The Significance of the Classics (*koten*) in Modern Japanese Aesthetics[1]

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I would like to begin with two questions. The first is if the Japanese have classics as Europeans do, and, the second is, if so, what the role for the Japanese was that the Classical antiquities played for the Europeans. These two questions are more complicated than they at first seem. In 1937 Kiyoshi Miki (1897–1945) had already indicated the following in his essay, "The Intellectuals and the Problem of Tradition":

> Which period in Japanese history is classical? The answer to this question has almost always remained ambiguous. One might, however, say that we cannot have any correct relationship to our tradition if the classical period in our history is not determined. The value of tradition does not derive from its being tradition. Something in the tradition is to be esteemed as exemplar; something is, on the contrary, to be rejected as enemy. […] It is our present creative spirit, and not anything like nostalgia, that realizes a certain period in the past as classical. (Miki, XIII, 337–339)[2]

Miki's question about which period in Japanese history is classical remains unanswered, and his reflection on the reciprocal relation between tradition and creative spirit remains valid. The fact that Miki posed this question in the mid-1930s is also of importance because the question indicates that the concept of the classics we have today in Japan was established around 1930.[3]

Why then is the question difficult to answer? The reason is the following: We Japanese use the Sino-Japanese word, "*koten*" [Chinese: *gǔdiǎn*, Korean: *kojeon*], as an equivalent to the Western idea of the "classics." In premodern Japan, however, the word "*koten*" referred solely to the Chinese classics, especially the Confucian texts called "Four Books and Five Classics" [Chinese: *sìshū wǔjīng*, Japanese: *sisho gokyô*].[4] We Japanese did not have the classics within ourselves, but outside ourselves. This is because Japan was located on the periphery of the sinosphere. The classics had to be sought in the center, not on the periphery. When Western modern learning was introduced into Japan after the Meiji era the word "*koten*" was applied to Western classics, and later came to also refer to Japanese premodern texts.[5] Therefore, the modern Japanese concept of "*koten*" has two different roots: the Chinese and the Western. And it is no wonder that we Japanese today still find difficulty answering the question posed by Miki about the classics in Japan. At issue is how the word "classics" came to be applied also to premodern Japanese texts or works, and which texts or works of which period were regarded as particularly classic.

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1 This article is based on my presentation at the XXIVth World Congress of Philosophy that was held in August 2018 in Beijing, China.

2 Unless otherwise noted, the translations are mine.

3 Miki pointed out in his essay "Reflections on the Renaissance of the Classics" (1934) that "for several years we have experienced the renaissance of the classics in this country" (Miki, XIX, 640).

4 See Kikan Ikeda, *Introduction to the Classics* [古典学入門], Tokyo: Iwanami, 1991, p. 17.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Several attempts in the past twenty years have been made to revisit the process of canonization of Japanese literature in modern Japan. These attempts include *Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature* edited by Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki (1999) and *The Invention of the Man'yôshû: The Nation State and the Classics as a Cultural Device* written by Yoshikazu Shinada (2001). Shinada argued that the year 1890 marked a milestone for the "renaissance of the classics" in Japan. That year was the publication of several collections of great literary works in Japan to include *Introduction into Japanese Literature* of Yaichi Haga (1867–1927) and *Japanese Literary History* of Sanji Mikami (1865–1939) and Kuwasaburo Takatsu (1864–1921) that is regarded as the first attempt at the historiography of Japanese literature. Seen from today's perspective, these texts witness the "renaissance of the classics." If we browse these books, however, we find, to our surprise, that the word "*koten*" was rarely used, which indicates that the concept of the classics in our sense of the term had not yet been established in 1890.

Few attempts have yet been made to follow the formation process of the idea of the classics in connection with the process of canonization. In my paper I would like to both historically and systematically reconstruct the context and meanings in which the Japanese word for the classics, "koten," was used in theoretical writings from 1880 to 1920.

To answer these questions, it might be better to distinguish three meanings of the word "classic," namely descriptive, stylistic, and normative. The descriptive meaning embraces all texts written in the ancient Japanese style (*bungo*) from which the texts written solely in Chinese characters (*kanbun*) are often excluded. The classic can be stylistically contrasted to the romantic. Classics are regarded as having everlasting value from the normative point of view. These three meanings—descriptive, stylistic, and normative—are intertwined, and the word classic is frequently used in the same text with the three different meanings. However, we can and must distinguish these three.

The first meaning was established, as will be briefly sketched in section 1, in the academic discipline of Japanese literature. In section 2, I will address the stylistic meaning of the word in the field of art history, addressing Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908), a Spencerian-Hegelian, who taught economy and philosophy at the University of Tokyo from 1878 to 1882, and his student Kakuzô (Tenshin) Okakura (1862–1913). For the third normative meaning, Raphael von Koeber (1848–1923) who taught philosophy at the University of Tokyo from 1893 to 1914 and his student Tetsurô Watsuji (1889–1960) played a decisive role. In section 3, I will analyze Watsuji's use of the word "classical" in his *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples* (1919), clarifying the philosophical background of the normative meaning of this word.

1. The descriptive usage

As the University of Tokyo was grounded in 1877 as part of westernization or modernization, Western sciences were given preference. Hiroyuki Katô (1836–1916) was appointed rector in 1882. He, however, also paid attention to Japanese or Eastern sciences, grounding the Course in Classics [*koten kôsyû ka*], which had two divisions: Division I (national writings) and Division II (writings solely in Chinese characters). The expression "classics" that was here introduced for the first time into the academic institution in Japan exemplifies the descriptive meaning. This does not mean, however, that

the expression became widespread. In the inaugural address of Division I, the author Kiyonori Konakamura (1822–95) used the word classics only once. Other expressions such as “ancient texts” or “ancient tradition” meant the classics (Konakamura, 1–9). In the 1883 inaugural address of Division II by Masanao (Keiu) Nakamura (1832–91), other than the title, the word classics did not appear (Nakamura, 43).

The question is when the descriptive meaning become common usage. Its indicator serves the *Lecture on the History of Japanese Literature* (1907) of Sakutarô Fujioka (1870–1910), who taught Japanese literature at the University of Tokyo as a successor to Yaichi Haga (1867–1927). The comparison between Haga und Fujioka makes clear Fujioka’s novelty. Haga noted the academic situation around 1881 and 1882 in his *Ten Lectures on Japanese Literature* (1899) that “in this period the ‘Course in Classics’ was founded and Mr. Fenollosa enforced the value of Japanese art.” He did not use the word “classics” as his own term. Fujioka, in contrast, assigned high importance to the expression “studies of the classics” [*koten no gaku*] (Fujioka, 312, 368 430), understanding thereby the so-called “national (or native) studies” [*kokugaku*] that originated during the Edo period as a countermovement to Sino-centric Neo-Confucian theories. Worth noting is that Fujioka, who in 1894 copied Kakuzô Okakura’s art history lecture (see section 2), was well versed in modern historiography.

What did then “studies of the classics” mean? Here I would like to consult *Japanese Linguistics Explained in Detail* (1910) by Kôichi Hoshina (1872–1955). Hoshina taught Japanese linguistics at the University of Tokyo. As a linguist he dissociated himself from the studies of the classics. Linguistics treats the “origin and development of languages,” but philology aims at studying “the thought of the nation” (Hoshina, 141). This is so that “the studies of the classics [*koten gaku*] in our country hold out the ideal of not only clarifying the development of the humanities, but also promoting the pearls of the nation” (15). Hoshina based his distinction between linguistics and philology on Theodor Benfey’s “History of Linguistics and Asian Philology in Germany” (1869), translating the German word “Philologie” or “klassische Philologie” by the Japanese word “*Koten gaku*” (literally: the studies of the classics) (Benfey, 5).

In short, Fujioka proposed the “studies of the classics,” to modernize “national (or native) studies” [*kokugaku*] by taking western classical philology as a model.

The descriptive usage became common in the 1920s, as is shown by the monumental series *Complete Edition of Japanese Classics* grounded by Hiroshi Yosano, Atsuo Masamune and Akiko Yosano in 1925 (up to 1944, 266 vols.).

2. The stylistic usage

Kakuzô (Tenshin) Okakura familiarized the stylistic usage of the word. Based on Hegel’s aesthetics, Okakura divided the history of art into three stages: the symbolic, the classic, and the romantic form of art. Okakura’s position will be clearly shown when compared to that of his teacher, Ernest Fenollosa, for whom he was interpreter, and he translated many of Fenollosa’s lectures into Japanese.

Fenollosa was far from admiring the classics or classicism. In his lecture “The fine art in Europe and Japan,” which was delivered during his first stay in Japan (1878–90) and published in Japanese,

he pointed out that "the infatuation for antiquity finally led to killing the new masters" (Fernollosa, 167). In his lecture on aesthetics from Okakura's translation, Fenollosa formulated his position as follows: "The fine art is basically free. When it is limited to certain customs of a school, we cannot expect master works" (Okakura, VIII, 471). Fenollosa criticized the fixed manners practiced in the academy, advocating thus the "novelty of invention," without denying the tradition. That is, we have to "learn the past art, in order to produce new ideas" (474).

Fenollosa returned to Japan in 1896 and taught literature theory at the Tôkyô Higher Normal School [*Tôkyô Kôtô Shihan Gakkô*], for which we have the manuscript in English. Fenollosa characterized classicism as follows: "Western Literature and theory have had the misfortune to be dominated, and partially enslaved by a past tradition; namely the example of ancient classic Literatures, notably that of Greece." He argued, however, at the same time: "Even in the recent modern reaction from the classic type, sometimes called Romanticism, the negative nature of its revolt defines it too narrowly, and holds it still in a kind of subjection to its predecessor" (Preliminary Lectures …, 79). He criticized not only the classicism, but also romanticism in so far as romanticism was restricted to a rebellion against classicism: "Hence the chaos of recent Western literature, in spite of its protest against the classic" (163). The romantic protest against classicism was certainly legitimate but insufficient because it was tied to "abstract subjectivity" (162). "We must penetrate deeper to that state where objectivity and subjectivity become one. This is Logic in its true synthetic sense. Now the very secret of the Logic of art is its self-hood of harmonious combination" (162). True "Harmony" consists of "a grade of being that transcends the distinction between Subjective and Objective." According to Fenollosa, this is nothing other than the "Locic in the Hegelian sense" and the logic of "Eki" (in Chinese: Yì) (136).

Fenollosa is often regarded as Hegelian. Hegel's aesthetic theories including his trichotomy "symbolic—classic—romantic," however, could not have influenced Fenollosa, at least during his first stay in Japan. Fenollosa could not read German and had to be content with the German translations of Hegel's works. And it was as late as 1886 that Hegel's lectures on aesthetics were partly translated into English by Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923). Fenollosa was rather interested in Hegel's logic, studying William Wallace's L*ogic of Hegel* (1874), a translation of the so-called "Small Logic."[6] That is also why Fenollosa mentioned "the Logic of art" (162) in his literature theory classes. Section 24 of Wallace's *Logic of Hegel* reads: "[T]he principles of logic are to be sought in a system of thought-types or fundamental categories, in which the opposition between subjective and objective, in its usual sense, vanishes" (Wallace, 46). It was not Hegel's aesthetic theory, but his theory of logic that Fenollosa applied to his theory of art.

In his *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (posthumously published in 1912), Fenollosa several times uses the word "romantic" positively, not contrasting it with the words "symbolic" and "classic," as Okakura did.

When Fenollosa came back to the United States in 1890, Okakura took on Fenollosa's lecture on Japanese and Western art history at the Tokyo Fine Arts School, primarily consulting Hegel's

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[6] Lawrence W. Chisolm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture*, New York and London, 1963, pp. 27–28.

Philosophy of Fine Art (translated by Bernard Bosanquet, London, 1886) und Lübke's *Outlines of History of Art* (translated by Clarence Cook, New York, 1888). From these two books Okakura learned the method of historiography, dividing Japanese art history—like the Western—into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modernity, without adopting the Hegelian trichotomy: "symbolic–classic–romantic."

In the books written in English in the first decade of the 20th century, however, Okakura explicitly based his thinking on the Hegelian scheme. In *The Ideals of the East* (1903), e.g., he argued: "The three terms by which European scholars love to distinguish the past development of art, though lacking perhaps in precision, have nevertheless an inevitable truth, since the fundamental law of life and progress underlies not only the history of art as a whole, but also the appearance and growth of individual artists and their schools" (Okakura, I, 93). In the "*Symbolic*" period, i.e. the age prior to the Tang dynasty and the Nara period, "matter, or the law of material form, dominates the spiritual in art." In the next "so-called *Classic* period," namely during the Tang dynasty and the Nara period, "beauty is sought as the union of spirit and matter" (ibid.). The final period, the age since the Song dynasty and the Muromachi (or Ashikaga) period, is characterized as "Romantistic," by which Okakura means that "Spirit must conquer Matter" (I, 94). He argues that "Japanese art ever since the days of the Ashikaga masters, though subjected to slight degeneration in the Toyotomi and Tokugawa periods, has held steadily to the Oriental Romantistic ideal—that is to say, the expression of the Spirit as the highest efforts in art" (I, 95). Okakura was basically a romanticist and advocated Taoist "individualism" (ibid.) instead of "Confucian socialism" (I, 36) or the "communism of Confucian thought" (I, 94).

In *The Book of Tea* also published in English (1906), Okakura proposed a new scheme "Classic–Romantic–Naturalistic," regarding the "Naturalistic" period as degeneration from the "romantic" one. His principal thought about the Classic and the Romantic periods in *The Book of Tea* did not change from that in *The Ideals of the East*.

From April to June 1910 Okakura taught the history of Asian art at the University of Tokyo, which Watsuji also visited as a student (see section 3). In this lecture Okakura argues that the "Hegelian division into three periods, namely the Symbolic, the Classic, and the Romantic, as if the world were already exhausted, is not valid. In art each tendency coexists simultaneously" (*Collected Works*, IV, 267). Okakura is not satisfied with Hegel's trichotomy. His position in this lecture is, however, principally the same as in his lecture in the 1890s and in his *The Ideals of the East*, in that he divided art as follows: "The East: Three main periods, antiquity, middle ages, and modernity: The Han, the Tang, and the Song style." He set the highest value on the "art and literature of the Song period" (IV, 334). Okakura's criticism does not, therefore, concern the trichotomy itself but instead its tendency of isolating the three stages and neglecting their multilayers.

The question is what then motivated Okakura to apply the Hegelian scheme to East Asian art history. Hegel himself named Asian art the "symbolic art form" and made it antecedent to the Greek or Classic and the European or Romantic art form. Lübke also had a similar perception: "In the vast regions of the East we have found forms of civilization, chiefly growing up along the course of mighty rivers, which have struck us as strange from their enduring stability and unchangeableness. The first step we take on entering the European continent brings us into a new world, full of activity

and fresh historic life, in which we at once are sensible of a *homelike* feeling" (Lübke, 121—italics by T. O.). It follows that according to Lübke, art history in the strict sense is possible only in the *home* of the European continent, from which the East and its art are principally excluded. To such a Eurocentric view of art history Okakura opposed his view that the East too has a Classic period like the West and that, as far as the Romantic period is concerned, the East takes precedence over the West.[7] Okakura used the Hegelian scheme to overturn Hegel's conviction that the West monopolized the classics and art-historical development.

3. The normative usage

In this section I would like to address the normative usage. Raphael von Koeber (1848–1923) made the primary contribution in the establishment of the normative usage of the word "classics" around the turn of the century. In his influential lectures at the University of Tokyo, Koeber underlined the importance of the knowledge of the Western classics and repeatedly asserted, as Kitarô Nishida (1870–1945) recalled in his essay "Memories of my teacher Koeber," that "without knowledge of the Western classics the understanding of the Western philosophy remains superficial" (Nishida, XI, 232). Tetsurô Watsuji depicted his teacher Koeber as follows: "My teacher Koeber richly embodied the classic period in Germany, or rather, his art of living was founded on that of the Greek philosophers" (Watsuji, VI, 26–27). Koeber's life according to Watsuji incorporated the German or Greek spirit of the classics and became hereby the art.

The next question is about Koeber's perspective on the classics. Koeber published little and his lectures on philosophy and aesthetics that were published in English did not address the classics.[8] After retiring from teaching, he addressed several themes in essays published in the journal "Thought" [*Shisô*] that he assumedly discussed with his students at the university, including the classics.

Koeber was a romanticist who favored Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Eichendorff. In his essay entitled "Romanticism" (1917), he characterized Romanticism as "having received the 'Danaäns' gift' of the idea of 'infinity'" (*Kleine Schriften*, 158). Romanticism seen this way is not restricted to a certain period. It rather represents the nature of humans distinguished from animals. Koeber even went so far to say that "Socrates and Plato, with them also the Neo-Platonists, are romanticists" (ibid.). What then is "the classic"? The answer seems to be "an opposite of the Romantic." The term means, however, "exemplary [mustergültig]," so that "the Romantic can also be classic at the same time" (161). Koeber, therefore, connects the stylistic point of view with the normative.

Although he lived in Japan for more than twenty years, Koeber had no interest in Japanese culture. His normative understanding of the classics exerted, however, a decisive influence on contemporary aesthetic or philosophical reflections on Japanese culture. In the following I will

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[7] In his lecture on the history of Asian art (1910) he asserted that "The Tang style could be compared to Greece and Italy; the Song style, however, has nothing in common with western art movement" (Okakura, IV, 308).

[8] Worthy of note is that Koeber provides the following concerning Kant's theory of genius: "*classicality* (i.e. his works are examples for other artists)" (*Lectures* …, 23). Here we find the germ of his later reflections on the classics or the classic.

address *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples* (1919) written by the young Watsuji. He was profoundly impressed by Okakura's 1910 lecture and referred to Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912) in the writing of *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples*. Several discourses of Okakura and Fenollosa influenced his ideas in this book.

This book was a kind of journal of Watsuji's trip to Nara in May 1918 and included many reflections on art in the Asuka and Nara period (592–794). He labeled certain art works of this period that he perceived as "classic."

First, Japanese art of this period was under the considerable influence of early Tang dynasty art and had—mediated by Gandhara art—connections with Hellenistic, or even further Classic Greek art. Taking *Shô-Kannon* (Avalokiteśvara) in *Yakushi*-Temple as a typical example of this period, Watsuji asserted that "its Classical power" derived from being "a new child born with India as the father and Greece as the mother" (*Pilgrimages*, 130—slightly modified). This stylistic view about the classics is supported by his global insight that the same Greek art brought forth both Christian art in the West and Buddhist art in the East.

Second, Watsuji ascribed normativity to Japanese art of the 7th to the 8th century. He regarded the wall paintings in the Golden Hall of *Hôryû*-Temple (around 700) as "the pinnacle of painting in all Asia" (167). Especially, the "daring boldness and roughness" of the two hands of Amitabha (in the 6th painting of the Golden Hall) witnessed, Watsuji wrote, "Classic strength," and by those who could not understand it "line drawing degenerated to the level of playgame" (168—slightly modified). "Now, I argue that this classical, vigorous art must be regarded as the true ancestor of our art. The spirit embodied in these hands must open a new artistic path in the realm of line drawing. The heart that feels deep love toward the hands, the image's left hand in particular, is the same heart that is critical of present-day Japanese painting" (ibid.).

Watsuji did not find the classics of Japanese culture in the periods that are generally regarded as Japanese. He did not see the classics in the so-called *Kokufû-Bunka*, i.e. native Japanese culture after the mid-Heian period (894–1185) during which influences from other countries were appropriated in a way specific to Japan. Watsuji did not perceive the townsmen merchant culture in the late Edo period in which the so-called isolation foreign policy was practiced by the Tokugawa shogunate and which produced Utamaro (1753–1806) und Hokusai (1760–1849) worthy of the term classic. He sees Japanese culture as classical in that period in which Japan was under the strong influence of China and Korea and flourished in the "worldwide stream" (Watsuji, XII 6) that originated from Greece. His idea of the classics was, therefore, based on his practical interests in activating and reinvigorating present-day Japanese culture by involving it again in the worldwide stream in which different cultures flowed into each other. The idea of the classics in Watsuji's essay that ascends to Greek antiquities was connected—mediated by Japanese art in the 7th and 8th centuries—to the contemporary task of again leading Japanese culture to the global standard.

Now I would like to revisit the above quotation from Miki at the beginning of my presentation. There are certainly some differences between what Watsuji wrote at the end of the 1910s and what Miki wrote in the mid-1930s. In *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples* Watsuji did not have the idea of the classics itself in mind. Only after discussion around "Japaneseness" [*nihonteki-narumono*] in the mid-1930s did the idea of the classics come to the foreground. Further, Miki did not share Watsuji's

idea about which period should be characterized as classic. What is at issue, however, is that Watsuji's essay anticipates Miki's thesis concerning the classics: "It is our present creative spirit, and not anything like nostalgia, that realizes a certain period in the past as classical." Watsuji's and Miki's insight has not lost its validity today.

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