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Japan’s Tradition and Modernity in Eisenstadt’s Sociological Formulation

LEE Yu-Ting

S. N. Eisenstadt (1923-2010) was an Israeli sociologist renowned for his fruitful and diversified research. Among his many contributions, one of particular interest to cultural interaction studies is his comparative analysis of civilizations. This branch of study took shape early in Eisenstadt’s career and later developed into a grand theoretical framework which attempts to outline and explain the different paths from tradition to modernity in different societies with a particular focus on conceptual, structural, and institutional changes. From this framework came Eisenstadt’s study of Japanese civilization, which claims Japan occupies a unique position in world history for its not having followed a “regular” route towards modernity. This paper explores Eisenstadt’s macro-sociological, theory-oriented characterization of Japan and tries to indicate both the advantages and the limitations of his unconventional methodology and perspective.

Keywords: Eisenstadt, tradition, modernity, comparative study of civilizations, Japan

I. Introduction

1. Scope and focuses of Eisenstadt’s research

Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, an eminent sociologist at Hebrew University of Jerusalem who was born in 1923, died on September 2, 2010. Eisenstadt’s prolific career had helped to modify and solidify many theories developed by his predecessors such as Max Weber (1864-1920), Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), Edward Shils (1910-1995), etc., as well as created several issues current for debates.

In celebration of Eisenstadt’s sixtieth birthday, a collection of essays contributed by sociologists around the world was edited and then published in 1985. According to the editors, since it was difficult for them to find a central theme to cover the vast scope of Eisenstadt’s work which delved into many major fields of sociology, the title of Comparative Social Dynamics was chosen to represent Eisenstadt’s general concern.1)

Such a vague term of “social dynamics” gained a center of gravity in a collection of Eisenstadt’s hand-picked essays, which was published in 2003 and entitled Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities. By

1) See Cohen, Erik; Lissak, Moshe; Almagor, Uri eds.: Comparative Social Dynamics: Essays in Honor of S. N. Eisenstandt (Westview Press, 1985), p. ix. This collection is divided into five parts which epitomize the main areas to which Eisenstadt’s research before 1983 were directed. They are: 1. Process and change in tribal and historical societies; 2. Modernization; 3. Sociology of science; 4. Israeli society; and 5. Sociological and anthropological theory.
the title and divisions of the book we get a clearer picture of how Eisenstadt evaluated his lifelong research: his work was conducted within the framework of comparative study of civilizations and the most intriguing issue for him was that of modernity in plural forms.2)

Although Eisenstadt also paid much effort to the exploration of tradition, as we are now able to view his career with the benefit of hindsight it can be said that tradition (or traditionality) of a society in his elaboration was to serve as a source of explaining its modernity. In other words, while “social dynamics” is a proper term to summarize Eisenstadt’s works, such dynamics was endowed with a keen historical and even causal sense in his later research where Eisenstadt sought strenuously to expound the nature and features of modernity in connection with tradition. Since different and heterogeneous traditions give rise to “multiple modernities,” to complete his theoretical generalization, Eisenstadt had to conduct research in a comparative manner. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Eisenstadt formulated his view on Japanese civilization in this frame, and attempt to point out the advantages and disadvantages of Eisenstadt’s methodology.

2. Japan in the comparative study of civilizations

As noted by Eisenstadt, although Japan first entered the Western eyes as a mere alien country in the 16th century, it soon became distinct from other exotic, fascinating cases for the West and drew critical attention, first for its cultural and social sophistication which distinguished it from other “barbarian” countries, and later for its phenomenal rise to a world power, initially a military and then an economic one.3) Indeed, Japan’s rapid, successful modernization has long piqued the curiosity of many Western scholars and kept them reflecting on some fundamental assumptions of their own culture. Of course, each kind of discourse on Japan follows its own logic to attribute Japan’s achievement of modernization to certain historical conditions and traditional inheritances and there are already abundant studies produced along this vein. In this regard, what is peculiar to Eisenstadt’s study is his extensive absorption of literature on Japanese civilization written in Western languages (he did not read Japanese) and subsequent accommodation of those perspectives to his frame of comparative sociology. For example, while Reischauer (1910-1990) speaks of the uniqueness of Japanese society as follows:

Even today, Japan occupies a unique place in the world as the one major industrialized and fully modernized nation that has a non-Western cultural background.4)

Eisenstadt recasts this general statement in very theoretical terms:

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One of the many paradoxes Japan presents for comparative historical analysis is that this first, and at least until recently only, fully successful non-Western modernization has been that of a non-Axial civilization, a civilization that could not be seen – to use terms employed by, among others, Max Weber – as a great religion or a world religion.\(^5\)

As I will elaborate on the theory of Axial Age civilizations in the following chapter, here the citation only serves to point out how specific Eisenstadt’s perspective is. He assumed a theoretical paradigm against which a civilization is measured and claimed paradoxical once it does not follow a regular or well-explained route of development.

At the end of introduction, it is noteworthy that in Japan Eisenstadt is reputed for his sophisticated theory of modernization, however, his comparative study of civilizations seems to be less appealing here. For instance, while Kinbara Samon accurately points out that Eisenstadt contextualized Japanese modernization within its specific historical dynamics, Kinbara’s summary stresses only the influence of Tokugawa regime on Japan’s development into a modern nation-state, largely ignoring that Eisenstadt attempted to trace the ideological fountainhead of Japanese modernity far back to its antiquity.\(^6\) Taking a historical stance, this article focuses on Eisenstadt’s characterization of Japan’s unique path from tradition to modernity. Such analysis requires explication of theories first and then their application to Japan. Meanwhile, I will try to present Eisenstadt’s arguments in chronological order with critical evaluations.

II. Tradition: endurance and change

1. Dynamics of traditions

The relationship between tradition and modernity experienced change of concept in sociology during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Before the 1960s, Western scholars commonly believed in the embedded dichotomy between traditional and modern societies. However, in a 1968 article Eisenstadt had already given a functional account of tradition:

We view social and cultural traditions, first, as the major ways of looking at the basic problems of social and cultural order, and of posing the major questions about them; second, as giving various possible answers to these problems; and, third, as the organization of institutional structures for implementing different types of solutions or answers to these problems.\(^7\)

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In short, the main function of tradition lies in, when confronting social problems, its provision of a specific way of perceiving, attempting at answering, and finally settling the problems. Such view gained a clearer articulation in *Tradition, Change, and Modernity* published in 1973, where Eisenstadt argues that, although “modernity” poses to various societies a set of distinct problems requiring specific methods of response, in each society such responses to “modernity” may be similar to those already developed in previous historical periods. That is to say, there are similarities and continuities shown in society’s reactions to changes in history, including the change termed modernization. This line of argument foreshadows Eisenstadt’s later idea of “multiple modernities” as different patterns of reaction to historical change form many distinct paths towards modernity; paths cannot be considered as belonging to a uniform program. More importantly, such recognition of the inner logic of each culture enabled Eisenstadt to trace the “multiple modernities” to their respective traditions, thus demanding a comparative framework for analyzing the dynamics of civilizations and societies.\(^8\)

2. Breakthroughs of the Axial Age civilizations

In Eisenstadt’s extensive study of traditions, the theory of greatest interest to him was that of “Axial Age civilizations,” a term coined by Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) in The Origin and Purpose of History published in 1949,\(^9\) which expounds that mutually independent cultural breakthroughs occurred from 800 BCE to 200 BCE in the world’s major civilizations such as China, India, Greece, Israel, and Persia. Such breakthroughs not only left an indelible impact on each civilization, but also conditioned each culture’s later developments until today.

Despite Jaspers’ being the creator of the term “Axial Age,” the significance of this historical period had already been recognized by Weber in his comparative study of world religions.\(^10\) In Chinese academia, Yü Ying-shih also indicates that Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) had noted the almost simultaneous awakening of literary creativity in China, India, Israel, and Greece in an article published in 1943.\(^11\) Furthermore, as scholars point out, Jaspers’ discussion on Axial Age was conducted in the field of philosophy of history, whereas Eisenstadt’s study fleshed out Jaspers’ conceptual structure and was informed by the spirit of Weber’s comparative sociology.\(^12\)

Although the so-called Axial Age triggered by no means a uniform mode of transformation in different cultures, some procedural characteristics common to those breakthroughs were generalized by Eisenstadt as follows:

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1. Emergence of a tension between the transcendental and mundane orders;
2. Attempt of a few intellectual elites to model the world upon a transcendental vision;
3. Successful institutionalization of the vision and an ensuing reordering of society;
4. Change in the dynamic of history.\(^{13}\)

The emergence of each of these traditions was the result of complicated social processes and can by no means be understood in a predestined or teleological way. However, what interested Eisenstadt was not the background but the unfolding and institutionalization of such cultural breakthrough: a small group of intellectual elites in specific cultural milieus were awakened to assume reflective attitudes towards human life and the cosmos; they felt urged to bridge the gap between the two worlds by way of reconstructing human behavior, which now pursued some higher moral or metaphysical order, and then to perpetuate that formula. It was the different interpretations of the gap and the ensuing divergent programs of reconstruction, combined with specific social conditions that facilitated or obstructed such development, which resulted in the unique crystallization of each Axial Age civilization and “ushered in a new type of social and civilizational dynamic in the history of mankind.”\(^{14}\)

As mentioned above, no change in history is blind to its own tradition. Nevertheless, the change in ontology and cosmology that took place in this period was so radical that all surviving traditions were subject to reappraisal and became a constitutive part of the new spirit, without occupying the most creative sphere of the culture they had previously. The blossoming and subsequent of institutionalization of Axial Age civilizations, in their turn, grew into sources from which every later development in history derived. This strong historical sense leads to two of Eisenstadt’s critical observations. First, modernity owes its origin to one of these great traditions, that is, the Western European society (which is the combination of Greek and Israeli civilizations); and second, Japan as a successful modernized country constitutes a special case for not belonging to any Axial Age civilizations.

Before treating the two points, here it should be noted that, in Eisenstadt’s views – as it will become clearer – the dynamics of tradition was very often understood in its relation to modernity. This relational scheme corrected the bias of dichotomizing tradition and modernity prevalent before the mid-twentieth century, but a problem also emerged: tradition was not treated in its full complexity; rather, it was reduced and compressed into a causal and comparative model to make explanation for modernity. In other words, despite being intellectual, this model to a certain degree seems too theoretically-laden to be truly historical.

\(^{13}\) Eisenstadt, “Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs – Their Characteristics and Origins” in The Origin and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations, p.1. This summary is, however, of my own.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, pp.3-4.
III. Modernity: one or many?

1. From modernity to multiple modernities

Early in Eisenstadt’s career, he had been a powerful objector of the “classical” view of modernization held by Marx (1818-1883), Durkheim (1858-1917), and even by Weber. Such view – which was prevalent until the mid-twentieth century and is by no means obliterated today – assumed that the program of modernity developed in Western Europe will ultimately prevail throughout the world. In other words, Western modernity was supposed to lead to the convergence of industrial societies, which means all modernized societies will eventually be reduced to a same cultural unit. Among such claims of the predominance of Western modernity, Max Weber’s proposition is particularly famous for his attribution of Western development to “the tendency towards the overall rationalization of social life,” the root of which could be found in the Protestant ethic, although such tendency was not totally alien to other major religious traditions.  

However, historical experiences negated the assumption of one universal program of modernity and witnessed the emergence of essentially different modern societies. Such recognition brought scholars to rework their perspectives and it was in this circumstance that Eisenstadt’s proposition of “multiple modernities” gradually came to fruition. Specifically, while Eisenstadt never held a monistic view of modernity, according to my survey of his writings, the term “multiple modernities” appeared only in the last years of the 20th century, serving especially as a counterargument against Francis Fukuyama’s claim of the “end of history,” which presages the predominance of market economy and liberal world-view in the age of globalization, and against Samuel Huntington’s (1927-2008) prediction of the “clash of civilizations,” which contrasts Western civilization with other civilizations often in hostile terms and rarely considers ways of mediation and cooperation. Although the two propositions are opposite to each other, in Eisenstadt’s view, they both derived from the same tradition of taking Western modernity as a universal model. While the former foresees the eventual triumph of Western

15) See, S. N. “Introduction: Historical Traditions, Modernization and Development,” in Eisenstadt, S. N. ed.: Patterns of Modernity Volume I: The West (Frances Pinter, 1987), pp.1-12. The major manifestations of the Western modernity are: the emergence of capitalist civilization, the bureaucratization of different forms of social life, the secularization of the world-view, the development of modern science, the reconfiguration of the center-periphery relation, the reexamination of the legitimacy of tradition and authority, the conscious human activity and participation, and attempts at the formation of a “rational” culture, an efficient economy, and civil (class) society and nation-states, etc.


values, the latter confronts the modern West with other traditional, fundamentalist, anti-modern, and anti-Western civilizations, among them the Islamic and Confucian societies are the most notable.\(^{18}\)

2. Modernity as a specific type of civilization

In delivering the idea of modernity from a narrow, Western paradigm, Eisenstadt never dismissed the prevalence and shaping force of Western modernity, whose expansion with unprecedented economic, political, and ideological forces has been stimulating those societies under its sway to make specific responses to and interpretations of it. On this premise, Eisenstadt came to view such program of modernity with all of its specific considerations and social mechanisms as a unique civilization.

Although the notion of “modernity as one type of civilization” received early attention in Eisenstadt’s writings,\(^{19}\) it was in somewhat later stage that this thesis put on theoretical weight, being connected directly with another theoretical construct, that is, the Axial Age civilizations.\(^{20}\) Critically, Eisenstadt not only revamps Weber’s argument to claim that modernity “developed in one of the Great Axial Civilizations – the Christian-European one,”\(^{21}\) but even designates modernity as “the Second Axial Age, in which a distinct cultural, political and institutional program crystallized and expanded throughout most of the world.”\(^{22}\)

That is to say, while in earlier works Eisenstadt modestly argued that modernity is traditionally conditioned, in later time he expressly recognized Axial Age civilization and modernity to be culturally, structurally, and ideologically similar. Holding this view, it is understandable that Eisenstadt regards the core of modernity first and foremost as “the crystallization and development of mode or modes of interpretation of the world,” which brought forth essentially an ontological transformation followed by new institutional formations.\(^{23}\) This statement is reminiscent of the view that it was the different interpretations of the gap between the transcendental and mundane orders that had oriented each Axial Age civilization towards its development into a “great tradition.” However, what differentiates the two changes is the degree of reflexivity, for

\[\text{the reflexivity that developed in the modern program not only focused on the possibility of different interpretations of core transcendental visions and basic ontological conceptions prevalent in a particular society or civilization; it came to question the very givenness of such visions and the institutional patterns}

\(^{18}\) Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” in Multiple Modernities, p.3.

\(^{19}\) One of its precedents is “modernity” as a new type of “great tradition,” in contrast to “Axial Age civilizations” as “Great Traditions.” See Eisenstadt S. N., “Modernity as A New Type of ‘Great Tradition’” in Tradition, Change, and Modernity, pp.203-211.


\(^{21}\) Ibid, p.493.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, p.494.

\(^{23}\) Ibid, p.493.
Moreover, what is central to this modern program is considered by Eisenstadt as “a belief in the possibility that society could be actively formed by conscious human activity,” so radical was this belief that its secular Utopian ideal threatened to redirect the entrenched dynamics of history.

In my personal view, not until this stage that it becomes clear why Eisenstadt tended to formulate his analyses of both tradition and modernity on such an abstract level rather than in more tangible terms. As has been suggested, what he aimed at was a causal framework which sought to explain social and institutional changes in ideological terms. Like Jaspers, Eisenstadt understood the Axial Age marked a turning point in human cognition of history because of the rise of fundamental questions and attempts at resolution. As most institutions prevalent in current societies are crystallizations of systematic responses to ontological enquiries or ideological tensions originating from the Axial Age, and now we are facing the extraordinary historical impetus of modernity threatening to revolutionize much of human establishment but actually in a way not totally deviating from past experiences, it was natural for Eisenstadt to connect this later radical change to the former one on an ideological level and in broadly structural terms. Such theorization of world civilizations, though ambitious and eloquent, is, in my judgment, made possible only by neglecting a myriad of context-specific historical details. Yü Ying-shih also comments that Eisenstadt’s characterization of modernity as the “Second Axial Age” does not sound quite convincing.

In any case, one of the merits of Eisenstadt’s project is that he places modernity in a macro-historical perspective, and distinguishes it as a unique type of civilization. In the meantime, such distinctness of modernity does not prevent it from assuming plural forms, which are all variations of but by no means subject to the model of Western European modernity:

...Within all of them [i.e. respective traditions] developed distinct modern dynamics, distinctive ways of interpretation of modernity, for which the original Western project constituted indeed the crucial starting point and continual – usually ambivalent – reference point.

In the same vein, analogous to the proposition of “multiple modernities,” the model of “multiple axialities” was also suggested, which demystified a more or less uniform world-wide Axial Age and sought to better illustrate how different Axial Age components interacted among themselves and with non-axial civilizations in the shaping

27) Yü, Intellectuals and the Value of Chinese Culture, p.73.
of world histories.\(^{29}\) Though this was not fully developed in Eisenstadt’s lifetime, his view of modernity being conditioned by tradition, and of plural forms of modernity bore the most interesting fruit when Japan was drawn into comparison.

IV. Japan in historical changes: in comparison with China

1. Japan as a non-Axial civilization

It is a matter of definition for Japan’s not belonging to any Axial Age civilization: it never in history experienced any form of drastic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders. Such experience (or inexperience), according to Eisenstadt’s formulation (see Chapter II), enabled Japan to suffer low degree of ideologization of changes and struggles, because they did not tend to define things in absolute terms, which facilitated social mobilization and institutional transformation in Japan.\(^{30}\) Such relative ease towards changes without severe ideological conflicts seems, at least in Eisenstadt’s theory, largely accountable for the different historical experiences between China and Japan on their ways to modernity.

To best illustrate how Japan achieved modernity as a non-Axial country, let me start with China to see how its “axiality” put certain restrictions on the unfolding of history. In respect of the transcendental vision developed in China, Eisenstadt followed Benjamin Schwartz’s (1916-1999) view that in the Analects, “heaven” is treated by Confucius “not simply as the immanent Tao [i.e. Dao, 道] of nature and society but as a transcendental will interested in Confucius’ redeeming mission.” Furthermore, Confucius referred to Tao as applying “not only to the objective structures of society and cosmos but also to the ‘inner way’ of the man of jen [i.e. ren, 仁].”\(^{31}\) In short, through the mediation of Dao the immanent and transcendental worlds, the moral and natural forces are metaphysically connected. Consequently, in Confucian China where the transcendental concerns were largely moralized and secularized, the tension between the transcendental and mundane was principally articulated in cultural terms. This particular mode of transcendence – an inward one – led to a uniquely this-worldly way of resolving the tension, that is, “through the cultivation of the social, political, and cultural orders as the major way of maintaining the cosmic harmony.”\(^{32}\) Since such a world-view put heavy stress on order and harmony in any relationship, it required “proper conduct and attitude, which necessitates a very stringent and reflexive self-discipline.” This tendency, however, brought out no institutional breakthroughs in China since the empire took shape in the 3rd century BCE. Most importantly, the inseparability of cultural and political functions in such a


system soon equated emerging professional intellectuals with political functionaries, as well as bound the Confucian literati-bureaucrats to the political center as a special social stratum with little autonomy. This structure in turn hindered the possibility of economic and cultural breakthroughs.\(^{33}\)

From this specifically ideological viewpoint, the historical development of Japan was contrary to the Chinese case. The lack of the tension characteristic of the Axial Age civilizations led the Japanese to a primordial, uncritical world view and cosmology, which imposed no urge on intellectual elites to bridge that gap by modeling the world order upon transcendental precepts. This phenomenon, in turn, reduced disputations among elites to a low degree, thus producing rare differentiation between professionals, between orthodox and heterodoxies, and so forth. Accordingly, historical dynamics in Japan acquired an exceptional flexibility to change without much ideological obstruction. One brilliant example of this flexibility is Japan’s ability to transform, or Japanize, the transcendental, universalistic orientations of Confucianism and Buddhism into an immanentist and particularistic direction.

In the face of foreign influences Japan always demonstrates “an openness to them combined with a tendency to Japanize them with but little effect on the basic Japanese ontological premises and conceptions of social order.”\(^{34}\) However, the perennial practice of Japanization evinces that “Japan always lived with these other civilizations but was never one of them. It continuously maintained its conscious collective uniqueness and the distinctiveness of its civilizational premises.” In this circumstance, Japan was stimulated to develop certain ideological discourse to distinguish itself from others. It was the intensive reflexivity shown in the discourse that separated Japan from other non-axial civilizations, bringing it closer to Axial ones.\(^{35}\)

Given the lack of dichotomy between the transcendental and mundane worlds, Japanese collectivity was defined in contextual terms in which many sacred and natural elements were amalgamated without being absolutized and ideologized.\(^{36}\) Such continuity can also be found in interpersonal relations. As Japanese society was primarily defined in primordial kinship terms, such framework facilitated the extension of trust from family to broader settings. Similarly, since Japanese elites were not ideologically orientated, they raised no opposition to the extension of trust under guise of universalistic principles.\(^{37}\)

As to Japanese attitudes towards tradition, it is argued that because there was no conception of discontinuities in cosmic time, corresponding discontinuities in mundane time did not exist either. Therefore, the Japanese generally perceived no break or change between different regimes or historical stages. This very notion brought Japanese to assume the mythical continuity of imperial symbolism, which is epitomized by reconstruction of the emperor system under the Meiji regime.\(^{38}\) Critically, Japan is considered one of the few countries whose

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34) Ibid, p. 425
modernization was realized “under the aegis of traditional symbols and even traditional elites.”

2. Japan’s neo-traditional way towards modernization

Since modernity is an idea triggered in and even imposed by the West, Japan, like many other civilizations, felt urged to search for their own place in the new world dominated by the West. However, quite different from most Asian countries, Japan was never colonized. That is to say, Japan’s program of modernity was not exercised by external force, but by the Meiji Restoration.

Although the translation of Meiji Isshin as Meiji Restoration has long drawn disputation, Eisenstadt argues that there are several factors preventing the event from being a true “revolution,” including a lack of tension between the transcendental and mundane orders, and the lack of ideological breakthroughs and institutional overturns. On the one hand, just like the so-called revolutions, the way towards modernity guided by the Meiji government gave rise to a new cultural and political program, which was designed to transform Japanese society to a degree equal to those brought about by Western modernity. On the other hand, it was a movement “proclaimed as a renovation of an older archaic system, which in fact had never existed, and not as a revolution aiming to change the social and political order, to reconstruct state and society alike, according to principles that transcended them.” That is to say, the Meiji government strategically prevented possible ideological confrontation by retaining or even reinventing old political symbols. Whole institutions were actually reconstructed. Since to gain a solid footing on the global stage was the prime concern, what the movement struggled for was a high adaptability combined with a restorationist vision. Consequently, what the Meiji Isshin brought about was “an almost uniquely successful initial modernization based on neo-traditional orientation and symbols.”

In contrast to the flexibility of Japan, Chinese intellectual and political elites were more structurally bound:

The identity between the cultural and political orders and the specific characteristics of the literati tended to maintain the dominance of a stagnant neo-traditionalism that continuously reinforced the non-transformative orientations of Chinese culture.

The search for Japanese authenticity also constituted a main focus of modernization. “That search oscillated between the negation of modernity – denied mostly as Western modernity — and the appropriation of modernity

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41) Ibid, p.430.
43) Eisenstadt, Tradition, Change, and Modernity, p.274.
manifest in attempts to identify a truly Japanese...modernity."\(^{44}\) The extreme of such kind of discourse, unfortunately, went into the service of fascist nationalism. Generally speaking, however, in search for Japan’s authenticity and tradition, what made the Japanese discourse of modernity distinct from others’ was its flexible way of defining traditionality and accommodating new ideas. New ways of life were easily adopted, thus, “there did not develop a sharp confrontation between traditionality and modernity.”\(^{45}\) Neither was there a rigid dividing line between “authentic” Japanese and the Western modes:

Tradition and traditionalism constituted a sort of general orientation, often identified with what was authentically Japanese, in the name of which many activities and organizations, old and new, were brought together and legitimized.\(^{46}\)

It is such flexibility, adaptability, and a the non-confrontational attitude that distinguished Japanese modernity not only from the Western paradigm, but also from the resistant mode of other Axial or non-Axial civilizations. It may be not far-fetched to conclude that Japan serves as the best example for Eisenstadt’s theory of “multiple modernities”, in view of its self-conscious incorporation of tradition into modernity. Again we find a contrasting situation in China in its confrontation with Western culture: Chinese tended to hold the extreme attitude of either rejecting their tradition or negating Western values. “Hence there were lacking the flexibility and potential transformative capacity that might otherwise have developed if the question of Westernization versus traditionalism constituted a continuous focus of discussion and did not give rise to mutually exclusive solutions.”\(^{47}\) According to Eisenstadt’s argument, this predicament also involved the ideological confrontation characteristic of most Axial-Age civilizations, which developed into a deadlock in China because of its particular historical context and social conditions.

V. Conclusion: reflection upon Eisenstadt’s methodology

This paper does not attempt to delineate Japanese history from its tradition to modernity. Instead, by exploring Eisenstadt’s theories, I want to demonstrate how his view on tradition and modernity evolved and how he accommodated the development of Japan to a theoretical frame to explain its cultural uniqueness. The unconventionality of this perspective is really fascinating and thought-provoking.

Both “tradition” and “modernity” drew Eisenstadt’s concerns early from his career. As he usually interpreted modernity to be both the succession and transformation of tradition, in his early works the process was basically


narrated in a historically-minded, context-specific manner. However, since the 1980s when he began to conduct systematic research on the Axial Age civilizations, it seems to me that Eisenstadt showed a strong tendency of viewing any tradition from a dichotomous, theoretical perspective – whether it experienced the Axial Age breakthrough or not – and the tension between the transcendental and mundane orders became an important criterion in his analysis of a civilization. As mentioned above, before long the discussion on modernity was also drawn in this orbit, forming a framework of comparative civilizations which is characterized by both temporality – tradition versus modernity – and spatiality – West versus East and Axial versus non-Axial civilizations. Perceptive and interesting indeed, however, this model might also deprive tradition of its own value because a tradition must be categorized in terms of being Axial first, and then be examined in the light of its own version of modernity. In short, I cannot but wonder that “tradition” in this framework is managed to serve a causal view rather than constitutes a self-sufficient subject of study. Applying this doubt to the case of Japan, perhaps the following question is worth raising: would Eisenstadt still have been interested in Japan had it not experienced the Meiji Restoration and successful modernization? Again I would argue that the title of Eisenstadt’s essay collection, Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities, had betrayed his intent to study a civilization’s tradition for the sole purpose to explain its modernity. This is the problem on temporality of Eisenstadt’s methodology.

In terms of spatiality, this framework also seems ideologically-deterministic as the following statement suggests:

> The distinctiveness of Japan lies in its being the only non-Axial civilization that maintained – throughout its history, up to the modern time – a history of its own, without becoming in some way marginalized by the Axial civilizations, China and Korea, Confucianism and Buddhism, with which it was in continuous contact.  

In other words, Japan is interesting to Eisenstadt less because of its specific cultural contents and historical experiences than because of its theoretical attribute. Therefore, a natural outcome of this approach is that Japan’s tradition must be studied in terms of its modernization, and Japan cannot be studied independently but has to be fit into a comparative frame of which “axiality” is the primary criterion of making distinction. Furthermore, the objectivity of such comparison is not without doubt as the paradigm of Axial Age civilizations is based on Israeli and Greek experiences – only two of the axes in the world history. If we are to claim that Japan is distinctive for its being an exception to this model, the impartiality of the model – its parameters and overall formulation – must be a prerequisite.

Undeniably Eisenstadt showed great intellectual power to make connection between the Axial Age

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49) Eisenstadt himself was not unconscious of this problem. See Arnason, Johann P. et al.: “General Introduction,” in *Axial Civilizations and World History*, pp.1-12.
civilizations and the theory of modernization. However, as Tominaga Kenichi indicates, while Eisenstadt’s theory provides one way to explain world history, such formulation was in nature a Western construct.\(^{50}\) We should not take this comment as Tominaga’s misunderstanding of or prejudice against Eisenstadt’s study on non-West civilizations. Rather, I would say that this judgment serves as a reminder that Eisenstadt had never had first-hand knowledge of China or Japan; he reached theoretical conclusions through reading published materials written in Western languages, so his opinions or perspectives can never be expected to be thorough or impartial. Edward Shils also noted that Eisenstadt was a theorist who accumulated his knowledge and worked out his reasoning mainly through reading published works.\(^{51}\) While such method allows a scholar to generalize, characterize, and theorize, viewing from the discipline of cultural interaction studies, how to strike a dynamic balance between theoretical generality and historical specificity is a particularly tempting question in front of this model. Indeed, one of the reviewers of Eisenstadt’s book also points out 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 the author’s view, any discussion on Japanese culture without mentioning its geography, ecology, rice agriculture, tea ceremony, aesthetics, craftsmanship, and so forth, is indeed incomplete.\(^{52}\)

One more thing I would like to say about the theoretical model is that, Eisenstadt formed his view on the Axial Age civilizations out of a sociologist’s concern, that is why he put more emphasis on the institutionalization of transcendental views than on the historical backgrounds and cultural ramifications of such breakthroughs. Needless to say, to supplement this perspective through more extensive reading and more varied ways of thinking will cause inevitable and probably large-scale modification of the framework.

In the last part I have to admit that, given Eisenstadt’s vast scope of knowledge and writing, I have to apply certain limitations to this article for better illustrating only one line of his research. First, my references are mainly limited to Eisenstadt’s own works, taking few other authors into consideration; second, while I deal with several of Eisenstadt’s core concepts, much more are missing in this paper; third, among so many orientations of a society, only the cultural and historical ones receive my attention in the article, others are not allowed into this space. Last but not least, while Eisenstadt compared Japanese civilization to Europe, China, and India in his books, in this paper I can only slightly touch upon the comparison with China, leaving other important parts to later writing plan. Of course, my reference cannot be confined to Eisenstadt’s works in future study; more discussions on modernization, on comparative civilizations and on Japanese culture and history are calling for critical attention.

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\(^{50}\) Tominaga Kenichi (富永健一), *Theory of Modernization* the West and East in Modernization (近代化の理論 : 近代化における西洋と東洋) (講談社学術文庫, 1996), pp.340-341.
