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# Japan from the viewpoint of culture and civilization

-What is necessary for Japan in the 21st century?-

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## THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

In the case of Japan, we unfortunately cannot find any thought, religion or philosophy that could influence the whole world. Japan received Chinese civilization via the Korean Peninsula, assimilated it to Japanese identity, and created at last Japanese original culture. Japanese culture is of value in terms of originality, but does not have universality. As a result, Japanese culture has never been spread to the world. In other words, Japan does not have any thought, religion, and philosophy that could become the lodestar for the world. For human welfare in the 21st century, thought, religion, and philosophy that lead the world are necessary. If Japan would create things that could be the basis of history, Japan may become a country that is respected by the world. In this respect, the situation surrounding Japan is not hopeless, and it is not too late to address the challenge.

Especially after the Cold War, the world is seeking new values that can take the place of democracy and a market economy. Democracy does not always have power to lead the present times. Besides, democracy is not always a monolith in the strict sense. Democracy stands on culture and tradition peculiar to each country. It is no exaggeration to say that, except for European-style democracy, there is Asian-style and American-style democracy. Intrinsically, the contents of democracy will change according to the times. Nevertheless, the United States and Europe tend not to accept that there is a diversity of democracy. This is a big problem. Ungenerous attitudes toward the different democracies of the United States and Europe may sometimes even cause a severe conflict. Recently, we can see some evidence that a disagreement over democracy provokes some disputes. For world stability, it is important that we respect each other, accept that there is a diversity of democracy, and coexist.

Since the middle of the 19th century, Japan has introduced Western advanced technology, and accomplished technological development. At last, Japan became a worldwide advanced technological country. Creating new things greatly contributes to human welfare. I introduce an example here to demonstrate this point. When Anastas Mikoyan, a Soviet statesman, visited

Japan, he met Konosuke Matsushita who was the founder of Panasonic. In this meeting, Mr. Mikoyan said that the Soviet Union succeeded in the liberation of women by the revolution. In response to this, Mr. Matsushita replied as follows. "I emancipated women from traditional and stern housework by spreading household electrical appliances, especially a washing machine." In Japan before World War II, women took care of most housework. Particularly washing required excessive effort for women, occasionally undermined their health, and caused disease. Mr. Matsushita liberated Japanese women from severe housework by producing electrical washing machines, and made an opportunity to live a healthy life. Toshio Iue, who was the first founder of Sanyo, which began the mass sale of washing machines in the same time as Panasonic, felt pride in easing women's burdens through his products in the same way as Mr. Matsushita. It is clear that creating these new products contributes to progress in people's welfare. In fact, while Japan has diversified from heavy and chemical industry to an electronics industry, it has consistently played a big part in improving our life. We can find Sony products even in a remote place, and Toyota's cars are popular throughout the world. Some say jokingly that most people in the world know Sony or Toyota even if they do not know the name of Japanese Prime Minister. Thus, because Japan has the capability to meet people's needs, it has been able to provide the stuff that people need. But these products, unfortunately, are consumable goods, so these will fade away with time. These things may be exhibited at a museum in the 22nd century, which is to say that only the record that these items existed may be left.

About thought, religion, and philosophy that affect the history after the 21st century, Japan has to produce something. However, it goes without saying that creating a new civilization is extremely difficult.

First of all, what is civilization? According to an eminent writer, Ryotaro Shiba, civilization is a mixture of a kind of hardware, technology that facilitates living like traffic lights, and software, a set of universal and rational values, which together can function everywhere in the world. In this meaning, the Bible or Greek philosophy typifies software. Meanwhile, culture is indigenous tradition and custom that every country and region has. For example, when a woman opens a shoji screen in a Japanese-style house, in accordance with a Japanese old custom, she opens the screen on her knees. This behavior is considered extremely elegant in Japan. From the viewpoint of Western pragmatism, opening the screen while she stands would be easier and more practical. However, even if opening the shoji screen while standing was rational, it is not only unsuitable for Japanese tradition, custom, and etiquette, but also inelegant. Thus, in every culture there is some view of what is essentially elegant, which, when viewed from another culture may well be considered irrational.

The aforesaid writer is learned about China. He analyzed American culture when he once visited the United States. His view is so sharp because he analyzed American civilization from the perspective of Chinese civilization. His study is remarkable in that he analyzed the latest

civilization through the oldest civilization. By this method, the outstanding differences of both civilizations became clear. According to his analysis, the United States is the country where the tone of civilization is stronger than the tone of culture. In this analysis, the United States is a country which downplays culture. On the other hand, China has both civilization and culture. If anything, China is a country which emphasizes culture because it has 4000 years of history. In this respect, Japan is also a country which makes much of its cultural aspects.

On the other hand, there is some culture that is classified as a sort of civilization because it has universality in spite of being in the category of culture. Italian opera is representative of this case. Considering that opera originated from Italy's unique climate, it is one of the cultures peculiar to Italy. However, opera has infiltrated through the world due to its universal character; namely, opera is the culture with elements of civilization. Canzone also plays a part in the category of universal culture as well as opera. *O Sole Mio*, *Torna a Surriento* (Come back to Sorrento), and *Musica Proibita* touch a chord in the heart of people throughout the world.

So, is there Japanese culture including the characteristics of civilization even though it came from history, tradition, and custom peculiar to Japan?