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in Beirut on the primordial undercurrent of  
Japanese modernity

図書名	国境なきヨーロッパ : 文学と思想における異文化接触の形
開始ページ	1
終了ページ	8
出版年月日	2010-03-31
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00020443">http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00020443</a>

# As I fly away on one spring day: reflections in Beirut on the primordial undercurrent of Japanese modernity

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In March 2008 I was invited to participate in the Symposium entitled “Popular Memory and the Formation of Identities,” which was to be held at the Lebanese American University, Beirut. This famous city, the “Paris in the Middle East,” was full of perils and dangers as it now is. Thrilled by a sense of adventure and allured by the city’s cultural density, however, I inadvertently and on the spur of the moment accepted the invitation without recognizing the utter complexities of the problem, which are subsumed under the theme of the symposium. At the last moment in preparation, being at my wits’ end, I thought I had no choice but to tell something about my experience in regard to “collective memory” and “national identity.”

## 1. The death of Emperor Showa in 1989

From the instant of his death to the staging of his burial some forty days later, the state choreographed an elaborate dance representing constitutionality and mystery, Western modernity and Eastern tradition. The dance had to suggest a history at once progressive and alluring, glossing adroitly over the interlude of war to elaborate the forty years of postwar prosperity.<sup>1)</sup>

It was on 7 January 1989 when the whole world was about to experience the

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1) Norma Field, *In the Realm of A Dying Emperor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 20.

collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square Incident that Emperor Showa, better known as Emperor Hirohito, died on the islands of Japan and Japanese society, for no other reason than that, came to a halt in its entirety. The contrast to the other incidents cannot be sharper: while in Berlin and Beijing people were claiming and expressing their own individual rights and freedom, people in Japan were absorbed, if only for several months, in a magical zone of collective memory and destiny. As if to defy the modernization move elsewhere, Japanese society, for one, seemed to exemplify the myth of the Arthurian legend in medieval Europe, the dying king with the corresponding mortal effects on all that surround him, from nature, the realm and cities to his people. The Emperor's crisis in his natural body found its direct reverberation in his political body.

Particularly extraordinary about the crisis of the Emperor's body was the almost abnormal behavior of the whole society for over four months from his collapse on September 19, 1988 up until his death on January 7, 1989. For those of you who do not believe that such a phenomenon was taking place in one of the most advanced countries of the world, Norma Field, a distinguished student of Japanese studies, who happened to be there and then on the spot as an eyewitness, provides us a trustworthy report: "Daily reverential reporting on the body of the emperor throughout the island nation both provoked and reinforced a massively orchestrated exercise in "self-restraint," or *jishuku*, a newly popularized word."<sup>2)</sup> In the national promotion of "self-restraint" innumerable activities and forms of conduct, daily or otherwise, fell victim one after another to the pressure of collectivism, ranging from the omission of felicitous phrases such as "nice day" from commercials, and of alcohol from political fund-raisers, seasonal neighborhood festivals, weddings etc., etc.

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2) Ibid., p. 21.

Now this was as recent as 1989, when people in Japan as well as the whole outside world took it for granted that they had managed to accomplish successful, if not straightforward, modernization, carrying with them eventually the distinguished modern passports of capitalism and scientific technology, freedom and equality, democracy and individual human rights. Some among the optimistic even went so far as to fancy that Japan was now already well into the stage of postmodernism. But then, quite suddenly and willy-nilly, the recognition was forced upon them of the existence at a subconscious level of a collective memory, which was powerful enough to nullify almost all the essential passports they thought they had obtained for the community of modernity.

## 2. The anatomy of the collective memory

But what was this extraordinary collective memory, which apparently was actualized not on the (self-)conscious but on a subconscious level by the crisis of the Emperor's body? Obviously it has closely to do with the modern history of Japan which has accrued in the people's memory, especially that of the period of his reign from 1926 to 1989, the truly eventful period marked by the Great Depression, the Second World War (or to be more precise, the Pacific War), the defeat at the end of it, and the postwar recovery. But this historical contingency alone won't explain what may be termed the "anti-modern" or "pre-modern" behaviour that Japanese society characteristically showed at the crisis of the Emperor's body. Such a sudden powerful eruption of the anti- or pre-modern urge in a nation which regarded itself as modernized and advanced suggests the existence of some underlying structure of complicity between modern and pre-modern elements in Japanese modernity itself. Briefly put,

there seem to be three mnemonic components that were at work to produce the social crisis along with the crisis of Emperor's body: (1) the structure of national psychology peculiar to the late modernizer, (2) the adoption of the restoration model in the move towards modernization, (3) the divine and human spectrum of respect accorded to Emperor Showa in the vicissitudes of history.

### 3. The double structure of national consciousness in Japanese modernity

The history of modern Japan as a nation-state began in 1868 when the last tycoon of the feudal government of the Tokugawa dynasty surrendered its sovereignty to Emperor Meiji, who thereby restored the ancient imperial rule. As a drastic change of political power, it was a revolution but in terms of national psychology it was a revival of the interrupted tradition, "the Restoration of the Imperial Rule," as every (nationally) authorized history textbook describes it. Japanese modernity, first and foremost, is therefore a composite state of affairs, a mixture of elements new and old, both politically and culturally. It was the function of the emperor, as a symbolic embodiment both of the new identity and of traditional authority, to combine these contradictory elements in one body and smoothe them out as the leader of the nation.

Not only was it a conglomeration of forward-looking revolution and backward-oriented restoration, of the modern and the traditional, but this newly-formed empire nation had the appearance of being violently forced to come out onto the international scene. Since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan had adopted a self-imposed policy of isolationism toward the outside world, and it was in 1868, simultaneously with the revolution/restoration of modern Japan,

that the country officially and fully opened its doors to foreigners. But it did not do so altogether willingly. The truth of the matter is that it had to give up the policy of isolationism under the threat of the warship diplomacy of Western colonizing powers. It is true that those revolutionaries who attempted the subversion of the *ancien regime* took advantage of this threat from outside, but after obtaining power, they were soon to find themselves obliged to cope with the same threat. It was probably the fate of any latecomer in the nation-building business in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Western colonialist endeavour was rife that it should suffer more or less from a sense of self-victimization. At least in the Japanese case, this feeling of self-victimization appears to have been so deeply ingrained that it has become hardly possible to imagine the nation without any residual trace of this feeling of self-victimization. Differently put, behind any positive assertion of national identity runs an undercurrent of the sense of being a victim of circumstances. It is a function of the emperor again to embody in one body these two contradictory kinds of passions.

(a) The reductive character of the double structure

As has been noted above, the contradictory double structures are prevalent in the national culture of Japanese modernity. But the contradiction was there not just to be reconciled as such but (one supposes) to be harmonized in the person and body of the emperor as the means of opening up the nation's sphere of influence. But how? About this historical state of affairs, we have two opposite views, one from inside, the other from outside. A typical instance of the harmonization of contradiction is the so-called "*wakon-yosai*", literally the Japanese Spirit combined with Western knowledge. If the modernization is a historical inevitability for Japan to take on itself in order to survive in the age

of Western imperialism and colonization, then let it learn as much as it can from the West in the fields of science and technology, but leave the Japanese Spirit intact as it eminently stands because there is nothing to learn from the West in the spiritual realm. More than that, with the excellence of Western knowledge of science and technology combined with the eminence of the Japanese spirit, as the ideologues of the "*wakon-yosai*" fancied, there cannot be a more ideal mixture of two great civilizations. Such is the happy view from within.

Predictably, the outsider's view was severe and critical, as represented by the German émigré Karl Loewith, an eminent philosopher who happened to come to Japan towards the end of the interwar period. His verdict of modern Japan as he saw it was without any reservation: "the 'modern Japan' is a contradiction in terms, though it does exist."<sup>3)</sup> While the Japanese claim and would like to believe that they have integrated the old genuine Japanese culture with the new Western scientific achievements, and thus have gone beyond the latter, it was clear to Loewith's (viz., the outsider's) eye that their achievements remain "no more than an adaptation of Western methodology" for the sake of preserving genuine Japanese. In fact, the fundamental problem with modern Japan as Loewith sees it lies in this reductive circuit of treating everything Western merely as a means to the end that is traditionally conceived as the Japanese Spirit. That is precisely why he diagnosed the 'modern Japan' as "a contradiction in terms, though it does exist." And it is perhaps unnecessary to remind you that it was a function of the emperor to make the existence of modern Japan as natural as possible and not "a contradiction in terms."

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3) "The Japanese Mind: A Picture of the Mentality That We Must Understand If We Are To Conquer," *Fortune* vol. 28, no 6 (New York, Dec. 1943), p.236.

The happy amalgam of the *wakon-yosai*, which duly underwent Loewith's critical analysis in the late 1930s, was not to survive in the defeated nation after WWII, but it is conceivable that the mechanism of the reductive circuit where everything Western is brought to bear on the traditional Japanese remains inscribed as specifically national in the popular memory.

(b) Divine tragedy and human comedy

If the above analysis has mainly dealt with the general characteristics of the imperial system that modern Japan invented, there are also those specific to Emperor Showa which could contribute in a direct way to the formation of the collective popular memory. It so happened during his long and eventful reign extending from 1926 through 1989 that he had the extraordinary experience of undergoing a divine tragedy and a human comedy. In the prewar period, from his enthronement to the collapse of the empire, he had been worshiped as a living god, whereas in the postwar era he became a man following the official declaration of the renunciation of his divinity. Such a unique event, to the best of my knowledge, belongs to the rarities of human history. Obviously, there is nothing comparable about it either to the Christian incarnation or to the prophetic descent of the divine voice. Noteworthy is the very possibility of the transition or transference from divinity to man, which would be categorically inconceivable in monotheistic cultures. This fantastic transition, which indeed saved the nation-state at the crucial moment of national crisis, has however helped not only to preserve the extant contradictions in the nature and structure of modern Japan but also to reconfirm and strengthen that characteristically closed circuit which will treat everything foreign as a means to the national end. The national sphere, whose continuity was saved and secured by the transformation of Emperor Showa, may well seem to its



inhabitants to be smugly homogeneous and comfortably permanent but, needless to say, it has its own price to pay for its maintenance.

#### 4. By way of conclusion

We have been in search of the reasons why Japanese society came to a standstill at the imminent death of Emperor Showa between 1988 and 1989. My assumption has been that for such anachronistically pre-modern behaviour there must have been a strong undercurrent of repressed discontents of a politico-historical kind. And my diagnosis is that the discontents of modern Japan derive from the fundamentally self-protective nature and structure of its modernity. Its modernization was a forced affair, not of its own accord. Hence came about the feeling of self-victimization closely bound up with it; its contradictory character of being a revolution and at the same time a restoration; and its underlying structure of the closed circuit relegating everything foreign to the national and cultural end. And all this contradictorily charged memory was further reconfirmed through the peculiarities of historical contingency in the pre- and post-war period, symbolically represented by the drastic transformation of the emperor's body.<sup>4)</sup>

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4) The present short essay is written as a sequel to my previous publications, "The Illusion of the Modern and the Pleasures of the Pre-Modern," *Overcoming Postmodernism: "Overcoming Modernity" and Japan*, eds., K. Doak & Y. Takada (Tokyo: Shubunkan, 2002), and "Supreme Emptiness and Temporal Fulfillment: Two Versions of Political Failure?", both of which are now included in my *Transcendental Descent: Essays in Literature and Philosophy* (The Center for Philosophy, The University of Tokyo, 2007).