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# Review of: Overcoming Modernity and the Kyoto School: Modernity, Empire, and Universality, edited by Sakai Naoki and Isomae Jun'ichi

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Sakai Naoki 酒井直樹 and Isomae Jun'ichi 磯前順一, eds.,  
*Overcoming Modernity and the Kyoto School: Modernity,  
 Empire, and Universality* 『「近代の超克」と京都学派—近代  
 性、帝国、普遍性』

Tokyo: Ibunsha, 2010. 368 pages. ¥3,780. ISBN 978-4-7531-0285-3.

THIS VOLUME is an outcome of a workshop held at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto on 23–24 May 2009, which brought together scholars from Japan and abroad to “readdress the question of modernity.” It includes ten essays, a substantial introduction, and a postscript.

“Overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chōkoku*) is a term with several layers of meaning. Originally it was the title of a 1942 roundtable discussion known as “Overcoming Modernity,” sponsored by the literary magazine, *Bungakukai* [The world of literature] (hereafter referred to as the “Bungakukai discussion”). Takeuchi Yoshimi’s 1959 essay, republished in 1979 as a single volume, also bears the same title, and it was largely due to his description of the perceived impact of this Bungakukai discussion that the adjective “infamous” began to be associated with “overcoming modernity”—construed as an icon of wartime propaganda that spurred the Japanese people to support the imperialistic, expansionist military aggression. Further, this term stands for the binary opposition of such ideas as “modernity vs. tradition,” “Europe and North America vs. Asia,” “the universal vs. the particular,” “the philosophical vs. the literary,” “the spirit vs. the body,” “the oppressor vs. the oppressed,” and so on. It is also considered a pertinent topic in addressing the contemporary problems associated with “modernity” to be “overcome.”

Going beyond a narrowly circumscribed monolithic assessment of the impact of the Bungakukai discussion of 1942 or the philosophies of the Kyoto School members, this volume contains a wide range of stimulating thoughts and new information, which can only be touched on briefly here.

The introduction by Naoki Sakai, entitled “The Philosophy of the Kyoto School under *Pax Americana*,” puts forth the thesis concerning how the present-day perception of the Kyoto School, especially in reference to Nishitani Keiji, has been colored by the post-World War II politics of tacit collaboration between the US and Japan, which allowed a spiritual reading of the Kyoto School thinkers in the name of the uniqueness of the Japanese people.

Under the heading: “A Discussion of *Overcoming Modernity* and the Kyoto School,” three essays are compiled. Isomae Jun’ichi’s “*Overcoming Modernity* and the Kyoto School” reiterates the binary oppositions of ideas, such as modernity versus tradition, the west versus the east (or orient), that were implied by the term “overcoming modernity.” He criticizes how the Kyoto School thinkers, although a diverse group, overall failed to see the connection between “the philosophical universal” and “the imperialist” ambitions of the Japanese wartime government, and how the philosophy of “the body” and “practice” developed by Nishitani Keiji could easily lead to “physical violence” exercised in the “encounter with the other” (67, 68). Isomae points out the difficulty of genuine “encounter” with the other.

Fujita Masakatsu 藤田正勝, in his “The Loss of Philosophical Contents in the Discussion ‘Overcoming Modernity,’ and Conflicting Standpoints concerning Overcoming Modernity,” examines the aforementioned Takeuchi Yoshimi’s essay (1959, 1979), and begins with Takeuchi’s claim that the phrase *kindai no chōkoku* became a “magic word” and exerted a symbolic power to promote the Greater East Asian War (75). Next, Fujita carefully analyzes the content of the Bungakukai discussion and finds a leap of logic in traditionalist thinkers, who misidentified the “ills” born out of rapid modernization of Japan with “modernity” itself (84). He notes that there were conflicting interpretations of the very term “modernity” among the discussants. Shimomura Toratarō, for instance, understood that Europe and modernity were not something alien to the Japanese reality of the 1940s. Fujita conjectures that “overcoming modernity” became a “magic word” because it functioned to “justify” the Greater East Asian War (91–92).

James W. Heisig, in his “Nishitani Keiji and the Overcoming of Modernity (1940–1945),” analyzes Nishitani’s comments made at the Chūōkōron discussions of 1941–42 (published in 1943), along the three lines of “the concept of world history,” “Japanese subjectivity that sheds off western culture,” and “departure from a simplistic scientific worldview in scholarship and rationality” (96). Exposing Nishitani’s “scandalous” remarks, Heisig nevertheless concludes that unlike ultranationalists of his days Nishitani did not privilege Shinto ideology, that he did not absolutize Japanese culture or the emperor system, and that his knowledge and observation in criticizing European modernity was highly informed and learned. In conclusion,

Heisig observes that Nishitani's ideas were politically futile and did not cross over into the arena of military policy making (116, 119).

Under the second heading: "Miki Kiyoshi and the Philosophy of Empire," Sakai Naoki in his "The Theory of East Asian Cooperative Bloc and Universality" shares his conviction that for philosophically universal principles to become viable, in our attempts of "overcoming modernity" we must squarely face inveterate racism. In promoting a politically unfettered plurality of thinking, the conventional concept of nation as a group of a people or a race must change (151, 158).

Sun Ge 孫歌 in her "*Overcoming Modernity and the Chinese Revolution as the Two Moments in the Post-War Japanese History of Ideas*" reexamines Takeuchi Yoshimi's thought in the wider Asian context, and considers the Maoist revolution as one instance of the actualization of "overcoming modernity." She ponders if Takeuchi's final point may not have been the realization that "history is full of paradoxes, and so are human beings" (177).

The third part deals with two discussions: the Bungakukai's *Overcoming Modernity* and the Chūōkōron's *The Standpoint of Global History and Japan*. Suzuki Sada-mi's 鈴木貞美 "Concerning the Notion of Overcoming Modernity and the Vision of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" is a detailed study of Japanese policies during the fifteen-year war, including the ideological principle of multiculturalism in managing Manchuguo. His study sheds light on the complex ideological realities of that time. He traces the emergence of "ultranationalism" in 1937 (198), and reads Nishida Kitarō's statement as a rhetoric of resistance that allowed him to criticize the military by "idealizing the imperial household" and thereby showed how military activities should not go astray over and against that ideal (202).

Kim Chul 金哲, in his "Homogeneity or Overcoming? Discussions of Overcoming Modernity in Colonized Korea," portrays the "other side" of the debate as noted by Korean writers and intellectuals during Japan's colonization, and how the basic message of "overcoming modernity" in the Chūōkōron discussion was understood by Korean intellectuals to mean "the crumbling down of western modernity and an emergence of a new world-historical vision that should replace the old model" (227). Kōyama Iwao's view of global history to have more than one European "stream" was adopted into a Korean novel, while Nishitani's and Kōsaka's arguments for "making Koreans into Japanese" was not so far from the colonial government's policy implemented in 1943–44 (213). That the message of liberation from the Western model was coming from the country that acted as the west to the Korean people presented mixed signals to Korean intellectuals. Kim's essay offers an invaluable inside look into the Korean struggle for independence and unity.

Under the fourth heading: "The Japanese Experience of Western Modernity," Gauri Viswanathan, in his "Wrestling with Modernity: James Cousins and Japan, India, and De-colonized Culture," discusses the Irish poet who emigrated in 1915 to India, where he found its search for ways to achieve independence from British rule provided him with an answer for Ireland's struggle for independence. Viswanathan

throws light on the role of Theosophy and traditional Indian thought in formulating a philosophy of political liberation, and at the same time he notes the racial pitfall Cousins fell into in his search for a solution to the method of de-colonization.

Hent de Vries's essay on "The Loss of the Western Course/The End of Movement towards the East and De-Europeanization" adds the voice of Levinas as an interlocutor to the discussion, especially his argument for the necessity of the "other(s)" in relation to "overcoming the inner contradiction of a nation" (296), and "overcoming violence" (310).

Originally a response to the two preceding essays, in his "Resistance against 'Western' Modernity and the Temptation of Succumbing to 'Oriental' Contemplation," Inaga Shigemi 稲賀繁美—drawing widely from aesthetics, literature, and cultural philosophy—points out a way forward. Based on the recognition that the present world is in fact that of hybrid cultures and technology, what is required of Japan today does not lie in extracting what is uniquely Japanese or oriental, but rather in finding and embodying a unique way in which cultures and technology may coexist (341).

A postscript by Isomae Jun'ichi summarizes the outcome of the two days of discussions, with a critical eye on the unresolved issues that challenge global encounters and a firm resolve to learn from the past.

Thus, "overcoming modernity" meant different things to different participants in this 2009 workshop, just as it did to the 1942 Bungakukai participants. That says something about the complexity of the question itself as a philosophical issue. The method of framing the question in dichotomous terms of "modernity vs. tradition," "East vs. West," "universalism vs. racism" may no longer be the way to find the answers we are looking for today. One consensus seems to be emerging—that what is needed today is to listen to the organically intertwined complex voices on earth (including that of nature).

Surprisingly, this volume, which appeared at first to be a collection of essays on loosely-related topics, gains significance as one reads each essay and ponders the contribution each makes. The historical details contained in some of the essays are especially indispensable for forming a well-rounded and more informed picture of this period of Japanese intellectual history. It is highly recommended to anyone seriously interested in the lively global philosophical exchanges that are currently taking place.

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