

## **On Cultural Advantages that the Italians Are Enjoying But Perhaps Are Not Fully Aware Of: An Alien's View**

*Yasunari Takada* (The University of Tokyo)

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be given an opportunity like this to talk in front of the Italian about the European classical tradition and culture. For this fortunate turn of event, I must thank the two men, ancient and modern, Marcus Tullius Cicero and Professor Ermanno Malaspina. Without my encounter with Cicero I would not have written a book on Cicero, and without which, I could hardly have a chance to meet Professor Malaspina, Vice-President of the *Società Internazionale degli Amici di Cicerone*. If I had not had the chance to meet these two Italians, one in the textual world and the other in the real world, I could not find myself here and now in front of you. But since I can meet, theoretically speaking, Cicero anywhere and anytime, I must be thankful more for having met Professor Malaspina.

Now, it is highly likely that you may find my presence in this room as much a nuisance as you may find or may have found Cicero in your classroom exercises. But my experience tells me, and I must say it is an authentic truth, that the classics is nothing if not a nuisance, at least in the first place. The classics is a sort of thing that you have first to endure in order to fully appreciate and enjoy it. It is like a love affair, if you like: if it is easy to accomplish it, its sweet enjoyment will last but short. The more difficult, the sweeter. The classics differs from the love affair, however, in that the classics is not equipped with that overpowering erotic charm with which the love affair is redolent. The classics usually will not allure you; without being attracted, you have to approach it on your own initiative in the first place. The existence of the classics may look absurd, but if it comes down to that, everything that exists on earth can look as absurd. The existence of Monica Bellucci or Raul Bova and looking at them is as absurd as the existence of Cicero and reading him. The only difference is that one is not as seductive as the other at the initial stage of encounter.

Be that as it may, it is not the purpose of my talk today to debunk the absurdity of the classical learning. Far from it. What I would like to tell you in earnest is that the classical learning is essential and indispensable for the present and future Europeans who must and will have to face the increasingly globalized world. Like it or not, globalization is inescapable because of the overriding

expansion of economic activities that defy any national, cultural, and even political boundaries. As our recent experience shows, we have little idea how this all-engulfing movement of capitalism will work itself out. As you may easily expect, EU (European Union) is an exemplary instance to cope with the ineluctable global movement. As you know, EU stems from its predecessor, EEC (European Economic Community), an economy-oriented organization. Its establishment is based on the recognition that a larger European economy will acquire a stronger competitive power than a non-coordinate aggregate of small national economies.

As is obvious even to an amateur-critic like me, EU has lots of problems and difficulties to solve. And yet, it is truly remarkable, one must not forget, that such a transnational entity has actually been brought into being. Nowhere on earth has it ever been attempted, let alone, realized except in Europe. There are many reasons and factors for it. One of them can be that the European experience in history has taught its peoples that the tragic age of expansionism, be it nationalist or imperialist, is finally over. A theory in the study of history tells that certain groups of people, be they tribes or nations, have to fight and kill one another certain sufficient number of times before they are reconciled in peace. It may be that after centuries of tragedy and atrocity Europe has reached the final stage of such saturation point in warfare. Whether Europe proves the theory or not, the fact stands that Europe has created the transnational political entity that has never been in human history. It is almost miraculous, and seems particularly so to the outsiders. The Asians like myself, for instance, would be totally at a loss what to do, if asked to construct an equivalent of EU in Asia.

A transnational political entity like EU is simply inconceivable in Asia. It is not merely because Asia is far vaster than Europe in its expanse and more diverse than Europe in its political regime and system – among the communist regimes are China the economic giant, North Korea the bankrupt tyranny, and Vietnam the winner of the war with the USA. One of the major reasons why Asia is unable to conceive a political entity like EU, I think, is that Asia is destitute of the kind of tradition or cultural history that Europe enjoys. What I have in mind is the image of Europe as a sort of cultural alloy (a metal made from two metallic elements) of Hellenism and Christianity. Briefly put, Europe without ancient Greece and Rome is unthinkable; Europe without Christian Middle Ages is impossible; Europe without Renaissance and Reformation is invalid. The essential point is that this cultural tradition, made up of disparate elements (Hellenism and Christianity have little in common), nonetheless forms itself as a dynamic and unitary history. And it is precisely this unitary

dynamic of cultural tradition in Europe that has been crucially conducive to the creation and upkeep of EU, the first of the kind ever realized in human history. And it is precisely such unitary dynamic of cultural tradition that Asia as a whole conspicuously lacks.

To show you how the Asian tradition is lacking in the power and structure of unitary dynamic enjoyed by the European tradition, and how it is difficult for the Asian tradition to conceive such power and structure of unitary dynamic in its cultural history, I would now like to draw your attention to one of the Japanese intellectuals who lived at the beginning of our modernity. (Japan began its modernization in 1867, when the former Shogunate regime was overthrown by the revolutionary, who took advantage of the threatening presence of the Western colonizing powers [English, French, German and American] for their revolution. ) The man in question is Kakuzo Okakura or Tenshin Okakura (1862-1913)<sup>i</sup>. He is perhaps best known as the author of *The Book of Tea* (1906). The reason why I would specifically like to bring him up on this occasion is that he is the only person, to the best of my knowledge, who dared to fabricate an Asian cultural history -- a unitary Asian cultural history -- after the model of the European one. It is sad to admit immediately, however, that his ambitious attempt was destined to be a failure. It was too ambitious and perhaps almost to the point of being Quixotic, but still it was an admirable attempt. Anyway, as you will see, the failure will provide, all the more for it, a good testimony of the rarity and importance of the European tradition.

Okakura was truly an extraordinary man. It is difficult to define him by ordinary vocational designations, but perhaps he can be described as a philosopher and art historian. He is best remembered as a champion of Oriental and Japanese art and civilization in opposition to the overwhelming trends of modernization and Westernization, which tended to neglect and even look down upon the Oriental and Japanese art. He was a man of ideal, so he could not help having quarrels. He was a man of passion, so he could not help having some love affairs throughout his life.

Born in 1862 in Yokohama, one of the important ports in the central part of Japan, he was fortunate enough to learn English from his early boyhood. At the age of 18 he graduated from the University of Tokyo, where he was taught and influenced by Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), an important intellectual whose interest in and publications in defense of Japanese art left an enormous impact on the future generations of literati and poets—Ezra Pound (1885-1972), for instance, was

one of them. Together with Fenollosa, Okakura was engaged in the business of a survey of the real state of Japanese art (i.e, paintings, sculptures, and other antiquaries). During 1886 to 1887 he, again together with Fenollosa, made a worldwide tour, visiting various academic institutions of fine arts in Europe and America for the establishment of a national school of fine arts, which was duly established in 1889 as *Tokyo School of Fine Arts* (now *The Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music*; the alma mater, by the way, of the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto). He became its president in 1890 and held the position until 1898, when he was forced to resign as a result of an internal feud as well as the revelation of a scandal.

This is the first occasion on which we have a glimpse of some love affairs he was to have in his life. (Okakura, by the way, had married in 1879 at the age of 17.) But this one has something extraordinary about it. The woman he had an affair with was the wife of the high-ranking official called Mr. Kuki, under whom Okakura had been working for some time. While he was on a tour of inspection for the establishment of Tokyo School of Fine Arts and came to Boston, Okakura met Kuki, his boss, and as Okakura was on his way back home and Kuki had to remain, Kuki entrusted Okakura with his pregnant wife. It was on the returning boat that he and Kuki's wife fell in love. The *liaison dangereuse* never ceased after their landing home but lasted for a long time, during which time Okakura even moved his lodging near her house. It was this period that the open secret about the president of the prestigious national institution came to the fore as a scandal. The love affair, however, seems to have continued until the poor woman came to lose her wits. I cannot help adding a footnote to this tragic story: If you happen to know Shuzo Kuki (1888-1941), the author of the fascinating book, *La struttura d "Iki"*, one of the most eminent philosophers of modern Japan, friend of Heidegger and Sartre, this Shuzo Kuki was the child of that poor woman. He at one time believed, as his later recollection tells, that Okakura was his real father.<sup>ii</sup>

Now back to Okakura's career as a cosmopolitan philosopher and art historian. He was a president of Tokyo School of Fine Arts, as I told you, from 1890 to 98. During this period he conducted a grand fieldwork in China (then Ching dynasty) in 1893, travelling around the country and visiting various historic sites and relics for about a year. This grand tour around China was a logical consequence for a man who is fighting for the Asian and Japanese cultural values for years. (And here I must remind you that he had had the experience of seeing and studying Western art back in 1886-87, when he made a tour around Europe and America for over a year.) The travel around China was followed almost inevitably by a passage to India, where he stayed in 1901-2. The

Indian sojourn marked a very productive period for him. He wrote his first book *The Ideals of the East*, which was to be published in London in 1903, and I'm going to discuss this book later on. (By the way, Okakura wrote three books in his life, all of them in English.) There were two things worthy of note during his stay in India: (a) he came to meet the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, and they became close friends; (b) he seems to have involved in the revolutionary and resistance activities against the British Imperialism. Literary and political activities usually go along with love affairs, and you may well expect some love affair to take place. Maybe there was, but we have no evidence on this occasion. When he was to revisit India in 1912, a decade ahead, however, he would not fail to meet a Bengali poet and widow, Priyambada Devi Banerjee. He met her on 16<sup>th</sup> September.<sup>iii</sup> They immediately fell in love, though it is almost certain that the relationship was strictly Platonic and continued long *in absentia*. (There remain today the total of 19 love letters written by Okakura.)

The year 1904 was important for Okakura. For he was invited by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to take charge of its Asian collections. Behind the scene was a woman, Isabella S. Gardner (1840-1924), an art collector, philanthropist and patron of the arts, with whom he made friends, though the details of their friendship is unknown. In 1905, the following year, he became the first head of the Asian division. From this onward, he truly became a cosmopolitan intellectual, quite a rarity among the Japanese of those days, not only commuting between Japan and Boston, but also travelling widely to Europe, China and India again. Under these exceptional circumstances he wrote other two books, *The Awakening of Japan* (New York, 1904) and the most famous *The Book of Tea* (New York, 1906). He died in Japan in 1913.

Now this brief account of his life, I hope, is sufficient to show how extraordinary Okakura was. He was extraordinary in both private and public behavior. But what is most extraordinary is the fact that it is difficult to find a man or woman who was more familiar with the fine arts in both East and West. The breadth of his knowledge and the profundity of his experience about them are beyond compare. He went to Europe three times (once a long tour), China two times (once a long tour), India two times (once a long stay), and America over five times. And he made these travels when the means of transportation consisted of boats and horse-drawn carriages. He knew better than any other man or woman about the world: the political situation in general and the cultural state of affairs in particular. The general political situation was obviously characterized by the overwhelming *tsunami* of Western imperialism and colonialism. Japan had come near to fall prey to

this dominant wave, but was saved by its quick and successful modernization and Westernization. But its rapid and successful modernization had the price to pay for it, i.e., the wide-spread neglect throughout Japan of things Japanese as well as Asian, including the precious fine arts.

Okakura knew, perhaps instinctively from the start, that things Japanese and Asians were equivalent to those European, and knew at least that the former were not inferior to the latter. This insight must have been strengthened by the teaching of Ernest Fenollosa, the lover of the Japanese and Eastern arts, at the Imperial University of Tokyo, and further corroborated by his experience both in Europe and Asia (China and India). But the predominant world trends were in favour of the Western civilization and its concomitant values. It was not sufficient, though certainly important, Okakura must have thought, that the Japanese fine arts alone were to be recuperated in a museum, or for that matter, the Chinese cultural heritage alone was to be recovered and re-evaluated. The same was true of the Indian traditions. Because what was at stake was the whole Asian values, religious, ethical and aesthetic, which were on the verge of being patronized by the Western civilization. Under such circumstances, it was Okakura's fate that he was to make himself the champion of not only the Japanese art and culture but also the Asian values in general.

In the face of the overwhelming dominance of the Western military power and cultural influence, Okakura's countermeasure had no choice but emphasize the spiritual aspects of the East. And for this, he mobilized almost every conceivable element in history that was conducive to his purpose. The result was the manifesto he produced under the title of *The Ideals of the East* (1903), his first book. Its first paragraph, which became famous and controversial, reveals Okakura's high ambition:

Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilizations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world. (p. 1.)

At the very beginning of the book, he declares, "Asia is one." Such a bold declaration had never been made before him. What guarantees this Asiatic oneness, according to Okakura, is the religious aspiration for "the Ultimate and Universal," whose two great manifestations can be seen in Chinese

Confucianism and Indian Vedic religion (the precursor of Hinduism). And this common religious aspiration, which defied even the seemingly-unsurmountable height of the Himalayas, enabled every Asiatic race to “produce all the great religions of the world.” He touched the delicate point very smartly. One certainly wondered, as one does today, if Judaism and Islam were included in “the all great religions of the world.” The answer, interestingly, is that Okakura ignored Judaism and included Islam in the Eastern camp of spiritualism. Of course, it is a considerable distortion of the history of religions, particularly so from our present day perspective. Okakura may have been aware of it, but his mission for great Asian spiritualism had the heavier weight and forced him to forge a new, if strained, history so that there might arise a grand binary opposition between the materialist West and the spiritual East. I must hasten to add that despite this fatal defect in the handling of Judaism, his attempt at the argument for “Asia as one” is remarkable, if eccentric, and still worth listening to.

Okakura’s strategy for great Asian spiritualism was clever. He took advantage of Japan’s peripheral position where virtually nothing of fundamental importance was invented but almost everything of fundamental importance was borrowed from the continental Asian civilizations. It is thus a historical and geographical necessity that Japan becomes a great repository and melting-pot of all things Asiatic. Okakura’s greater Asia is made up of West Asia (Arabic and Persian) and East Asia (India and Chinese). These Western and Eastern “Asiatic races,” Okakura declares, “form a single mighty web,” (p. 3.) and “Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, and Indian thought, all speak of a single ancient Asiatic peace.” (pp. 3-4.) There is, of course, neither scientific evidence nor an established myth that supports his contention; what would guarantee his argument, if any, is actually Japan’s peripheral and dead-end position in the Asian civilizations, where everything came to be gathered up. Okakura’s acumen, however, made a virtue of this necessity and called this necessity “unity-in-complexity.”

It has been, however, the great privilege of Japan to realize this unity-in-complexity with a special clearness. The Indo-Tartaric blood of this race was in itself a heritage which qualified it to imbibe from the two sources [i.e., West and East Asian civilizations], and so mirror the whole of Asiatic consciousness. ... [Its unique history] made Japan the real repository of the trust of Asiatic thought and culture. (p. 5.)

Japan came to be defined as “the real repository of the trust [i.e., hope] of Asiatic thought

and culture.” But what did Japan create out of that “repository”? Okakura’s answer was its unique art, and again he was clever in this respect as Japan could boast neither religion nor philosophical thought of world-historical significance. Japan was and is nothing significant in the production of religious, philosophical, and ethical ideas. But when it comes to the area of fine arts and aesthetic ideas, Japan has a competitive power. Okakura’s ambitious design of great Asian spiritualism finally found its concrete expression in “the history of Japanese art” because it is, in itself, “the history of Asiatic ideals” ----“The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals.”(p. 8.) This is why about 80% of the book titled *The Ideals of the East* consists of the history of Japanese art, and this is why the Italian translation is titled *Lo spirito dell’arte giapponese*.

Okakura’s design for “Asia as one” was as remarkable as it was eccentric. As an ambitious attempt to cope with the overwhelming presence of the Western civilization and culture, it was remarkable and even praiseworthy. But as an attempt to create an alternative history, an innovative ideology, and a new myth, it was a bit too far-fetched and, sad to say, largely unconvincing. (I must say, however, that it is still worth reading as a history of Japanese art.) What is wrong with it is its structure of logic in stating “Asia is one.” For, Asia is one exactly because its diverse elements, religious, ethical, cultural even racial, all come to be gathered up in Japan to form an aesthetic unity-in-complex. There are two rhetorical sleights of hand in his theory of Asian unity-in-complexity. One is an aesthetic reductionism: religion, ethics and philosophical thought are all reduced to mere elements that go to form a history of art or aesthetics. The other is the structural weakness in his theory of Asiatic unity (“Asia is one”). It is a resultant entity, not the structural principle as is the case with Europe: what guarantees Okakura’s idea of “unity-in-complexity” is essentially the structure of accumulation, the structure of stratification, which keeps growing with new arrivals. There may be a certain aesthetic principle that serves as a selective and unifying function for the creation of the history of Japanese art. But that unitary principle does not hold true of the entire Asia.

Okakura’s attempt was destined to be a failure. But let us remember that he could not but make an attempt in the face of the dominant trends of Westernization.

I have so far talked about the extraordinary attempt at the creation of a new cultural history of Asia by the extraordinary man, Kakuzo Okakura. Now with this in mind, let us turn once again to the European cultural history, your cultural history. The point I would like to make is that, as Europeans, you don’t have to argue that “Europe is one,” as Okakura had to do for the case of



Asia. But why is it that Europe is so securely assumed to be one and single unity? Of course, it is not easy to make a clear-cut definition about European borderlines, particularly in relation to Russia. The issue of Turkey is complicated. And yet, the idea and concept of Europe as unity has been deep-rooted and consistent, so much so that it paved the way for the creation of current EU. One of the reasons for its tenacity lies, I think, in its conceptual structure, which is essentially “unitary, dynamic and dialectic.” It owed its birth largely to a historical contingency, namely the encounter of the Greek tradition of rigorous *logos* with the Christian spiritual dynamics of God and man. In its inception, the encounter was a historical coincidence, but once the two elements met and interacted, there came about an incomparable conceptual structure, which is distinguished by its unitary dynamics and dialectical development. Its range and complexity defies any easy analysis as it is tantamount to the European civilization itself, which prepared the Western modernity as well.

As Europeans, you are living in it and breathing it, and hence it may not be visible to you, but as the existence of the word “Eurocentrism” indicates, it is there firm and unshakeable. Or rather, it is so firm and unshakeable that it often becomes a target of criticism. It is so firm and unshakeable that European philosophers have constantly attempted to deconstruct it to produce new thought. A cultural and historical entity called Europe, a unique amalgam of Hellenism and Christianity, is so durable that it even survived the modern movement of secularization. At present, all the EU member states are mainly Christian countries, but there is no Christianity code in its membership as the controversial issue of the Turkish membership has made it clear. Even today Europe is developing as a dynamic unity. And it is precisely such a dynamic unity that Okakura’s concept of unitary Asia lacked.

Now by this time it is clear, and I hope it is clear to you, how happily you are situated in terms of cultural history. The so-called “cultural relativism” is rampant world-wide. It prescribes that any culture is as valuable as any other. As a political statement, it is indeed correct; but as a cultural statement, it is nonsense. Cultures vary in their breadth, depth, and intensity. Obviously I know only a little about Europe, still less about Asia, but it is clear to me that the European cultural tradition has enjoyed a unique status in its tenacity, depth and intensity. There is no poet in Asia, for instance, who has been so consistently read as Virgil. There is no poet in Asia who has been so consistently read as Ovid. I don’t have to remind you that thanks to the Fourth Book of *Eclogae*, Virgil came to be regarded as a Christian prophet-poet (*vates*) in the Middle Ages. Ovid could not afford to be discarded but had to be “moralized” as allegory. Both authors were anyway in demand

for required reading in the curriculum of the Christian Middle Ages. Again this might be to you an instance of the arid textbook matter but for me an enviable instance of the European cultural dynamics. It is Dante's "Limbo" in the *Inferno* IV. As he is led by his master Virgil to "Limbo," Dante meets "the goodly school of those lords of highest song":

Quegli è Omero poeta sovrano  
l'altro è Orazio satiro, che viene,  
Ovidio è il terzo, e l'ultimo Lucano.

We know that what is referred to by the "Omero" here is totally different from what we have as Homer now but that is irrelevant for our purpose. What matters is, first, that the Christian Middle Ages could not discard the pagan classical authors but incorporated them in its scheme of divine comedy. In the topography of *the Divine Comedy*, "Limbo" may be a detached enclave, but it is not detached from the spiritual landscape of Dante the poet, as is clear from the amazing declaration Dante makes about his classical canonization as poet: he goes so far as to declare himself as being admitted in their company:

E più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,  
ch' esser mi fecer della loro schiera,  
sì ch' io fui sesto tra cotanto senno. (IV, 100-3)

The structure of such Christian incorporation of the classic of pagan antiquity was turned upside down in the Renaissance, when the classical antiquity was to be rediscovered in conjunction with the movement of secularization. But the European great tradition, with Virgil as its unifying symbol, continues.

You all know about this better than I, so I don't have to dwell on this at length. But before I finish the present talk, let me briefly mention, by way of reminder, two of the most salient examples of the Virgilian quotation. One is Hegel's and other is Freud's.

Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher who, as you know, consummated the so-called German Idealism. According to him, the world history is a self-realization or self-substantiation of what he called "World Spirit" or "the Absolute Spirit." He seriously thought that the world history was no other than the spiritual event, where the absolute Spirit came to

recognize itself. We may imagine it as a self-unfolding of the scriptural *logos* in history. On this principle and in this spirit he wrote, among others, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and *The Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. And it was toward the end of the latter work, *The Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, when the long history of the Spirit's self-recognition is about to be accomplished, that Hegel famously described this situation by alluding to Virgil: *Tantae molis erat se ipsam cognoscere mentem* ("what a struggle it was for the mind to know itself"). What Hegel had in mind was, as you know, *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* ("What a struggle it was to found the Roman race", *Aeneid*, I. 33), i.e., the hardships Aeneas suffered on his divinely ordained mission for the world-historical race, "*Romanam gentem.*" For Hegel, it was the world-historical mind, "*mentem,*" that had to suffer for the mission of the history of philosophy.

When Freud (1856-1939) wrote his epoch-making *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), he also expressed his revolutionary intention by alluding to Virgil: *Flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo* ("If I cannot bend the Higher Powers, I will move the Infernal Regions", *Aeneid*, VII. 312). As you know, these words are spoken by Juno, the fatal enemy of Aeneas, when she saw Aeneas, against her will and efforts, successfully landing the Italian mainland. According to Freud, Juno's repressed subterranean thoughts are precisely the dreams' relation to the waking, reasonable thoughts, Jupiter's thoughts. Freud quotes this phrase twice at the beginning and in the concluding chapter.

Limited as I am in my knowledge of the European classics, I can go on like this almost ad infinitum. It provides a good proof of the extraordinary density of the so-called intertextuality that goes to inform the dynamic cultural unity of Europe, which, I must repeat, it is not the privilege of Asia to enjoy. As the descendents of Virgil and Dante, or for that matter, Cicero and Petrarch, you Italians are blessed with enviable circumstances to make the best of the great European tradition. But in order to make the best of the game, you must first undergo hardships, *tantae molis*. Good luck for your Greek and Latin.

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<sup>i</sup> Secondary literature in Japanese on Okakura abounds. Among a few critical works in English particularly useful is Christopher Benfey's *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics and the Opening of Old Japan* New York, Random House, 2003, esp. pp. 75-108.

<sup>ii</sup> In this respect there is a fatal misrecognition in Benfey's otherwise excellent book (p. 89): «There is little doubt that Okakura was his [Kuki's] father».

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Ooka Makoto, *To the Jewel-Voiced*, Tokyo, Heibonsha, 1982, p. 193.