Okakura Tenshin wrote many books on traditional Japanese culture but they were written mainly for foreign readers. The reason why he wrote for a foreign audience rather than for native Japanese was very clear. Japan was largely ignored by the Occidental world and Okakura sought to spread knowledge about Japan to remove this ignorance. In the early years of the formation of the modern nation-state, the Japanese intelligentsia tried to reconstruct the country so that it could compete with the Western world in all spheres of life.

The most powerful direction of this movement of reconstruction was to use the old framework of the emperor system (Tenno sei) to assure the hegemony of the samurai or warrior class. The quintessence of this movement consists of the revival of Confucianism. Ito Hirobumi, one of the major leaders of this movement, said he wanted to invest the Confucian body with a new Western dress. Ito Hirobumi introduced a European-style constitutional monarchy and he infused the language of the Imperial Constitution with the Confucian precepts: the worship of the sovereign, respect for ancestors, respect for elders, the differences between man and woman, obedience of wife to husband. All these precepts were meant for the conservation of the old order of the Edo regime.

The second direction was to fundamentally reform society introducing the idea of democracy and with it new political and legal institutions. One of the major representatives of this movement was Ueki Emori who, along with many other members of the intelligentsia, supported the Peoples’ Rights Movement (Jiyu-minken undo). Ito Hirobumi and his government suppressed these political radicals because they were afraid that a democratic system would destroy the emperor.
Okakura Tenshin went the third way: he created the discourse of the spiritual supremacy of Japan, as well as ‘Asia’, over the Occident. He elaborated the framework of his argument in ‘The History of Japanese Art’ (lectures given in the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo bijutsu gakko) from 1890 to 1891. It is very important to keep in mind that this work was the result of the survey of ‘National Treasures’ planned by the Office of the Survey of National Treasures (Zenkoku Houmotsu torishirabekyoku) which was under the control of the Ministry of the Imperial Household (Kunaisho). This survey was carried out over nearly a decade (1888–97) and they collected and classified in eight categories 215,091 pieces of ancient cultural properties. As a member of this committee, Okakura examined many works of art to ascertain their value as ‘National Treasures’. It is really surprising that this system of classification of national treasures is still being used for it is the clearest symbol of cultural nationalism in Japan.

This classificatory system aimed to establish the principles that would identify what was unique and of the highest quality as the cultural tradition of Japan and to create what is ‘Japanese’, or in other words, to define what is not Japanese, that is ‘the Western’. Keeping in accordance with this nationalistic way of seeing, Okakura Tenshin published his famous ‘The Ideals of the East with Special Reference on the Art of Japan’ in 1903. In this book he declared the principles of Great Asianism. He examined the roots of the great traditions of Asian philosophy from India and China discussing Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. And he declared ‘Asia is one’.

The history of modern Japan shows that this Macro-Asian centralism ended tragically with the Second World War. I would like to note here the recent echo of Okakura’s voice in a book written by a Tanaka Hidemichi, a historian of Western art and the president of a nationalistic group called the ‘Society for Writing a New History of Japan’ (Atarasii kyokasho o tsukuru kai). This group is one of the most dangerous contemporary right-wing radical groups. In the book, ‘The History of Japanese Art’ (Husosha 2002) Tanaka Hidemichi took up the same discourse as Okakura Tenshin arguing that Japan once had great artists like Michelangelo and ‘we’ were superior to any Western country. He wrote that Okakura’s spiritual collaborator was Vivekananda who believed that Indian spirituality was superior to that of Western countries. In this way Vivekananda sought the restoration of Hinduism to fight against the Western domination of India.

In truth, Okakura was in India 1901–1902, well before he wrote the history of Japan, and it was during this stay in India that he wrote a very remarkable pamphlet entitled ‘The Awakening of Asia’. This was written under the strong influence of Vivekananda. Okakura met Vivekananda in the autumn of 1901. In January 1901, Okakura received information of this Indian saint from Miss J. Mcleod, a faithful follower of Vivekananda. At first, Okakura invited Vivekananda to Japan to