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The Conflict of Culture and Civilization

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The tastes of the Japanese can be changed so easily

After World War II, soy sauce makers came begging to Ms. Appleton, the head of the Economics and Scientific Section of GHQ for the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, which controlled the distribution of soy beans. She is reported to have said “the tastes of the Japanese can be changed so easily.” Soon thereafter, 1,500 soy sauce factories were forced to close their doors, and like a self fulfilling prophecy, Japanese dietary habits quickly changed.

The twentieth century saw mass production, mass consumption, and mass disposal grow to global proportions. During this period, cultural diversity was greatly reduced as the power to impose a uniform lifestyle won out. This trend was embodied in the words of Ms. Appleton.

In Europe and the U.S., a backlash against twentieth-century lifestyles has given us the Slow Life and Slow Food movements, and Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS). However, the Japanese have long seen nature as something to coexist with rather than something to take from, and this concept is so fundamental to Japanese lifestyles that it was never questioned or verbalized. There was much wisdom in how to live a happy life with limited resources, as shown in the concepts of *shindofuni* (harmony of health and the environment) and *ichibutsuzentai* (synergy of the whole), as applied to food, and the 100-year kimono. However, the Japanese came to believe that all the better things in life come from overseas, and they abandoned this lifestyle of their own free will.

The elimination of diversity through imitation

The French understood that culture was the ultimate marketing tool for their products, and they used a colonial method by first penetrating the privileged and moneyed classes, with the belief that over time it would eventually trickle down to the rest of society. By the end of the nineteenth century, the French had a cultural monopoly on the lifestyles

of the wealthy. They created the standards against which everything was gauged, from the arts to cuisine to fashion.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the U.S. leveraged the developing info-communications technology and the increasing incomes and leisure time of the general population to propagate a wave of pop culture to the masses.

The envy of the American way of life set new standards of living and redefined expectations in all aspects of life. Adopting the western way of life became a national policy as a means to modernization, but the collective desire of a population to imitate this way of life resulted in a one-way flow of western culture that blanketed Japan, and indeed all of Asia.

Global standards

In the West if something cannot be documented, it is not considered to exist. For restaurant guides and the like, they create evaluation procedure manuals and rating standards checklists, like recipes, so that even a novice could easily become a professional critic with a little study.

A checklist itself is premised on the belief that the whole is the sum of its parts, but the Japanese do not think that way. The sense of taste is like perfect pitch, it is something one is born with, and for those who do not have it, no amount of training or practice will allow them to achieve it. The synergy of the whole also applies in food. Eating is a behavior that arises from natural urges, and it sustains life. We eat the whole, made up of many ingredients, and we prepare foods to make them edible. Sometimes, we eat things that do not necessarily taste good, but we are happy to be able to eat, and we are thankful for the nutrition that gives us sustenance. This sort of thing is not accounted for in the Western standards of evaluation.

Those who do not have a standard of their own can drape themselves in the banner of global standards, which they self righteously push. Because advocates of global standards believe so fervently that what they are promoting is good, things become more difficult than they need to be. The problem with global standards is that they confuse civilization with culture. Civilization promotes the physical comfort of human beings and creates convenience by allowing people to achieve things beyond their

physical limitations. In this respect, civilization is a common goal of all people and can be considered a universal objective. Light allows people to be active even at night, and airplanes allow people to travel great distances. Culture is spun from the land and its history, so while civilization tends to bring together and unify, culture tends to separate and individualize.

Everyone thinks that their culture is the best, and for this very reason, all cultures must be tolerated. The cultures that people have come to love and protect do not have an order, relative position, or rank. The term “global standard” represents a blind certainty in the superiority of one’s own culture and a narrow mindedness that does not allow for cultural diversity.