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CULTURAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE RAPID MODERNIZATION OF JAPAN

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SUMMARY — The rapid modernization of Japan, which is one of the most interesting questions of modern history, cannot be answered if one considers only that part of her history which is well known to Westerners since the middle of the nineteenth century. The author believes that the traditional culture developed and the rigorous discipline maintained during the isolationist period in Japan from the beginning of the seventeenth century laid the foundation for Japan to form a modern nation-state rapidly.

I. Introduction

In the morning session on Friday, 22 October 1976, the author wanted to join his colleagues in the discussion on the problem of education, but was unable to do so for lack of time. Therefore, he talked privately with a number of Academicians including the President on what he had in mind, and in doing so, he realized it was necessary to explain first the cultural, educational and social background of the rapid modernization of Japan. Since President Chagas agreed with the author to write on this subject, he chose the present title. Perhaps one of the most interesting questions of modern history is why Japan alone among the non-Western countries

of the world, had developed so much by the beginning of this century that she was able to transform herself into a modern nation-state.

The author believes this question cannot be answered, if one considers only the part of Japan's history since the middle of the nineteenth century, that is the part well known to Westerners.

II. *Outline of the Modernization of Japan*

Before going into detail of what the author has in mind, he wants to give a brief outline of the story in order to make the focal point clear.

Japan decided to transform herself into a modern nation-state about one hundred years ago. Before that, Japan had been a feudal society for many centuries. It was in general difficult then for anyone to transfer from one class to another and in consequence one tried to rise within his own class as far as possible. (The feudal society at that time was not as inhuman as some might think. There is good reason to believe that people of one class maintained their morale unaffected by those of the upper classes).

For this reason, Japan had capable people in all levels of her society when the Japanese government which had maintained the isolationist policy, became aware of the gravity of the situation. It realized that Japan could no longer close her door, for it could have been broken open by Western armaments, with the resulting establishment of a foreign colony, as was the case in all other parts of Asia at that time. The only alternative was to open her door voluntarily and develop friendship with Westerners so that she could introduce their technological achievements as soon as possible. This she did and the reason she did so with such success is that she had capable people in every part of her society. Furthermore, the national literacy was comparable to that of

a European country and was far ahead of any other part of Asia, as will be explained later.

The situation was quite different in China, where a high civilisation had existed from time immemorial. Their age-old assumption that the Chinese civilization was the only true one made it extremely difficult for the Chinese to adapt themselves to outside ideas. For this reason China had made no essential change in her political system, which had lasted for thirteen centuries, even though she had lost Hongkong and some other important areas by the beginning of this century. Superficially her system seemed very rational, at least much more so than that of Japan at that time. However, the Chinese political structure had the great disadvantage that almost all capable persons became government officials and there were not enough capable people in other parts of her society. Furthermore, even at the beginning of this century the Chinese who studied in Western countries and returned home could do almost nothing in the rigid framework of the Chinese political structure, which was supported ideologically by Confucianism for many centuries. This was the reason why China was slow in her modernization, but this very fact might enable China to develop a country of a new type without troubles common to all highly industrialized countries of our day.

III. *The Culture and Education of the Isolationist Period*

The above is a brief sketch of the modernization of Japan, for which the author will now furnish the details.

Probably one of the most interesting questions of all modern history is how the Japanese in the mid-nineteenth century were intellectually prepared for the formation of a modern nation-state, notwithstanding the isolationist policy which had lasted from the beginning of the seventeenth century to that time. Some consider this is due mainly to the tiny window left open to the Dutch, who seemed to have

no intention of intervening in our domestic affairs during the isolationist period.

Some Japanese scholars studied energetically Dutch books and were well versed in such areas of Western science and technology as astronomy, medicine, cartography, gunnery, smelting and ship-building by the end of the isolationist period. Few in number though they were, they formed a valuable nucleus of scholars to begin scientific studies when the opportunity finally came.

It is evident they contributed significantly to the rapid development of science and technology, but it is very doubtful if they did so to the institutional and ideological transformation to modern times. The author believes that the foundations for modern Japan were already laid in the seventeenth century, not long after the isolationist policy had been adopted and that learning through the medium of the Dutch language came after that.

Because of the blessing of peace during the isolationist period, the warriors quickly developed into a well-educated class of administrators and intellectuals. Some of them did quite rational administration, comparing favorably with that of modern times. Among the intellectuals of the day, some studied natural phenomena well before the introduction of Western science through Dutch. Evidently the policy of allowing no international contact made Japanese drop far behind in scientific and industrial achievements, but it also appears that such a policy resulted in an intellectual thirst among the Japanese. Therefore, it is no wonder some of them energetically studied human knowledge in this area, as soon as Dutch books became available to them.

What has been described above concerns the Japanese of higher intellectual level. Next the author would like to explain about the general public. During the isolationist period the city merchants, responding to the needs of a more complex economy, became largely literate, and even among the richer

peasants literacy became common. The ruling class had placed the merchants at the bottom of the social scale, but these same merchants came increasingly to dominate economic life. Their supremacy is perhaps best seen in the cultural field, for the art and literature of the day were more an expression of a city bourgeoisie than of a feudal warrior class. For example, the works by the seventeenth-century novelist Saikaku had a great vogue with city dwellers. The drama of the age, as well as the novel, reflected the tastes of the city merchant class. A puppet theater developed in that century and, closely parallel to it, a new dramatic form known as Kabuki. Both are still alive and have devotees today. Kabuki, which has become popular among foreign visitors to Japan of our day, maintained a high degree of emotional tension and dealt freely in scenes of violence and melodrama in sharp contrast to the slowmoving and sedate No-drama developed one or two centuries before. Chikamatsu, the greatest dramatist of the isolationist period, made a great contribution to the development of Kabuki.

It is to be noted that the works of Saikaku, Chikamatsu, et al. were in a sense against the ethical view of Confucianism, which was thought to be a stabilizing factor in the intellectual life of feudal society. Notwithstanding this, the novelists, dramatists, and painters of the day were not practically interfered with in their creative works. Thus they could enjoy freedom, which is one of the important requirements for the formation of a modern nation-state.

The seventeen-syllable poem (Haiku), also born at that time, is the shortest or simplest poem one can find in world literature. Its simplicity may be explained as follows: at the supreme moment of the appreciation of natural beauty, we just utter a cry and never give ourselves up to lengthy talk, and so a seventeen-syllable sentence or phrase is sufficient to express what we have in mind, if the unexpressed is as carefully considered as the expressed. We Japanese are interested to learn that since the last war a number of Westerners have

been composing poems in English (called « Haiku in English ») of not exactly seventeen syllables, but very short poems resembling ours; probably they want to enjoy the explosive simplicity which our « Haiku » are meant to impart.

What has been described above concerns only a part of the Japanese culture in the seventeenth century. However, one will see that Japan had been fairly civilized in this century and that because of the blessing of peace, which lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, her cultural level was raised to a considerable extent. Evidently the nature of the Japanese culture at that time was quite different from that of the West, but the intellectual training during the isolationist period, to be explained below, as well as the high national literacy, comparable to that of a European country of the day, enabled the Japanese to assimilate quite a different civilization.

As I said before, in the beginning of the isolationist period the warriors quickly developed into a well-educated class and composed the majority of the ruling class. Then it is no wonder that they educated their successors very strictly in both mental and physical training. For instance, as a training for the mind, boys were forced to start reading a text on Confucianism as soon as they were five or six years old. At this age they understood nothing, but learned by heart by reading repeatedly. As they got older, they understood the meaning step by step through their daily experiences, since Confucianism is a very rational and pragmatic philosophy. The teacher's role was, therefore, to induce his students to understand by themselves the significance of what they read, not merely to give answers. The author believes that this type of intellectual training proved to be a great help to the Japanese, when they had to work out the new problems that confronted them from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

The training of technicians was done similarly. A newcomer was never allowed to work immediately in a special field, but was required to merely clean the workshop for one

or two years. Only when a leader felt that the newcomer was ready to work, was he allowed to do so. This means that a number of newcomers must have given up hope, and only those who had unusual patience and ambition became technicians.

The main stream of Western science and technology reached Japan when her educational system was still in such a state. As will be explained in the next section, Japan opened her door to Westerners at a good time to understand their civilization as a whole, but if we had not had such rigorous training in the isolationist period, our understanding of the new civilization would have been much poorer and it is very doubtful whether we could have formed a modern nation-state.

IV. *Japan opened her Door at a Good Time*

As mentioned above, some of the administrators and intellectuals had a modern sense already in the seventeenth century, the national level of literacy was comparable to that of a European country in the mid-nineteenth century and the training of intellectuals and technicians was rigorous during the isolationist period. All of these were favorable for Japan to form a modern nation-state, but the author cannot but admit that Japan opened her door at a good time to understand the Western civilization as a whole. This can be explained as follows:

When Japan decided to introduce Western science and technology on a full scale, it was first thought technology would operate only on the surface of life and would not change the Japanese mentality in depth. This was the reason they often used the term « Japanese spirit and Western technology » in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, when a number of able people went to Europe to study in various fields of human knowledge, they became gradually aware of the fact that all the different elements in a culture pattern

cannot exist without some connection with each other and, therefore, each of them tried to understand Western culture as a whole insofar as possible. Fortunately it was not too late for them to do so. England at that time, for instance, was in the latter half of Queen Victoria's reign, a period which was one of the most glorious in the whole history of England and in which interrelated ideas were sufficiently shared so as to closely approximate the way of the ancient Greek city-states. The author still remembers very well the part of the poem in « Locksley Hall » by Tennyson, poet laureate of the Victorian period, which he learned in his school days:

« Yet I doubt not throu' the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with process
of suns ».

These words were read and enjoyed by many people of different backgrounds in the Victorian period, whereas now we are suffering profoundly from the fragmentation of what was once an exciting whole. Again I say, it is essential to know the interconnection between the elements, if one is to accept properly any part of a new culture pattern. This is the first step one has to take, and the assimilation, or proper understanding of new things without losing the old good things is the second step. Thus Japan was fortunate that there was still time to introduce the new civilization properly.

V. *Separation of Secular and Religious Powers in Europe and in Japan*

If the author remembers correctly, Dante insisted in his political writings that the Holy Roman Emperor should abandon any pretensions to religious authority, and that the Pope should keep out of politics. Dante knew nothing about Japan, but about a century before he said this, Japan had made a successful separation of the secular and religious powers. In the beginning of the twelfth century Yoritomo established a

completely separate military government in Kamakura (now a tourist resort), very close to Tokyo but quite a distance from Kyoto, the seat of the imperial court. From that time until the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan was governed essentially under a dual system that carefully separated temporal and spiritual authority.

In Europe the Holy Roman Empire existed as a ghost empire for many centuries, but actually Europe gradually developed a feudal society. Quite a similar situation can be seen in the history of Japan. Soon after the death of Yoritomo, a feudal society of almost the European type was born, and from the seventeenth century onwards this became frozen under the control of the Tokugawa government, with Tokyo (at that time called « Edo ») as the secular center, whereas the spiritual center was in Kyoto. Thus the dual system was more obvious in Japan than in Europe.

Some historians consider that this dual political system was very favorable to the development of true feudal society. If so, Japan affords the only close and fully developed parallel to Western feudalism, the aftermath of which contributed to the formation of the modern nation-state.

I would like to say a word about China, where the administrative and spiritual authorities were not separated. In this case, if one ruling family failed to hold the reins, another had to assume both authorities. This meant that the conquerors, who were in general less civilised, were soon converted to the traditional Chinese civilisation, resulting in the formation of a new government of almost the same type as the former one. This made it difficult for the Chinese to adopt the outside ideas.

VI. *Conclusion*

In this article the author has tried to explain the historical background of the rapid modernization of Japan. In doing so,

he has emphasized the development of her culture during the isolationist period. Evidently this culture was quite different from that of the West, and Japanese knew nothing about what was taking place in the Western countries during this period.

However, the high level of the traditional culture as well as the rigorous discipline (particularly in individual upbringing) during this period seem to have assimilated quite a different civilization from the mid-nineteenth century onwards without losing the good traditional culture.