A Rereading of the Symposium Entitled " Overcoming the Modern": Unconscious Links in Japanese Discourse on Civilization or the Modern

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Summer of 1942

In July 1942, a little more than half a year after the outbreak of the Pacific War, the literary circle named Bungakkai organized a symposium with the title "Overcoming the Modern" (*Kindai no chōkoku*). Thirteen intellectuals participated in discussion of "overcoming the modern," or more precisely, how to overcome the modern, for two days in the middle of summer. The proceedings were published within the same year in a literary monthly magazine *Bungakkai* for two months in a row.¹

Most of the participants were around the age of forty, and had already gained recognition in such fields as literature, philosophy, history, and music. They had been asked to write and submit a paper on the issue well before the gathering, and to read the other members' views. Their essays were distributed in advance.

Originally, according to the opening statement made by Kawakami Tetsutarō, a literary critic who served as one of the chief organizers and moderators of the gathering, the discussion was intended to deal with the following three main topics²:

(1) What is modernity in the West?

(2) After the modernity in the West had been imported to Japan during the course of Civilization and Enlightenment [*bunmei kaika*], what kinds of merits and demerits were brought about?

(3) Some problems with Japanese culture under the influence of modernity imported from the West.

In his concluding remarks, Kawakami said, "Whether the deliberations were successful or not, it was an indisputable fact of great importance that such intellectual debates had taken place with an intellectual shiver within the first year of the outbreak of the war."³ Also, he saw the discussion as reflecting a struggle between "the blood of the Japanese that truly motivates our intellectual life" and "Western intelligence that has been imposed too much on Japan in modern times."⁴

Like Kawakami, other participants in the symposium had been convinced by the outbreak of the Pacific War that the conflict was not only military but intellectual as well. The intellectual confrontation was, again according to Kawakami's expression, between "Western intelligence" [*seiōteki chisei*] and "the blood of the Japanese" [*Nihonjin no chi*].⁵

Prior to the Pacific War, Japan had been fighting against China since 1937. No matter how the government attempted to present it to the people, the fact still remained that the action in China was an unmistakable act of invasion. Most intellectuals had a desire to resist the course of events that the government had taken. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, however, although the military conflict was still in progress on the continent, Japanese intellectuals' desire to oppose government policy rapidly dissipated. The war seemed to have a new meaning, and was interpreted as a revolt against the modern West and, for that matter, its hegemony over Asia.⁶ The "intellectual shiver" [*chiteki senritsu*] to which Kawakami referred was an excitement arising from the prospect of that hegemony of Western thought and colonial governance being brought to an end.⁷

An Attempt at Overcoming "the Other"

It was natural that the symposium discussion eventually concentrated on the Western influence over modern Japan, or to be more precise, the significance of "civilization and enlightenment" [*bunmei kaika*] in the Meiji period. One of the participants, Hayashi Fusao, a novelist and cultural critic, went so far as to say, "I believe that civilization and enlightenment meant the adoption of European culture after the Meiji Restoration and resulted in the submission of Japan to the West."⁸

This was a rather emotional statement, to be sure, but the rest of the discussants also pointed out negative aspects of the Meiji Enlightenment, in particular utilitarianism and the craze for things material, not of the spirit, although they approved of the fact that the introduction of Western civilization was prerequisite for Meiji Japan in order to prevent the country from being colonized by the Western powers. The debate on "overcoming the modern" somehow concluded itself with a general consideration of the possibilities for Japan in the context of the 1940s. The problem was, after all, how Japan might retain its technological achievements yet preserve those cultural elements that made the Japanese distinctive.⁹ Put another way, the discussion attempted to propose that Japan overcome, or at least be liberated from, "the other"—an "other" that had once guided the country to become one of the powers in the world.

Naturally, throughout the two-day symposium, the West was frequently discussed. Yet when it came to criticizing the entity called the West, participants referred not to particular nations located in Europe, but almost exclusively to the United States. Further, what the speakers took up for criticism was not America as a whole but what they called "Americanism," that is, utilitarianism evidently perceived in a craze for things American or enthusiasm for material things. In other words, "'the other' to be overcome" was mainly represented by the United States, which in turn was reduced to "Americanism," which was again characterized by things material. The fact was that Japan was in conflict not only with the United States but with Great Britain and the Netherlands as well. Throughout the discussion, however, no reference was made to the Netherlands, a country that had once exerted unmistakable influence on Japan

during the period of national isolation.

Here, one is reminded of Nakae Chōmin's keen insight into Japan in the early 1900s:

But, when shortly they [the German troops] lined up on the battlefield in North China and engaged the enemy, they badly exposed their weakness; and seeing their barbarous conduct, all our soldiers realized for the first time that their so-called civilization was confined merely to things material and that, as far as reason and justice were concerned, they were no better than we and possibly far inferior.¹⁰

This shows the emergence of the view that Western civilization may be superior in "things material," but is decidedly *not* in terms of "reason and justice." The trend of the times which Chōmin pointed out with succinctness led to the unanimous criticism for "Americanism" that we observe in the symposium in 1942.

Furthermore, behind the discussion over the modernity, one can detect another intellectual trend of the Meiji and Taishō periods, that is, a debate over the ascendancy of "culture" over "civilization." Civilization in Meiji Japan did function as a driving force for establishing a new powerful modern state; however, with the progress in industrialization, civilization gradually began to be associated with the world of materialism, rationalistic but shallow spiritual planning and the leveling of existence. That is, civilization, once a brilliant state objective, came to remind one of something negative.

This understanding had developed by the Taishō period (1912–1926) into the ascendancy of spiritual "culture" or *bunka* over the "civilization" or *bunmei* represented by technology. This new concept of culture or *bunka* was chiefly influenced by the German term *Kultur*. *Bunka* thus appeared as a critic of *bunmei*. Culture or *bunka* was employed in the sense of the cultivation, improvement and ennoblement of the physical and spiritual qualities of a person or a people. It was in the Taishō period that the term *bunka* was used on a wide scale for the first time, in contrast to the associations raised by the description of Meiji Japan as *bunmei*¹¹.

Above all, this new usage of culture or *bunka* meant a reverence for the diverse creations of the spirit, for the mystery of the arts, which possessed a power and beauty greater than life itself. Yet, such a conception of culture or *bunka* was employed to attack what was seen as a mechanical or material character of civilization or *bunmei*. In contrast to the previous usage of civilization or *bunmei* in the early years of Meiji, *bunmei* came to possess a negative implication. This dichotomy between *bunmei* and *bunka* was also seen in the symposium *Kindai no chōkoku*. For instance, Nakamura Mitsuo wrote in his paper, "One could go so far as to say that at bottom the introduction of Western civilization at that time [during the Meiji period] amounted to nothing but the importation of machinery and the acquisition of the know-how to operate it." Given this intellectual background, it could be said that behind the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the West, in particular the United States, most intellectuals

saw *not* a clash of civilizations *but* a clash between culture and Western civilization as represented by technology and culture.

Previous Readings of the Symposium

Despite the above-mentioned seemingly well-organized preparations, however, the discussion did not conclude itself as it might have been expected. The participants often talked at cross-purposes. With no common understanding or definition of either "the modern" or "overcoming" among the discussants, the debate over modernity sometimes seemed superficial and emotional rather than scholarly. Probably due to this "unsatisfactory" outcome, most subsequent attempts to discuss the theme of "overcoming the modern" have not placed much significance on the content of the symposium itself. So far, the literature on this has treated the symposium as something like an aborted intellectual experiment, not to say a "failure."

Still, I would contend, given the discourses on or against civilization in modern Japan, that the symposium, in which more than ten active intellectuals engaged in a detailed discussion of modern Japan, was a scholarly event of significance in the context of the history of Japanese thought. The fact that no agreement was reached does not necessarily mean that the whole discussion was of little importance. It is *not* the outcome *but* the process of the discussion that matters; and yet, most previous scholarship that has treated this symposium has tended to point out the hollowness of the basic premise that seemed to underlie the gathering.

For instance, in 1958, Odagiri Hideo, a professor of Japanese literature at Hōsei University and a literary critic wrote:

Despite careful preparations, the difference among the participants as to the concept of modernity to be overcome prevented the discussion from going smoothly.¹²

Upon the outbreak of the Pacific War, a lot of literary figures expressed their approval of the war all at once, expecting that more strict thought control would be implemented. With this atmosphere in mind, *Bungakkai* people organized this symposium, hoping to establish unanimous glorification of the war in the fields of philosophy and art as well. Once the discussion was put into practice, however, they were not able to obtain such unanimous outcome as might have been expected.¹³

Odagiri's pioneering work was successful in presenting the whole framework of the symposium, sometimes in comparison with other similar intellectual attempts during the war. Still, precisely because of the fact that no unanimous conclusion had been reached, he did not pay sufficient attention to the content of the discussion itself. On the other hand, had the discussion proved to be more organized and successful in presenting a solid agreement among the participants, for instance, Odagiri surely would have attacked the outcome with more severity. Quite evidently, in either case, he would not have placed positive significance in the symposium, criticizing the shal-

low content or disapproving of the pro-war, not to say "fascist," attitude among the discussants.

The following year, in 1959, Takeuchi Yoshimi, a professor of Chinese literature at Meiji University, published an essay dealing with the symposium in more detail. His essay concentrated on sorting out the intellectual genealogies of the various participants;¹⁴ besides, as some critics have pointed out, the real significance of Takeuchi's piece consisted in his keen insight into the dual structure of the war that Japan had fought.¹⁵ He wrote to the effect that to China, the "Greater East Asian War" was plainly an invasion, whereas to the Anglo-American side it was a war between nations of imperialistic regime. Despite this clear dissection of the war that began in December 1941, Takeuchi, like Odagiri, was not enthusiastic about analyzing the content of the proceedings of the symposium.

The greatest legacy of "overcoming the modern," according to my view, was that it was not able even to function as an ideology of war and fascism. In other words, "overcoming the modern" failed to establish a new thought or idea, although in act it did struggle to.¹⁶

Another essay deserving mention here is by Hiromatsu Wataru, a professor of philosophy on the Komaba campus of the University of Tokyo. He wrote in 1980:

Frankly speaking, the symposium was not only poorly organized but did not bear much fruit as well.¹⁷

Given the initial framework conceived by Kawakami Tetsutarō, "The Completion of the Holy War and the Determination of our Intellectuals" would have been a more appropriate title.¹⁸

From Synchrony to Diachrony

All these earlier analyses of the 1942 symposium, as is easily discerned, placed little significance in the discussion itself. Instead, they attempted to illuminate the intellectual situation of the early 1940s and thus place the discussion in its proper context. They compared this symposium with other intellectual attempts, such as the symposiums organized by the Kyoto school scholars¹⁹.

Harry D. Harootunian referred to this tendency with succinctness:

It is one of the paradoxes that those scholars who have written so forcefully on the symposium, like Takeuchi Yoshimi and Hiromatsu Wataru, have generally dismissed the content of the discussions as trite and empty and have chosen to concentrate on the major intellectual affiliations represented by the participants. Instead of confronting the content of discussions, these and other writers have frequently appealed to its immediate intellectual context and thereby reduced the symposium to previously prepared positions that had already been articulated in prior discourses. Lost in a thick description of background context characterizing contemporary ideologi-

cal formations, the event disappears as nothing more momentous than a passing blip on the screen of the "current situation."²⁰

In the terminology of linguistics, the preceding approaches employed by many writers could broadly be referred to as "synchronic." Of course, "being synchronic" here is not "being simultaneous in the strict sense of the word," but rather, "being around the war-time period." In a "synchronic" perspective, one might conclude that nothing more could be added to these preceding works. That is, one is inclined to conclude that the discussion did not generate a satisfactory outcome, and the event can thus be referred to as an aborted intellectual experiment. Hence, to argue persuasively that this intellectual event was more than "a passing blip on the screen of the 'current situation,"²¹ one needs to place it in a different perspective, where new significance might be revealed. A perusal of the record of the discussion in a light other than "synchronic," that is, in a "diachronic" light, might contribute to generating fresh interpretations.

In fact, put in a "diachronic" light, some statements made by the discussants could instantly emit a fresh light. They could be regarded as replies—unconscious responses, perhaps, but recognizable as responses nevertheless—to a well-known lecture delivered four decades or so earlier by Natsume Sōseki, a key literary figure of the Meiji and Taishō periods. Sōseki's lecture was entitled "The Enlightenment of Modern Japan" [*Gendai Nippon no kaika*]. Before we proceed to a reading of this famous speech, some background needs to be mentioned here.

Natsume Soseki and Meiji Civilization and Enlightenment

In February 1911, it was reported that Natsume Sōseki, together with four other men of letters, including Kōda Rohan and Sasaki Nobutsuna, was nominated as a doctor of letters. What was being offered was not a doctoral degree in the sense we understand that today, but rather a membership of Academy of Arts and Sciences. Several days later, however, the press carried stories saying that Sōseki declined the nomination. Upon hearing this news, a number of people wrote to him supporting his decision, among them Sōseki's old teacher, James Murdoch.²²

Murdoch was a Scotsman who had taught Sōseki English and history in high school and college.²³ As a student, Sōseki visited Murdoch's house, even on Sundays. They developed a close relationship as teacher and student. Murdoch left Japan several years later to join the socialist movement in Paraguay, and he and Sōseki fell out of touch. Sōseki had not heard from him since his departure, although Murdoch \p9080had become disillusioned with the movement that he found in South America and returned to Japan.

The old teacher's encouraging letter was a pleasant surprise to Sōseki. In the letter Murdoch also asked his former pupil to read the introduction of the first volume of *History of Japan*, which he had recently published. Upon receiving a copy, Sōseki immediately perused the introduction, in which he discovered Murdoch's interpreta-

tion of enlightenment in Meiji Japan. Sōseki found the teacher's view to be a little too optimistic. Therefore, when he published his review of *History of Japan*, he wrote:

Whereas Professor Murdoch is doing devoted research on Japan's past, motivated by his amazement at the current progress of enlightenment, we are, driven minute by minute by the very progress, are thus pessimistic about our future. Taking the opportunity of introducing his great achievement on our history, I would like to put down some views of mine about our future.²⁴

Probably motivated by his old teacher's view on the Meiji enlightenment, Sōseki decided to express his own understanding in more detail. In August the same year, Sōseki delivered a lecture for the general audience in Wakayama prefecture entitled "Enlightenment of Modern Japan," in which he introduced two types of enlightenment: *naihatsuteki kaika* [enlightenment attained through gradual development from within] and *gaihatsuteki kaika* [enlightenment driven by external forces] and categorized Japan's enlightenment as the latter. He then went on to examine what kind of influence *gaihatsuteki kaika* would exert upon the people of Japan. Sōseki's answer was clear and simple:

The people under the influence of this type of enlightenment must have a sense of emptiness, must have a sense of dissatisfaction and uneasiness.²⁵

Sadly, he added:

I have no solution to this. I have no choice but to suggest that we attempt to attain enlightenment from within, paying as careful attention as possible not to suffer from nervous breakdown.²⁶

Metaphors of Disease

Sōseki thus concluded his pessimistic view of the future of Japanese enlightenment with the usage of a metaphor of disease, that is, "nervous breakdown" [*shinkei suijaku*]. This view of Japanese enlightenment by Sōseki in 1911 reminds one of the following statements made in the symposium of 1942.

Kawakami Tetsutarō: . . . The enlightenment in the Meiji period accepted as materials in various fields too much of Western culture [sic], which was far from perfect. Therefore, the enlightenment developed to reveal unhealthy aspects.²⁷

Kamei Katsuichiro: Consequently, civilization in Meiji developed in an unhealthy manner. . . . Professionals have now become disabled.²⁸

These are some examples of using metaphors of disease. Here, one could see some replies to Sōseki's prediction. Kawakami and the others, unwittingly or unconsciously perhaps, were making a connection between the great author's lecture and their own symposium some four decades later.

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A few of the critiques of the symposium "overcoming the modern" have already been discussed, but one more piece of writing must be mentioned here, for it referred not only to the symposium but also to Sōseki's view of enlightenment in modern Japan. This was a short essay written shortly after Japan's defeat, entitled "Modern Thought" [*kindaiteki shiyui*], by Maruyama Masao, a political scientist who taught in the Faculty of Law of the University of Tokyo. Maruyama was then thirty-one, several months after being repatriated. He wrote to the effect that the prevalent discourse of the past few years had held that "overcoming the modern" was the only problem to be solved. Also, he stated explicitly that "our intellectuals . . . did not possess what Sōseki called *naihatsuteki bunka* [a culture attained through gradual development from within]." Then, Maruyama went on to show his view on the issue of "overcoming the modern," or precisely speaking, modern thought or thinking [*kindaiteki shiyui*]:

It gradually became clear to everyone, therefore, that modern thinking in our country, far from being "overcome," had not even been truly attained. . . . On the other hand, one cannot label as correct the view that in the past Japan witnessed absolutely no autonomous development of modern thought.²⁹

During the war period, an "ultra-nationalistic view of history" [*kōkoku shikan*] was prevalent. After the defeat in 1945, that view was swept away, and another view of history became prevalent among Japanese intellectuals instead. It was a view that the very insufficiency of Japan's modernization, or the vestiges of feudalism from the premodern era, had brought about the unprecedented tragedy of the defeat.

Unlike the advocates of the latter view of history, Maruyama refrained from going so far as to blame everything on feudalism, but he thus clearly stated that far from being "overcome," "modern thinking" had never truly been attained in Japan.

Two Faces of Modernity

Another intellectual responded. He took exception to the then-dominant historical view centering on feudal remnants and Maruyama's understanding that Japan had failed to attain "modern thinking." This was Takeyama Michio, who a year later became famous throughout Japan for his book *Biruma no tategoto* [Harp of Burma]. At the time he was a professor at the First Higher School under the old system. He had started his career as a scholar of German literature but his interests were not confined to that. Not only were his interests broad; he was one of the courageous minorities as well. When he started his scholarly career in the 1930s, German literature circles in Japan were leaning toward glorification of the Nazis. In the midst of that, Takeyama wrote:

If the Anglo-French side is victorious, "freedom of thought" can be saved in some form for at least as long as we live. If Germany is victorious, it will likely be rooted out immediately.³⁰

Later, he came to be known as a critic who went against the current of the times. It was then natural that after the defeat of the war Takeyama attempted to present a different view of history, when the majority was attributing Japan's failure to the insufficiency of modernization. One year after the appearance of Maruyama's article "Modern Thinking," in 1947, Takeyama published an essay entitled "Modernity as a the Lead Actor" [Shuyaku to shite no kindai]. In it he says:

All the major calamities we have encountered are the work of vestiges of things medieval. This has become the accepted opinion nowadays. It is as if "feudalism" was being charged with all crimes, whereas modernity was being held entirely blameless, I cannot help being puzzled and wonder: can "feudalism" really have done all those things?³¹

Modernity has two aspects. One is the modern that liberates human beings; the other is the modern that shackles human beings. In Japan, due to special circumstances, by the time the former began to show glimpses of itself, the latter had already attained decisive power.³²

Takeyama thus examined two faces of the modern, presenting them as the two characteristics of modernity. Here, in an essay written by the author of *Harp of Burma*, one could discern an unconscious series of discussions on modernity beginning with Sōseki's old teacher, James Murdoch.

Eight years later, in 1955, Takeyama published a book entitled *History of the Spirit of Shōwa* [*Shōwa no seishin shi*], in which he discussed in greater detail the two characteristics of modernity in the context of Shōwa history, refuting again point by point the then-dominant historical view that feudal vestiges were the cause of the Shōwa tragedy.³³

Discussions Continued

The unconscious chain of discussions on the modern did not stop at Takeyama. In 1961, Takeuchi Yoshimi, whose critique of the symposium on "overcoming the modern" had already been published two years before, referred to Takeyama's interpretation of modern civilization. In an essay "Japan and Asia" [Nippon to Ajia], he discussed Takeyama's *History of the Spirits of Shōwa*, and presented a critical view of Takeyama's interpretation of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East:

Few criticisms have appeared regarding the Tokyo War Crimes Trial. In particular, a very few have approached the trial in a theoretical way. Among those few achievements, *History of the Spirits of Shōwa* by Takeyama Michio is a noteworthy piece.³⁴

After this statement at the beginning of the essay, Takeuchi went on to attack Takeyama's work. However, Takeuchi's essay was by no means an unleavened refutation of everything in Takeyama's book, and he did not hesitate to offer some praise, although in qualified terms.

Having made the most of a large number of documents, *History of the Spirits of Shōwa* contains original ideas and penetrating insights, although sometimes being based on a mistake of facts and implausible arguments.³⁵

He did not give specific examples of Takeyama's "mistake of facts and implausible arguments" or "original ideas and penetrating insights"; still, he thus evaluated the work. Despite this balanced approaches to Takeyama's work, Takeuchi's interpretation of *History of the Spirit of Shōwa* or more precisely, interpretation of Takeyama's view of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial was not to the point. Takeuchi wrote:

Although Takeyama objects to the Tokyo Trial, he only takes exception to some parts of the trial; he does not object to the legal basis of the trial or the essence of the judgment. For instance, he approves of the idea that the international court is able to judge "crimes against peace." He merely disapproves of the way the accused were chosen and of the improper verdicts of some defendants. Simply put, approving of the framework that one could judge war crimes under the name of Civilization, Takeyama places himself on the side of Civilization.³⁶

However, one could not possibly discover the very passages in *History of the Spirit of Shōwa* from which Takeuchi seemed to draw this conclusion. Takeuchi wrote: "Takeyama approved of the framework in which one could judge war crimes under the name of Civilization." However, Takeyama's contention was that one must have a close look at the two faces of civilization before judging the crimes under the name of Civilization. Consciously or unconsciously, Takeuchi omitted Takeyama's strong insistence that one should closely examine the two faces, which constituted the core of his contention.

Thus, a critique by Takeuchi Yoshimi of History of the Spirit of Showa was not so convincing as he might have expected it to be. Nevertheless, his critique did involve a fresh and significant insight. That is, the essay attempted to distinguish between Takeyama and the Indian judge Radha Binod Pal, both of whom have usually been treated as the same, seeing that the two expressed strong criticism against the Tokyo Trial. Not stopping at this common understanding, Takeuchi presented a different view, making distinction between the two. Takeyama was based on a monistic view of civilization, while Pal was on a pluralistic view of civilization, so Takeuchi insisted. True, Takeyama's civilization was none other than "modern civilization" and for that matter "European civilization." When Takeyama referred to the dual faces of civilization—"the modern (civilization) that liberates human beings" and "the modern (civilization) that shackles human beings,"37 he undoubtedly had "modern civilization" in mind. No less evident was the fact that the Indian judge came from a country with its background of an ancient civilization, based on which he criticized the court composed of Western civilization only. In this very respect, Takeuchi's dissection is, despite the passage of more than forty years, of equal significance in the twenty-first century.

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- 10 Nakae 1983, p. 207.
- 11 Harootunian 1974, p. 15.
- 12 Odagiri 1958, p. 112.
- 13 Ibid., p. 113.
- 14 Harootunian 2000, p. 421.
- 15 See, for instance, Oketani 1992, p. 420.
- 16 Kawakami and Takeuchi 1979, p. 288.
- 17 Hiromatsu 1989, p. 24.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 232-233.
- 19 Kosaka et.al. 1942.
- 20 Harootunian 2000, p. 47.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Natsume 1986b, p. 216.

23 I am greatly indebted to Professor Hirakawa Sukehiro for his pioneering work on the relationship between Sōseki and Murdoch (Hirakawa 1984).

24 Natsume 1986c, p. 233.

- 25 Natsume 1986a, p. 33.
- 26 Ibid., p. 38.
- 27 Kawakami and Takeuchi 1979, p. 233.
- 28 Ibid., p. 234.
- 29 Maruyama 1982, p. 189.
- 30 Takeyama 1983, p. 289.
- 31 Takeyama 1984, p. 55.
- 32 Ibid., p. 57.
- 33 For detail, see Ushimura 2001.
- 34 Takeuchi 1993, p. 266.
- 35 Ibid., p. 268.
- 36 Ibid., pp. 275-276.
- 37 Takeyama 1984, p. 57.