

## Two Wheels of Japan

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The current downturn in the economic situation of Japan is widely known; it is perhaps more apparent because it occurred after the global expansion of the Japanese economy during the late 1980s. In Japan nowadays, everybody seems to be talking about a "global standard," in contrast to "Japanese-style management" so frequently repeated just a decade ago. What is shared in both cases is that rational, analytical thought and discussion are almost totally lacking. Just parroting the words "global standard" is expected to be sufficient to improve the situation.

Unfortunately, culture is frequently associated with the complex relationships of political, social, and economic factors, but cultural activity can and should be independently defined. I am afraid that the global standard so frequently cited within the economic and political spheres is imported into the cultural sphere without any thought.

The global standard, as we see it in Japan, is something more closely related to the cultural and political standards of Western Europe and North America, ignoring temporarily the differences within. It is difficult for me to recognize the correspondence in the United States to what is called culture in Japan.

In effect, within the economy-centered society, cultural status is determined by economic well-being. The globalization of the information network reinforces this tendency. The culture exported from economically rich countries is readily accepted as the global standard in other areas, while the culture in the poorer countries is not known at all or, if known, accepted as something exotic by richer peoples. Nevertheless, the cultural activities in, say, an Amazonian area or Tibetan may be just as alive and credible as that of economically advanced areas.

Just ten years ago, when the Japanese economy was at its peak and was visible in every corner of the world, our culture was also exported to a greater degree. I am not sure, however, how accurately and rationally it was interpreted and appreciated. People, whether Japanese or not, still prefer talking about *wabi* (unaffected restraint) and *sabi* (natural beauty) when they talk about Japanese culture. But in fact, they are just a part of the Japanese cultural tradition. The concept of *wabi* which is a historical product of the medieval unstable era is related to the modern but rural concept of *sabi*, we can also recognize a contrasting concept of *iki* (in the mode), also a modern concept, that is innovative and urban. The historical landscape indeed influences the modern state, but when we talk of *wabi* or *sabi* independently, we lose sight of the

current manifestations of our cultural scene, from which modern culture is to be interpreted and appreciated.

Japanese culture was recognized only after the West had "discovered" and reinvented it. It is historically true that what is currently called culture worldwide is the framework by the western concept of culture. At the same time, however, we need to recognize that what is now considered to be global was once a local historical invention, that what may still be the local cultures of Japan, Tibet, or the Amazon, for instance, cannot become anything more than the mirror image of what the appreciators want to see.

This is a disaster, as cultural development is triggered by mutual communication. This situation is characterized by a lack of communication, in fact, only supported by the illusion of communication.

While the current global standard is closely aligned to what was once just a local standard of the West, not everything of the West has become a standard. Since the late 19th century, both traditional and western ideas have existed in parallel in Japan. These two wheels of culture are an active part of modern Japanese life. However, when people talk of the two wheels, they almost always talk of the illusionary cultural tradition that is nothing more than the product of orientalism on one hand, and on the other hand of the global standard that is nothing more than the reinterpreted local standard of the West.

It is becoming increasingly important to analyze the complex relationships of the two wheels of local traditions and global standards in a rational way to establish proper communication in the cultural area of human activities. This is not only the task of the westerners, whose eyesight may have been strained by unconscious orientalism but also the task of all people whose cultural lives are determined by the complex relationships of tradition and globality.