The Dawn of the Asian Century

Lee O-Young

Whether by coincidence or as a result of poorly understood forces, the end of each century does seem to bring with it some sort of upheaval, as the old gives way to the new. The end of the twentieth century, which also marked the end of the second millennium, has witnessed the collapse of two major pillars of the modern world. One is industrial civilization, which has been toppled by the revolution in information technology. The other is the bipolar cold-war setup in international affairs, which ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A new cultural paradigm is taking shape. An ideology-dominated era, in which Western civilization, with its emphasis on logos, reigned as the world’s only universal culture, is drawing to an end. This change is bringing about a paradigm shift, from a focus on politics and economics to an emphasis on civilization and culture. In the process, it is triggering major changes in the political map of the world.

The number of countries plagued by racial, religious, or cultural strife has mounted to at least 40. A full one-third of the world’s nations are torn by civil war. Cultural identity has emerged as a decisive factor in world affairs.

Of Birds, Beasts, and Bats

One of the nations that has been seized by an identity crisis as a result of this paradigm shift is Japan. Japan’s identity crisis stems from the perception that the civilization of this country is unique, belonging neither to the West nor to East Asia. It is owing to this perception that the Western powers alternately treat Japan as an “honorary white nation” and subject it to persecution in the form of Japan bashing. Within Japan, meanwhile, the pendulum swings back and forth between Asianism and anti-Asianism.

Unfortunately, a country like Japan, which lies on the fault line between the East Asian and Western civilizations, is in danger of being isolated as the twenty-first-century world realigns itself into regional-cultural blocs. That is, Japan could find itself shunned by both East and West. Refusing to identify itself as either bird or beast, it is in danger of being reviled as a bat. From an economic standpoint, meanwhile, Japan’s economic power, though large for a single nation (accounting for 16% of the world’s gross domestic product), threatens to be overwhelmed by that of the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement bloc.

We must note, however, that this negative view of the bat as a bizarre and despised hybrid of bird and beast—as seen in Aesop’s fables—is itself a product of outmoded Western ideas. Samuel Huntington’s concept of the clash of civilizations is also a product of such thinking—more specifically, the “Saint George complex” that compels one to slay the evil dragon before one can win the hand of the fair princess.

In countries that use Chinese ideographs, by contrast, the bat is an auspicious symbol, since the pair of characters for bat shares an element with the character for happiness. In the Western cultural tradition, anything that seems to fall between two categories, or partake of the qualities of two different types of being, has tended to be rejected as a freak of nature. In East Asia, however, such beings are more often prized as mediators that reconcile two extremes. Japanese culture—a culture that appreciates off-colors and has created intermediate hues of its own, such as “Rikyū gray”—has always possessed the capability to turn the collision of civilizations or cultures into an enriching relationship—as has East Asia as a whole. Unlike the countries of Europe, which endured centuries of religious warfare, China, Japan, and Korea have managed to accommodate several major religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in the case of China and Korea; Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism in the case of Japan) in an environment of peaceful coexistence for long periods of history.

Power in the twenty-first century is defined by more than just political, military, and economic might; it involves also the ability to unite people culturally. In the wake of the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan consciously rejected its cultural ties to the rest of Asia with the slogan Datsu-A nyū-Ō—get away from Asia and unite with Europe—as it sought belatedly to ride the wave of modernization that had already swept most of the West. In the wake of the so-called Heisei restoration, Japan has at length adopted the opposite strategy of Datsu-Ō nyū-A—get away from Europe and unite with Asia—as it seeks to ride the new wave of the twenty-first century.

However, history teaches us that reuniting with Asia is incomparably more difficult for Japan than joining with Europe. Japan succeeded brilliantly in its attempt to mod-
ernize by distancing itself from Asia and identifying with the West. But it has failed in its two separate efforts—one a premeditated military plan, the other a more haphazard economic venture—to reclaim its Asian identity and unite the region. On the first occasion, Japan was thwarted in its vision of a Japan-dominated Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere when it lost World War II; on the second occasion, the dream of presiding over an East Asian economic bloc was shattered by the collapse of Japan’s own “bubble economy” and the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund in the wake of the currency crisis that swept other countries in East Asia several years later.

Having failed to unify East Asia by military or economic means, Japan now has but one card left to play, and that is culture. In this context, the joint hosting by Japan and Korea of the quadrennial World Cup soccer championship in 2002 could prove an event of great symbolic significance. Handled correctly, it could bring together globalism and localism under the new paradigm known as “glocalism.”

**WHAT IS EAST ASIAN CULTURE?**

The key questions now, therefore, are whether Japan is indeed an integral member of the East Asian region, and where Japan should seek to rediscover its Asian cultural identity—which, in fact, provided the foundation for its economic and political development. The Meiji aesthetician Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913) asserted that “Asia is one,” but the very concept of “Asia” is of non-Asian origin. Is there such a thing as an East Asian cultural identity? And, if there is, of what does it consist? The time has come to fundamentally reexamine the universal and distinguishing features of East Asian culture.

Cultural identity is not something fixed and absolute. It is often said that the German-speaking Swiss tend to view the French-speaking Swiss as members of another culture—unless they encounter one another in Spain. Similarly, if a Spanish person and a Swiss person encounter one another in Japan, they suddenly become conscious of their shared European identity. East Asians share a cultural identity in the same intuitive, relative sense that Europeans do.

The people of China, Japan, and Korea all eat with chopsticks, but not with the same kind of chopsticks. In Japan, where fish is an important part of the diet, chopsticks are pointed, the better to separate the flesh from the bones. In China, where diners sit at large, round tables, the chopsticks are long to permit one to reach the serving dishes in the middle. Korean chopsticks are somewhere midway between the Japanese and the Chinese in shape.

But all these differences are overshadowed by the difference between chopsticks and Western eating utensils. Chopsticks can be used only when the food is prepared in bite-size pieces. If uncut steaks were brought to the table, it would be necessary to supply the diners with kitchen knives in addition to chopsticks. From the East Asian standpoint, in other words, the custom of eating with fork and knife is a bit like placing the kitchen knife on the table instead of the kitchen cutting board where it belongs.

In chopstick cultures, then, there is a certain sympathy between those who prepare the food and those who eat it, an attitude that corresponds to the Confucian virtue of ren, or benevolence. In a modern Korean restaurant, where customers grill meat at the table, the same spirit can be seen in the waitresses who go around with large scissors to cut the rib meat off the bones. This is the mind-set of a culture that views the world in relational terms, not as a collection of discrete individual entities. And such a mind-set is anything but obsolete, for it is the same concept that underlies the trend toward the interactive in computing and media in general.

The difference between East Asian and European culture can be seen also in domestic architecture, which has been called the most basic manifestation of culture. East Asian society is often criticized as being closed to the outside, but comparisons of domestic architecture suggest otherwise. Certainly Japanese and Korean homes are distinguished by their openness to the outside, in contrast to the heavily walled homes of the West, which clearly separate the exterior from the interior to keep out intruders.

As Gaston Bachelard pointed out, the cellar is the ultimate expression of Europe’s culture of walls. The walls of the cellar can never be breached, since they are surrounded by the earth itself. When one enters the cellar, one finds an interior space completely isolated from the outside. The sounds of the outside world barely penetrate to the interior, and sounds from the cellar can rarely be heard outside. It can be either a secret hiding place or a torture chamber. And it has been one of the favorite settings of Western writers from Edgar Allan Poe to Dostoevski to Sartre.

The traditional Korean or Japanese home has no basement. Instead, both are characterized by the papered lat-
tice doors, or shōji, that caused early Western visitors to speak of them as “paper houses.” In the traditional domestic architecture of both Korea and Japan, interior and exterior space are separated by no more than a single thin sheet of paper that lets in not only light and shadow from the world outside but also its sounds and its breezes. One can hear the din from busy streets or the lovely chirping of insects in the bushes. The culture of shōji does not shut out foreign sounds but welcomes them. It is an open culture.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Separated from nature by no more than a thin layer of paper in the depth of winter, the Japanese and Koreans were able to hear even the sound of the snow falling outside their houses. In Japanese onomatopoeia, the falling snow went shin-shim; for Koreans, salak-salak. And this use of language is yet another clue to our cultural identity.

Professor Shimomiya Tadao of Gakushūin University has compared the number of onomatopoetic words appearing in various translations of Hans Christian Andersen’s “Little Mermaid.” He found 6 in the English, 7 in the German, and only 3 in the French. In the Japanese translation, however, there were 34. And in the Korean, there are probably twice that many.

Indeed, the frequency of mimesis is one of the key features—along with vowel harmony—that Western linguists cite when discussing the distinguishing characteristics of the Korean language. Mimesis in language arises from the impulse to grasp and express things directly and intuitively—as they are—rather than intellectually. These are the first words an infant learns, but they tend to be abandoned when one grows to adulthood and learns to struggle with things instead of accepting them.

It is interesting to note in this connection the way that children around the world have embraced the Japanese electronic game and animated television series Pokémon, including many of the original Japanese names. Most popular, of course, is Pika, the “electric mouse” named after the sound it ever utters, combining the mimetic word describing a flash of light, pika, with the onomatopoeia for a mouse’s squeak, chir. I very much doubt this character would have been such an international hit if it went around saying something conventional like ohayō (good morning). The mimetic language of Pokémon is, in this sense, a global language unifying our otherwise fragmented world.

TOLERANCE IN EAST ASIAN CULTURE

The Sony Walkman, invented in Japan, has been referred to as a typical cultural artifact of me-ism, since it plays music for a single individual alone. But this kind of talk ignores the more fundamental way in which the Walkman has revolutionized our music-listening habits.

Concert halls with their acoustic walls and ceilings attempt to screen out every incidental sound, so that even a cough or the rustle of sheet music is considered a distraction. But when one walks down the street listening to a Walkman, the music is accompanied by every kind of incidental noise from automobile horns to crying children. The experience is not unlike the atmosphere of kabuki in Japan or performances of pansori in Korea, where the appreciative exclamations of the audience add to the enjoyment of all.

A similar openness and tolerance for heterogenous elements can be seen in the area of religion, where culture reaches its apex. China, Japan, and Korea have generally been tolerant of and open to a variety of religions, unlike most European countries. Indigenous religions and cults have coexisted and fused with foreign religions. In China, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were regarded not as competitors but as different manifestations of one truth. Early Korean Buddhism in the kingdom of Shilla (Silla) embraced the syncretic ideal put forth by the priest Won-hyo (617–86), that Buddhism should naturally harmonize, not conflict, with preexisting religions. From the standpoint of Europe, where religious wars have spanned the centuries, such developments must seem to defy basic principles.

This sort of mutual tolerance and interaction can be seen not only among different religions but also between the sacred and secular spheres, which in East Asia have typically engaged in free interchange instead of holding themselves apart as in the West. Unlike the strict precepts of Jainism, which forbade its followers from killing so much as a mosquito, Buddhism as it developed in Shilla was fairly flexible, leaving open the option of killing in some cases.

The Japanese were once compared to monkeys by Westerners because of their ability to imitate. But the ability to imitate can be interpreted positively, as a matter of tolerance and acceptance. This attitude is characteristic of a culture in which the self is separated from the “other” by soft, paper-covered screens instead of thick, solid walls. In
such a world, the boundary between inside and outside is changeable, expanding and contracting flexibly. To adopt another’s system as one’s own requires a tolerant nature that is like the stomach, which accommodates foreign matter, not like the rest of the body, which rejects it. East Asian culture might be characterized as having had, from its very beginnings, a special sort of “immune system,” which tolerated the coexistence and intermingling of three different religions. What Westerners saw as mere imitation should in fact be viewed positively as the capacity to accommodate and accept foreign cultures.

**Mastering Western Culture**

One of the fields in which East Asians are having a major impact today is classical music. It is hard to find an orchestra in Europe or North America without its contingent of East Asians. More and more, musicians from China, Japan, and Korea are demonstrating a mastery of this Western art form equaling or, in many cases, surpassing that of their Western counterparts. It is not unusual for musicians of East Asian descent to take all the top honors at Western music competitions. In at least one case, the organizers of a competition in Europe decided to exclude Korean performers in order to give Westerners a chance at the prizes.

One after another, East Asian musical prodigies have stepped into the spotlight. In the footsteps of Japanese violinist Goto Midori, who rose to fame at age 11, came Korean violinist Sarah Chang, who won world acclaim at the age of 12. Most recently, the American press has been trumpeting the accomplishments of a pair of musicians of Chinese ancestry.

Why have East Asian classical musicians become such a dominant presence on the Western concert circuit? One Japanese journalist explains it like this:

> “With such instruments as the piano and the violin in particular, it is simply impossible to teach children absolute pitch after the age of five. And a child is unlikely to receive and benefit by such training before age five unless he or she (1) has parents who are very serious about education, (2) listens attentively and obediently to his or her parents and teachers, and (3) is willing to practice very hard.”

The journalist went on to conclude that East Asians fulfill these three conditions. That is to say, musical prodigies emerge as a consequence of the Confucian emphasis on hard work and obedience to one’s elders that is a part of everyday family life in China, Japan, and Korea. In other words, what these musical geniuses have in common is their East Asian cultural identity.

Peter Drucker has pointed out that in the West, the emphasis on education is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the wake of World War I, when many young men returned from the war and were unable to find jobs, legislation made it easier for people to get a college education. But East Asian culture has valued education highly since ancient times. Confucianism teaches that we are not born human but become human. Without learning, courage is mere savagery, and benevolence is simply foolishness. Education is how we mature into human beings; without it, we are no better than wild animals. Based on this thinking, East Asians developed and passed on a tradition of being incomparably more enthusiastic about education than Europeans were.

The process of modernization in Japan is commonly described as a process of westernization. But the modern ethic put forth by the agricultural philosopher Ninomiya Sontoku (1787–1856) was that of hard work and diligence in the Confucian spirit. And the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 is said to have been based on the neo-Confucianism of the illustrious Yi dynasty scholar Yi T’o-gye (1501–1570).

Even as the media announce the breakdown of discipline in the home and the classroom and the mounting epidemic of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among Japanese schoolchildren, we can see that the Confucian tradition of obeying one’s parents and teachers remains alive among East Asian children.

The East Asian values of hard work and perseverance can also be considered products of East Asian rice-paddy culture. Farmers took the character for rice, which can be broken down into characters meaning 88, as signifying the number of times one needed to tend rice plants before they would ripen. On seeing the process of rice farming in Japan, one Western visitor referred to it as gardening. To one accustomed to wheat farming, which requires farmers to do little more than sow and reap, such a reaction is completely understandable. The strength of the East Asian countries in the semiconductor industry is likewise said to relate to the cultural emphasis on diligence, perseverance, and attention to detail fostered by paddy farming.

**Composing Our Own Music**

In the aforementioned column, the writer concluded that “East Asians should not be content merely with performing music composed by others. In the field of composition as well, let us create Asian music.”

It seems to me that the significance of this admonition extends far beyond the realm of music. We East Asians have gained confidence by winning world acclaim for our performance of Western music on Western instruments. But it is hard to see how we can make a major contribution to the twenty-first-century world, with its new cultural paradigm, simply by virtue of our ability to perform Western music better than Westerners. What we need now is a different kind of music. If we are to solve the world’s environmental problems, for example, we need an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which views humankind above and apart from nature and ruling over it according to God’s design.

In olden days, Korean farmers would plant three beans in one hole. When their grandchildren asked why they planted three, they would answer, “One is eaten by the insects in the ground, another is eaten by the birds in the sky, and...
and the last sprouts and is eaten by people." In this way they transmitted to future generations the concept that people are part of nature, not its rulers. Indeed, during the warmer times of year when insects were about, Korean farmers used to weave their straw sandals only half as tightly as other times so as not to kill the insects they trod on.

Japanese culture incorporates the same attitudes. In fact, the Japanese traditionally expressed compassion not merely for other living things but even for the tools they used. Broken needles were not merely thrown away but offered memorial services, and worn-out writing brushes were interred in burial mounds.

Whatever the object of their attention, the people of East Asia share a characteristic focus on relationships and interaction instead of isolated individual entities. This could be called the spirit of ren (benevolence)—the Chinese character for which combines the elements for "person" and "two." Ren, in other words, focuses neither on the individual nor on the group but on two acting as one. Like chopsticks, entities have meaning only in relationship to one another, as a pair. In his poem "Gingko Biloba," Goethe extolled the Eastern gingko leaf as a symbol of that which is "towfold and yet one." This is the culture of ren, which is neither dualistic (like the West) nor monistic, but interactive and relational.

The information age is laying the foundation for a worldwide culture of ren. We can see this in the representative tools of this age and how they differ from those of the industrial era. Computers, cell phones, and fax machines all require interaction to function. Information is something exchanged between an addresser and an addressee, one who provides and one who receives; in the absence of this relationship, it does not exist. I may have a cell phone, but it is useless—as good as nonexistent—unless someone else has one, too. My possession of something depends on another’s possession, and the meaning of another’s possession of something changes according to whether I have it also. This is none other than the Confucian concept of ren.

The inter of Internet expresses a concept comparable to that of ren, though in this case the interaction occurs digitally, through optic fibers and so forth. Modern computing glossaries offer their own equivalents of ren in such terms as interface and interactive.

REN IN FOOD, FURNITURE, AND PHILOSOPHY

In the West, there is a clear separation between the user and the object being used. Beds are one example of this. The Western bed is made to sleep in, and it remains as it is—sleeping—24 hours a day, whether it is being used or not. By contrast, in Japan and Korea the futon bedding is spread out when the user is about to retire for the night, but when the user is up and about, it is folded and stored in a closet; to leave bedding spread on the floor night and day like a bed is considered slovenly. In Japan and Korea, the sleeper and the bedding are not severed from one another; they are one.

Similarly, chairs in Western-style rooms are in no way affected by the people who use them. They are independent entities, behaving precisely the same whether people are sitting or standing. The cushions in a tea room are very different. Their number can be easily adjusted to the number of guests, and their arrangement can also be altered according to circumstances. This is because there is interaction—ren—among people and things.

The vocabulary of poststructuralism, like that of computers, is full of words prefixed by inter-, such as inter-subjectivity, intertextuality, and intermediation. Here, too, we can see the paradigm shift from individuality to relationality.

The same distinction applies to Eastern and Western cuisine. A Western menu typically consists of separate dishes to be enjoyed one at a time. In fact, when one course is taken away and another served, a new fork and knife are used, so as to avoid mixing flavors. Bread and sherbet are even used to “refresh the palate” between courses.

In Japanese and Korean cooking, however, rice is always served in combination with other dishes. Rice is too bland to eat alone, and the other dishes are often too highly seasoned to eat without rice. This sort of interdependence is characteristic of Korean cuisine in particular. Koreans are especially fond of pibinpap, in which meat and various vegetables are all served together over rice.

In the realm of language as well, Japan and Korea are characterized by the tendency to combine different, or even opposing, concepts in one word. Indo-European languages are ill-suited to this sort of “intermingling”; instead, the tendency is to focus on one concept at the expense of the other. Thus, what East Asians think of as an “ascending and descending machine” is referred to simply as an “elevator” in English. There are countless examples illustrating the same principle in our languages. With the dissemination of the new information culture, however, words that combine two opposing concepts are becoming increasingly common in English as well. Some examples are edutainment (education + entertainment), global (global + local), and prossumer (producer + consumer).

One distinguishing feature of recent technological developments, we are told, is the emergence of “fusion” technologies that combine the ordinary with the extraordinary. For example, Japan’s new i-mode cell phones, which can serve as Internet terminals, have revolutionized our use of the Net. While American and European automakers were proceeding on the assumption that a car had to run either on gasoline or on electricity, Japanese manufacturers were developing hybrid engines that can use gasoline for high-speed expressway driving and electricity for low-speed city driving. In this way they have been able to respond to calls for an environment-friendly car without sacrificing practicality. East Asia has indeed begun to write its own music.

This is not to reject the music of the West. The need to
deny or exclude an entire tradition is, after all, a Western impulse (the St. George complex), not an Eastern one. The song of the East is a song of tolerance, which can inject a new harmony into the music of the West.

Today English is the dominant language of cyberspace. But Nicholas Negroponte, professor of media technology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, believes that Chinese ideographs will some day play an important role. This is because, unlike the alphabet, ideographs allow instant communication among speakers of very different languages. If I write the character for water, people throughout East Asia will understand its meaning, even though they may pronounce it differently. Moreover, the number of people in the world who use Chinese characters surpasses the number who use the Roman alphabet.

I am not appealing here to some irrational regionalism. I am simply saying that as we start a new century the world is shifting from a political and economic paradigm to a cultural one, focusing on improving the quality of life, and in such an age, the unifying power of culture is more important than military might. New developments in information technology and biotechnology are simply superficial changes. The real issue is the use to which these technologies are put and the content with which they are invested, and this is a matter of mental and spiritual outlook.

The younger generation is showing us one direction in which this can lead us. Encouraged by the repeal of old laws designed to limit the spread of Japanese popular culture in Korea, young people in both countries are coming together like a new breed of Asian nomad on a vast cultural steppe, intermingling and sharing freely. They are clear evidence of a shift from the exchange of material goods to the sharing of that which moves the spirit. Newly developed Japanese-Korean translation software now allows Korean users to read Japanese websites instantly. With the click of one's mouse, one can hear the sound of hoofbeats galloping across the Asian steppes.

Still, we should not minimize the challenges to regional unity. Rather, let us learn from the symbiotic relationship of the giraffe and the oxpecker bird. In a mutually beneficial relationship, the bird feeds off parasites on the giraffe's skin. But when the giraffe has a wound, the bird pecks at the wound, and the mutually beneficial relationship collapses.

In order to enjoy this sort of symbiosis in East Asia, we must first allow old wounds to heal. Once this happens, a mutually beneficial relationship can be reestablished, and cultural conflict will give way to cultural fusion and harmony. It is from this ambient that Asia's new song will emerge. At length we will hear, wafting in from the once-forgotten Asian steppe, a song that transcends the spiritual, emotional discord of the recent past—a beautiful song for the new millennium.

Translated from “Atarashii Ajia no sōgen o shissō suru hizume no oto o kike!” in Seirin, September 2000, pp.104–16; slightly abridged. (Courtesy of Sankei Shimbun)

Challenging the ‘Conformist’ Stereotype
Individualism and the Japanese
An Alternative Approach to Cultural Comparison

By Yamazaki Masakazu
Translated by Barbara Sugihara

Individualism and the Japanese
Yamazaki Masakazu

Perceptions of Japanese culture, both in Japan and in the West, rely heavily on stereotypes accentuating characteristics that seem to set Japan apart from the rest of the world. Yamazaki Masakazu, a leading Japanese intellectual versed in sociology, aesthetics, and drama, takes issue with this approach, stressing that cultural comparison is possible only because all cultures share certain basic values and qualities.

Focusing on the question of individualism in Japanese culture—as opposed to the groupism that is commonly assumed to define it—he scrutinizes Japan’s social history from an angle that illuminates the prominent role individualistic attitudes and strong personalities have played in the formation of the nation’s cultural traditions.

Professor Yamazaki’s analysis not only provides valuable insights into interpersonal communication among the Japanese and the dynamics of their society but also demonstrates that the principles of aesthetic self-expression are in fact a universal product of human individuation.

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