

Harmonious Dialectic: Redefinition of Japanese Philosophy

Hitoshi OGAWA

Since Japan decided to participate in the TPP, which can be viewed as the opening up of the archipelago for the third time, this country seems to finally face true globalization. Now we have to seriously think about the identity of Japan. This paper offers the ideas needed to reshape Japan in order to define Japan's identity correctly in a global society. In order to reshape Japan's identity, the country must first understand its own philosophy. We rarely use the expression "Japanese philosophy," even though we have philosophized since ancient times. As H. Gene Blocker and Christopher L. Starling point out in *Japanese Philosophy*, this is strange. Thus, I decided to approach all of Japanese thought as Japanese philosophy and reexamine its meaning. I greatly admire Nishi Amane for his creation of the word "*tetsugaku*" made by translating the word "philosophy." However, I have to criticize one of his fundamental mistakes: he didn't realize philosophy had been in Japan long before the creation of a new vocabulary word. Furthermore, this paper examines the unique attributes of Japanese philosophy as opposed to philosophies from other parts of the world. A political scholar, Maruyama Masao described Japanese philosophy as a continually existing base of thought, which absorbs foreign philosophies. While I agree with him, I want to propose a more active concept of a harmonious dialectic, which takes foreign thought and fuses it into existing Japanese philosophy. The result is a more highly developed school of thought. This flexibility is the strongest point of Japanese philosophy, and Japan itself. In this paper, I argue for the potentiality of Japanese philosophy as harmonious dialectic, in order that Japan may survive globalism.

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Introduction: History repeats itself because we have a short memory

The clock has stopped in Japan, though it's not easy to say when it happened. Since we refer to recent history as "the lost two decades," maybe it happened twenty years ago. Perhaps it happened at 2:46 p.m. March 11th, 2011 when the Tōhoku disaster occurred? We can at least recognize the fact that the shape of Japan has been completely altered by various megaton cultural assaults, a big disaster, and political demands from other foreign countries. This leads many to conclude that the current shape of Japan is now unidentifiable and stagnant.

As I will demonstrate in this article, Japan's struggle to find its identity is actually nothing new. Indeed, the country has struggled with this since its origin. It has consistently coped with the changing times as the hands of the clock move. However, it seems that its prior state of flexibility and adaptation has stopped. In order to reignite the strengths of Japan, we require resilience and the inherent strength of the land. While this opinion is often held, I believe it is necessary for us to first reconsider the ideal shape of Japan. To do so, we must turn to philosophy, especially Japanese philosophy. Every country has its own schools of thought, which accumulates over history, and Japan is no exception. By referencing Japan's rich intellectual history, we will be able to redefine Japan.

However, as soon as we turn to Japanese philosophy, another more serious problem immediately presents itself: we don't know what Japanese philosophy is. Certainly, there is the word "Japanese philosophy," but this doesn't necessarily mean "the philosophy which represents the shape of Japan." Instead, the term "Japanese philosophy" often holds the narrow meaning of the Kyōto School philosophy founded by Nishida Kitarō in the Meiji era. This limited definition is the reason why it's important to discuss exactly what Japanese philosophy is, as well as the need to suggest

a redefinition of it. This process of redefinition is not a novel idea, and has in fact been done by philosophers on the archipelago since the sixth century. It was around then that the foreign thought of Buddhism was first introduced to Japanese elite and intellectuals. Since then, Japanese philosophy has been challenged by various ideas originating from outside its borders. Currently the foreign thought of globalism is striking at Japan, causing dramatic losses in culture, identity, and economics.

Indeed, as a result of the continuing, increasing presence of true globalism, Japanese people are more than ever urged to identify exactly what is “Japan” both to themselves and the rest of the world. Sadly, academics and laymen alike are at a loss in the face of such a global force. But to really understand the current situation, we need to examine both the current and historical thoughts underlying Japanese philosophy. When we can clarify the meaning of Japanese philosophy through this inquiry, we can finally depict the ideal shape of Japan.

1. Roadblocks to Redefinition

It is not easy to redefine Japanese philosophy. Furthermore, there are unfortunately some opponents to even the notion of Japanese philosophy, let alone an attempt to redefine it. This absurd objection stems from two basic misconceptions, which I will expand on later. Prior to that however, Sueki Fumihiko’s classification system must be explained, for it is vital for answering those who argue that “Japanese philosophy” doesn’t exist.¹

One of Sueki’s main ideas is universalism. This holds that philosophy is universal and never changes depending on the differences between culture and tradition. Following this idea, there is then no need to differentiate between various world philosophies such as Japanese, Western, Indian, and Islamic. However, ignoring these differences can actually trigger serious problems. As Sueki writes, such an attitude can lead to an “imperialism of intelligence.” His second idea is particularism. There are people out there that claim by definition Western philosophy is the only philosophy. All other cultural ideas and arguments are considered “thoughts.” This seems a little ethnocentric to me. His third idea provides a simple solution to the problems created by the two ideas mentioned above. It states that while there is universality to all philosophies, each one can and should have its own character. Sueki didn’t name this

idea, thus I have labeled it “personality theory,” and it can aid in redefining Japanese philosophy. This is not so simply done, for even in Japan people have thrown up roadblocks that prevent the progress and identification of Japanese philosophy.

For example, during the Meiji era Nakae Chōmin famously said “from antiquity to the present day, there has never been any philosophy in Japan.”²² His point was that philosophy is both universal and exhibits unique attributes from one school to the next. He believed that Japanese philosophy falls into neither of these categories: not universal and not unique. In contrast, modern Japanese philosophers including Sasaki admit that Japanese philosophy does have a character. Fujita Masakatsu writes, “of course, philosophy means to seek for the universality. Meanwhile we can say Greek philosophy has its own ‘personality’ and Japanese philosophy has its own ‘personality’.”²³ Both Sasaki and Fujita mistakenly argue the personality of Japanese philosophy is only represented by the Kyōto School of philosophy. One intellectual group representing the totality of Japanese philosophy is just strange. The idea itself belittles our history of intelligence. Recently, there has been a breath of fresh air in the form of a book by H. Gene Blocker and Christopher L. Starling. The book, titled “Japanese Philosophy,” makes a strong case that all Japanese thought, culture, religion, morals and ethics should be included under the umbrella of Japanese philosophy. They define Japanese philosophy as follows:

There are three main groups, corresponding to three main historical periods. Early Confucian and Buddhist philosophy (from the eighth century on); neo-Confucianism of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868); and philosophy inspired in style and content by the Western thought introduced in the Meiji period (beginning in 1868), which has in the decades since come to engender its own fresh and distinctly “Japanese” scion.⁴

I in fact emphasized this idea in one of my recent publications, *The Power of Japanese Philosophy*.⁵ To drive the idea that Japanese philosophy covers the whole of Japanese history up to modern times, I added “From the Record of Ancient Matters to Murakami Haruki” as the subtitle of this book.

There are some even more fundamental reasons why Japanese thought needs and deserves the title “philosophy.” After all, if philosophy means to seek for the substance of things through critical thinking, Japanese people have done this since the Jomon

period, which started roughly 10,000 years ago. I think Jomon people expressed their philosophy through designs that they put on their earthenware. Of course, they didn't have the word *Tetsugaku* (which means philosophy) at that time. This word was created in the Meiji era. Nishi Amane translated the English word "philosophy" into "Testugaku". This was the beginning of a great philosophical mistake in Japan. His translation limits the definition of philosophy to a Western one. Since then, we have innocently, and arguably ignorantly, accepted his translation as the standard. As the Kyōto School imported Western philosophy and mixed it with traditional Japanese thought like Buddhism, only they were deemed to be worthy of the title of "Japanese philosophy." Intellectual activity occurring outside of the Kyōto School received the label of "Japanese thought."

2. The Harmonious Dialectic

While there are those like Nishi Amane who have written before me, arguing for a uniquely Japanese philosophy, I feel their approaches are too narrow-minded. To better understand the true identity of the totality of Japanese philosophy, we have to set up a time frame for its creation in Japan. I think we can safely say that Japanese philosophy was born when the Yamato court established the unified state. Also, we can classify the roots of Japanese philosophy into two types: First, foreign thought like Buddhism, Confucianism, Western philosophy, democracy. Secondly, thought that originated in Japan like Shintoism, Kokugaku, which is like a type of National Studies, Bushido, as well as, in the narrowest sense, Japanese philosophy. That being said, I believe at its base Japanese philosophy consists of the acceptance and resistance of foreign thought, which I will highlight now.

Can we explain these various foreign and indigenous roots of Japanese thought by one consistent principle? If we can, it means we can call all Japanese thought "the" Japanese philosophy. In this sense, Maruyama Masao, a famous political thinker, once proposed a unique idea in his article "Archetypes, Old Strata, Basso Ostinato." He said the history of Japanese thought was that of modification, and explained the consistency of Japanese thought using a musical concept; the basso ostinato. He writes that the musical note is "a phrase that includes a certain melody and recurs obstinately in the lower tones, resonating with the high and middle notes. It is a specific sound but not

necessarily the main melody.”⁶

Maruyama is emphasizing that any kind of foreign thoughts can be accepted into Japanese thought. Just like the high and middle tones meld with the recurrent basso ostinato, the base of Japanese thought allows various elements and new ideas to come together and make a masterpiece. His explanation is indeed very persuasive, despite a few problems. For instance, his theory doesn't explain the situation that arises when a new foreign thought collides with a traditional native thought. Moreover, a close reading of his article shows that he regards the existence of Japanese elements as something negative when accepting foreign thoughts. Matsuoka Seigow understands this principle as “Japan as a method.” In his book, *Japan As a Method*, he explains this as follows:

In other words, in our social and life culture, we might be doing the same thing even now after importing pasta dishes or toppings as we have accepted things coming from the oak forests or the evergreen broad-leaved forests, changed them, set them in the new environment and life style, and adapted them to our needs. If so, there must be a kind of “Japan as a method,” which should be examined. I want to recognize this as “a way of editing” or “Japanese editing.”⁷

As opposed to Maruyama, here Matsuoka regards the existence of Japanese elements as something positive. Accepting foreign culture skillfully is an “editing” for Matsuoka. The problem is that he recognizes that his own idea is the same as Nishida Kitarō's “self-identity as absolute contradiction.”⁸ This notion tries to create self-identity while preserving contradiction. Harmony is refused outright. Matsuoka thinks that this is a characteristic of Japanese thought. I consider both Matsuoka and Nishida's view on contradiction within Japanese self-identity to be in error. Rather, the foreign thoughts that have merged with indigenous Japanese thoughts create a new harmony. This is the principle characteristic of Japanese thought.

Now I want to further examine the history of Japanese thought in this new light of “harmony.” To do so, Hegel's well-known dialectic must be employed. He initially used the concept of dialect to develop an object. When something (thesis) has a problem (antithesis), this process brings forth a synthesis, a developed solution, by bringing an antithesis into a thesis. And this process continues forever or until

it reaches an absolute stage. I want to apply his logic to my theory regarding the definition of Japanese philosophy: a harmonious dialectic. While Hegel's purpose was to develop things, the purpose of the harmonious dialectic is to develop nothing more or less than harmony. The harmonious dialectic prioritizes harmony when attempting to synthesize new thoughts. This means an antithesis can override a prior synthesis if it adds to or creates harmony.

For example, in "The Problem of Japanese Language and Philosophy", Watsuji Tetsurō evaluates language development on the archipelago highly as a "revolution in language." Japanese thought created new Japanese words by combining existing Chinese characters with accepted European thought. Watsuji points out it was during this combination that Japanese thought abandoned the original meaning of those Chinese characters:

This kind of revolution was probably inevitable and the wisest way when the Japanese tried to accept foreign culture which had totally different characteristics and tradition and adapt our own culture to it.⁹

If this means it is wise for the Japanese to always prioritize harmony, I totally agree with Watsuji. Of course, some people outright resist antitheses, but in Japan this opposition usually doesn't last long. While at first glance the history of philosophy in Japan looks like that of either acceptance and / or resistance to antitheses, it is all in fact part of a continuous harmonious dialectic. By the way, this phrase "harmonious dialectic" is the translation of a new Japanese word that I created: "*wa no benshōhou* (和の弁証法)." As many readers are undoubtedly aware, "wa" is the Japanese idea for harmony, and it is present in all aspects of our culture: from art to food, ritual to daily life. *Benshōhou* is the Japanese word for, of course, dialectic. My combination of these two ideas is exactly the way I view Japanese thought working within the harmonious dialectic: an indigenous thesis melding with a foreign idea.

3. History of Dialectic

As mentioned earlier, the acceptance of Buddhism in Japan was the first case of a harmonious dialectic creating a synthesis. After an official introduction of Buddhism

in 538, powerful families in ancient Japan accepted Buddha as a foreign god. Prior to Buddhism, worship was mainly centered on Shintō deities. One of the powerful families, the Soga, led international diplomacy with Kudara (that is modern day Korea), and strongly promoted the introduction of Buddhism. Through the process of melding Shintō beliefs with the lessons from Kudara, Buddhism was fused into politics by this Soga family. As is well known, it eventually made its way into Japanese philosophy.

Since ancient times primitive Shintoism (or Old Shintoism) has existed. However, Emperor Tenmu established the mythological ideology around the eighth century that the emperor is an offspring of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. Since then people have valued Shintoism as a thought, which supports the state, alongside Buddhism. As Shintoism began with the worship of nature and is often said to have eight million gods, it has been tolerant towards other religions. It is worthy of note that such a thought is the underlying basis of Japanese society. We can say the harmonious dialectic owes a lot to the tolerance of Shintoism. In just such a fashion, Shintoism took in Buddhism. As early as medieval times, syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism including *Honji-suijaku setsu* (theory of original reality and manifested traces) appeared. Since then, myth and various rituals have been given a Buddhist interpretation. For example, after *Nakatomi no Haraekunge* explained Shintō belief through esoteric Buddhism, *Ryōbushintō* was founded as a type of Shintoism by employing complex, yet fundamental Buddhist ideas. We can recognize this example as another process of the harmonious dialectic. Here we have Buddhism influencing the evolution of Shintō.

Now let's focus on Confucianism, especially the Zhu Xi school of neo-Confucianism, which flourished during the Edo era. Confucianism was introduced in Japan a long time ago, but it didn't become popular until the Tokugawa shogunate adopted it as an official study. Fujiwara no Seika is said to be a founder of the doctrines of Zhu Xi. Originally a Buddhist, he later converted to Confucianism. His laicization symbolizes the harmonious dialectic because he moved from Buddhism, which by his time had become a "native" Japanese thought (in Hegel's terms, thesis) to Confucianism; a foreign one (or antithesis). Influenced by the pedantic atmosphere of the Edo era, various schools of Confucianism were founded and developed. The Tokugawa shogunate used this study to establish their feudal rule, and thus providing strong support for the spread of Confucianism. Confucianism was eventually accepted smoothly in Japan largely due to Bushi warriors needing to function as an officer in a

peaceful society once their war duties were finished.

Nevertheless, this doesn't mean there was no resistance. For example, Kokugaku had resisted the development of Confucianism because it was a foreign thought. Scholars in this field tried to seek the original spirit of Japanese people which had not been influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism. The fear of an outside idea becoming a mainstream thought is an example of resistance to the necessary antithesis of the harmonious dialectic. As with most cases involving valid foreign ideas and the existing Japanese philosophy, Confucianism was eventually brought into Kokugaku.

And finally the Kyōto School, which is generally known as “Japanese philosophy” appeared. All Japanese philosophy, not only the Kyōto School, was solidified in the Meiji era by embracing Western philosophy. Indeed, the Kyōto School, influenced by Western philosophy, provided an antithesis for the current thought in the country at the time. However, this case is different from previous ones in the sense that the antithesis was just a brief step towards becoming the mainstream thought like in Nishida Kitarō's *An Inquiry into the Good*. I think this is an ideal case where the harmonious dialectic could produce a synthesis perfectly. Of course, that wasn't an easy job. Nishida's struggle is clearly expressed in the introduction of his well-known book.

For many years I wanted to explain all things on the basis of pure experiences as the sole reality. At first I read such thinkers as Ernst Mach, but this did not satisfy me. Over time I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience. I thus arrived at the idea that experience is more fundamental than individual differences, and in this way I was able to avoid solipsism. Further, by regarding experience as active, I felt I could harmonize my thought with transcendental philosophy starting with Fichte. Thus, I finally finished writing part 1 of this book, but it goes without saying that this is not perfect.¹⁰

Native thought including State Shintoism was sublated by democracy, which was an antithesis to the religious zeal during World War II. It was introduced to Japan by the U.S., and produced “postwar democracy.” Postwar Japanese democracy is a unique form of democracy. Whereas in a traditional sense democracy is viewed as “power of the people,” Japanese postwar democracy actually encourages the people to rely on a strong power, much like the emperor system of the past. Why did this happen even

though postwar democracy was introduced in Japan? John Dower points out its trigger in his book, *Embracing Defeat*:

The emperor's role in Japan's aggression was never seriously investigated. He was dissuaded by the Americans from acknowledging even moral responsibility for the repression and violence that had been carried out in his name and with his endorsement. When members of the imperial entourage raised the possibility of his abdication, SCAP opposed this emphatically. Indeed, the occupation authorities chose not merely to detach the emperor from his holy war, but to resituate him as the center of their new democracy.¹¹

Dower calls this structure “imperial democracy” and points out that the birth of Japanese democracy was quite particular. Here we have to pay attention to the fact that, as Dower wrote, it was GHQ that made imperial democracy. However, it was the Japanese people that accepted such a type of democracy. In other words, we can say American democracy was also taken into Japanese philosophy by a harmonious dialectic.

When considering contemporary thought, it's useful to start in the 1980s when the New Academism (*Nyuaka*) boom occurred. People like Asada Akira, Nakazawa Shinichi or Karatani Kōjin introduced the most modern thoughts including post-structuralism. I call this phenomenon the postmodern harmonious dialectic. In the 2000s Zero Academism (*Zeroaka*) had started to rise in the society mainly led by Azuma Hiroki. He connected Western thought with the Internet and subculture.¹² I view this movement as the harmonious dialectic manifesting itself in the digital age. The most obvious example is *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. This book not only had a big influence in Japan, but also is being evaluated highly in the world as an analysis of turn-of-the-century Japanese cultural phenomenon.¹³ Right around 2010, a political philosophy boom occurred. The trigger was a NHK TV program; a series of lectures by Professor Michael Sandel. He showed us Japanese the importance and potential of political philosophy. I feel the ready acceptance his ideas received and their integration into contemporary Japanese culture is a perfect example of a harmonious dialectic.

However, Japan quickly entered yet another new area of thought after 3/11; that is after the Tōhoku earthquake and infamous tsunami. The devastation to a nuclear power

plant really awakened the country to cronyism that occurs between government and big business. Currently, there is much resistance to this existing system. Many academic minds point to globalism as a cause for the corruption in business and government. Indeed the combination of an increasingly dog-eat-dog mentality and the need for a post-catastrophe value judgment system is a huge current issue in Japanese philosophy. There is a large resistance to the antithesis of globalism, so it is time for the harmonious dialectic to get to work.

4. Challenges of Globalism

The vocal resistance to globalism is quite natural, yet clearly the global community is here to stay. To create a valid antithesis, an amalgamation of all the syntheses that have been reached through a uniquely Japanese dialectic must be employed. If we don't, it's quite possible that globalism will completely destroy Japan's identity. To take on globalism, it is useful to refer to the application of Mutai Risaku's argument proposed by Gereon Kopf. Mutai was one of Nishida Kitarō's apprentices and recognized as a left-wing scholar of the Kyōto School. Mutai advocated a particular humanism called "humankind humanism" and tried to propose it as a type of world ethics. Kopf is trying to regenerate it as a theory relating to global citizens by applying it to the context of the global society. Kopf summarizes Mutai's theory as follows:

Given these descriptions, I think it is best to understand the "world" as a "principle of unity" insofar as it implies that the multiplicity of individuals all inhabit the same world, while "individual" designates an infinite amount of subjectivities that create and transform the world we live in.¹⁴

The ideal is that individuals coexisting in the global society should change the world as creative subjects at the same time. Only in this way can global society avoid being overwhelmed by globalism and preserve its characteristic. Unless each individual takes actions, all people will be dyed the same color. This is one undesirable result of globalism. The problem is what Japan should do concretely to balance out the pressure of globalism. Here I want to propose *Otagaisama* (お互い様) ethics as just such concrete way. After all, for thousands of years the Japanese have placed incredible

emphasis on solidarity and concern for the community. This value is a fundamental aspect of Otagaisama. Furthermore, this value is clearly at odds with the current values of the dog-eat-dog nature of globalism.

Otagaisama cannot be exactly translated into English. However, it is a fundamental Japanese ideal that admits the existence of competition, while stressing solidarity and harmony in the community. By using a harmonious dialect, the deeply entrenched ideals of what I have termed “Otagaisama Ethics” will undoubtedly be able to provide a useful, relevant synthesis to the current, powerful antithesis of globalism. In fact, after the Tōhoku disaster, what we call a “post 3.11” thought is being produced and the core of that thought must be Otagaisama ethics. In order to recover from the damage of the disaster, the Japanese have already been helping the victims for several years. Incidentally, this assistance became a trigger to pay attention to the value of something communal and supportive. In this country a silent resistance against globalism has just begun. We can say this is the process of a harmonious dialectic and again a new Japanese philosophy is about to be born.

Conclusion

Japanese philosophy has a complex personality, which nonetheless continues to create acceptance and amalgamation of various schools of thought. All of these mergers have been brought about by a harmonious dialectic. The potentiality of a harmonious dialectic is as infinite as Hegel’s original concept. It means Japanese philosophy will always be able to flexibly cope with any kind of future change in the world as it has always done. I have no doubt that as long as this uniquely Japanese dialectic is employed, even such a strong attack against Japanese ideology like globalism will be balanced and synthesized, and harmony will once again be achieved.

Notes

1. Sueki Fumihiko, *A Place of Philosophy: A Meaning of Thinking in Japan*, Transview, 2012, pp.7-13.
2. Nakae Chōmin, *Ichinen yūhan, Nakae Chōmin, Ōsugi Sakae, Kawakami Hajime Shū; Gendai*

- Nihon bungaku zenshū* 3, Chikuma Shobō, 1961, p.8.
3. Fujita Masakatsu, *Hint of Philosophy*, Iwanami Shoten 2013, p.9.
 4. H. Gene Blocker and Christopher I. Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, 2001, p.23.
 5. See Ogawa Hitoshi, *The Power of Japanese Philosophy: From the Record of Ancient Matters to Murakami Haruki*, Asahishinbun Shuppan, 2013.
 6. Maruyama Masao, “Archetypes, Old Strata, Basso Ostinato: My Path Towards a Methodology for Japanese Intellectual History,” in *Maruyama Masao Anthology* 12, Iwanami Shoten, 1996, p.152.
 7. Matsuoka Seigow, *Japan As a Method: Culture of Omokage and Utsuroi*, NHK Shuppan, 2006, p.19.
 8. *Ibid.*, p.12.
 9. Watsuji Tetsurō, The Problem of Japanese Language and Philosophy, in *Watsuji Tetsurō Anthology* 4, Iwanami Shoten, 1962, p.511.
 10. Nishida Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Iwanami Shoten, 1950, p.6.
 11. John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p.278.
 12. See Sasaki Atsushi, *Thought of Japan*, Kōdansha, 2009. This book introduces the details of the contemporary Japanese thought.
 13. See Kōno Shion, *Delivering Texts to the World Reader*, Kōdansha, 2014, pp.211-3.
 14. Gereon Kopf, “Between the Global and the Local: Applying the Logic of the One and the Many to a Global Age,” in *Diversity of Japanese Philosophy: For a New Dialogue in the 21st Century*, Lam Wing-keung and Cheung Ching-yuen (eds.), Sekaishisōsha, 2012, p.77.