies in the world are or are just about to become modern: the terms of the conflict therefore no longer lie in the polarity between modernity and tradition, but in the different types of modernity.¹² These conflicts are not only economic or political, but imply different conceptions of modernity. Even if one looks at the issue from the economic standpoint only, the various types of modernities differ according to how the four main criteria, i.e. market, regulation, intervention, welfare, have been adopted. From a political standpoint, Eisenstadt sees fundamentalisms as paradoxical developments of Jacobinism; these do not represent a return to the *ancien régime*, but a modern interpretation of some heterodox utopias, which came out of the fringes of the great religions. As modernity's main path has become crystallized, so nothing really important takes place anymore, what prevails is the search for an alternative 'better' order beyond the existing one, the reconstruction of the mundane world according to a sharply articulated transcendental vision. According to Eisenstadt, the modernity of fundamentalist movements is clearly visible in very tight party-like discipline, in the use of modern communication technology and modern propaganda techniques and in the belief in the possibility of transformation of society through highly mobilized political action.

Japan represents an exception with regard to these developments of modernity, because she is not an axial culture and seems far more resistant to the fundamentalist developments of utopian heterodoxies typical of axial cultures, which were the outcome of some of the great political revolutions of modernity. However, at the same time, the encounter of opposite types of cultural and social patterns has led to the adoption of aspects that differ entirely from those prevailing in axial societies. Japanese society has experienced a type of modernity that has nothing to do with the one inspired by Jacobinism.

Juxtaposition in non-axial civilizations

If the arrival of the new entails refusing the old, according to the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* paradigm, nothing of the kind has taken place in Japan. The process of modernization, which started in 1868, is not a new one, because it repeats a millennial pattern. The attitude that Japanese culture has adopted towards the West is the same as the one used towards China. We find ourselves standing in front of a historical experience in which the notions of hybridity and crossing are inappropriate. In fact, what we see here is not the encounter and mixture of different and heterogeneous aspects. It is that of any kind of content that undergoes a deconstructive process enabling it to be put next to another one without ending up in conflict, even if originally the two may have been antithetical. Therefore, I think that *juxtaposition* is the notion that best explains the type of procedure employed by the Japanese when they deal with something that does not come from within their culture. In Japan, numerous patterns of tradition and modernity live side by side without interfering with one another. On the other hand, whatever seems completely different and incompatible with Japanese culture sooner or later gets thrown out, such as Christianity at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the revolutionary radicalism of the students' movement in 1972¹³ and the fundamentalist eschatology of the *aum* sect in 1995.¹⁴ To sum up, anything novel raises great interest and is accepted in Japan as long as it does not have any of the extreme features typical of the axial mentality of Western heterodox sects. The highly aesthetic features of the Japanese juxtaposition, which it takes over ethics and metaphysics, should be the object of careful consideration.

Finally some questions are still unanswered: does the cultural strategy of juxtaposition belong only to Japan or is it also found other civilizations? Is Western civilization only axial, as Jaspers claims, or did non-axial features exist in ancient Greece and Rome? For example, Greek and Roman polytheism were types of juxtaposition strategies. In the modern world, Catholicism and the Enlightenment inherited some of the same attitudes from the classical world.¹⁵ Last but not least, in the contemporary world juxtaposition seems a more suitable strategy to safeguard the identities of cultures and tolerance than the melting pot.

References and Notes

1. R. Heinemann (1989) Pensée et Spiritualité Japonaises. In *Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle, I, L'univers Philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 1599–1605.
2. J. Burckhardt (1943) *Reflections on History* [1905], English Translation M.D.H., (London: Allen & Unwin).
3. With the exception of the American Occupation from 1945 to 1952.
4. R. Servoise (1995) *Japon. Les Clés pour Comprendre* (Paris: Plon).

5. K. van Wolferen (1989) *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (New York: Knopf).
6. K. Shuichi (1987) *Storia Della Letteratura Giapponese*, Trad. It. (Venezia: Marsilio).
7. K. Jaspers (1949) *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich: Artemis).
8. S. N. Eisenstadt (1996) *Japanese Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
9. P. N Dale (1986) *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London: Routledge).
10. B. T. Wakabayashi (Ed) (1998) *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
11. I. Buruma and A. Margalit (2005) *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (London: Penguin Books).
12. S. N. Eisenstadt (2003) *Comparative Civilisations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 Vols (Leiden, Boston: Brill).
13. W. R. Farrell (1990) *Blood and Rage. The Story of the Japanese Red Army* (Toronto: Lexington Books).
14. M. Box and G. McCormack (2004) Terror in Japan. The Red Army (1969–2001) and Aum Supreme Truth (1987–2000). *Critical Asian Studies*, 36(1).
15. M. Perniola (1995) *Enigmas* (London, New York: Verso); M. Perniola (2001) *Ritual Thinking. Sexuality, Death, World* (Amherst: Humanity Books); M. Perniola (2004) *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (London, New York: Continuum); M. Perniola (2004) *The Art and its Shadow* (London, New York: Continuum), 2004.

About the Author

Mario Perniola is Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. He has published in English *Enigmas*, *Ritual Thinking*, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, *The Art and its Shadow*. His works have been translated extensively in German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and many other languages. His current interest is especially on philosophy of culture.