

Review of: S.N.Eisenstadt, **Japanese Civilization; A Comparative Review** (University of Chicago Press, 1996), xii + 581 pp.

[Alan Macfarlane in *Cambridge Anthropology*, 1998]

This is a fascinating book. Eisenstadt asks an extremely large and interesting question, namely why has 'Japan' been so very different in many respects from China and yet similar to western Europe, and what, precisely is 'Japanese Civilization'. The author is one of the great comparative sociologists of the later twentieth century and he has utilized a vast amount of secondary material on Japan, plus his own experience of other civilizations, to provide an answer. He has been thinking about Japan for fifty years and working on this book for over seven. He has collaborated with many of the leading figures in Japanese history and sociology. He has summarized the state of the art in the fields he has covered and provided an extremely useful survey of the history of many areas of Japanese society, for instance education, law, feudalism, administration, concepts of the person. He has put forward a grand theory to explain the peculiarity of Japan. Yet, in the end, the book fails to solve the Japanese riddle. Why is this so?

The most interesting chapters in the book concern religion. Here Eisenstadt attempts to reverse Weber's hypothesis. Weber had argued, among other things, that the success of western Europe and the failure of China to develop into advanced technology and capitalism was partly due to the relation between the natural and supernatural worlds. In Europe, Christianity and particularly Protestantism created a demanding 'other worldly' model which provided a standard or measure against which this world could be judged. This created a productive tension or contradiction out of which 'modernity' emerged. Such a tension, Weber argued, was absent in China. Although Weber does not pursue this, the implication would be that this tension should be present in Japan.

Eisenstadt, linking the argument to Karl Jaspers' ideas of the growth of 'Axial' civilizations (those which in the centuries between about 800 and 200 B.C., namely Buddhism, Confucianism, Hebraic prophecy and Greek philosophy made a change on their 'axis'), argues that almost all civilizations including China, developed the tension between religion and society. He then gives the argument a novel twist by suggesting, with some very full documentation, that when Confucian and Buddhist ideas were taken to Japan they were 'domesticated', accommodated, stripped of the features which caused the 'tension'. Thus the secret of Japan's peculiarity is that it is the only 'non-Axial' world civilization. If his argument is correct, we have to re-think both 'China' and 'Japan' and, more widely, the central Weberian argument. Although I have serious doubts about both parts of his argument, it is certainly intriguing and one of the most provocative attempts to explain the peculiar religious configuration of Japan which he has dissected with considerable care.

His explanation is, however, only a start. Eisenstadt locates a number of other peculiarities of Japan, the odd contextuality of morality and personhood, the unusual absence of the State and Law, the curious relation between politics and religious power.

The 'non-Axiality' thesis only provides a very partial explanation of these. If one steps back from this massive book, one can see that what claims to be a book on 'Japanese Civilization' only deals with a very small part of 'Japan', mainly at the middling, institutional, level. In order to understand the roots of Japanese civilization it is essential to consider the geography and ecology, the typhoons, earthquakes, heavy rainfall, poor grass, very poor soils, mountainous terrain. It is necessary to consider its remote, island, position. We need to look at its peculiar demography - the absence of most epidemic diseases, the absence of warfare, the general success against famine, the peculiar fertility patterns. We need to consider its major agricultural features, the absence of domesticated animals, the demands of rice agriculture. To have a huge book on Japanese civilization which scarcely mentions rice, except in its symbolic aspects, is indeed strange.

Or again, Japan is famous for its aesthetics and craftsmanship and its great literary tradition. A book which fails to deal adequately with the wonderful craft traditions and Japanese aesthetics, which hardly mentions the high literature since the time of the Genji, which passes very quickly over even the central feature of Japanese civilization, the tea ceremony, can only be dealing with parts of the puzzle. Indeed, one leaves the book with hardly any sense of 'Japaneseness'. Although constantly stressing the 'otherness', 'Japan' is reduced to an abstract formula.

Thus this is a book which provides a rich mine of information for all those interested in certain aspects of the representation of Japan. It is filled with erudition, weighed down with long quotations from current work, sincerely searching for an answer to interesting questions. Although the readers task is not made easier by frequent repetitions, much jargon and a style which resolutely stays at a middling, abstract, level, it is worth the effort. Yet we often long for something concrete, something which grounds the general assertions in some causal mechanisms. For instance, when we are told that Japanese child-rearing provides a strong mould of Japanese character, it would have been good to have had a reasonably detailed account of the well known peculiarities of Japan - the universal carrying of infants, the sleeping with children, very long-breast feedings, permissive toilet training and so on. Yet this is not given.

This is a very cerebral book which presents one grand and intriguing thesis in answer to a well posed question. Robert Bellah, whose own work is thrown into disarray by Eisenstadt's thesis, states on the back cover that 'Eisenstadt has come closer to solving the Japanese riddle than anyone so far.' By stating the riddle so clearly, and by putting forward an enveloping and novel interpretation, this is arguably true. But if we compare his work to the previous classic attempts by Fukuzawa Yukichi, Ruth Benedict, Norman Jacobs, Chie Nakane, Ronald Dore and others, it is clear that while he has added to our understanding in some respects, their accounts are just as convincing - and furthermore, that none of them are, as yet, anywhere near solving the riddle of 'Japan'. Although aware of the difficulties, Eisenstadt still works within the conventional methodology of the great western sociological tradition. Until an author devises a strategy for transcending the only partially applicable categories of that tradition we will not solve the riddle.