
In July 1942 a group of prominent Japanese philosophers, writers, musicologists, theologians, scientists and historians gathered for a symposium on “Overcoming Modernity.” The proceedings of the conference (twelve essays and two roundtable discussions) were first published in September and October 1942. They represent the highlight of Japan’s intellectual achievement during the Second World War and, if only for that reason, Richard Calichman is to be thanked for making them available in English.

Preparations for the symposium had started in January 1942, a month after Pearl Harbor, so it is reasonable to assume that its organizers were inspired by the dazzling Japanese triumphs over the Anglo-Americans. The events of subsequent months did nothing to dampen their spirit. By early May Japan appeared to be firmly in control of Southeast Asia and the western section of the Pacific Ocean. Although in retrospect the Japanese defeat at Midway in June 1942 may have constituted a turning point in the Pacific War, few, if any, in Japan at the time realized the significance of the battle. If the participants had any inkling of the ultimate disaster, they did not let on. Most probably, however, they swallowed the official line which presented Midway as yet another great victory.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that in the thrall of war euphoria the participants did not address such banes of modernity as military dictatorship or thought control, but instead focused on combating individualism, hedonism and pursuit of selfish profit. They were hostile to Anglo-American philosophy, which they regarded with contempt so great that, as Calichman tells us, they did not bother to discuss it. They feared the threat posed by the “contagion of the American way of life” (119) with its lethal combination of materialism, democracy, “jazz, eroticism and optimism” (120). They were alarmed by the “Jewish finance capital’s international dominance as well as the virus of material civilization on which it is based” (122). They were somewhat less worried about Marxism, because it represented “[Jewish thought and spirit [that] are now outdated” (125). To combat these diverse evils, they wanted to oust Western influences which, the participants believed, had come to pollute Japanese culture, but they offered no practical solution as to how to end such contamination. It seems that the only concrete measure they came up with was their call to purify the Japanese language from Western loan words, but that does not seem to have been particularly original. For calls to purify the language had been made in Japan (with reference to China) by the great nativist Norinaga Motoori (1730-1801) and one must not forget that the Nazis also had similar ideas. Other than that, none of the participants stated just how they were going
to overcome modernity, though some, it seems, believed that this could be done by the study of Japanese classics such as the *Manyōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves) and the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) (128).

It is perhaps inevitable that a symposium with thirteen contributors from diverse fields had no unity of style or form. Some contributions are short, impressionistic sketches; others, long and erudite, and use highly technical language. Occasionally, subtlety and erudition reach such rarified heights that arguments are difficult to follow. This is not surprising given the belief of some contributors that “it is decadent to try to make oneself understood” (197).

It is possible to see in this collection a profound and pioneering critique of Western civilization. But it is just as valid to regard it as a monument to the bankruptcy of Japan’s intellectual enterprise during the war. Readers who embrace the latter position will no doubt agree with the remark by one of the participants, the celebrated literary critic Nakamura Mitsuo (1911-88), that “[i]n every country and in every age, countless examples can be found of erudite scholars who turn out to be nothing more than poor thinkers” (142). As the symposium shows, wartime Japan had more than its fair share of such erudite scholars.

In his lucid preface and introduction, Professor Calichman provides the intellectual background of the symposium. Certain important issues, however, are left out. For example, one wonders about Nazi influences on the participants. And one would like to know what evidence, if any, the literary critic Karatani Kōjin (b. 1941) produced in support of his intriguing claim that the neglect of Britain and the United States “throughout the symposium pointed to an unspoken conviction on the part of the participants that Japan would, in fact, lose the war” (xiv).

Such reservations notwithstanding, the collection, finely translated by Calichman, will be indispensable for the study of Japan’s modern intellectual history and as such is to be highly recommended.

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