



Overcoming Modernity

Ho Tzu Nyen

Two encounters/citation from *The Ethical and Historical Character of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere*, a round-table discussion held on the evening of 4 March 1942 at Saami Maruyama, Kyoto by Kōsaka Masaaki, Koyama Iwao, Nishitani Keiji and Suzuki Shigetaka.

1.

KŌSAKA: This is the point I think that the Chinese have failed to accept. On the subject of Japan becoming great because it has been able skilfully to adopt the fruits of European civilization, one might observe that the translation (*honyaku*) of the ideas of European culture into Chinese has often been not direct but via a Japanese version of the original. Japan has not been troubled by the spiritual/cultural (*seishin*) gap between Europe and itself but rather has just set about importing European things in an uncomplicated manner. At least, that has been the intention. But this radically contrasting approach to Europe is what decisively distinguishes Japan from China.

NISHITANI: Listening to all this, I have just recalled a conversation I had on my last trip to Europe. At Shanghai, a Filipino boarded ship and we fell into conversation. He was full of admiration for what Japan has achieved, and declared his hope that the Philippines might become like this country, saying that his nation had to make more effort to absorb the products and lessons of Western civilization. At the time I kept my counsel, but I thought to myself that the problem is more complicated than that. Over the course of its long history, Japan has fostered a [sober and disciplined] culture, and therefore we have completed the apprenticeship of civilization. In other words, well before the arrival of European civilization on these shores, Japan could boast a highly developed culture, one animated by an active life force. The Philippines lacks such foundations. Therefore,

even if the Philippines absorbed the products of European civilization on a Japanese scale, the results would be very different.

Cited from David Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 202.

2.

NISHITANI: I would like to say something here even though it is completely off the subject. I think that the task of constructing a Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere requires far more people than Japan's present population. There are simply not enough of us. Unless our population reaches 110 million sometime soon, this is not going to work. So we need to turn to the peoples and nations of the Co-prosperity Sphere, especially those blessed with superior qualities who thus have the potential to help us build our region together. Can't we find those who could be transformed [via training and education] into Japanese, at least partially (*hannipponjin*)? Obviously this is impossible for peoples such as the Chinese and Thais, because they already possess their own distinctive histories and cultures that have given them strong inner solidarity and a sense of unity (*do-ho--teki-na kankei*). By contrast, peoples such as the Filipinos lack a [sophisticated] culture they can call their own. In any case, Filipinos have been spoiled by the impact of American culture. This suggests they may be resistant (*toriatsukainikui*) [to the disciplines of modern life]. On the other hand, there are peoples who appear to lack the kind of defining culture of the Chinese and the Thais but do demonstrate exactly those superior qualities needed for the task of constructing this Co-prosperity Sphere. Take, for example, the Malays. I am not very knowledgeable about Malaya but the people appear to be quite remarkable (*so-to- yu-shu*) ...

SUZUKI: Perhaps the Indonesians.

NISHITANI: Yes, one hears at least that they have really superior qualities. Haushofer has described the Malays as a nation of aristocrats (*kizokuteki minzoku*). It is even said by some that Japanese blood has been mixed with Malay blood. But my suggestion is that one might educate a people of excellent qualities with the potential to become what I call 'half-Japanese' provided one starts early enough. If my second-hand knowledge can be relied upon, the Moro people in the Philippines, for example, appear to possess the kind of qualities I am speaking about.

Cited from David Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 259 - 260

Related Keywords

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