

## Reconsidering "Japanese Aesthetics" from the Intercultural Point of View

My personal creed when I talk about part of my own culture is - I hope this could be a principle for anyone talking about one's own culture in an international situation - that I should do so with the basic intention of sharing ideas, instead of just reporting them. This might sound a simple creed, but I believe it is an important one. Making oneself understood is not a one-way but a mutual process. And it is not an easy task because in this process one is often led to doubt his own preconception about the native culture. And this is a good chance to reconsider the familiar way of thinking. Otherwise, one might give way to an essentialist attitude toward our culture, an attitude to regard oneself as its privileged reporter. So, I think it important always to keep in my mind a question to myself: "Are you really so sure that you know part of Japanese culture simply because you were born and have been brought up in it?" I understand this question as a renewed version of Cartesian skepticism to be asked in the context of the present, globalized world. And I also understand it as the first stage of an "intercultural" approach as I understand it.

The Intercultural approach in this sense is all the more required with such a topic as "Japanese aesthetics," since "Japanese aesthetics" has come into existence through a relatively short period (roughly the last 130 years since the mid-Meiji Era), and has been formed through radical changes in the way of thinking brought about by the relentless process of modernization of the nation. Modernization not only brought new ideas but has changed the way to look back on the past. Japanese aesthetics, like aesthetics in any other culture, has not emerged solely from an isolated traditional entity, but has been formed as the result of complex and multiple interactions between different cultures. No doubt the impact of modern Western aesthetics was the decisive moment. But it is not a simple process of assimilation or indigenisation. I think what we simply call "influence" of the West on Japan should be interpreted a little bit more carefully. My suggestion here is that

it may be convenient to see this influence at least on two different levels: one is explicit and the other implicit.

On the explicit level we can clearly see the domination of Western aesthetic thoughts in the academic discipline in Japanese Universities since the late nineteenth Century. And it lasted quite a long time. Even around the year 1980, when I graduated the Philosophy Department of Kyoto University, it was taken for granted that a student of aesthetics should learn German, French or English aesthetics. (Actually German was especially recommended.) But this Western dominance in academy shows only the one side of the whole picture of the Western influence on Japanese modernity. On the other side, excessive admiration of Western aesthetics has always been compensated with the strong urge to return to "traditional" Japanese (or Asian) aesthetics since the Meiji period. Okakura Kakuzo, the author of *The Book of Tea* (1906), emphasized the unique quality of Asian aesthetics, which manifests itself in its most sophisticated form in the tradition of Tea Ceremony, and it was described as being opposed in many ways to Western way of thinking. Holistic worldview, the sense of harmony with nature, integration of theory and praxis, strong affinity to Taoism and Zen Buddhism, were counted as important characteristics of Asian or Japanese aesthetics, and the similar characterization is still found today, though in a less straightforward way than in the time of Okakura.

So, on the explicit level, there seem to have been an opposition of the Western and the Japanese (or Asian) aesthetics in the modern Japan, which has been regarded either as a contradiction, as a choice between the two, or as a problem of merger or integration. During the time of Nationalism it appeared as an issue of overcoming the one (Western modernity) by appealing to the other (Japanese spirit).

On the implicit level of the Western influence, however, we get a totally different picture. When Ernest Fenollosa, an American professor invited by the Meiji Government (Okakura was one of his students), gave a famous lecture on "the Explanation of the Truth of Art" in 1882, it was not any of the doctrines he introduced in the lecture that influenced so many contemporary Japanese intellectuals at that time. Fenollosa was an amateur aesthetician and art lover, and his lecture is just a

hotchpotch of philosophical views widely shared by liberal, English-speaking intellectuals in the second half of the 19th Century. And I don't believe there were many among the audience who could relate these views to their original context. But that's not important. The most important and implicit message of his lecture at that time is that aesthetics matters at all, in other words, that there IS a legitimate, serious theoretical attempt to argue a unique value to art. The impact of Fenollosa's lecture was not simple acceptance of new ideas from the West. It was the total and fundamental reorganization of theoretical discourse about beauty and arts. The contemporary Japanese word "Geijutsu" referring to "art," maintains the memory of this reorganization. Seen from this implicit level, both the Western and Japanese understandings of art derives from the same conceptual transformation that took place around the 1880s.

It is not my intention to talk about this piece of history as an episode of good old days. On the contrary, I understand the problem of "Geijutsu" exactly as the issue we are confronted today, when the legitimate status of art is radically questioned and deeply eroded in the postmodern transformation of culture, that is an equally relentless process as the modern transformation experienced in the late 19th Century. What I like to present you in this brief lecture is how I see the question about the status of art, and the question about the status of aesthetics as a defender of art. I believe the question is more seriously rooted in the implicit level of cultural interaction, and the issue has been so persistently resident that we recognize almost the same question after more than a Century. Now I want to jump back to the present and argue the actuality of the past by explaining two examples of projects I have been involved in the last couple of months.

One is the first international convention on the concept of "Media Geijutsu" (literally "media arts" but include wider range of arts as I will explain soon). This is the project by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs and I chaired the convention last February in Tokyo. The central topic of the convention is the question: what "Meida Geijutsu" means. For the last 14 years they have held the annual festival titled "Meida Geijutsu-sai" which is officially translated into English as "the Japan Media Arts Festival." But it is confusing if we understand it in the English title, because the area of "arts" shown in the festival includes entertainment like

games, animation, manga and digital media art. The term "Media Geijutsu" works as a kind of umbrella term to house these newly developed and increasingly popular fields of Japanese culture. In addition to this festival, there is the Fundamental Law for the Promotion of Culture and the Arts, passed in 2001, which defines "media geijutsu" as "film, manga, animation, and other arts using computers or other electronic devices." Though the definitions differ slightly, it is obvious that the term "Media Geijutsu" is intended to provide a new, postmodern category of art, which is hard to be covered by "Geijutsu"=art in its conventional sense.

It would be easy to sneer cynically at this term as no more than a label devoid of content, fabricated simply to fill a government policy need. Honestly, it was an attitude I took when I first came across the term "Media Geijutsu." On a semantic level, the term is open to any number of objections. For example, the meaning of "media" is unclear. Does it refer to mass media, or electronic media, or other forms of media again? Why does the term "geijutsu," with its strong connotation of "fine art," need to be used to include manga and anime? To be honest, I gave up answering all these questions and nearly declined to work for it. But I talked about it with my students, and I had the second thoughts. I thought, even though it is hard to define "Media Geijutsu," we can at least look more carefully at the context where the term was coined. Seen from the semantic point of view, there is indeed an kind of disguise in this term. Considering the historical context behind the word "Geijutsu," however, I find the term seems to reveal some truth through that very act of disguising. And this is closely related with the way "Japanese-ness" in culture and society has generally been understood.

"Japanese-ness" is not something that has just always been there—it was, in fact, discovered. During the mid-Edo period (around the mid-18th century), philosopher Motoori Norinaga is credited with identifying a unique Japanese spirituality through his research on Japanese classical literature. That cultural identity, however, could only be established through the eyes of a superior other, namely that of Chinese culture. The establishment of an ethnic cultural identity by internalizing the gaze of others is hardly exceptional. After all, that's essentially what a cultural identity is. In the modern Japan since the Meiji Restoration, Western culture has functioned as the primary "other" establishing "Japanese" culture. This does not

contradict the fact that modern Japan has taken the West as its model and worked furiously to absorb Western culture. Emphasizing the uniqueness of ethnic culture and idealizing Western culture are indeed two sides of the same coin.

Over the last 20 years or so, that schema seems to have begun to change. The clearest manifestation of this is the international popularity of Japanese manga, animation, video games and other forms of entertainment—in other words, the so-called “cool Japan” phenomenon. Such cultural activities were once designated as mass culture or sub-culture in contrast to modern Japanese literature, fine art, theater, music, and other forms of “fine art” born from the impact of modern Western culture. However, looking at the situation at least from the 1960s onward, while manga, for example, has not been part of mass culture as opposed to elite culture nor an element of subculture as opposed to mainstream culture, it has been widely shared among different social strata and groups.

“Elite culture” and “mainstream culture” themselves have never manifested as clearly in postwar Japan as in the West. To employ the stereotype of the *honne/tatemae* (truth/façade) divide that is often employed in talking about Japanese culture, both “fine art” following the Western model and the “traditional Japanese culture” created by reflecting that model in local culture have only existed as part of *tatemae*. This does not mean that such art is therefore false. The key issues are that a more honest or *honne* level of cultural expression has always been present alongside “official” Japanese culture, and that manga, animation, and games have evolved as part of that expression.

To distinguish between these two levels, a certain rhetoric has developed for talking about Japan and Japanese culture which concerns the singularity of Japan and Japanese culture. *Nihonjinron*, or theories of Japanese cultural or racial uniqueness, have long been a popular genre amongst Japanese readers. All big bookstores will have a *Nihonjinron* section. Some writers are Japanese with a strong knowledge of the outside world, and some are foreigners. The genre contains some outstanding critical work, but the bulk of it is dubious comparative culture studies generalizing from the writer’s own experience of different cultures. Two points merit attention. First, where some *Nihonjinron* writers criticize the Japanese people and Japanese

culture as immature and insular when viewed from an international perspective, others praise the same people and culture for their uniqueness and superiority. Both, however, are enjoyed in the same way, in that they share the basic message that Japan is a unique place, and it doesn't really matter whether they move on from there to conclude that this is a good or bad thing. Second, Nihonjinron theories have their strongest supporters not among intellectuals and readers with a particular interest in cultural comparisons, but among general readers and, more specifically, male white-collar workers.

I believe that the "cool Japan" discourse as it currently stands is nothing but the latest version of Nihonjinron. In other words, it is still based on the assumption that Japan is a unique place. (I don't deny Japan is a unique place as long as any other place is unique.) With the cultural dissemination of Japanese manga and animation demonstrating that Japanese culture is not in fact unique but rather contains universally shareable qualities, I believe that that assumption needs to be discarded. The important issue is to voice this reality and put it up for discussion, instead of lingering in the myth of uniqueness which has been formed in the course of modernization both from inside and outside.

The other recent project I got involved is a symposium titled "Aesthetics VS. Contemporary Art" which took place in Yokohama on the 23rd of April, 2011. The symposium was organized by Japanese Society for Aesthetics, and three aestheticians including myself were on the panel, with the guest speaker Takashi Murakami, one of the most provocative Japanese artists today. (The other two aestheticians are Prof. Kiyokazu Nishimura from Tokyo University and Prof. Motoaki Shinohara from Kyoto University, though unfortunately they are not here with us.) This event was intended to promote "bigaku," the Japanese word for aesthetics, and "bigaku-kai," our society for aesthetics. Part of the motivation for this promotion was a widely shared concern among us that aesthetics, as an institutional academic discipline, is being threatened to shrinking. This threat has two aspects. One is the influence from a series of reformations of higher education since 1990s, including the privatization of national universities, which focused on the development of technology and business, and resulted in general reduction in terms of budget and courses of not only aesthetics but of humanities in general. The other is the change

of interests among students and younger researchers in the field, who are getting more and more concerned with contemporary arts, popular culture and sub-culture rather than philosophical subjects of conventional aesthetics. Many professors of my generation try to enlarge the definition of aesthetics to accept these new interests, but then there seems to be little distinction between aesthetics and cultural studies, for example. For many aesthetics seems to have lost its autonomous character as an independent discipline.

To show the actuality of aesthetics, it was a valuable opportunity to invite the remarkable artist Murakami, whose activity is so often talked about among younger generations, both in positive and negative ways. Those who are positive about Murakami's activities admire the artist's willingness to fight for survival in the globalized market of contemporary art, and agree with his despise of the domestic art world comfortable with its modernist understanding of purity and autonomy of art. Those who are negative hate Murakami as a mammonist obsessed with worldly success, and criticizes his appropriation of "Otaku" images in the context of contemporary art as shamelessly unfair. Murakami has published a couple of books, and has made occasional statements in public including the symposium last April, in which he declares how few of Japanese artists are really fighting in the international battlefield of art, and how the majority of Japanese artists as well as the audience indulge themselves in sweet dreams of an outdated modernist fantasy about art. Obviously he is doing them as part of his artistic performance and we cannot take it for face value, though some people get angry or feel seriously humiliated by Murakami's comments.

Let me conclude this lecture with my evaluation of this artist, seen in the context of "Japanese aesthetics." Does his work (not just pieces of work but his total activity) really points a way for the future, that is, a direction we should share for art and aesthetics in the age of multi-cultural complexity? My answer is: Definitely, not yet. But I highly appreciate his work as a fantastically written summery of the modern Japanese art and aesthetics since the age of Fenollosa and Okakura. Murakami stands for a Century-old character of "Samurai" who, confronted with the threatening Western power, bravely challenges it with a limited number of enlightened comrades and struggles to win the West by the Western rules (i.e. rules of the

global art market, as the artist often emphasize on), leaving the coward majority in his country behind. (I once discussed the issue of "Samurai" as the cultural and psychological self-image of heroic male subject in the modern Japan in the article titled: 'Samurai and Self-colonization in Japan' published in the collection *De-colonization of Imagination*. The article is now available on my website.) He seems to play out this stereotype of "Samurai" often to the point of absurdity, and I think this performative character constitutes the central significance of Murakami's work in total.

We can describe the Murakami's case as a "critical state" of art and aesthetics, which embodies the fundamental problems we have experienced in the modern Japanese culture, in an incredibly compressed form. But the equilibrium of the critical state, of modern culture as well as the nuclear reactors, has obviously been lost. So, what could we learn from this marvelous example of Murakami? What ideas do we hope to share about it? My final comment is that we do not need any more to be obsessed by the discourse of crisis and it's overcoming. Instead of making a brave step forward, we should stop, or rather step back, and be slow enough to give another look at the situation in front of us.