KAKUZO OKAKURA

The Ideals of the East, 1904

Kakuzo Okakura (1862–1913) was a Japanese scholar who was responsible for the development and preservation of the arts in Japan. In addition to creating important art schools and journals, he was the director of the Imperial Art School in Tokyo. In 1890 he founded the first Japanese art academy. In later life he worked and lectured in England and the United States, serving as the director of the Chinese and Japanese department at Harvard and, after 1910, as Curator of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He is best known for *The Book of Tea*, which introduced the ritual beauty of the Japanese tea service to a Western audience. He also wrote for a Western audience *The Awakening of Japan and The Ideals of the East*, from which this selection is taken.

What are the “ideals of the East” that Okakura celebrates? What are the features of the West that he wants Japan to avoid?

Thinking Historically

In Okakura the contradictions abound. He was a cosmopolitan world traveler, living in Europe, the United States, China, and India, as well as Japan. Yet, at the Imperial Art School in Tokyo, he offered no courses in Western Art. He spent his last years in Boston, developing the Asian art collection of an American museum. He wrote all of his major books in English, albeit to extol Asian, especially Japanese, art to the wider world. He was a modern urbanite who sought strength of identity in blood and the past.

How does he use the then popular Western idea of “race” in this selection? How does he negotiate the conflict between Japanese nationalism and a broader Pan-Asian identity? How does he combine love of monarchy with ideas of democracy? How does he reconcile tradition and individualism?

The Range of Ideals

Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, 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, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the
Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and
to search out the means, not the end, of life. . . .

For if Asia be one, it is also true that the Asiatic races form a single
mighty web. We forget, in an age of classification, that types are after all
but shining points of distinctness in an ocean of approximations, false
gods deliberately set up to be worshipped, for the sake of mental conveni-
ence, but having no more ultimate or mutually exclusive validity than
the separate existence of two interchangeable sciences. . . .

Buddhism—that great ocean of idealism, in which merge all the
river-systems of Eastern Asiatic thought—is not coloured only with the
pure water of the Ganges, for the Tartar nations1 that joined it made
their genius also tributary, bringing new symbolism, new organisation,
new powers of devotion, to add to the treasures of the Faith.

It has been, however, the great privilege of Japan to realise this
unity-in-complexity with a special clearness. The Indo-Tartar blood
of this race was in itself a heritage which qualified it to imbibe from the
two sources, and so mirror the whole of Asiatic consciousness. The
unique blessing of unbroken sovereignty, the proud self-reliance of
an unconquered race, and the insular isolation which protected ance-
stral ideas and instincts at the cost of expansion, made Japan the rea-
pository of the trust of Asiatic thought and culture. Dynastic
upheavals, the inroads of Tartar horsemen, the carnage and devast-
ation of infuriated mobs—all these things, sweeping over her again and
again, have left to China no landmarks, save her literature and her-
ruins, to recall the glory of the Tang emperors or the refinement of
Sung society. . . .

It is in Japan alone that the historic wealth of Asiatic culture can be
consecutively studied through its treasured specimens. The Imperial col-
collection, the Shinto2 temples, and the opened dolmens, reveal the subtle
curves of Hang3 workmanship. The temples of Nara4 are rich in rep-
resentations of Tang culture, and of that Indian art, then in its splendour,
which so much influenced the creations of this classic period—natural
heirlooms of a nation which has preserved the music, pronunciation,
ceremony, and costumes, not to speak of the religious rites and philo-

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1 He means Central Asian Turks and Mongols. [Ed.]
2 Traditional Japanese religion. [Ed.]
3 Han, i.e., classical Chinese. [Ed.]
4 City in Japan, capital 710–784 (the Nara Period). [Ed.]
The treasure-stores of the daimyos, again, abound in works of art and manuscripts belonging to the Sung and Mongol dynasties, and as in China itself the former were lost during the Mongol conquest, and the latter in the age of the reactionary Ming, this fact animates some Chinese scholars of the present day to seek in Japan the fountain-head of their own ancient knowledge.

Thus Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilisation; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old. The Shinto still adheres to his pre-Buddhistic rites of ancestor-worship; and the Buddhists themselves cling to each various school of religious development which has come in its natural order to enrich the soil.

The Yamato poetry, and Bagaku music, which reflect the Tang ideal under the régime of the Fujiwara aristocracy, are a source of inspiration and delight to the present day, like the sombre Zennism of the No-dances, which were the product of Sung illumination. It is this tenacity that keeps Japan true to the Asiatic soul even while it raises her to the rank of a modern power.

The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals—the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand-ripple as it beat against the national consciousness. Yet I linger with dismay on the threshold of an attempt to make an intelligible summary of those art-ideals. For art, like the diamond net of Indra, reflects the whole chain in every link. It exists at no period in any final mould. It is always a growth, defying the dissecting knife of the chronologist. To discourse on a particular phase of its development means to deal with infinite causes and effects throughout its past and present. Art with us, as elsewhere, is the expression of the highest and noblest of our national culture, so that, in order to understand it, we must pass in review the various phases of Confucian philosophy; the different ideals which the Buddhist mind has from time to time revealed; those mighty political cycles which have one after another unfurled the banner of nationality; the reflection in patriotic thought of the lights of poetry and the shadows of heroic characters; and the echoes, alike of the wailing of a multitude, and of the mad-seeming merriment of the laughter of a race...
The Vista

The simple life of Asia need fear no shaming from that sharp contrast with Europe in which steam and electricity have placed it to-day. The old world of trade, the world of the craftsman and the pedlar, of the village market and the saints’-day fair, where little boats row up and down great rivers laden with the produce of the country, where every palace has some court in which the travelling merchant may display his stuffs and jewels for beautiful screened women to see and buy, is not yet quite dead. And, however its form may change, only at a great loss can Asia permit its spirit to die, since the whole of that industrial and decorative art which is the heirloom of ages has been in its keeping, and she must lose with it not only the beauty of things, but the joy of the worker, his individuality of vision, and the whole age-long humanising of her labour. For to clothe oneself in the web of one’s own weaving is to house oneself in one’s own house, to create for the spirit its own sphere.

Asia knows, it is true, nothing of the fierce joys of a time-devouring locomotion, but she has still the far deeper travel-culture of the pilgrimage and the wandering monk. For the Indian ascetic, begging his bread of village housewives, or seated at evenfall beneath some tree, chatting and smoking with the peasant of the district, is the real traveller. To him a countryside does not consist of its natural features alone. It is a nexus of habits and associations. Of human elements and traditions, suffused with the tenderness and friendship of one who has shared, if only for a moment, the joys and sorrows of its personal drama. The Japanese peasant-traveller, again, goes from no place of interest on his wanderings without leaving his bokku or short sonnet, an art-form within reach of the simplest.

Through such modes of experience is cultivated the Eastern conception of individuality as the ripe and living knowledge, the harmonised thought and feeling of staunch yet gentle manhood. Through such modes of interchange is maintained the Eastern notion of human intercourse, not the printed index, as the true means of culture.

The chain of antitheses might be indefinitely lengthened. But the glory of Asia is something more positive than these. It lies in that vibration of peace that beats in every heart; that harmony that brings together emperor and peasant; that sublime intuition of oneness which commands all sympathy, all courtesy, to be its fruits, making Takakura, Emperor of Japan, remove his sleeping-robins on a winter night, because the frost lay cold on the hearths of his poor; or Taiso, of Tang, forego food, because his people were feeling the pinch of famine. It lies in the dream of renunciation that pictures the Boddi-Sattva as refraining from Nirman.

12 Buddhist Boddisatva: saint; model of compassion. [Ed.]
13 1868-1912. [Ed.]
from that sharp contrast that has been placed it to-day. The samurai and the pedlar, of the country, where every merchant may display his goods and see and buy, is not yet gone. Not only a great loss can not be made at industrial and decorative in its keeping, and she has lost the joy of the worker, the toiling humanising of her spirit. Japan's own weaving is to the spirit its own sphere, the lives of a time-devouring culture of the pilgrim-etic, begging his bread with some tree, chatting of the real traveller. To him alone it becomes alone. It is a nexus of the old and traditions, suffused with he has shared, if only for a few drama. The Japanese interest on his wanderings and the world of within reach of 

The power of the Eastern conception of knowledge, the harmonised. Through such modes of human intercourse, the meaning is prolonged. But the essence. It lies in that vibrational harmony that brings to the conception of oneness which the objects, making Takakura, on a winter night, be Taiso, of Tung, a pinch of famine. It lies the Boddhi-Satta as refraining from Nirvana till the last atom of dust in the universe shall have passed in before to bliss. It lies in that worship of Freedom which casts around poverty the halo of greatness, imposes his stern simplicity of apparel on the Indian prince, and sets up in China a throne whose imperial occupant—alone amongst the great secular rulers of the world—never wears a sword.

These things are the secret energy of the thought, the science, the poetry, and the art of Asia. Torn from their tradition, India, made barren of that religious life which is the essence of her nationality, would become a worshipper of the mean, the false, and the new; China, hurried upon the problems of a material instead of a moral civilisation, would writhe in the death-agony of that ancient dignity and ethics which long ago made the word of her merchants like the legal bond of the West, the name of her peasants a synonym for prosperity; and Japan, the Fatherland of the race of Ama, would betray the completeness of her undying in the tarnishing of the purity of the spiritual mirror, the bemanning of the sword-soul from steel to lead. The task of Asia to-day, then, becomes that of protecting and restoring Asiatic modes. But to do this she must herself first recognise and develop consciousness of those modes. For the shadows of the past are the promise of the future. No tree can be greater than the power that is in the seed. Life lies ever in the return to self. How many of the Evangelists have uttered this truth! "Know thyself," was the greatest mystery spoken by the Delphic Oracle. "All in thyself," said the quiet voice of Confucius. And more striking still is the Indian story that carries the same message to its hearers. For once it happened, say the Buddhists, that the Master having gathered his disciples round him, there shone forth before them suddenly—blasting the sight of all save Vajrapani, the completely-learned—a terrible figure, the figure of Siva, the Great God. Then Vajrapani, his companions being blinded, turned to the Master and said, "Tell me why, searching amongst all the stars and gods, equal in number to the sands of the Ganges, I have nowhere seen this glorious form. Who is he?" And the Buddha said, "He is thyself!" and Vajrapani, it is told, immediately attained the highest.

It was some small degree of this self-recognition that re-made Japan, and enabled her to weather the storm under which so much of the Oriental world went down. And it must be a renewal of the same self-consciousness that shall build up Asia again into her ancient steadfastness and strength. The very times are bewildered by the manifoldness of the possibilities opening out before them. Even Japan cannot, in the tangled skein of the Meiji period, find that single thread which will give
her the clue to her own future. Her past has been clear and continuous as a mala, a rosary, of crystals. From the early days of the Asuka period,\(^{16}\) when the national destiny was first bestowed, as the receiver and concentrator, by her Yamato genius, of Indian ideals and Chinese ethics; through the succeeding preliminary phases of Nara and Heian, to the revelation of her vast powers in the unmeasured devotion of her Fujiwara period, in her heroic reaction of Kamakura,\(^{17}\) culminating in the stern enthusiasm and lofty abstinence of that Ashikaga\(^{18}\) knighthood who sought with so austere a passion after death—through all these phases the evolution of the nation is clear and unconfused, like that of a single personality. Even through Toyotomi,\(^{19}\) and Tokugawa,\(^{20}\) it is clear that after the fashion of the East we are ending a rhythm of activity with the full of the democratising of the great ideals. The populace and the lower classes, notwithstanding their seeming quiescence and commonplaceness, are making their own the consecration of the Samurai, the sadness of the poet, the divine self-sacrifice of the saint are becoming liberated, in fact, into their national inheritance.

But to-day the great mass of Western thought perplexes us. The mirror of Yamato is clouded, as we say. With the Revolution, Japan, it is true, returns upon her past, seeking there for the new vitality she needs. Like all genuine restorations, it is a reaction with a difference. For that self-dedication of art to nature which the Ashikaga inaugurated has become now a consecration to the race, to man himself. We know instinctively that in our history lies the secret of our future, and we grope with a blind intensity to find the clue. But if the thought: be true, if there be indeed any spring of renewal hidden in our past, we must admit that it needs at this moment some mighty reinforcement, for the scorching drought of modern vulgarity is parching the throat of life and art.

We await the flashing sword of the lightning which shall cleave the darkness. For the terrible hush must be broken, and the raindrops of a new vigour must refresh the earth before new flowers can spring up to cover it with their bloom. But it must be from Asia herself, along the ancient roadways of the race, that the great voice shall be heard. Victory from within, or a mighty death without.

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\(^{16}\) 552-645. [Ed.]
\(^{17}\) 1185-1333. [Ed.]
\(^{18}\) 1336-1573. Feudal period. [Ed.]
\(^{19}\) Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598). A feudal lord who ended feudalism. [Ed.]
\(^{20}\) Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616). Founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868). [Ed.]