

III. Flickering Shadows of China in Japanese Modernity

Genealogy of Nothingness

Nishida Kitaro and China

Taoist Culture is called a Culture of Nothingness. Nevertheless, it is still chained by Nothingness or a form of Nothingness.¹

It is not appropriate to say that Oriental Art developed in the direction of transcendence in the same way as Primitive Art. It might be better to say that it took an in-between position like Gothic, but developed in the opposite direction from Gothic. When Oriental Art is called spiritual, the meaning of the spiritual consists here. It does not find an expression of infinite life in a Gothic spire, but includes Heaven and Earth in a black tea bowl called "Kuroraku."²

Introduction

Nishida Kitaro (1870–1945) insisted on distinguishing Japanese Culture from Chinese Culture. For that purpose, he needed to introduce a certain difference in Oriental Culture defined as "Culture of Nothingness" or "Thought of Nothingness." He tried to differentiate between Japanese "Nothingness" and Chinese "Nothingness." However, contrary to his intention, this difference seems to be reversible. In other words,

1. Nishida Kitaro, "The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West seen from a Metaphysical Perspective" (1934), in NK, vol. 6: 351.

2. Nishida Kitaro, "Artistic Creation as the Historical Formative Function" (1941), in NK, vol. 9: 298.

Japanese Culture or Japanese “Thought of Nothingness” he tried to define seems to be similar to the Chinese “Thought of Nothingness,” all the more in the eyes of a Sinologist.

His original intention to distinguish Japanese Culture from other cultures, including Chinese Culture, put Japanese Culture in the middle among them. This centrality of Japanese Culture made it possible to coordinate various cultures around Japanese Culture. For such a privileged *in-betweenness* of Japanese Culture, there have been many positive reactions. For example, Ueda Shizuteru said: “Since Nishida put himself in the ‘middle’ among various cultures, he took upon himself the task of considering a new theory throughout his life. This new theory should be constructed on a ‘still deeper basis,’ and should be applicable to both Eastern culture and Western culture in this one-world.”³ However, this emphasis on the *in-betweenness* of Japanese Culture at the same time reminds us of the so-called Japanese Orientalism. We have to ask why Nishida assigned the *in-betweenness* to Japan, or why he raised Japan to an exemplified place at the “middle.”

It might be easier to answer the question by stating that Nishida was *Japanist*. But, if we forget that he opposed some kind of *Japanism*, and distanced himself from it, this answer would miss the importance of the question. Yet, it is difficult to save him by saying that the reason why he raised “Japan” and other *Japanist* concepts such as “Imperial Way” and “Japanese Spirit” consisted in the “struggle to gain the significance [of these concepts]’ against Japanese military authorities and *Japanists*.”⁴ It was not the situation at that time, but Nishida’s philosophy itself, that made Japanese Culture and the “Japanese spirit” a “still deeper basis” in the highest instance. Contrary to the defense for Nishida, his philosophical structure led him to conceal a critical dimension of the real politics at that time. It affirmed accomplished Fact much more than was done by other *Japanists*.

There is also another type of discourse that defends Nishida. It tries to lower the value of what he discussed about Japanese Culture, stating that it was “just a passing episode in the course of his thought” or it was

3. Ueda Shizuteru, “Nishida Kitaro: ‘that War’ and the ‘Problem of Japanese Culture,’” in *Shiso*, Iwanami Shoten, September 1995: 127.

4. Ibid: 114-15.

“far from purely philosophical.”⁵ However, it is impossible to separate philosophy from aesthetics and politics in Nishida’s thought. He argued that he could “clarify [his] fundamental thought in relation to” aesthetics and politics, which were involved in special concrete problems such as what was the nature of artistic production.⁶ Besides, the structure he tried to extract from Japanese Culture is similar to his “purely philosophical” discourse, i.e., the concept of “absolutely contradictory self-identity.”

What is necessary for us is neither to save Nishida in relation to the political situation at that time nor to protect him from criticism by saying that this is just a peripheral issue in his pure philosophy. We need to ask about the meaning and limitations of his acceleration of Japan or Japanese Culture as a *philosophical* question. It is not until then that we can inquire about any possibility of resisting the Japanese onto-aesthetico-ethico-political philosophy typically embodied in Nishida’s discourse.

In order to approach this question, it is inevitable to examine Chinese Culture which Nishida tried to put aside. This problem of Chinese Culture has been always neglected by favorable readings of Nishida, too. They praised his discourse on Japanese Culture as “intercivilizational” or “multi-culturalism.”⁷ Nishida was never indifferent to Japanese Orientalism. Although using Chinese concepts, he ignored China. However, in Nishida’s thought, especially in his “Thought of Nothingness,” there lurks *the Chinese* as a negativity inconvertible to positivity or as a negativity consigned to oblivion. The Oppressed must inevitably go back again.

But, it is complicated enough that this oblivion of *the Chinese* is also a repetition of the “Thought of Nothingness” in Chinese Culture. We

5. Bernard Stevens, “Philosophy of Kyoto School,” in *Shiso*, Iwanami Shoten, September 1995: 148.

6. Nishida Kitaro, “Introduction for *the Collection of Philosophical papers No.4* (1941),” in NK, vol.9: 97–99.

7. “Intercivilizational” is a word coined by David A. Dilworth who is a translator of Nishida’s work (*Nishida Kitaro, Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, translated with an introduction by D.A. Dilworth, University of Hawaii Press, 1987: 1). This word is cited by Stevens as well (“Philosophy of Kyoto school.” 148). “Multi-culturalism” is a word from John C. Maraldo (“The Problem of World Culture: mastery of Nishida’s philosophy of Sate and Culture,” in *Shiso*, Iwanami Shoten, September 1995: 169).

not only need to recapture Chinese Culture from its modern philosophical oblivion in Nishida, but we must also criticize the Chinese “Thought of Nothingness” in a way other than Nishida’s.

1. *The Form of Japanese Culture: Thought of Nothingness unchained from Nothingness*

At the beginning of his paper “The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective” in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: A Sequential Work* (1934), Nishida expressed his purpose.

I would like to consider how different the forms of cultures of East and West are from one another on their own basis from a metaphysical standpoint.⁸

Then he inscribed differences among Greek Culture, Christian Culture, Indian Culture, and Chinese Culture. The former two Western cultures are “Thoughts of Being,” while Indian Culture is that which “has the deepest Thought of Nothingness as its foundations.” Because Indian Culture reaches “the extremity of negation,” it ends up inversely affirming “the existence of absolute infinity.”⁹

As for Chinese Culture, Nishida recognized two dimensions in it simultaneously, i.e., the Confucian Culture of “Rites” and the Taoist Culture of “Thought of Nothingness.” In Chinese Culture, there is something “similar to” Western cultures and something “closer to” Indian Culture.¹⁰ But, at the same time, he distinguished it from other cultures. He insisted that Chinese Culture was “not philosophical” as the Greek one was, did not have the “idea of persona” as the Christian one did, and was “not religious” as the Indian one was.¹¹ He stressed par-

8. Nishida Kitaro, “The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West seen from a Metaphysical Perspective.” 335.

9. Ibid: 338.

10. Ibid: 341.

11. Ibid: 339–41.

ticularly the difference from Indian Culture. Although both of them belong to the “Thought of Nothingness,” Chinese Culture is a “practical” “Thought of Nothingness,” while Indian Culture is an “intellectual” one.¹²

This kind of characterization of Chinese Culture seems to be insufficient to distinguish the form of Chinese Culture from the others. But, it is effective enough to show the *in-betweenness* of Chinese Culture, which is not Greek, Christian, or Indian Culture. However, is not this *in-betweenness* also applicable to Japanese Culture? Nishida tried to find that Japanese Culture had a deeper *in-betweenness* than the Chinese one. The former is an affirmative *in-betweenness*, while the latter is a negative one. The former can convert the negative *in-betweenness* of the latter into an affirmative one. The procedure is as follows.

1) Based on the two dimensions of Chinese Culture, first of all, Nishida emphasized two aspects of Japanese Culture. First, Confucius “Rites” represented a moral aspect of Chinese Culture, while Japanese Culture was not moral but “emotional.”¹³ Second, Japanese Culture is more radically founded on the basis of “Nothingness” rather than the Taoist “Thought of Nothingness.”

2) Let us paraphrase the latter aspect. Nishida said, “Taoist Culture is called a Culture of Nothingness. Nevertheless, it is still chained by Nothingness or a form of Nothingness.”¹⁴ Contrary to that insufficient “Thought of Nothingness” in Taoist Culture, Japanese Culture is unchained from “Nothingness” and reaches the “absolute affirmation” beyond the negative function of “Nothingness.” By saying so, he could find the authentic figure of “Thought of Nothingness” demanding that the “absolute negation must be the absolute affirmation”¹⁵ in Japanese Culture.

3) Nishida proposed a concept of *time* to unify these two aspects,

12. Ibid: 341.

13. Ibid: 346.

14. Ibid: 351.

15. Ibid: 350.

the emotional and the radical “Nothingness.” Greek Culture and Chinese Culture are spatial and solid, while Japanese Culture is temporal and flat.¹⁶ As far as “emotion comes out temporally,” it must always be “generative” and “developing” to produce “form without form.”¹⁷ As for the radical “Nothingness,” Nishida insisted that the “authentic self-limitation of Nothingness as the affirmation of absolute negation must be something in infinite motion,” thus, it is necessary to introduce the “present in motion,” which never becomes spatial or static.¹⁸ He concluded that it was Japanese Culture that embodied this temporality.

However, what did he aim to realize through this gesture to distinguish Japanese Culture from other cultures, especially from Chinese Culture? The last sentence of this paper reads: “We can learn the path along which we should truly advance only as we both deeply fathom our own depths and attain a profound understanding of other cultures.”¹⁹ Some years later, this “path along which we should truly advance” became evident.

2. Political Philosophy of the “Imperial Way”

“Wild cherry blossoms are glowing in the morning sun.” This is a phrase from a Japanese poem on the Japanese spirit composed by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). Nishida referred to this phrase not only in the last part of “The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West seen from a Metaphysical Perspective” (1934), but also at the beginning of *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (1940). Nishida declared

16. Ibid: 347.

17. Ibid. Nishida insisted that Japanese poetry beginning from *Man-yōshū* (*The Ten Thousand Leaves*) was already “lyrical” (ibid.) and has given great importance to “emotion.” However, he neglected Chinese Poetics, of which Japanese Poetics had been continuously conscious. For example, the “Great Preface” of the *Shijing* reads: “poetry is a place where our intent is expressed. Intent consists in Mind. Poetry is Word where intention is expressed. Once our emotion moves in Mind, it will appear in Word.” To express “emotion” is a core discourse of Chinese Poetics.

18. Ibid: 351.

19. Ibid: 353 (Dilworth, *Nishida Kitarō, Last Writings*: 254).

that the “Japanese Spirit” was “to obey the truth of things” and “to bow one’s head to the truth.”²⁰

Nishida distinguished Japanese Culture from other ones, and put it at a central position in this work as well. Indian Culture and Chinese Culture became “rigid and fixed” at some moment, whereas Japanese Culture was regarded as a “new creator of Oriental Culture through the assimilation of Western Culture,” because Japanese Culture could “go to things themselves without chains.”²¹

What allows Japanese Culture to do so depends upon its character of “Nothingness” and *in-betweenness*. Here, Nishida rephrased it as a “flexible-minded Culture,” which enabled the “Japanese Spirit” “to embrace other subjects from a standpoint of the World.”²² It is not “imperialism” which makes a “subject” when confronted with other subjects and possesses them from a standpoint of a “subject.”²³ That is, the “Japanese Spirit” Nishida wanted to defend became the “World” to embrace all subjects by virtue of negating or nihilizing subjectivity itself.

Nishida explained this structure from the concept of *time* again.

As I wrote once in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: A Sequential Work*, we can characterize various cultures in terms of *time*. I think it might be possible to arrange, relate, and unify various cultures in the structure of *time*.²⁴

Thus, Japan was privileged as a place to arrange other Cultures in its temporal structure. This acceleration was reinforced by the concept of *history* as well.

It seems me that the basis of our Japanese people’s thought consists of a principle of self-constitution in a historical world.²⁵

20. Nishida Kitaro, *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, in NK, vol. 9: 5.

The Conference “The Problem of Japanese Culture” was held in 1938.

21. Ibid: 6.

22. Ibid: 59.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid: 92.

25. Ibid: 52.

Japan is a vertical world. The Japanese spirit consists in a construction of Japanese history. However, Japan is no longer an isolated island in the Orient today. It is not a closed society any longer. It has become Japan in the world, or Japan has confronted the world. Therefore, the principle to constitute Japan should become the principle to constitute the world from now on.²⁶

At the present moment, as far as the “horizontal world has become vertical one,” Japan has to lead other countries that are standing in a horizontal space, because Japan is a country in a “vertical world” that is able to construct history. It is Japan that can “truly unify” other countries in the world.²⁷

But, how can we grasp such a Japanese principle in a concrete way? Nishida ultimately mentioned the “Imperial Way.”

It seems me that the Imperial Household transcends these subjectivities, and sets itself in a position in the world, determining itself as a contradictory self-identification between the subjective oneness and the individual plurality.²⁸

There is a fact founding of the country at the basis for our national thought. There existed just a so-called historical fact. This means that we will constitute a historical world on the axis of this fact. The Imperial Household is a contradictory self-identical world, an eternal present embracing past and future, and a place from which we come and to which we go. This must be the thought that has the total support of all people.²⁹

The Imperial Way has been a principle constituting the world from which we come and to which we go.³⁰

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid: 9–10.

28. Ibid: 48.

29. Ibid: 52.

30. Ibid: 53.

The secret of *time* makes the Imperial Household a historical continuation over “thousands of years” since the founding of the country. The “Imperial Way” is the uninterrupted production of history with the “total support of all people.” Thus, the “path along which we should truly advance” is nothing but a “demonstration of the Imperial Way.”³¹

However, we never make the “Imperial Way” “hegemonic” nor “imperialistic.” It must be a process of self-negation down to the extreme state: “everything becomes things and matters of the Imperial Household as the world (things are things that belong to a historical creative world, and matters are matters that belong to the historical creative world).”³²

Contradicting Nishida’s reservations, the process of self-negation in the “Imperial Way” was never innocent in comparison with hegemony and imperialism. However, we cannot find any possibility of criticism against the relevant State and the *status quo* in Nishida’s understanding of the “Imperial Way.” Far from that, it was totally affirmed for them as an accomplished Fact. The present State of Japan was legal and moral only because it existed *factually*. In “The Problem of the Reason for the State” (1941), Nishida asserted:

Politics has to be a step-by-step creation. The State forms itself legally, but the legal formation is not the State. The State should be a gathering place of all historical power.³³

We function morally as a creative element in a creative world. This means that we function nationally. Conversely, to function nationally means to function morally. From this standpoint, I think, we can solve the problem of the Reason for the State. [...] Being and Moral are unified into one in the State.³⁴

Concerning Law, Nishida concluded with the phrase: “Law and Morals are unified into one from a standpoint which regards the subject as the

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid: 56.

33. Nishida Kitaro, “The Problem of the Reason for the State” (1941), in *the Collection of Philosophical papers No.4*, in NK, vol. 9: 336.

34. Ibid: 348.

world, that is to say, from the standpoint of the State.”³⁵

To sum up, the self-negation in the “Imperial Way” is a political philosophy to unify Being, Law, and Morals in the State. This political philosophy could raise Japan and make Japan possess totality more strongly than any “imperialism.”

3. *Asthetization of Political Philosophy of the “Imperial Way”*

The political philosophy of the “Imperial Way” is aesthetic, too. This is not only because it is founded on “emotion” as mentioned above, it is also because it tries to register itself in a discourse of Art.

In the same year as the publication of “The Problem of the Reason for the State,” Nishida presented a paper on aesthetics: “Artistic Creation as the Historical Formative Function” (1941). In this paper, he frequently referred to Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), the author of *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1911), and paid much attention to Worringer’s definition of Gothic as an “in-between phenomenon.”³⁶ He wanted to have Oriental Art understood as still more gothic than Gothic.

If we think the Artistic Will lies in the middle between the transcendent [like Primitive Art and Oriental Art] and the immanent [like Classical Art], it should be gothic. This gothic can be seen as both internal and spiritual. However, it is not yet a third standpoint that I intend to take.

In my opinion, it is still a standpoint for the objective direction, and just a grasp of the space of things.³⁷

Although Nishida put high value on the *in-betweenness* of Gothic, he concluded that it was still insufficient because it was just a “grasping of a space of things.” On the contrary, the Oriental Art he was trying to re-define was an Art that “took the same position of *in-betweenness* as Gothic, but could develop in the opposite direction from Gothic.”³⁸ By “grasp-

35. Ibid: 350.

36. Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, R. Piper, 1911/1920: 31.

37. Nishida Kitaro, “Artistic Creation as the Historical Formative Function.” 298.

38. Ibid.

ing a space of Mind,”³⁹ Oriental Art could truly get away from itself and “set itself free in the Mind.”⁴⁰

Japanese Art was exemplified in this concept of Oriental Art. It was a “tea bowl of ‘Kuroaku’ to embrace Heaven and Earth” that corresponded to the Gothic spire.⁴¹ Otherwise, the style of Oriental Art of “making itself vanish into an absolute space” was also found in the “architecture of a tea-ceremony room.”⁴²

It seems to me that there is something flexibly minded and existent-real, which functions at the bottom of Japanese Culture. This should be able to be developed into a scientific spirit, which would never be chained to anything. We do not need to say that Japanese Art is mystic or symbolic. The essence of Japanese Art consists in grasping the world in the moment of the Absolute Present.⁴³

As the title of this paper shows, it is Japanese Art that has “the Historical Formative Function” and can “grasp the historical space as the existent-real.”⁴⁴ That is why we point out the *aesthetization* of the political philosophy of the “Imperial Way.”

4. *Maruyama Masao :*

Resistance against Japanese aesthetico-political philosophy

How can we delimit the Japanese “Thought of Nothingness” as an aesthetico-political philosophy? Or what possibility of philosophical criticism against it can we pursue? Here, we would like to examine a radical criticism of the “National Entity” in the aesthetico-political philosophy of Maruyama Masao (1914–96).

He argued the character of Japanese Culture in this way.

39. Ibid: 299.

40. Ibid: 282.

41. Ibid: 298.

42. Ibid: 282.

43. Ibid: 300.

44. Ibid: 299.

The Japanese sequentially absorbs what is new and what is fundamentally heterogeneous, without sufficiently confronting the past, a new thought gains victory over the past surprisingly quickly. This means that the past is put aside without consciously confronting the present, or the past is precipitated into the bottom of the historical memory. In other words, the past disappears from consciousness to sink into “oblivion.” Thus, it spouts out suddenly in a moment as “reminiscence.”⁴⁵

So-called “jumbled thoughts,” which had been buried in the depths of “oblivion,” spout out as “reminiscences” particularly in moments of “national or political crisis.” This is a time when people regard this phenomenon as a “returning to Japanese ‘original figure’ or ‘proper aspect.’”⁴⁶ How can we resist such a Japanese Culture in its amalgam of “oblivion” and “reminiscence”?

Maruyama first raised a question to the naked “Fact (factum)” having an affinity with “reminiscence.”

In a country without universality, Kobayashi Hideo finished peeling away universal designs when he faced the absolute of Facts utterly unmoved by “interpretation” or “idea”—there is only a way of going ahead toward things (Motoori Norinaga). Even Kobayashi with his fierce individuality had no choice but to silently bow his head in front of this Fact (things).⁴⁷

He criticized Naturalism as represented in the lineage from Motoori Norinaga to Kobayashi Hideo. Naturalism is an aesthetico-political theology based upon Nature. Maruyama regarded this Naturalism to be a supporter of the National Entity. In the same way as Nishida’s aesthetico-political philosophy of the “Imperial Way,” by appealing to the insight into the “impermanence of things” and to “reminiscence without any distracting designs,”⁴⁸ Naturalism connects the present Fact with History,

45. Maruyama Masao, “Japanese Thought,” 1957, in *Japanese Thought*: 11–12.

46. Ibid: 12–13.

47. Maruyama Masao, “Modern Japanese Thought and Literature,” 1959, in *Japanese Thought*: 120.

48. Kobayashi Hideo, “The Impermanence of Things,” 1940, in *Complete Works of Kobayashi*

and affirms the present-factual state as it is.⁴⁹

Therefore, it is necessary to find grounds to resist “reminiscence” and “Fact” in order to criticize an authoritative ideology. For that purpose, Maruyama tried to destruct the ideological aesthetics of the “Feeling of Reality” that supported “reminiscence” and “Fact” in the first place. He never stopped criticizing the “village community,”⁵⁰ which was a place where “all ideologies are *originally* embraced, and people are embraced by a world of Oneness by being released from the spell of every kind of abstract theory.”⁵¹ And, this was the place from which the National Entity had been nourished.⁵²

Second, Maruyama stepped forward to separate History and Norm from their adhesion with Being. That is, he tried to make Historicity and Normativity irreducible to the “Natural” by appealing to the artificiality of the “Natural.” At this stage, he attempted to introduce Historical Consciousness as another Historicity, and Legitimacy as another ethico-legal Normativity, which would be opposed to the lineage of Naturalism since Norinaga, via Nishida, up to Kobayashi.⁵³

However, Maruyama could not effectively overcome the Japanese aesthetico-political philosophy. As for Legitimacy, he made it slip away from legality, and saw justice as a positive foundation of the power of orthodoxy as a support for a particular dogma. He abandoned the critical tool of the National Entity.

As for Historical Consciousness, like Nishida, Maruyama also privileged Japan over China. In his early days, he said that China was “a-historical,” while Japan had a “mature Historical Consciousness,” therefore, Japan could have Political thought.⁵⁴ A similar scene was

Hideo, vol.8, Shinchosha, 1967: 19.

Kobayashi here referred to Norinaga and admired the beauty of Historical Fact: “only a thing that rejects any interpretation and is immobile is beautiful. This is the strongest thought of Norinaga” (Ibid: 18–19).

49. Cf. Maruyama, “Japanese Thought:” 19–20.

50. Ibid: 46.

51. Ibid.

52. Cf. Ibid: 51.

53. You can see the details of the process of this resistance in an article by Nakajima Takahiro, “Memory and Legitimacy: Law, Violence and History in Maruyama Masao,” in *the Journal of the Humanities*, No. 86, Yonsei University, 2004.

repeated in his last days. In “The ‘Old Stratum’ of Historical Consciousness” (1972), Maruyama willingly discussed a Japanese “old stratum” characterized as “*Eternity* in the genealogical succession.”⁵⁵ He could not constitute Historical Consciousness on a Universal dimension.

We cannot but approve the mighty potential of the “flexible-minded”ness of the Japanese aesthetico-political philosophy. It absorbed even a severe critic such as Maruyama. But what was the reason for this absorption? We cannot help recognizing in it a program of separation of China from Japan. Even Maruyama could not escape from the program to arbitrarily make the negative aspect of Japan impose on the Chinese. The distinction between positive Japan and negative China would result in a re-affirmation of Japan.

Yet, the characteristics included in the “form of Japanese Culture” (like “Thought of Nothingness” and “Emotion” or “Historical Consciousness” and “Legitimacy”) are also easily found in Chinese Culture as a matter of *fact*. Moreover, we can even find in Chinese Culture a program to affirm itself by appealing to the concept of “History,” and by distinguishing one’s own culture from other cultures.⁵⁶

If so, we must retrace this Chinese genealogy, which has been consigned to oblivion. And, then we need to arrange it horizontally by the side of Japanese aesthetico-political philosophy in order to resist the latter. This arrangement itself could help to stop the program of Self-affirmation. In doing so, we would like to open up the other possibilities of philosophy that never go to the programmed end.

54. Maruyama Masao, *Lecture Transcript*, vol.1: History of Japanese Political Thought, University of Tokyo Press, 1998: 136.

55. Maruyama Masao, *Loyalty and Treason: A Phase of Intellectual History in Japanese Transformative Period*, Chikuma Shobo, 1992: 350.

56. Here, we can refer to the Han Yu in Tang dynasty. He asserted “Guwen” literature based on one’s spontaneity, which has been carrying a “Chinese ancient way” in it. And, by appealing to this old but ever lasting literature, he distinguished “China” from Buddhism. Cf. Nakajima Takahiro, “Delimitation of the *Spontaneity* for a Deconstruction of Neo-Confucianism,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, No. 9, the Society for Chinese Philosophy in the University of Tokyo, 1995.

5. Genealogy of Nothingness (1): the Laozi and Wang Bi’s Commentary

Let us return to Nishida’s “Thought of Nothingness” once again. By exemplifying Japanese Culture as the extreme embodiment of the “Thought of Nothingness,” Nishida created a basis for his Japanese esthetico-political philosophy. In contrast to Chinese Culture (Taoist Culture in particular), which is “still chained by ‘Nothingness’ or a “form of Nothingness,” Japanese Culture is unchained from “Nothingness.” In other words, beyond the negative function of “Nothingness,” Japanese Culture reaches the “absolute affirmation” and accepts the whole reality. However, if we argue from the standpoint of Chinese Culture, the scene of “Thought of Nothingness” to wholly affirm reality had already been seen in the China of the Six Dynasties.

When we retrace the genealogy of “Nothingness” in Chinese Culture, it is worth noting the modern philosophization of the concept of “Nothingness.” The concept of “Nothingness” was excessively registered in modern metaphysical discourses both in Japan and in China. If we simply retrace its genealogy, we cannot help but find a duplicate of the modern concept of “Nothingness” in traditional Chinese Culture. Thus, it is necessary for us to re-read Chinese texts, while paying attention to how they have been read in the modern philosophical discourse.

The first clue to retracing the genealogy of “Nothingness” is the ancient Taoist text called the *Laozi Daode Jing*. Nishida himself referred to this text: “It seems me that the so-called Tao is apparently a Thought of Nothingness in Taoist teaching like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*.”⁵⁷ He cited several chapters (1, 18, 14, 16, 2, 20, and 25) from the *Laozi* one after another. But, there is no passage that clearly defines Tao as “Nothingness” in the chapters cited. For example, Chapter 1 begins: “Tao that we can regard as Tao is not a constant Tao. The Name that we can regard as a Name is not a constant Name. Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth. Name is the mother of Myriad things.” In short, this chapter shows that “Tao” is not “Nothingness” but “Namelessness.”

57. Nishida Kitaro, “The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West seen from a Metaphysical Perspective:” 340.

Again, in chapter 14, “Tao” is treated as “Shapeless” or “Formless.” As far as Nishida’s citations can prove, “Tao” has the meaning of “Formless” at most.

According to Horiike Nobuo, who is an excellent scholar in the philosophical reading of Chinese Culture, to comprehend “Nothingness” as “Formless” is “the limit of Taoist thinking at the end of Han.”⁵⁸ Beyond this limit, one who could grasp “‘Nothingness’ (beyond a binary opposition between Being and non-Being) as the entire ‘Nothingness,’ as the absolute ‘Nothingness’ and as the existence of nothing absolutely” was Wang Bi (226–49) in the Wei dynasty.⁵⁹ In order to prove this proposition, Horiike refers to Wang Bi’s commentary on Chapter 1 in the *Laozi*: “Every Being begins with Nothingness. That is, the moment before forming or the Nameless is the beginning of a Myriad of things.” It is in this part, he suggests, where Wang Bi found “Metaphysical ‘Nothingness’” in the *Laozi*. On the basis of this interpretation, Wang Bi could set up other concepts such as “Tao,” “Profundity,” “Depth,” and “Bigness” as sub-categories of “Nothingness” or as limitations on “Nothingness.” Thus, Wang Bi should have been successful in explaining the generation of “Being” coherently.⁶⁰

This reading by Horiike might be the most refined philosophical explanation of the metaphysical acceleration of “Nothingness” in Chinese Culture. However, Wang Bi’s “Absolute ‘Nothingness’” would be still “chained to Nothingness” as long as we keep following Nishida’s diagnosis. Nishida thought that the “absolute negation is nothing but the absolute affirmation.”⁶¹ Unless the “Thought of Nothingness” affirms “Being,” the metaphysics of “Nothingness” would not have been completed.

We need to take notice of the above philosophical explanations. As for Wang Bi’s commentary, the first half of his commentary on Chapter 1 is just a citation from the very text of the *Laozi*, Chapter 40. That is, this part does not show Wang Bi’s originality. Once we read his whole com-

58. Horiike Nobuo, *Study on History of Ideas in Han Wei Dynasties*, 1988: 483.

59. Ibid: 482.

60. Ibid: 483–84.

61. Nishida Kitaro, “The Forms of Culture of the Ancient times of East and West seen from a Metaphysical Perspective.” 350.

mentary on Chapter 1, we easily understand that Wang Bi interpreted “Nameless” in the text as “Shapeless” or “Before forming,” not as “metaphysical ‘Nothingness.’” This is reinforced by his commentary on Chapter 40, where he disposed of binary opposition: “High and Low;” “Noble and Humble;” “Being and Non-Being.” “Nothingness” was interpreted as “Non-Being,” which contributed to “make Being complete.” In sum, even Wang Bi never positioned “Nothingness” as “metaphysical ‘Nothingness.’” He comprehended “Nothingness” as “Non-Being” to benefit “Being.”

This must be a strange scene both for Nishida and for Horiike. As long as the aim of “Taoist Culture” consists in benefiting “Being” by supporting “Nothingness” as “Non-Being,” this becomes closer to the Japanese Culture idealized by Nishida. More surprisingly, Nishida’s ideal world had already been realized in the other text on “Taoist Culture” at the ultimate figure. It is time to go to the second clue of retracing the genealogy of “Nothingness.”

6. Genealogy of Nothingness (2): *the Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang’s Commentary*

Guo Xiang (ca. 252–312) in the West Jin dynasty was praised as “Wang Bi’s Equal.” He is famous for his commentary on the *Zhuangzi*. According to Horiike, the character of his thought is the “total exclusion of any metaphysical ground or the Supreme in his Ontology.”⁶² Horiike continues that he negates even Wang Bi’s “Nothingness” as the metaphysical ground and asserts “Being” itself as having its own ground. That is, everything “varies by itself,” “acquires itself,” and “generates by itself.” This is the ultimate scene of “Nothingness,” where “Nothingness” negates itself and affirms “Being” absolutely. It is the same ideal Nishida wanted to find in Japanese Culture.

Moreover, Guo Xiang’s “Ontology of ‘Nature,’” as Horiike analyses it, is inclined to demand the “Negation of the Mind” of the Sage. For it is not until “he negates his mind, devotes himself to ‘Nature’ and corre-

62. Horiike: 575.

sponds to every variation of Being” that he can neither “acquire ‘true teaching’ nor comprehend ‘Nothingness.’”⁶³ This “Nothingness” is not “‘Nothingness’ as Ontological ground,” but “the ultimate accomplishment, and the realization of ‘Nature.’”⁶⁴ At this ultimate stage, everything is confirmed as it is through a “Negation of the Mind.”

If we accept Horiike’s reading, the ideal world of Nishida had already been realized in Guo Xiang’s thoughts. However, we should pay more attention to the status of “Nothingness” in Guo Xiang.

Contrary to Wang Bi, who used “Nothingness” as a contributor for “Being,” Guo Xiang separated “Being” from “Nothingness,” and founded “Being” on “Being” itself without “Nothingness.”

As far as Nothingness is already negated, it cannot engender Being. As far as Being is not yet engendered, it cannot engender something else. So who produces things? Things spontaneously engender themselves. [...] there is no place where things come out of.⁶⁵

Nothingness cannot engender things.⁶⁶

There is no Nothingness after all, while Being comes out spontaneously and abruptly.⁶⁷

These citations show that Guo Xiang did not negate “Nothingness” at the ultimate metaphysicalization of “Nothingness,” but affirmed “Being” as “Nature” without “Nothingness.”

But, what was the concrete meaning of this self-affirmation of “Being” as “Nature”? If we retrace the genealogy of “Nature” before Guo Xiang, Ji Kang (223–62) in the Wei dynasty gave it a radical meaning. By saying “to devote oneself to Nature beyond a ‘ritual system’” (Ji Kang, “The Abandonment of Ego”), he negated the present “ritual system” based on Confucius’ “Rites” and “Human Virtue.” He also tried to devote himself

63. Ibid: 597.

64. Ibid.

65. Guo Xiang, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi Jiwulun*.

66. Guo Xiang, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi Tiandi*.

67. Guo Xiang, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi Gengsangchu*.

to “Nature” beyond/before that system. However, surprisingly enough, Guo Xiang reaffirmed that system as “Nature.”

As far as Human Virtue and Righteousness belong to human emotional nature, everything goes well if we devote ourselves to them.⁶⁸

In other words, he absolutely affirmed the Confucian system represented in “Human Virtue and Righteous,” which had been criticized by the Taoist school.

Thus, Guo Xiang’s thought lost the possibility of criticizing the existing state (the *status quo*) for its lack of “Nothingness.” This was a consequence of “Taoist Culture” that was *unchained* from “Nothingness.” The consequence should have been repeated in Nishida as well. Even though Nishida negated “Nothingness” after the metaphysicalization of it, what he affirmed in the “absolute affirmation” of “Being” was “Nature” based on “human emotional nature.” Ironically enough, the Chinese “Thought of Nothingness” was restored in the philosophy of Nishida in a modern design.

Conclusion

By distinguishing Japanese Culture from Chinese Culture, Nishida insisted on making Japanese Culture re-appropriate the essence of “Thought of Nothingness,” which ended up in the self-negation and the absolute affirmation of the present Fact. But, once we retrace the genealogy of “Nothingness,” we can find that this way was already registered in the inheritance of Chinese Culture. However, Nishida forgot this Chinese inheritance, while he tried to accelerate Japan up into the privileged place of “Nothingness.” This logic was no less than Japanese Orientalism to centralize Japan through the oblivion of China. Even if Nishida took a critical stance against both the “subjectification” of Japan and “hegemonization” or against “imperialization” of the “Japanese spirit,” what is at stake is his gesture to set China at a peripheral position, and to

68. Guo Xiang, *Commentary on the Zhuangzi Pianmu*.

set Japan in the privileged place of “Nothingness.” Besides, this concept of “Nothingness” let Nishida lose the possibility of asking a metaphysical (i.e., anti-natural) question critically to the accomplished Fact in Japan.

If we imagine the resistance against Japanese onto-aesthetico-ethico-political philosophy, we have to pursue Historicity and Normativity once again in the same way as Maruyama, but without repeating his setback. For that, before we hasten to build up the ultimate instance of Japanese Culture, we need to re-read Chinese Culture and its inheritance through a genealogical eye other than Japanese Orientalism. If we neglect to do so again, we will be compelled to stay in the closure of Nishida’s problematic.

We would like to understand the conclusion drawn by Nishida in a way other than Nishida’s: “We can learn the path along which we should truly advance only as we both deeply fathom our own depths and attain a profound understanding of other cultures.”

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