COMPARING JAPAN: THE RETURN TO ASIA

Johann P. ARNASON

Japan has, for obvious reasons, been a particularly attractive field for comparative research in history and sociology. But some comparative approaches have been more sensitive to Japanese realities than others, and the results are correspondingly uneven. In general terms, it is safe to say that Western historians have done more justice to the Japanese experience than Western theorists. Apart from such persistent imbalances, major shifts of focus and context have occurred in response to changing historical trends. A recent and familiar example is the growing interest in Japan as an integral but distinctive part of the East Asian region, rather than a case of quasi-Western development in an Asian setting. This new (or renewed) comparative perspective will be central to the following reflections. But its bearing on theoretical questions inherited from an earlier frame of reference is one of the themes that can only be outlined with a view to further discussion.

The widely accepted image of Japan as an exceptional counterpart to the West within the non-Western world was based on present evidence and a more conjectural reading of the past. Japan's unique record of Westernizing on its own terms raised questions about indigenous preconditions and suggested long-term historical parallels which have to some extent been confirmed by research. Similarly, the shift towards more emphasis on Japan's affinities and connections with other East Asian countries is founded on observable fact. The emergence of new developmental states in the region (Korea and Taiwan, followed – albeit with some qualifications – by mainland China) has cast doubt on earlier constructs of Japanese exceptionalism and drawn attention to more broadly shared patterns of modernization. It is the whole "Sinified new world" (VANDERMEERSCH 1985), i.e. a cluster of countries with a common heritage of Chinese origin, rather than Japan alone, which is now seen as the non-Western modernizer par excellence. The apparent spread of similar models of growth to Southeast Asia has prompted some analysts (e.g. HUNTINGTON 1996) to subsume that region under an expanded idea of East Asia. However, though the tendency to disregard historical and cultural boundaries may well be strengthened by the current 'Asian crisis', this line will not be taken here. Within a more circumscribed context, the recent ascendancy of East Asia has served to remind comparative historians of the very distinctive regional

responses to Western expansion and hegemony, as well as of a well established identity and prominent place in history prior to the encounter with the West. The early modern phase of East Asian history is of particular interest. This may not be the only non-Western region that can be said to have "entered the modern age as a mature but still vigorously productive civilization" (Schiffrin 1985: 254), but such judgments are more obviously applicable to it than to any other part of the world outside Europe. There is, in short, a whole series of reasons to reflect on the interpretive problems inherent in theorizing the East Asian experience – and the Japanese part of it – from a comparative angle.

1. The view from Europe

To grasp the implications of the turn from Western to East Asian starting-points for comparative analysis, it may be useful to recapitulate some aspects of the earlier approach. The East Asian connection is not only important for its own sake, but also as a necessary background to any further comparison across regional or civilizational boundaries, and it may be relevant to problems first posed in a European perspective.

Interpretations of Japan by Western historians and social scientists are rooted in broader but less articulate ways of relating one cultural universe to another. If we begin with these underlying views, the notion of Japan as a particularly distant and enigmatic 'other' is too familiar to need references. It may be less widely understood that this idea has coexisted with strong claims about parallels or convergences between Japan and Europe. A fundamentally alien identity seems compatible with inbuilt affinities of a more specific kind. Arguments in that vein range from sixteenth-century views of the Japanese as the most perfect natural Christians to recent presentations of Japan as a pioneer or model of postmodernity. In between, we may note Marx's reference to Japan as a museum of European institutions and the later image of Japan as "the essential modernizer" (Maraini 1987), i.e. as more directly predisposed to modernizing change than the original Western cases in point. In short, it seems evident that Western visions of Japan have tended to highlight a paradoxical combination of essential difference and contingent similarity.

It may be possible to spell out the underlying logic of this dual image. On the one hand, the exceptionally pronounced otherness of Japan has to do with a pattern of collective identity that is less dependent on universalist models and therefore less open to interpretation along their lines than are the cultural models linked to world religions or to civilizations shaped by them. Radical particularism is more resistant to a fusion of horizons

than the rival universalism of non-Western traditions. On the other hand, the attitudes seen as conducive to change or comparable to Western sources of dynamism are not unrelated to the particularist background. The very self-defining distance inherent in the latter makes it possible to pursue a course of adaptive learning and transformation without loss of identity. The particularist core is constructed in terms of self-contained variability, rather than firmly defined contents, and it is compatible with practices which observers can interpret in terms of pragmatism, relativism or eclecticism; whether such dispositions are treated as modern or postmodern may depend on the conceptual framework.

There are thus some grounds for arguing that a pre-theoretical conception of contrasts and similarities between Japan and Europe (more generally between Japan and the West) has long been operative, and that it prefigures the theoretical task of accounting for a very peculiar case of structural convergences across a cultural divide. But this pre-comprehension is not easily translatable into a more analytical language. More systematic versions of comparative historical inquiry entail a one-sided focus on social structures, by definition easier to thematize from a comparative angle, and lead to overstated analogies at that level, in contrast to a cultural domain of residual and under-theorized otherness. The far-reaching conclusions drawn from problematic parallels between European and Japanese feudalism are perhaps the best-known claims in this vein (for a seminal example, significantly different from the then predominant paradigm of modernization theory cf. JACOBS 1958; here the common cultural otherness of China and Japan is noted in passing, only to underline its irrelevance to a social bifurcation which sets Japanese feudalism – accompanied by a more general fragmentation and localization of power – apart from the Oriental patrimonialism of the mainland).

When it comes to sociological analysis in the more restricted disciplinary sense, the account of contrasts and affinities is even less balanced. A strong tendency to transfigure Western developments into general trends leaves little scope for specific parallels with the Japanese case. Similarities can at best be seen as accelerating or facilitating factors, relative to uniform patterns of change, and the most exceptional aspects of the Japanese experience can in that context only play a limiting role. This way of thinking culminated in the rival models of orthodox Marxism and mainstream modernization theory during the first postwar decades. But if we want to reconstruct the history of Western sociological approaches to Japan in somewhat greater detail, three phases may be distinguished. For the classics, Japan was a very marginal theme, but intriguing enough to inspire some speculation about its particular importance to comparative sociology. Arguments along these lines are, however, prone to exaggerate the af-

finities between Japanese and Western history, sometimes to the point of contradicting their own underlying assumptions. Durkheim used the work of a Japanese sociologist to construct a very comprehensive model of parallel development (presented as a prelude to, rather than an application of general theory), including – even then – manifestly untenable claims about the role of urban communities and a rising bourgeoisie in Japanese history. Weber compared the divisions of medieval Japanese Buddhism to those of the European Reformation, but this seems incompatible with his simultaneous attempt to show that there was no specific religious background to Japanese economic and political modernity, as a religious *tabula rasa* would not allow any meaningful comparison with Protestantism.

Constructions of this kind had been discredited when the later theorists of modernization began to develop a more systematic framework for comparison. Their strong commitment to universalist readings of Western experience led them to minimize the autonomous development of Japan as well as of other societies outside the original home of modernity. The only comparative perspective that could be developed on this basis had to do with Japan's pioneering role and privileged place among non-Western latecomers. Modernization theory was thus left with an ambiguous model which could highlight either Japan's exceptional success or the essential similarity of choices imposed by global constraints in spite of cultural diversity, and stress either the early dynamism of Meiji Japan on the persistent imbalances of its legacy (cf. especially Parsons 1971). Finally, the most recent developments in Western sociological theory are ambiguous in another sense: on the one hand, the major protagonists of conceptual innovation are markedly uninterested in lessons from the Japanese experience, but on the other hand, there are significant – albeit still very atypical – attempts to rethink central theoretical problems with particular reference to Japan. Eisenstadt's work on Japanese civilization is the most representative project of the latter kind.

2. Reconstructing a region

The above-mentioned approaches have one thing in common: they consistently side-step the question of Japan's belonging to the East Asian region and the implications of that context for comparative analysis. Recent interest in the East Asian connection has more to do with historical changes than with theoretical reflection, and if it is to be shown that the regional perspective has some bearing on broader issues, we must begin with a brief survey of past and present constellations.

2.1. Cultural patterns and historical trends

It should, first of all, be noted that we are referring to East Asia in the narrow sense, i.e. distinguishing it, on cultural and historical grounds, from Southeast Asia. If the region is defined in this way, its core consists of China (not including the Central Asian territories now ruled by the Chinese state), Korea and Japan. Its contemporary profile has been significantly affected by the separate development of two offshoots of China (Taiwan and Hong Kong). From a long-term perspective, it is perhaps more important that successive waves of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia projected East Asian patterns of organization and development beyond the borders of the region; Singapore is the only independent political embodiment of that trend.

Some further details might be added to the historical picture. The maritime and commercial polity of the Ryukyu Islands was an interesting and anomalous part of the regional state system, but did not survive the transition to advanced modernity and tougher interstate competition. Finally, there are important overlaps with other regions. Vietnam is often seen as a part of the Chinese cultural sphere, but it seems more appropriate to treat it as a historical mixture of East and Southeast Asian elements. The profound and durable influence of the Chinese model was counterbalanced by older patterns of Southeast Asian origin, as well as by the dynamics of interaction with neighboring Indianized states. At the opposite side of the Chinese heartland, Manchuria is best described as a shifting borderland between two regions. For most of premodern history, it was a peripheral part of the Central Asian zone of imperial counter-formations (BARFIELD 1989). In the seventeenth century, it became the launching pad for the last inner Asian conquest of China, and as a result, it was more thoroughly assimilated into the Chinese world than other external arenas. In the twentieth century, it became a decisive battleground for three different visions of China's future, namely Japanese hegemony, Nationalist state-building and the Communist revolution.

These comments should suffice to show that East Asia was, historically speaking, a very complex configuration of central, peripheral and external parts. In some ways, Japan combines central and peripheral characteristics, and the latter aspect suggests some interesting lines of comparison. The interplay of Chinese and indigenous traditions in Japan and Vietnam took very different directions, but some analogies can be found. Comparison with the Ryukyu Islands may serve to highlight aspects which were submerged or marginalized by the development and later decomposition of the Japanese imperial state. In general terms, the interplay of foreign conquest and counter-expansion is absent from Japanese history before 1868 (apart from an unsuccessful invasion in the thirteenth century and an

abortive bid for a mainland empire at the end of the sixteenth century), and this record can be contrasted with other parts of the region. But here we must limit the discussion to more central themes. The focus will be on Japan as one of the three core countries mentioned above. After a brief survey of basic common characteristics, some questions relating to Japan and each of the two other countries in particular will be considered.

The East Asian region is, as has often been pointed out, characterized by a particularly tangible source of cultural unity: the Chinese writing system. This conspicuously distinctive feature becomes even more significant if we accept that it is not a case of an archaic technique failing to follow the mainstream pattern of evolution towards alphabetic writing, but rather of a written language achieving a unique degree of autonomy and self-rationalizing capacity vis-à-vis the spoken one (VANDERMEERSCH 1985: 127–151). The independence and durability of ideographic writing can, in turn, only be understood in the light of cultural foundations and connotations: it depends on a "shared conceptual language of textual precedent" (GLUCK 1997: 229). In the Japanese case, the cultural background to the Chinese writing system stands out in particularly clear relief because of its encounter with a native but eminently receptive tradition. The relationship between imported and indigenous elements remains controversial (cf. POLLACK 1986), but some basic facts are beyond doubt. An imported writing system could not have been imposed on an alien language without backing by a comprehensive and superior cultural model. Conversely, the tensions and dissonances created at this most elementary level of discourse were bound to affect the whole cultural context, however difficult it may have been be to reduce their ramifications to a general formula. From the present perspective, this intercultural constellation may be seen as an exceptionally acute variant of the regional pattern which maximizes the distance between a culturally charged and standardized written language on one side and oral, local or subaltern discourses on the other.

To complement and counterbalance this strong *prima facie* case for cultural identity, some aspects of regional political history should be noted. The East Asian zone has never been united within one imperial formation. The only serious premodern attempt to achieve that goal was made by conquerors coming from elsewhere (the Mongols), and symbolic sovereignty without imperial control (the Chinese 'tributary system') was a more regular and codified part of the traditional order than anywhere else. But the existence and predominance of a uniquely permanent imperial center was nevertheless crucial to the cultural unity of the region. The prestige and legitimizing potential of the Chinese cultural model was more durably dependent on imperial power than any other comparable civilizational framework (in the case of Islam, the initial connection

to an imperial project was more direct, but also much more short-lived). Cultural influence goes beyond imperial control, most obviously in the case of Japan, but it reflects imperial presence of an unusually massive kind.

We are thus faced with a distinctive pattern of interrelations between culture and power, characteristic of the region for a long time and constitutive of the identity that makes it one of the more clearly demarcated long-term geocultural and geopolitical arenas of world history. But this configuration is also reflected in a historical trend which became more pronounced after a temporary shift in the other direction. The East Asian region has mostly been less actively involved in world affairs and global developments than its relative strength and internal dynamism would have seemed to warrant. More specifically, East Asia has – in contrast to some other major civilizational areas – not given birth to universal religions with a missionary thrust, and the power dynamics of the region were not very conducive to projects of imperial expansion beyond cultural boundaries. The prevalent pattern was, in short, characterized by a mutual closeness of culture and power which set specific limits to developments on both sides. The vision of cosmic order and the model of imperial order that took shape together during the formative phase of the Chinese tradition did not wholly exclude deviant modes of thought, but they were confined to marginal roles and derivative themes. The original Chinese combination could be reproduced on a peripheral scale with more or less significant modifications and simultaneous reconstructions of native traditions (Japan and Korea represent two very different variants of that pattern), but no rival center or alternative claimant to hegemony could develop alongside China. The relationship between the interpretive framework and the imperial paradigm could be redefined in a more or less far-reaching fashion, but the dominant way of doing so centered on the re-appropriation of classical sources.

Although the smaller-scale replication of the Chinese model within the region did not lead to the intra-civilizational power struggle that developed in other major regions, it could be translated into strategies of isolation, designed to minimize direct contact despite ongoing or even intensified cultural borrowing. The ambitions and effects of such policies varied greatly in the course of East Asian history. But from our point of view, it is of particular interest that both the overall detachment of the region from the global arena and the pattern of interstate seclusion within the region became more pronounced with the transition to early modernity, i.e. at the very historical juncture when the first wave of Western expansion was gathering momentum. The efforts of East Asia, in particular by China, to "be a world on its own and … to remain so" (ADSHEAD 1995:

309), despite growing involvement in an international economy and increased visibility in the global arena, cannot be explained as a defensive response to Western initiatives. The most plausible view is that the logic of cultural orientations favored a more inward-looking strategy than the wealth and power of the region might have suggested. Analogously, the isolationist stance of the two smaller countries in question cannot be seen as a purely strategic position, the measures taken went far beyond any situational constraints and are in both cases linked to cultural legitimation, be it through exclusivist claims to particular perfection of the Chinese model (Korea) or constructs of an imaginary alternative to the Chinese world order (Japan).

These aspects of early modernity in East Asia seem particularly striking when contrasted with the exceptional dynamism of the region after the nineteenth-century breakdown of the old order. East Asian responses to Western expansion in its culminating phase, exemplified in different ways by the long-drawn-out revolutionary upheaval in China and the sustained state-guided transformation of Japan, have been more momentous than those of any other non-Western societies. The relationship between early modern strategies of containment and advanced modern patterns of change is an intriguing and still underdeveloped theme for comparative history.

2.2. China, Japan and Korea

To complete this survey of the region from a historical point of view, a few relevant aspects of Japan's relationship to the two other core countries should be noted. As for China, the traditional view is that premodern and early modern Japan was a cultural satellite of China (this leaves room for debate on the relative importance and authenticity of surviving native traditions, and also on the question of continuous trends or separate waves of sinification). However, that this very condition and the attitudes it had fostered made it possible to shift the focus of learning and borrowing to the Western powers which displaced the Chinese empire. It was therefore in conjunction with other factors instrumental in setting the Japanese modernizing process apart from the much more protracted Chinese one. The civilizational shift from Chinese to Western models was, moreover, accompanied by an attempt to restructure the regional order along Western lines, re-center it around Japan and reduce the former center a to peripheral status. While this interpretation is not fundamentally wrong, it must be integrated into a more balanced picture which has gradually emerged from historical research.

First and foremost, the traditional relationship between Japan and China should be analyzed from both sides. As Marius JANSEN has argued, China's role in relation to Japan was unique: it was a "cultural colossus which endured", combining – in European terms – the characteristics of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, Renaissance Italy and eighteenth-century France (1989: 11). But Japan's position with regard to China was no less peculiar in that it combined features which elsewhere tend to diverge. Cultural assimilation on a scale usually linked to foreign conquest or control was in this case counterbalanced by political segregation to a degree normally incompatible with cultural unity. This constellation gave rise to further distinctive developments. Political autonomy enabled the Japanese importers and interpreters of Chinese culture to construct and reconstruct a model of the latter on their own terms, to pursue strategies of selective appropriation with changing priorities and to keep the synthesis of the Chinese and native traditions open to new combinations. Cultural borrowing made it possible to reinforce the authority of the Japanese state within a particularist framework and without entering into an open contest with the Chinese center whose symbolic resources were thus put to independent but not antagonistic use. In brief, it may be suggested that these interconnected aspects of the Japanese tradition resulted in the constitution of a virtual regional center alongside the real and formative one. As far as I can judge, there was no comparable development within any other civilizational complex. The modern transformation of East Asia can then be seen as a radical – but still inconclusive – restructuring of the relationship between the two centers.

With regard to the more specific mechanisms and pathways of the modernizing process, changing perspectives have brought the Chinese and Japanese variants closer to each other. The decay of Chinese Communism has effaced the apparent contrast between two incompatible and equally systematic models of modernity. On the Chinese side, affinities between the late imperial projects of self-strengthening statecraft and the post-Communist search for a strategy of development are becoming more visible (cf. CHU and LIU 1994). This continuity can at the same time be seen as a much weaker parallel to the progress of the Japanese developmental state. In other words, it now seems less plausible to interpret the last century of Chinese history in terms of an alternative path to modernity, and it may make more sense to see it as a series of interrupted moves in a direction prefigured by Japan, but obstructed by the Chinese imperial legacy and its revolutionary mutant. This does not mean that we can reduce the role of Chinese Marxism to a disturbing factor which did not operate in Japan. As recent comparative research has shown (cf. particularly HOSTON 1984), the strikingly different destiny of Marxism in the two countries

should not obscure the fact that its rise and decline was in both cases linked to processes of state-building and formation of national identity. Japanese Marxism was a theoretical alternative as well as an elusive but not unimportant contributor to the nationalist strategy of the developmental state, and Chinese Marxism served to legitimize the most effective among rival strategies of state-building during the twentieth-century post-imperial crisis, although it also played a role in the self-destructive turn taken after a phase of consolidation.

Comparisons of Japan and Korea face a very different task as they must begin with the closely – and one-sidedly – linked trajectories of the two countries after the nineteenth-century turning-point in East Asian history. The *prima facie* case for a crucial Japanese input into the Korean modernizing process is obvious not only with regard to the Japanese colonial state (and the economic policies implemented as part of its buildup for further expansion), but also in the sense that Korean strategies of development from the 1960s onwards drew on Japanese precedents. Evidence of Korean originality can, on the other hand, be found in distinctive features of the developmental state and its nationalist ideology, but this side of the argument has been less focused, and its most forceful versions tend to stress indigenous obstacles rather than impulses (JACOBS 1985). There has been less debate on the long-term historical background, i.e. the specific and enduring structural differences that might to some extent account for the very different Japanese and Korean responses to the end of East-Asian isolation. The traditional and still widely held view is that Korea took the common condition of cultural dependence on China much further than Japan, combined the symbolic acceptance of Chinese sovereignty with a self-image centered on small-scale reproduction and conservation of the Chinese model, and was therefore much less capable of the ideological and political mobilization of indigenous traditions against the old order. It may be possible to restate the valid part of this claim in terms which make it more amenable to qualifications.

It seems clear that there was a very significant difference between the ways of combining Chinese and native traditions in Japan and Korea: in the Korean case, there was no parallel to the construction of Shintō, i.e. no ongoing refashioning of a pre-existing religious culture with the aid of inputs from elsewhere but for the purpose of maintaining an ostensibly separate source of identity. And by the same token, there was no equivalent to the Japanese imperial institution as an extensively Sinified but artificially archaized version of the sacred monarchy. These contrasts are obviously important, but they do not exclude other differences which might have to do with more original Korean variations on the Chinese pattern. Drawing on the work of James B. PALAIS (1984, 1995), it may be suggested that

such divergences can be located on the level of power structures, and that they open up new perspectives for comparing Korea and Japan. On this view, the two countries were characterized by significantly different ways of maintaining a more aristocratic social structure than their common model civilization had done, and this was in both cases achieved through reconstruction in response to change, rather than simply by virtue of entrenched traditions.

In Korea, as in Japan, we can distinguish successive waves of Sinification; the fourteenth-century wave led to a much more thoroughgoing Confucianization of Korean thought and culture than ever happened in Japan, but this process was – paradoxically – accompanied by the consolidation of an institutional framework markedly different from the one that had already taken shape in China. The dominant element of the new order was the *yangban* aristocracy. Its virtual monopoly of access to bureaucratic office contrasts with the 'real' Chinese model, but the fusion of aristocratic and bureaucratic power can, as Palais argues, be seen as an authentic institutional expression of the ambiguities inherent in the Confucian vision of authority. With regard to this view, the Korean social regime embodied and sustained a balancing act which proved impossible in China and was never attempted in Japan. But on the other hand, the Confucian-bureaucratic nexus was only one aspect of a more complex aristocratic power structure which differed markedly from Chinese principles and practices. Palais notes the persistence of large scale slavery (unique in the East Asian context), the institutionalized limits to strong monarchy, and the permanent struggle between hereditary factions who strove to control the center, rather than to decentralize power.

The *yangban*, the dominant class at the center of this configuration, was hereditary, but of a peculiarly elusive and potentially unstable kind: it was based on a shifting combination of property, power and prestige. Here a comparison with Japan would seem particularly relevant. Both the court aristocracy of the early Japanese imperial state and the samurai of the early modern epoch were more strictly defined and more clearly demarcated hereditary elites than the *yangban*. However, in between, Japanese society went through a prolonged phase of relatively fluid and contested hierarchy which has no parallel in Korea (the *yangban* regime can perhaps be seen as a more limited loosening of earlier and stricter rules). We cannot pursue this topic further, but a general conclusion can be drawn: when discussing the transformations of the Chinese model in the East Asian context, the question of aristocratic limits to bureaucratic rationality and Confucian ethics cannot be posed in simple terms. The character and meaning of aristocratic elements depends on the historical context, and the forces that block certain Confucian potentialities may favor others.

3. Confucian traditions and civilizational traits

So far, we have outlined the historical contours of the East Asian region and briefly explored the most obvious lines of comparison. The next step will involve more theoretical issues: the problems of conceptualizing the identity and trajectory of the region must be confronted, with particular reference to Japan's place within it and with a view to integrating other perspectives on the Japanese experience.

3.1. Traditions in context

Historical formations of the type and dimensions to be discussed here have traditionally been a key theme of civilizational theory. The conceptual foundations are notoriously uncertain. For our purposes, it will be enough to note a strong tendency to equate civilizational spheres with major religious traditions. This is evident in the conventional notions of the Christian, Islamic or Hindu civilization. If we try to approach the East Asian area from this angle, we face a dilemma. On the one hand, Buddhism, the regional tradition that can most convincingly claim the status of a world religion, was imported from elsewhere long after the emergence of a distinctive regional macroculture. It suffered major setbacks during later phases (although not everywhere to the same extent), and could never – even temporarily – achieve the exclusive primacy which other versions of it enjoyed in some other parts of Asia. On the other hand, Confucianism, the tradition most closely identified with regional identity, seems to lack some of the features usually regarded as essential to a religious belief system. Among Western interpreters, its status as a religion has therefore been permanently contested, all the more so since this religious underdevelopment appears to explain its failure to resist the uniquely peaceful spread of Buddhism in the region. If we go on to consider the Japanese case, the difficulties are compounded with regard to both traditions. They did not simply interact and mix with indigenous traditions – which is not exceptional – but rather, they became parts of a much more uncommon pattern which allowed for an ongoing recombination of traditions without mutual absorption or concluding synthesis. And if we add to this the fact that Japan later proved exceptionally receptive to Western civilization without any significant opening to its dominant religion (the absence of large-scale Christian inroads after 1868 is all the more remarkable because of the contrast with a short-lived early modern success), it is tempting to conclude – as Max Weber suggested in his brief excursus on Japan – that Japan represents a case of religious under-determination.

Notwithstanding the problems noted above, the idea of a Confucian region, tradition or civilization is still the interpretive key most frequently used to theorize the East Asian experience, and most favored by those who try to situate Japan within that context (the notion of a more broadly defined Buddhist civilization has proved much less workable). This line of argument is often based on more or less explicit attempts to present the apparent weaknesses of Confucianism as underlying strengths. The absence of fully-fledged orthodoxy in the style of universal religions is taken to mean that Confucian ways of thought could prevail in a more flexible fashion and contribute a common frame of reference without a frontal assault on other traditions. By the same token, Confucian hegemony was less dependent on codified doctrine and more a matter of strategic institutions, such as the family, the examination system and the imperial bureaucracy. The emphasis on institutional practices can, moreover, be seen as a secularizing bent which prefigures more systematic shifts in the course of modernization. Confucianism would, in this regard, seem to have been more predisposed to a modern reorientation than the otherworldly traditions sometimes credited with that capacity. Let us note in passing that these considerations are not easily applicable to Japan. In the Japanese tradition Confucian elements could not claim the central and formative role which they played in China; key institutions and official rituals were never adopted, and the most emphatic invocations of Confucian ethics after the transition to advanced modernity were linked to an explicit re-sacralization of authority.

Another obvious but answerable objection to the idea of a Confucian civilization has to do with the ambiguity of basic premises. It is a matter of an ongoing debate whether the notions of "heaven" and "will of heaven" refer to a sacred dimension of reality, and how thoroughly it has been de-personalized. The Confucian ideal of a "gentleman" can be interpreted as a proposal to humanize and moralize a pre-established aristocratic regime, or as a more radical meritocratic model. And the well-known emphasis on the family as a paradigm of order is similarly double-edged: it reflects a vision of social integration through family solidarity, as well as a prior adjustment of family organization to political imperatives, and the relative weight of the two orientations remains controversial. All these points cast further doubt on notions of Confucian orthodoxy, but the civilizational perspective can be articulated in a way which puts them to more constructive use. The ambiguities in question – as well as others – can be seen as starting-points for different lines of interpretation, and the Confucian universe of discourse and practice will then appear as a cluster of interrelated but not mutually integrated traditions. This redefinition of the Confucian framework, with a stronger emphasis on its internal differ-

entiation, is doubly relevant to the countries which borrowed Confucian ideas at a later stage. Here the different components of the original configuration could be appropriated in a more selective fashion and adapted to the demands of a milieu which did not share the whole history of the Confucian complex.

3.2. Confucianism compared: A rejoinder to Rozman

With these considerations in mind, we should now take a closer look at the Japanese case. Gilbert ROZMAN'S essay on Confucian values in China and Japan (1991b) will be a convenient starting-point for further discussion. It is, if I am not mistaken, the most systematic attempt to show that traditional constellations and modern developments in China and Japan can be analyzed as variants of a common Confucian pattern (there is no reference to Korea, but as the above comments suggest, comparison with the particular features and directions of Korean Confucianism might open up interesting perspectives). Rozman's account of Japan's place within the Confucian world is, moreover, designed to explain the very characteristics which could, from a more one-sided point of view, be seen as symptoms of Japanese exceptionalism and reasons for suggesting analogies with the West.

The *prima facie* case for approaching the problematic of East Asian identity and development from a Confucian angle can be summed up very briefly. In the light of past and present achievements, it seems appropriate "to view this region as an imposing sociological phenomenon in which human relations have been moulded to maximize collective action" (ROZMAN 1991a: 32). During earlier historical periods, this mobilizing and organizing capacity was most evident in unusually sustained dynamics of state formation. In the advanced modern phase, the same underlying logic leads to a new emphasis on economic development as a collective goal, with a strategic role reserved for the state. The grounds for assuming a distinctively Confucian contribution to this historical record have to do with persistent attitudes rather than any doctrinal contents. The commitment to education, the mutual reinforcement of families and larger collectivities, and the combination of hierarchy and mobility did not *ipso facto* subvert the traditional order, but after a modernizing turn in response to external pressures, they could be harnessed to developmental goals.

Apart from these preliminary observations, for our purposes, Rozman's argument can be recapitulated in two steps. He first distinguishes five traditions within the Confucian complex. As he sees it, they all existed in Japan as well as in China, even if some of them differ in significant ways and

the overall configuration does not take the same form. The beliefs and rituals most closely associated with central political authority can be described as *imperial Confucianism*; in Japan, this was "less central and more detachable from other parts of the tradition" than in China (ROZMAN 1991b: 164). *Reform Confucianism*, persistently underestimated by those who see the whole tradition as conformist or adaptive, represented a counterweight and corrective to imperial rule, in that it gave voice to demands for a moral upgrading of authority, but it could be co-opted by rulers intent on improving their public image as well as their techniques of control. As Rozman points out, the latter trend was stronger in Tokugawa Japan than in late imperial China, and it can to some extent be seen as a precursor to later governmental activism. *Elite Confucianism* was the set of cultural orientations and codes of conduct essential to the collective identity of a dominant group. Here the contrast between China and Japan is perhaps most pronounced, because of the differences between the scholar-officials and the samurai. *Merchant-house Confucianism* represents an attempt by an officially downgraded group to codify its own version of "loyal service to an organization that modeled itself on the family" (ROZMAN 1991b: 166). Finally, Rozman's last category, *mass Confucianism*, is residual in that it refers to changing, but on the whole increasing, results of the diffusion of Confucian notions among the peasantry.

In short, Rozman's account of Chinese and Japanese Confucianism leads to the conclusion that the latter was more flexibly structured, and therefore more easily recomposed and reoriented. But at a more general level, his interpretive framework is still Sino-centric and inadequate to the Japanese context. The claim that "the values are largely the same, although Japanese tradition gave greater weight to some" (ROZMAN 1991b: 167) is fundamentally misleading. It would be more appropriate to say that Japanese ways of combining Confucian values with others differed from the Chinese model and changed the relationship between various Confucian traditions. The difference is perhaps most obvious with regard to the symbolic center of the tradition. Although the imperial institution drew on Confucian language and imagery in varying ways at different junctures in its history, the charter myth of a descent from heaven, instead of a mandate of heaven, must be seen as an unequivocal invalidation of Confucian principles. There was, strictly speaking, no tradition of imperial Confucianism, only a selective use of Confucian resources to dignify and consolidate an institution whose core had been immunized against the rationalizing and transformative potential of Confucianism, and because reform Confucianism was ultimately dependent on the same frame of reference as its imperial counterpart, the relativization of the latter affected the whole character of the former. The reformist version of the Japanese imperial imaginary

was a restorationist stance, often reinforced by Confucian ideas but retaining its distinctive link to the dynastic myth. Although its ideological expressions and political implications varied in the course of Japanese history, the continuity of underlying orientations set it apart from other components of the tradition. As for the category of elite Confucianism which Rozman distinguishes from the traditions of rulers and reformers, it is perhaps even less applicable to Japan than the others. The history of samurai responses to Confucian culture is long and complex, and it includes episodes of intensive appropriation as well as emphatic distance. But as recent work on samurai ethos and identity has shown, a highly developed honor culture with strong ideological connotations predetermined the possible uses of implanted traditions, including Confucian ones (Ikegami 1995). A Confucian collective identity can be attributed to the Chinese scholar-officials, but not to the samurai. Finally, it seems unnecessary to discuss the two last categories – merchant house and mass Confucianism – in this context. Rozman sees them as derivative and subaltern in relation to the three dominant ones, and if the latter are less homogeneous than he claims, that must also apply to their secondary offshoots.

We can thus speak of different social forces and cultural currents involved in the Japanese reception of Confucianism, but in each case, the Confucian elements become parts of traditions with notably non-Confucian roots. On the other hand, the unifying aspects of Chinese Confucianism – canonized texts central to the educational system, a discursive framework built around those texts, and a corresponding set of cultural institutions – were absent from the Japanese version. It is therefore impossible to treat the two cases as comparably distinct and coherent variants of the same model. In more general terms, we cannot understand the Japanese adoption of the Chinese model as the transfer of a dominant tradition, even if we allow for some internal elasticity. Japanese transformations of the Chinese tradition changed the relative weight of its components and the relations between them. Chinese and indigenous sources interacted in a way which left them open to ongoing inputs from each other as well as to the possibility of re-polarization. Because of both these factors, the internal pluralism of the Japanese tradition took a distinctive form, different from the Chinese one. But it seems equally implausible to treat this outcome as a result of subsumption under pre-existing native patterns. Such claims do not do justice to the historicity and originality of the successive constellations created in the course of Japan's engagement with China. The relationship between these two unequal centers of the East Asian region can thus serve to clarify a general point about civilizational theory: its field of inquiry cannot be limited to enduring and encompassing cultural patterns; rather, its frame of reference must be defined in such a way

that it allows for the formation and reconstruction of such patterns, in and through interaction with other forces.

The most important of those other forces may be easier to identify if we return briefly to the other part of Rozman's argument. His analysis of the Confucian legacy as a cluster of traditions paves the way for an understanding of the Confucian imprint on modernity as a new tradition in the making, perhaps best described as developmental state Confucianism. Rozman does not use this term, but the idea seems implicit in his account of the modern fate of Confucianism in the two countries. As he sees it (or saw it at the beginning of the 1990s), phases of decline and rejection have in both cases alternated with those of partial reactivation, but in China, the phases of decline have been longer, the counter-trends more explicitly rejectionist, and the revivals much less effective. Most importantly, the Japanese search for a stable synthesis of Confucian attitudes and modern practices has gone far beyond anything attempted in China. This argument is obviously not about a self-perpetuating or spontaneously mutating tradition. Rather, aspects or elements of the Confucian complex are mobilized or marginalized as parts of a more comprehensive strategy. The mere fact that the relative role of Confucian elements varies conspicuously from phase to phase suggests that the decisive factors are to be found elsewhere, and Rozman's concrete analysis makes it clear that they are primarily political. The consolidating phases of the Meiji state and the postwar developmental state after the Occupation reforms were characterized by the most extensive and effective use of Confucian traditions. In China, both the ineffective Nationalist state between the wars and the inconclusive reforms after the anti-traditionalist paroxysm of the Cultural Revolution fell far short of Japanese achievements in this field. The link to more or less successful strategies of state-building does not mean that the Confucian framework is a purely ideological construct; it should rather be seen as a cultural resource which helps to articulate, embed and justify the projects of the developmental state.

But if the modern vicissitudes of Confucianism are thus related to the more or less successful strategies of the developmental state, it might seem appropriate to shift the line of argument towards the latter. Rozman's own analysis reaches a point where the continuing relevance of Confucian values as such appears less important than their progressive adaptation to historical innovations in the economic and political sphere. And in view of the stark contrasts between Chinese and Japanese achievements in that regard, it is tempting to link the changed perspective to a corresponding view of regional history. The focus on state-centered modernization goes together with a strong emphasis on Japan's central role in the modern transformation of East Asia. On this view, the transition to advanced mo-

dernity coincides with an abrupt transfer of primacy and initiative from one center to another, and a Japano-centric approach to recent history is therefore no less justified than the Sino-centric one in earlier phases. It can then be argued that the more or less far-reaching direct or indirect impact of Japanese growth and expansion on the other countries in question is the key factor in the political and economic dynamics of the region (cf., for example, CUMINGS 1984).

3.3. Long-term perspectives

There is, of course, no denying that Japan was – after 1868 – the main regional catalyst of change, and that this role continued in less conspicuous ways after the retreat from expansionism. But this is not the only point highlighted by the above argument. A brief outline of other implications may serve to suggest a more balanced view of regional interconnections. It would do more justice to the autonomy of the Japanese trajectory within the traditional framework as well as to the plurality of developmental patterns during the last century. The key to that perspective is a more long-term approach to the prehistory of the developmental state. Although we cannot go into details, it seems safe to say that recent work on the Tokugawa period has opened up new possibilities of linking the Japanese case to more developed accounts of long-term state formation in other parts of the world, without losing sight of the specific features which set it apart. This does not entail any strong constructions of continuity as no historian has ever suggested that the Tokugawa regime could be described as a developmental state, and growing insight into the Meiji origins of the latter is related to better understanding of the whole Meiji constellation as a particularly innovative phase. Rather, the most striking aspect of the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji is a paradox. Control, containment and isolation had been the unconditional priorities of the Tokugawa state, imposed in an exceptionally methodical fashion; but this very regime then proved to have created essential preconditions for conversion to developmental goals. Some of the underlying and unintended connections that help to explain this have been explored by historians. The particular characteristics of the Tokugawa power structure (the division of authority between center and domains) gave rise to unusually intensive forms of bureaucratic administration. At the same time, the structural logic of the regime transformed its social basis – the samurai class – in ways which proved conducive to a more activist version of the bureaucratic ethos. The 'global' strategy of the Tokugawa (best understood in terms of the vision of an imaginary world order centered on Japan, not to be confused with

isolationism pure and simple) fostered a more radical kind of particularism, not identical with, but eminently adaptable to modern nationalism; other factors could be added to the list.

It would be instructive to compare China and Japan from this angle. As noted above, observers have recently become more aware of similarities between the nineteenth-century beginnings and the present phase of Chinese modernization, and of the crucial role of statecraft in both cases. The imperial legacy inherited by the Chinese pioneers of state-controlled opening was very different from the Japanese one, and so was the configuration of social forces which shaped the setting of Chinese history after the terminal crisis of the empire. A closer analysis of these background contrasts would throw new light on both sides.

On the other hand, the distinctive course of state formation in Japan did not begin with unification under Tokugawa rule. The power structure established after 1600 was the outcome of a long process with major turning-points, changing overall patterns and more or less visibly foreshadowed alternative lines of development. For the purposes of comparative analysis, it is essential to integrate this aspect of the Japanese historical experience into the framework of civilizational theory. This task reflects a more general theoretical issue: so far, the most seminal analysis of state formation in a long-term perspective – the work of Norbert Elias – has done more to generate a separate strand of civilizational theory than to enrich a broader agenda. Its theoretical and historical results have yet to be synthesized with those of the more widely pursued study of civilizations from a culturalist angle. The implications of such a conceptual fusion for the Japanese case are obvious: to analyze the dynamics of state formation is to give a more concrete historical content to the political autonomy which we have already noted as an important aspect of the civilizational relationship between China and Japan, and to specify the context in which the ongoing adaptation of the Chinese model took place. To reduce the imported Chinese traditions to mere instruments of state-building would be no less misleading than to explain political history in terms of a cultural program. But the focus on the interactions and interrelations of cultural patterns and power structures sets the course for a civilizational theory without inbuilt reductionist assumptions or one-sided explanatory models.

To conclude these reflections, a few words should be said about the implications of our civilizational and regional perspectives for the questions raised at the beginning. As suggested above, the rediscovery of Japan's East Asian roots might provide a new context for discussing the problems left pending by inconclusive comparisons of Japan and the West. Conversely, the significance of the East Asian connection can only be fully spelt out if we relate it to broader horizons. Our analysis of Japan's civili-

zational setting suggests a comparative perspective which may prove useful in both respects. Briefly, it seems possible to identify some interesting contrasts and parallels between Japan's relationship to China and that of Western civilization to its sources. This theme has not been completely absent from earlier discussions. For example, the two pioneering statements on feudalism in Europe and Japan – those of Marc Bloch and Otto Hintze – linked the rise of feudal institutions to the failure of attempts to revive or imitate imperial models, namely the Roman Empire in the West and the Chinese Empire in the East. Given the strong civilizational connotations of both models, this can be read as a pointer towards civilizational theory. But there is no explicit recognition of the need for it, and when civilizational points of view appear in later work on Japan and the West, they are mostly unrelated to the issue which interests us here.

A recent book by Rémi Brague (1993) contains a particularly interesting discussion of one of the paradoxes of European civilization: its derivative character as a source of originality. If we trace the history of European cultural and historical formations from Greek and Jewish beginnings to the modern globalizing turn, each stage is characterized by a constitutive relationship to earlier sources and paradigmatic precedents, but this background is integrated at a distance and identified with a past that has ceased to play a directly formative role. The result of this specific relationship to an anterior significant 'other' (Brague uses the term *secondarité*) is an open-ended and pluralistic cultural identity, open to universalistic traditions and at the same time capable of questioning the orthodoxies that grow out of them. The most provocative part of Brague's thesis is that Roman attitudes to Greece marked the decisive step in this direction. This question is beyond the scope of the present paper, but its more general context may have some bearing on our understanding of Japan.

To elaborate on this point, let us briefly return to Jansen's comments on China and Japan. If the Chinese source differed from those of European traditions in that it combined the roles of successive historical strata and continued to exist as a dominant cultural and political center, the Japanese relationship to it had to be correspondingly different from European constructions of origins and legacies. It can, however, be argued that this was also a case of derivative originality. If we can speak of a distinctive "Japanese synthesis of China" (to use David Pollack's term), it must be added that China's continuing and overwhelming presence affected the character of this synthesis. Also, the maintenance of a separate identity alongside the internalized great tradition had to be based on an appropriately reinforced and reconstructed particularism, rather than a simple perpetuation of pre-existing traditions. No stationary archaism could have sustained the ongoing and active encounter with China. Similarly, the preservation

of political autonomy on the periphery of an imperial power was, in historical terms, bound up with an unusually self-contained process of state formation. But the long-term dynamics of that process were co-determined by lessons learnt from the regional environment in general and Chinese experience in particular.

From both points of view – the cultural and the political – the contrast between Japanese and European patterns are obvious, but the background parallels seem strong enough to make comparison possible and relevant. Further details cannot be discussed here; suffice it to reiterate that the civilizational perspectives outlined above link up with the initial questions about Japan seen from the West, and confirm that they can more easily be answered from an East Asian angle.

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