

A Japanese view of history: Where are the Etruscans now?

By DAVID SCHAEFER & KEIICHIRO KOMATSU

Somewhere in Europe or America a teacher is winding up his lecture on the ancient Etruscans to a bored and listless class. He mentions that their language is still unknown, despite the remains of a few inscriptions. He may then say that the people disappeared, or, more probably, he will just go on to talk about Rome, leaving the fate of the Etruscans a blank.

In a Japanese classroom, much the same lecture has just been heard, and a student raises his hand: 'But Sir, where are the Etruscans now?' In the Western classroom, the question would be facetious, but in Japan it would be quite serious, and the teacher would not be surprised to hear it.

Many cultural differences exist between Japan and the West. Most of these are acknowledged in such broad fields as aesthetics, religion, work habits, the social fabric itself. There are, however, more subtle differences, in areas that are not normally scrutinised, but which are still significant because they have to do with the way the world is viewed.

One of these is the perception of world history; specifically, the rise and fall of cultures, and the



Illustration from William Caxton's *Fables of Asope*, 1484.

fate of the ethnic groups that give rise to them. In the West, it is readily accepted as part of historical cycles that ethnic cultures appear and can suddenly disappear, leaving only a name and perhaps a few artifacts. The concentration is on their architectural ruins, and the reconstruction of their languages from fragments of writing, when there are any.

In the Japanese view, cultural identity has a life of its own and

remains expressed in recognisable form as long as descendants are around. Japanese writers and scholars, therefore, prefer to take a tape-recorder somewhere and look for living speakers. In other words, while Westerners are quite comfortable with the idea that the Hittites or the Mayans may disappear, the Japanese would insist that this is not very likely, and then go to quite a lot of trouble finding out where the people are now.

DIFFERENT TERMINOLOGY

The depth of this gap in perception is best appreciated through casual conversation with people from both sides. It can thus be noticed how consistently Westerners and Japanese cling to their respective views. On the Western side, with the exception of a few experts, one usually encounters surprise and some scepticism at the Japanese view of history. For the Japanese, an explanation of the Western perception is unanimously met with deep incredulity. To them, it is as if this view of the world were a denial of the whole validity of historical research. It can in fact be quite difficult to persuade either side

that the other seriously holds such a different view. A common reaction has been a vow to verify this thesis by direct questioning of acquaintances on both sides, with the inevitable result that the thesis is confirmed. For a more substantial validation, one has to look at written evidence.

Here the Western view is confirmed more by omission than anything; books and articles on ethnic peoples simply end their narrative at the point of decline of their culture. When anything at all is said of their fate, the words most commonly used are: 'vanished', 'disappeared', 'were absorbed', and, most frequently, 'were conquered'. Japanese accounts hardly ever use this terminology.

An interesting example of the discrepancy in views can be found in the approach to so-called 'dead' languages. A Japanese linguist, Tatsuo Nishida, states in an article that the purpose of the study of dead languages must be to link them to present living ones. He questions, in fact, whether any language really dies out, concentrating on the particularly difficult (because unwritten) languages of the ancient nomadic tribes of Western Asia.

He found references in an eighteenth-century Tibetan text to some obscure words of an unknown language, subsequently named Tosu, and suggested that it might still be spoken somewhere. Later, he was delighted, though not surprised, to find a Chinese Government census showing the language was indeed still spoken in an area of Szechuan province. The Chinese themselves have made great efforts to eradicate all traces of Manchurian culture in China since they overthrew the Ch'ing dynasty, but the Japanese like to point out that though Manchu is no longer allowed in Manchuria, it is still spoken in Sinkiang province to the North-West. The emphasis on language is characteristic of Japan, where ethnic identity, race and language are particularly closely linked.

HISTORICAL STRUGGLE

Still in the Far East, Westerners think of the rise of Communist governments there as a distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon based solely on political ideology. The histories of North Korea and North Vietnam as Communist states start for the West with the introduction of Russian Communism, followed later by the influence of China.

A Japanese writer, however, points to the fact that just these very areas, northern Korea and northern Vietnam, have come under Chinese political control at various times for the last two thousand years. For him, it is no coincidence that all three now share the same political system. In other words, while the West thinks of the division of the two countries as a recent phenomenon motivated by the rise of Communism, the Japanese see it as part of a long historical struggle for political hegemony by China.

While it may seem natural for Japanese scholars to have a broader view of the history of their immediate neighbours, their interest in fact ranges further than that. A recent best-selling travel book (a very popular genre in Japan) by Shinobu Iwamura relates his experiences of finding remnants of ancient Mongol tribes in Afghanistan, such as Kipchaks, the 'Golden Horde' not mentioned in Western histories after the sixteenth century.

When he hears that there are 'Yaphtali' communities in Badakhshan, he realises they must be Ephthalites, the 'White Huns' who occupied Central Asia in the fourth and fifth centuries and who, according to Western histories, were eventually 'absorbed' into surrounding populations. His conclusions are based on circumstantial evidence such as facial characteristics and samples of vocabulary, but what is remarkable is the equanimity with which he accepts that these peoples had to be around somewhere, and that he has found them.

OVERLAPPING HISTORY

Another general interest book on 'Newspapers of the World' shows the front page of each nation's most popular dailies, followed by a brief history of the country from its most ancient origins. The chapter on Bulgaria explains that, though modern Bulgarians speak a Slavic language, the ancient Bulgars were a Turkic people from Asia. It further points out that there is a growing interest among Bulgarian historians in their Eastern origins and that, as the relevant Chinese records are difficult for them to read, they are expecting Japanese scholars, who generally read Chinese, to help them fill in the gaps. There is perhaps a role here for the Japanese love of history and scholarly research in bringing together the often overlapping histories of East and West.

A guide to 'The Various Countries of the World' gives detailed histories of each modern nation. Swaziland, it says, is an ancient kingdom, as old as the Japanese Imperial dynasty, dated traditionally from the third or fourth century AD. It is interesting to compare this with the Western view from the Encyclopedia Britannica: 'According to their traditions, the Swazi lived originally in southern Tongaland . . . whence they migrated at the beginning of the nineteenth century'. The Japanese always compare the antiquity of another country's history to their own, while Westerners tend to show an interest only from the moment of first contact.

While on the subject of southern Africa, it is interesting to note that Richard Deacon, in his book on the Japanese Secret Service, *Kempeitai*, says 'most probably the Japanese are better informed on South Africa than many Western nations'. This does not necessarily imply a sinister compulsion to spy, but rather a natural curiosity and interest in the world in general. Indeed, while many Westerners have until relatively recently seen the conflicts in that part of the world

simply as a Black versus White struggle, the Japanese have long perceived it as a complex historical struggle among many black tribes and two white tribes, the British and the Dutch.

EUROPEAN CONTACT

Ranging further West, an investment report on the United States prepared by the foreign exchange division of a Japanese bank presents some historical background to the country, starting with an outline on Pre-Columbian civilisations going back 15,000 years. Note here the unavoidable use of the term 'Pre-Columbian', indicative of the prevailing Eurocentric view. The West continues to see history in terms of the 'European contact' watershed, whereas for the Japanese such a seemingly unrelated activity as banking is seen in a context of continuous cultural development.

Still on the same continent, the case of the Mayans and Aztecs is particularly instructive. Japanese interest in them goes back a surprisingly long way. In 1613 a trade mission consisting of 140 Samurai, led by one Hasekura Tsunenaga, was on its way to Europe by way of Mexico. They landed at Acapulco (where a statue of Hasekura can be seen today) then marched up to Mexico City.

No doubt they were impressed by the European civilisation they saw, as represented by the Spanish, but what particularly attracted their attention was the fate of the native Indians, who were not coming off too well in their contact with the Europeans. Hasekura made a detailed study of their condition, extrapolating no doubt the fate of other potential Iberian colonies.

The Spanish and Portuguese were then steadily advancing through East Asia, and the Japanese were very well aware of it. It is interesting to speculate how much influence Hasekura's report may have had on the Tokugawa Shogunate's decision around that time to close Japan off from Western influence, and

particularly from Spanish and Portuguese influence. This almost complete seclusion was to last for the next two-and-a-half centuries.

'LIVING PEOPLE'

Modern Western books on the history of the Mayans, while acknowledging that several million of them still inhabit America, hardly refer to them as a living people. Their history apparently ends with the Spanish Conquest, and their language is a subject fit only for



Posthumous portrait of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616).

deciphering by historical linguists. Japanese books on the same subject, however, trace developments in their history continuously to the present day. Even a simple paperback history examines the effects on the Mayans of the Mexican Revolution as well as their involvement in the civil war in Guatemala. It recognises that modern Mayans still speak a form of the original language, and that their most recent migrations have taken some of them to parts of Texas and Florida.

There is no intent here to evaluate the accuracy of any particular historical theory, but rather to demonstrate the difference in basic popular attitudes towards the continuity of ethnic groups in history. In the West, there is relatively little consciousness of a direct ethnic/cultural homogeneity through time. While they see themselves as 'inheritors' of Classical Greek and Roman cultures, Westerners

certainly do not directly associate Classical cultures with, say, the present inhabitants of Athens or Rome.

In Japan it is different; it seems that every group that ever 'appeared on the stage' (to use a Japanese expression) of history is still living somewhere, though perhaps in reduced circumstances. The only unequivocal exception would presumably be the Tasmanians, who are officially extinct.

JEWISH EXCEPTION

Incidentally, the exception that proves (i.e. tests) the rule for the Western attitude must be the case of the Jewish peoples. Here the West seems to have a rather Japanese view, a conscious perception of a group with enduring and unchanging cultural and ethnic attributes. It could be said that in order to understand the Japanese perception of each and all of the peoples mentioned in history, one need only think of how Westerners are aware of the peregrinations, the trials, and finally the endurance of the Jewish people.

It is tempting to try to explain the Japanese view. Do they assume that every group lives forever because of their own strong feeling of cultural homogeneity and continuity? Is it just an extension of a general Eastern long-term view of things, as compared with the reputed Western short-term view? Certainly, it seems that in the West there is only interest in a culture when it is at its peak, its Golden Age. Westerners admire the high level of development of the Mayans at their 'best', but quickly lose interest when they are conquered, and finally ignore them completely when they cross the Mexican border to look for jobs in Texas. Perhaps the Japanese are simply more philosophic: Mayans are just Mayans, and always will be. ○

DAVID SCHAEFER, an honours graduate of Columbia University, worked in Japan for 10 years. KEIICHIRO KOMATSU, a former banker, is currently a scholarship student in international relations at Oxford University.