

Civility in a Polytheistic Environment: A Perspective from the Japanese Experience*

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I

A recent circular distributed in January 2008 presented the concept of this conference by designating a number of questions to be addressed. These ranged from the first question about ‘the place of ... Asia in the emerging global system,’ to the last, regarding the future role of Israel ‘in mediating and stimulating the developing conversation between East and West.’ One question among them particularly caught my attention. It read as follows: ‘Are the future political and economic rivalries of the world going to be between East and West, or are they going to remain rivalries between different Easts and different Wests?’

Views based on dichotomy have long since proved a powerful mode of perception in discussions about the world. The durability of this style of thought would appear to be deeply rooted in the human mind, partly—perhaps—because it economises the energy consumption of the human brain. Dichotomies drawn by ethnologists in many parts of the world include, for example, ‘light and dark,’ ‘heaven and earth,’ and ‘the feminine and the masculine.’ The conspicuous expansion of Europe to the outer world in the late 15th century stimulated the conventional mode of perceiving two worlds: one being that of Christendom and the other that of the ‘heathens.’ The 19th century saw a reinforcement of this dichotomy under the symbolic idea of a meeting between ‘East and West’—the idea that was strongly supported by the ideals of so-called ‘civilisation’: a new western European banner for changing the

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whole world. Driven by a certain religious sense of mission as expressed in such words as ‘the white man’s burden,’ or armed with a firm belief in the blessing of ‘free-trade,’ the proponents of ‘civilisation’ exhibited a self-righteous mode of perceiving the world that went on to demonstrate its intrinsic power in many parts of the world throughout the 20th century, in the form of major world wars, various revolutions, and the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources. Global climate change and declining biodiversity are two of the serious environmental problems that can be understood as the eventual product of such a mode of perception. During the latter half of the last century, as some ‘Eastern’ countries virtually joined the ‘West,’ an alternative dichotomy has gained popularity, that is ‘North and South.’

Given this quick glance at the history of this mode of perceiving the world and the stage of globalisation at which we find ourselves today, what is the point of raising afresh the conventional mode of perceiving the world: ‘East and West’? Will efforts to acknowledge the current complexity between plural Easts and Wests be a start in helping us better understand the ever more unstable situations of our world? I do hope that they will be, and to this end, let me dare offer here another mode of dichotomy that seems to touch upon a certain reality of increasing significance but yet to be accepted world-wide: ‘Polytheistic World and Monotheistic World,’ that is the world with many gods and the world with only one god.

The majority of peoples in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief system are concerned with the difference between various sacred scripts and places within that system. To those looking in from outside the system, these differences that matter so gravely to those within it can appear almost minute. What remains as the congruence between one group and another is the idea of one transcendental god that entrusts human beings with a special privilege to rule the other ‘creatures’ on the Earth. Today, at a point in time when a more harmonious coexistence within the human and ecological community on this planet is fast becoming a necessity, I should like to present the polytheistic environment of pre-modern Japan, where a different mode of perceiving humanity and nature prevailed. My talk will be about the comparatively peaceful lives of Japanese living in a period spanning about 200 years from the late 17th century; a time when the nation was yet to be reshaped to join the group of competitive world powers. It was a time when people exercised a certain civility towards one another and enjoyed a humbler position in the universe than we seek for ourselves today—people as yet free from the ceaseless pursuit of short-term benefit that haunts so many of us today. What can we learn from them?

II

Pre-modern Japanese society was sustained by numerous factors. These included the seclusion of the Japanese archipelago from the outer world owing to its rulers’ fear of possible intrusions by the Christian kings, an intricate ‘neighborhood watch’ system structured under

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the motto of *'go-seihitsu'*, (lit. 'honourable quietude,') and an overall balance between production and consumption that can be attributed to the perpetual issuing of minute sumptuary decrees by the authorities. The stability of this society was won without the cost of gloomy stagnation; a fact that seems to owe a great deal to the populace's almost spontaneous participation in the social order. People cultivated in their daily lives a kind of elegant civility towards other humans as well as non-humans and avoided where possible the conspicuous waste of resources.

Plate 1 is a reproduction of a lithograph, depicting an orderly crowd of people who had gathered to watch a group of British naval officers' enjoying an excursion to a temple in Edo (modern day Tokyo). The picture was an illustration of a book broadly disseminated in the Victorian heyday.¹ The book's author, Laurence Oliphant (1829–1888), intended to emphasise the placid nature of the crowd in the streets, which he found vastly different from crowds experienced during his various dispatches as an occasional correspondent for *The Times* to major cities in Europe, the Middle East, India and China during the mid-19th century. Similar sentiments to Oliphant's were expressed by Lord Elgin (1811–1863), the British envoy and former Governor-General of Canada for whom Oliphant served as Private Secretary during his visit to Japan. Elgin penned his own observations in a letter home to his wife in Britain, which he wrote in the bay of Edo shortly before leaving Japan, after a successful round of negotiations with the Shogun's government to open trade relations:

'On the whole, I consider it the most interesting expedition I [have] ever made ... their joyous, though polite and respectful demeanour; the combination of the sort of neatness and finish which

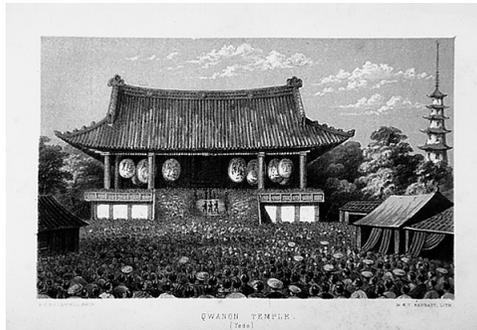


Plate 1 British visitors entering the main hall of Sensô-ji, Asakusa, guarded by no more than a small number of the Shogun's retainers.

¹ Oliphant, Laurence, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59* (Edinburgh and London, 1859), Vol. II, p. 212ff.

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we attain in England by the expenditure of great wealth ... made me feel that at last I have found something which entirely surpassed all the expectations I had formed ... Every man, from the Emperor ... to the humblest labourer, lives under a rigid rule, prescribed by law and custom combined ... but, in so far as one can judge, this system is not felt to be burdensome by any. All seem to think it the most natural thing in the world that they should move in the orbits in which they are placed.²

While the Western notion of a ‘civilised Japan’ goes back as far as Jesuits’ reports to their headquarters during the 16th century, the most influential literature expounding this idea was probably *The History of Japan*, published in 1727, written by Engelbert Kaempfer, a physician who stayed on the Dutch trading station off Nagasaki in the late 17th century. Kaempfer had emphasised in the concluding part of his account of a return journey from Nagasaki to Edo that ‘the whole Empire might be call’d a School of Civility and good manners.’³ Various popular editions of Kaempfer’s *History of Japan* were published in Britain around the middle of the 19th century and Oliphant and Lord Elgin had read the book before they visited Japan. It is, therefore, important to examine the mid-19th century British visitors’ views of Japan in a broader context that encompasses previous European accounts of the country. Still, I would contend that the descriptions these visitors left were not altogether based on mere wishful thinking but reflected a certain reality that made Japanese society look somehow different from the outside world, even to the eyes of seasoned travelers from abroad.

III

Over the course of two decades visiting numbers of Japanese archives both private and public, I have come to the conclusion that two genres of popular household encyclopedias, *setsuyōshū* and *ōzatsusho* played important roles in maintaining the orderly culture that enthralled visitors to Japan in the pre-modern time. [Plate 2] The name *setsuyōshū* has the dual meaning of a compilation both ‘for economising tasks’ and ‘for occasional use.’ The major function of this book was to instruct readers in the ‘proper’ Chinese characters that should be used for writing formal messages, avoiding unreserved expressions in vernacular Japanese. Plate 3 shows one such example. The upper printed sections shown give its readers instructions of self-deprecating forms of letter writing. *Setsuyōshū* also carried ample appendices that gave, as a whole, select guidance on ‘proper’ behavior towards humans and non-humans as is shown in Plate 4, two of the illustrated pages giving instruction in etiquette.

² Walrond, Theodore, ed., *Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin, Governor of Jamaica, Governor General of Canada, Envoy to China, Viceroy of India* (London, 1872), pp. 269–270.

³ Kaempfer, Engelbert, *The History of Japan*, tr. J.G. Schoultzer (London, 1727), p. 447.

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Plate 2 *Eitai Setsuyō Mijinzo* (4th edn., Kyoto and Edo, 1864/ left) and *Eitai Daizatsusho Banreki Taisei* (3rd edn., Osaka, 1880/ right)—the two most popular household encyclopedias of the 19th century.

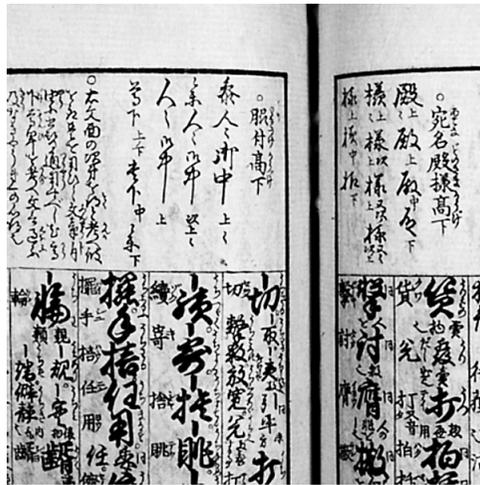


Plate 3 High and low styles of writing *dono* or *sama* (my lord) and *onchū* (hon. company) in accordance with the social distance between a letter-sender and the addressee(s), *Eitai Setsuyō Mijinzo* (2nd edn., Kyoto and Edo, 1831), ff.247b, 248a.

The second genre was called *ōzatsusho*, meaning literally ‘the great book of miscellany.’ Books of this genre provided more detailed guidance than *setsuyōshū* on the recommended forms of ‘un-offensive’ behavior towards non-humans, the majority of which were the numerous ‘benevolent,’ but if ignored or offended, ‘fearful,’ gods in heaven and on earth. For

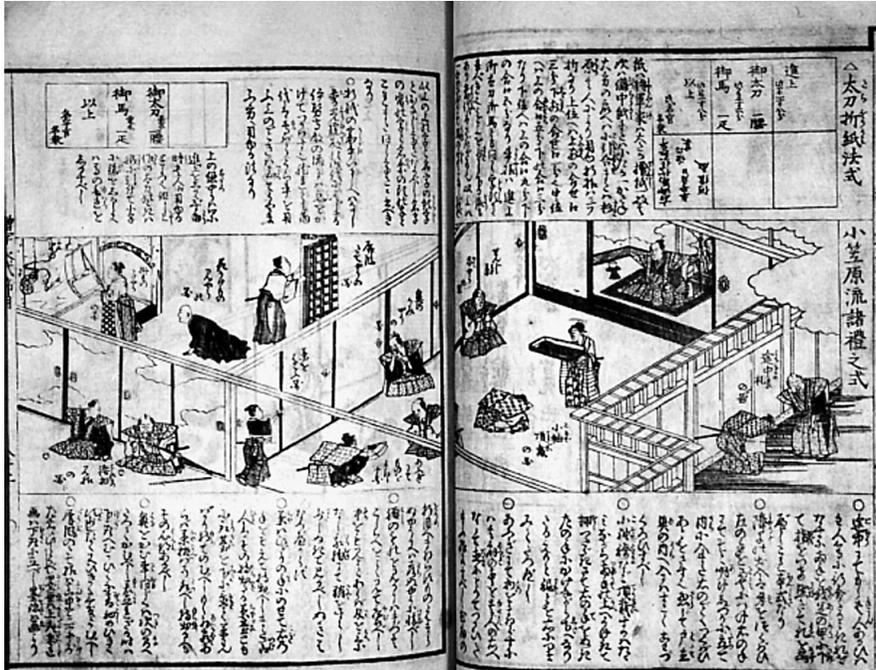


Plate 4 An illustrated guide to the Ogasawara School of Etiquette, *Eitai Setsuyō Mijinzo* (3rd edn., Kyoto and Edo, 1849), ff.81b, 82a.

example, Plate 5 depicts Tai-shōgun, one of the gods regulating geographical directions of human activities. The instructions on the page provided the readers with information about the annual change of location of the planet Venus, the ‘spirit’ of which was believed to be that god itself, urging them to avoid the planet’s direction for any important act such as moving a house, or boring a well. The users of *ōzatsusho* varied across social classes and lived in both urban and rural areas, but they often assumed diviners’ roles in communities where expectations for such godly messages were strong.

My studies of the nationwide distribution of these popular books and the diverse patterns of wear and tear exhibited by extant copies slowly revealed a society in which *In-yō Gogyō Setsu*, the Yin-Yang and Five-Element School of Astrology and Geomancy thrived. More than ninety per cent of the extant copies that I examined distinctly showed users’ interest in the pages carrying that school’s instructions—a fact that contradicts many modern Japanese historians’ attempts to emphasise the early secularisation of Japanese society. [Plates 6, 7] The page most frequently consulted during the 18th and 19th centuries featured the *rokuju-zu*, or ‘chart of sixty’ [Plate 8], a diagram consisting of two cosmic dimensions.

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Plate 5 Tai-shôgun, one of the eight mighty heavenly deities, believed to be the spirit of the planet Venus, *Eitai Daizatsusho Banreki Taisei* (2nd edn., Osaka, 1856), f.11a.



Plate 6 The bottom surface of the copy of the 1831 edition of *Eitai Setsuyô Mijinzô*, used in the household of the Lord of Bizen (The Ikeda Archives, Okayama University).

The first of these dimensions was *kyukkan-jûmishi*, shown in the inner broad circle: this consisted of the sixty cyclic cosmic categories (from *Kinoé-Né*, *Kinoto-Ushi*, *Hinoé-Tora* ... to *Mizunoto-I*), adopted to denominate divisions of time such as years and days. The second was *gogyô*, shown in the outer circle: this consisted of the five elementary categories of *Moku*

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Plate 8 *Rokujū-zu*, the chart of sixty, *Eireki Ôzatsusho Tenmon Daisei* (3rd edn., Osaka, 1835), f.69b.

blessed with five children. At the beginning some quarrels will occur, but afterwards the two will enjoy a harmonious relationship and long lives. It is recommended that they worship the patron god of the kitchen range to prevent them from being cursed by others. The couple's prosperity can be expected to increase, like plants thriving in springtime.⁴

For many people in Japan, knowledge about such cosmic attributes was indispensable when seeking instruction on any serious act scheduled on a certain day and concerned with a certain direction, as each day and each direction carried, according to the school, certain cosmic and divine attributes and the compatibility between one's intended act and the chosen day and direction was often a grave matter. The substance of such belief has simply been rejected by modern scientists as 'superstitious,' but the very mode itself of prudent consideration in a universal context seems to give us some hints.

Judging from the contents of *setsuyōshū* and *ōzatsusho* and the dominant patterns of wear and tear on extant copies, those household books civilised their users in three main ways. First, they afforded users a grand world view, together with a sense of their humble but unique position in the all-embracing cosmos. Second, they urged users to place more value on harmonious relations between the human as well as non-human constituents of a whole community than on any individual's capability. Third, they infused users with a sense of 'blessed security' whenever their mode of life was thought to be 'properly' conducted and therefore 'sanctioned' and 'encouraged' by the surrounding gods, or forces caused by varieties of cosmic combinations, that is to say their 'environment'—if we resort to the modern

⁴ *Eireki Ôzatsusho Tenmon Daisei* (Osaka, 1835), fol.120b.

expression. On other occasions the users exercised restraint in their lives, becoming cautiously inactive. This type of rhythmical change in the activities of bodies and minds seems to have been effective in maintaining individual health and politeness and the social stability of the country.

IV

The 19th and the 20th centuries witnessed Japanese society's gradual detachment from the Yin-Yang and Five-Element School of Astrology and Geomancy. The change of intellectual climate, however, was not violent—a testimony, perhaps, to the fact that the school had, for various reasons, never assumed any character of rigorous orthodoxy, thereby avoiding harsh criticism from non-believers. The school's subtle civilising influence has survived in many parts of Japanese society well into the present.

Today, the numerous, non-transcendental gods with whom people used to share the world are faded as they are, but notably, almost in their place, we now have the powerful products of modern science and technology. Proper human relations with these new non-humans would certainly be beneficial, but any uncontrolled dependence on them could be disastrous. Let us take for example the invisible electromagnetic waves under which modern life is submerged. In June 2007, a task group for the Environmental Health Criteria under the World Health Organization announced, after ten years of discussions, a risk assessment concerning human exposure to extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields that are produced on a daily basis by our familiar household appliances including fridges and personal computers.⁵ The group's statement will be used by a high level international committee as a basis for the world guidelines, the implementation of which will depend on the political will of each country's government. The group's next task is to spend more years preparing for another risk assessment concerning the high frequency electromagnetic fields that are almost indispensable for our current lives sustained by mobile phones.—We have come a long way indeed since James Maxwell elaborated, with no such anxiety as is shared by many people now, an understanding of the nature of such power in his *Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism* published in 1873. To achieve harmonious coexistence with these and other modern powerful non-humans, the traditional, sensitive mode of perceiving the relations between oneself and the environment on a cosmic scale might be of some help, as it can lead us to recognise what is lacking in our minds as we try to civilise modern human activities within the complex human and ecological community on this planet. Perhaps, one major characteristic of modern urban dwellers' minds is the lack of a sense of propriety, or self-

⁵ See *Environmental Health Criteria Monograph*, No. 238/ *Extremely Low Frequency Fields*, World Health Organization, 2007, i-xxiv, 1–519 pp.

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restraint, when resorting to newly-invented, powerful, but at the same time crude technology, as our knowledge and imaginations are far too limited to comprehend our relationship with such new things in terms of durable compatibility, not to mention cosmic harmony.

V

This somewhat jumping analogy across more than one century might be thought-provoking. That is the analogy between the two modes of communal interconnections: on the one hand the relationship between humanity and the environment represented by numerous gods in pre-industrialised Japan, and on the other the relationship between humanity and the numerous, man-made, little-controlled, non-humanity in the modern world. From the advantageous view point of the latecomer, we may smile at the timid and ever harmony-oriented behavior of the inhabitants in the secluded old Japan, but if we take into account that the world is shrinking and becoming more than ever closely interconnected, and that such non-humans are becoming ever more powerful and unpredictable, then experiences such as Japan's might be acknowledged as being among the cultural heritages of increasing gravity for the future of human beings, who are to undergo the process of civilising themselves in any non-conventionally modern way for their survival. This is the reason why I have dared to propose a mode of perceiving the world afresh in an alternative two-world dichotomy: the polytheistic world and the monotheistic world.⁶

⁶ The middle part of this lecture note is drawn upon material from my article published in *Sansai, An Environmental Journal for the Global Community*. No. 1, January 2006, pp. 41–57. I express my thanks to colleagues, Associate Professor Tracey Gannon and Mr. Ainslie Kerr—both of Kyoto University—for kind stylistic suggestions incorporated in this text. I also thank Professor Junji Miyakoshi for sharing with me in 2007 the then most recent information about the discussions of his WHO electro-magnetic-field task group.