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The Chinese Turn in Philosophy

**THE CHINESE TURN
IN PHILOSOPHY**

Takahiro Nakajima

Preface ————— 7

Acknowledgements ————— 17

I. Deconstructing Chinese Philosophy

1. Don't Mix! Can Be Dangerous:
De Anima in China ————— 21

2. From Foundation to Difference:
On the Conception of the *exteriority* and the *interiority*
in Chinese Philosophy ————— 37

3. Pour en finir avec ce désir récurrent de *TONG* 統 ————— 51

II. Genealogy of Modern Philosophy in East Asia

4. Pragmatism and Modern Chinese Philosophy:
The "genetic method" of John Dewey and Hu Shi ————— 67

5. Historical Consciousness in Hu Shi and Maruyama Masao — 83

6. Trace of Legitimacy and Justice in Maruyama Masao ————— 105

III. Flickering Shadows of China in Japanese Modernity

7. Genealogy of Nothingness:
Nishida Kitaro and China ————— 121

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8. Buddhist Discourses on Contemporary Bioethical Problematics in Japan ————— 141
9. Like Tongueless Men: Silence at Fushun Coalmine ————— 161

IV. The Moments of Tears: *Reflecting* European Philosophy

10. Der Moment des Tränenvergießens:
Gedanken mit Jacques Derrida zur transzendentalen Ökonomie der Zeit
————— 175
11. Lexikon zur Zeittheorie Derridas ————— 201
12. Relire *Fonder la morale* de François Jullien
et redécouvrir une pensée chinoise plurielle ————— 207
- Note about the author ————— 223

1. *Plurality in Philosophy and the Violence of Philosophy*

UTCP¹ has been a philosophical movement during the last five years. Its aim has been to open a philosophical space to inquire into the condition of the possibility of co-existence with others through intervening in hegemonic social discourses as well as by deconstructing a diverse range of philosophical discourses.

But the question remains: Why be philosophical today? Has philosophy not already carried out its role? Isn't it the most meaningless discourse in humanities? It could be true that philosophy has come to an end, having emerged as a science posing certain types of fixed questions in Europe under the institutional background of the modern university system. Nevertheless, philosophy has been so resilient as to address such ideas as *the end of philosophy* and *the meaninglessness of philosophy* in order to survive. In doing so, philosophy became a sort of immortal science, obstinately refusing to die. It has haunted other non-philosophical sciences by *philosophizing* them and thereby extending its own scope of inquiry.

Long before UTCP was established, I had been interested in this movement which has always been conscious both of its own limits and of the *other* of philosophy. Whenever philosophy came under attack or became obliged to recognize its own limitations, it would re-appropriate this *other* of philosophy and re-draw its own borders. This image of philosophy leads one to see it as Penelopean task of endlessly drawing and erasing lines.

If this process of re-drawing borders results only in reconstruction, then it is nothing more than an extension of philosophy, and we are then faced with the extreme self-consciousness of philosophy. However, what

1. UTCP (The University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy): the 21st Century COE (Center Of Excellence) program at the University of Tokyo, Komaba.

I would like to find in this movement is something quite different. There might exist more subtle “*lignes de fuite*” that might be able to resist this type of re-appropriation and make philosophy open to the *other* in a completely different way. At this time, philosophy and its *other* (represented as *non-philosophy*, *a-philosophy*, or *pre-philosophy*) will reflect each other and transform together. They will be set in a curved or refracted space where we can find plurality *in* philosophy.

When I use the term “plurality *in* philosophy,” it does not mean that there are many philosophies in our temporal-spatial world. It means that philosophy cannot be reduced to one genuine genre of philosophy, but that it will always be with the *other* philosophy or the *other* of philosophy *in its core*. In short, plurality *in* philosophy is, simultaneously, the condition of the possibility and impossibility of philosophy. On the one hand, it makes philosophy more proper by being able to absorb every *otherness*, but on the other hand, it also makes philosophy welcome *otherness* in spite of the fact that doing so consumes away philosophy itself. We cannot talk about co-existence or comparison until we reach this point.

Just as with the condition of the possibility and impossibility, if I am allowed to use Kantian terms in a deconstructive way, “Kritik without synthesis” should be necessary to resist the re-appropriation of philosophy. It is an action of cutting out (*krinein*) the condition of the possibility and impossibility of philosophy, instead of reaching solid grounds through synthesis. It is a philosophical attitude of making philosophy open to the *other*. If being philosophical still means anything today, it should be relevant to this “Kritik without synthesis.”

Nevertheless, it is not easy to see philosophy as being open to the *other*. It compels us to consider the problem of the original violence to the *other*. Philosophy is not innocent when it draws and re-draws the line which define itself. It makes different types of discourses into the *other* of philosophy or the *other* philosophy. This is an original violence, but insofar as it is always hidden and to be discovered only later, it *was* an original violence to the *other*. This is why being open to the *other* should signify opening up *once again* to the *other* while examining the delimitations of philosophy, inquiring into the violence against the *other*, and *consuming* away philosophy.

Certainly, it is almost impossible to escape from violence, original violence in particular, but it is indispensable to inquire into the violence of the re-appropriation of the *other* by philosophy and necessary to determine how to render justice to the *other*. From this vantage point, *being philosophical* begins to exist in our concrete world. It has to inquire into the history of violence and the right of resistance to violence.

2. Chinese Philosophy : An Alternative to being the other of Philosophy

During my undergraduate days as a student in the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo, I was originally interested in Political Philosophy and European Philosophy. My academic ambitions were focused on delving into the essential meanings of *the political* and *the legitimate*. Unfortunately, I had no chance to pursue this in the Faculty of Law after the retirement of Professor Maruyama Masao. All I had to choose from were courses which never dealt with these concepts directly such as analysis of political processes, political science and positive laws.

I could, however, detect a problematic similar to what I had in mind in the works of contemporary European “philosophers” such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Martin Heidegger.² Each of them took up these themes seriously in different and contradictory ways. After a while, I encountered political philosophers like J. G. A. Pocock and Hannah Arendt. In my view, the focus of these scholars turned towards violence. What is violence? How does it function? What is able to resist violence? In these questions one could see the realms of *the political*, *the legal*, and *the ethical*. Moreover, history was employed as not just a narration of violence or activity of philosophy, but also as a space of memory and as a witness to violence. Memory is another function of history as a narrative of resistance, while violence always aims to destroy this ability to narrate events in a different way than historiography. These aspects of contemporary European Philosophy so attracted me that I turned my back on the study of political science during my undergraduate years.

2. I placed “philosophers” in quotations inasmuch as I see them more as individuals who had complicated relationships with philosophy and criticized philosophy as such in order to open a realm of the “other.”

At the same time, I had decided to study Chinese Philosophy, even though I was sure that the field would soon perish in Japan. The reasons for which I chose Chinese Philosophy are too complex for me to go into detail here. Suffice it to say that I was convinced that Chinese Philosophy was an alternative to the *other* of European Philosophy. To me it seemed like *a philosophy*,³ whose modes of interaction with the *other* were markedly different from those of European Philosophy. Having confronted these two philosophies, we would be able to consume away the idea of philosophy lying at their tangent and ascertain the *topoi* for the *other* of philosophy.

I never forgot the debate about whether or not Chinese Philosophy was *philosophy* or not. Non-European philosophies like Chinese Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, and American Philosophy have often been regarded as improper philosophy, pre-philosophy, or non-philosophy. Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese Philosophies have been subject to even worse contempt. They are forced into being defined as *thought*. There are two typical reactions to this. One is to limit oneself to the realm of *thought* and play the role of the *other* of European Philosophy. The other is to over-philosophize oneself in an attempt to exhibit the same philosopheme as European Philosophy, and in some cases to even claim the potential to transcend it. It is a simple matter to find good examples of these two types of reactions in the modern history of philosophy in China and Japan.

These two types of reactions were inevitable, but they often resulted in an over-simplified understanding of European Philosophy and in shielding non-European Philosophy from severe philosophical criticism. In contrast, what is important is to “reflect (*bend back together* in Latin)”⁴ these two philosophies by shaking philosophemes each other. In other words, it is necessary to confront Chinese Philosophy as a criticizable and deconstructible one, while delimiting European Philosophy. Chinese Philosophy has its own philosopheme, which makes clear the limitations of philosopheme in European Philosophy. Yet it also has a similar prob-

3. *A philosophy* means neither the Philosophy nor the other philosophy. It is a countable-singular philosophy among plural philosophies.

4. Cf. François Jullien, « Europe et Chine : dans le miroir », in *Le Monde*, 19 Septembre, 1997.

lematic as the latter, concerning the condition of the possibility of philosophy.

For example, I have been using the term “European Philosophy.” However, can we really conceive it as a coherent entity? There should be English Philosophy, French Philosophy and German Philosophy, which all have deep differences between them. They have each been grasping for the crown of philosophy for some time, each laying claim to being the true inheritors of the Greek philosophical tradition. Herein lie the problematics of legitimacy, heritage, and language. These problematics have not been the exclusively proper philosopheme of European Philosophy, but also exist at the core of Chinese Philosophy as well, inasmuch as they are strongly tied to the condition of the possibility of philosophy.

Thus, I began to deconstruct Chinese Philosophy and contemporary European Philosophy at the same time.

3. Concrete Problematics in my zigzag Itinerary

3-1. Chinese Philosophy

Firstly, my concerns regarding Chinese Philosophy are grouped into four major problematics.

1) Otherness and Evil

Modes of representation of *otherness* and the distribution of *evil* between ego and the *other* are critical to developing an understanding of *the ethical* in Chinese Philosophy.

See “Don’t Mix! Can Be Dangerous: *De Anima* in China” (Chapter 1).

2) Violence and Language

Since the publication of “The Violence of Rectified Language and its Unraveling in the *Xunzi*” (1990), I have been tracing this problematic in literature as well as philosophy from ancient China to modern China.

See “From Foundation to Difference: On the Conception of the *exteriority* and the *interiority* in Chinese Philosophy” (Chapter 2).

3) Historiography and Historical Consciousness

The question of how best to narrate events is a recurrent question in the Chinese historical consciousness and is strongly connected to ethics.

See « Pour en finir avec ce désir récurrent de *TONG 統* » (Chapter 3) and “Historical Consciousness in Hu Shi and Maruyama Masao” (Chapter 5).

4) The Configuration of Oriental Studies

It cannot be forgotten that Chinese Philosophy is a product of modern scholarship. It is necessary to pursue the configuration of Oriental Studies in Asia, which is intimately related to political problems such as nationalism and colonialism.

See “Pragmatism and Modern Chinese Philosophy: The ‘genetic method’ of John Dewey and Hu Shi” (Chapter 4) and “Like Tongueless Men: Silence at Fushun Coalmine” (Chapter 9).

These four problematics are too entangled to cleanly discern from each other. Besides, my recent academic endeavors have increasingly involved investigating the overlapping areas between them.

3-2. *European Philosophy*

Secondly, in regards to European Philosophy, I have been trying to make clear the limits of each philosopher from two different angles.

1) Ethico-Political Delimitation

I put Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt in the same arena in an attempt to set up a confrontation between their discourses. Through deep consideration of the similar terminology employed by Levinas while addressing ethics and Arendt while addressing politics, we discover *the political* in Levinas and *the ethical* in Arendt. Each, however, has the

potential to undermine itself.

2) In-deconstructive Divinity

From the very beginning, Jacques Derrida has held onto the unique concept of “transcendental divinity.” When referring to this in-deconstructible series, which included concepts such as “messianism without messiah” or “faith,” he was always more Levinasian than Levinas, whom he severely criticized. Herein lies an opportunity through which to boldly consider the transcendence of philosophy in theology.

See „Der Moment des Tränenvergießens: Gedanken mit Jacques Derrida zur transzendentalen Ökonomie der Zeit“ (Chapter 10) and „Lexikon zur Zeittheorie Derridas“ (Chapter 11).

In short, European Philosophy is in touch with the *other* of philosophy at the risk of becoming entangled with the latter. This consumption of philosophy seems to demand one to “be philosophical.” Chinese Philosophy can, in this respect, surpass it here by showing other ways of being open to the *other* of philosophy.

3-3. *Comparative Philosophy*

Thirdly, as for Comparative Philosophy, I have been focusing on multilateral comparisons between China, Japan, and Europe.

1) Chinese Modernity and Japanese Modernity

It strikes me as very strange that there has been little attention paid to comparisons between Chinese modernity and Japanese modernity on the levels of philosophy or political philosophy. A reason for this is that Japanese modernity was formed at the cost of ignorance of Chinese modernity.

See “Historical Consciousness in Hu Shi and Maruyama Masao” (Chapter 5) and “Genealogy of Nothingness: Nishida Kitaro and China” (Chapter 7).

2) Chinese Philosophy and Contemporary French Philosophy

“A Chinese man could pass through a wall” (In Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*). A Chinese dimension creeps into the most philosophical thinking of a contemporary French philosopher. François Jullien, a sinologist and philosopher, treats Chinese Philosophy as an “other of European Philosophy” in order to better understand the latter. How can we respond to this treatment of Chinese Philosophy in contemporary French Philosophy?

See « Relire *Fonder la morale* de François Jullien et redécouvrir une pensée chinoise plurielle » (Chapter 12).

3-4. *Political Philosophy*

Finally, as for Political Philosophy, I have once more taken up the study of modern and contemporary Japanese Philosophy as ethico-political discourses. What I emphasize here is to inquire into *the political* in modern and contemporary Japanese philosophical discourses as seen in politics, law, ethics and literature.

See “Trace of Legitimacy and Justice in Maruyama Masao” (Chapter 6); “Buddhist Discourses on Contemporary Bioethical Problematics in Japan” (Chapter 8); “Like Tongueless Men: Silence at Fushun Coalmine” (Chapter 9).

In this field, Maruyama Masao played an important role with his colleague Takeuchi Yoshimi. As a standard-bearer of postwar democracy in Japan, he was renowned for his analysis of contemporary politics. His main academic concerns were expressed in his works on the history of Japanese Political Thought. Though I have great respect for his role as a vital advocate of postwar Japanese democracy, I did not find his work on the history of Japanese Political Thought to be fully persuasive, as I saw something wrong with his treatment of Chinese Philosophy. He used it as a mirror reflecting Japanese Thought, and accordingly often oversimplified it. Even in Maruyama’s *thought*, Chinese Philosophy became a persistent problem.

4. *Philosophy as questioning in friendship*

Looking back at my *zigzag* itinerary as described above, I realize that I owe a great debt to my fellow colleagues. Some gave me opportunities to present papers in conferences while others encouraged me to pursue my studies in this field which had never received proper acknowledgment in the former Japanese academic system. Some gave informative, sensible and critical comments on my presentations, while others corrected my papers with great patience. Philosophy never exists without friendship, nor remains my *zigzag* itinerary without it.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of my friends, for their support and inspiration over the years.

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1. “Don’t Mix! Can Be Dangerous: *De Anima* in China” was given as a lecture at the UTCP International Symposium “On Kokoro,” in Japan-German Centre, Berlin, on 2–3 November, 2006.
2. “From Foundation to Difference: On the Conception of the *exteriority* and the *interiority* in Chinese Philosophy” was given as a lecture in French in the Institut Marcel Granet, l’Université de Paris 7, on 14 March, 2002.
3. « Pour en finir avec ce désir récurrent de *TONG 統* » was given as a lecture in the Institut Marcel Granet, l’Université de Paris 7, on 14 May, 2002 and in EHESS, on 3 May, 2002.
4. “Pragmatism and Modern Chinese Philosophy: The “genetic method” of John Dewey and Hu Shi” was originally given as a lecture at the Workshop “Genealogies of the Modern Notion of ‘History of Chinese philosophy,’” in Maison Franco-Japonaise, on 20–21 April, 2002. The modified version was given as a lecture at the UTCP International Symposium “Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Technology in the 21st Century,” in the University of Tokyo, on 12–15 December, 2003. It was published in *Proceedings of the COE Symposium: Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Technology in the 21st Century*, vol. 1, 2003, pp. 53–62.
5. “Historical Consciousness in Hu Shi and Maruyama Masao” was given as a lecture at the Workshop “East Asia: Trans-Regional Histories workshop,” in University of Chicago, on 13 May, 2005.
6. “Trace of Legitimacy and Justice in Maruyama Masao” was given as a lecture at the Friday Forum, in Harvard-Yenching Institute, on 25 March, 2005.
7. “Genealogy of Nothingness: Nishida Kitaro and China” was given as a lecture at the International Symposium “Discussion between Japan and Europe on 20th Century Thought,” in Prada Foundation, Milan, on 14 March, 2006.
8. “Buddhist Discourses on Contemporary Bioethical Problematics in Japan” was given as a lecture at the Guangzhou Harvard Symposium “Borderless Asia,” in Sun Yat-sen University, on 12–14 November 2006.
9. “Like Tongueless Men: Silence at Fushun Coalmine” was given as a lecture at the NYU Conference “Morality and Modernity,” in Department of East Asian Studies, New York University, on 10 January, 2007.
10. „Der Moment des Tränenvergießens: Gedanken mit Jacques Derrida zur transzendentalen Ökonomie der Zeit“ (translated by Michael Fuhrmann) was given as a paper for *Orbis Phaenomenologicus: Zeit* on March, 2000, but was unpublished.

11. „Lexikon zur Zeittheorie Derridas“ (translated by Michael Fuhrmann) was given as a paper for *Orbis Phaenomenologicus: Zeit* on March, 2000, but was unpublished.
12. « Relire *Fonder la morale* de François Jullien et redécouvrir une pensée chinoise plurielle » was given as a paper at the International Colloque « François Jullien: Passeur de pensée et concepteur de rencontres », in Université de Fue, Viet-nam, on 3 May, 2005.