

An Inquiry into the Historical Development of Philosophy in Japan*

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Abstract

What is Japanese philosophy? This paper will address this question, not by giving a survey of the works of Japanese philosophers or a definition of the subject matter of Japanese philosophy, but by attempting to present how it emerged as a distinct philosophical tradition—by sketching the controversies that gave rise to its formation; the social, intellectual, and historical factors that paved the way to its development; and the revolution of thought which finally gave it the title “Japanese philosophy.” I will argue that Japanese philosophy was born not because Japanese thinkers desperately wanted a philosophy that they could call their own, but because, first and foremost, they were thinking of ways to articulate the ever changing and paradoxical nature of reality. Formed by their religion and informed by the Chinese and Japanese classics, they used the language they learned from the West and tried to answer the most fundamental questions of existence. A unique way of philosophizing thus emerged and became a true locus of dialogue between Eastern and Western thought.

Key terms *Japanese philosophy, Thomas Kasulis, John Maraldo, philosophy, history*

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Upon my encounter with studies about Japanese philosophy, it surprised me to find that almost all of them touch upon the call for a redefinition of philosophy. They often begin or end with a remark on philosophy's Eurocentrism,¹ which has always been a subject of intense debate since the recognition of both Chinese and Indian ways of thinking as philosophical traditions on a par with the West. As I read on, it became clearer to me why this theme is so central in the texts of Japanologists, like John Maraldo. In his article, "Defining Philosophy in the Making," he writes, "if as the Greeks suggested, perplexity itself counts as an origin of philosophical thinking, then the perplexity over the meaning and scope of that concept can be said to originate [modern] philosophy in Japan."²

As I will show later, the debate about whether philosophy can only be attributed to European traditions or could also be applied to traditional Asian or non-Western thinking, fuelled the discourse that marked the beginning of modern academic philosophy in Japan. For although China

¹ James Heisig, one of the pioneering Japanologists in the world, who organized a series of conferences devoted to Japanese philosophy, and is one of the editors of the recently released *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* and the journal *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy*, objects to Bertrand Russell's attribution to Thales as the beginning of all philosophical thought. In "Redefining Defining Philosophy: An Apology for a Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy," Heisig writes, "Russell may have only been poking fun at the idea of gathering all of philosophical thought into a single, comprehensive history. Yet when he came to composing his own history of philosophy fifteen years later [Published in 1945 as *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster)], he made no attempt to disguise his starting point: philosophy—not western philosophy, but just philosophy—begins with Thales." In the same article, Heisig lays out his and his co-eastern scholars' project to rethink the definition and scope of Philosophy in order to accommodate emerging thoughts that can actually enrich and widen Philosophy itself. (James W. Heisig, "Redefining Defining Philosophy: An Apology for a Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy," in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, ed. James W. Heisig [Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, 2004], 275–76.)

Meanwhile, in the words of Wing-keung Lam, we find an admission of the Western origin of the term "philosophy." He says, "As far as Japan and China are concerned, the term 'philosophy' with its Greek origins is a concept imported from the West." However, his position on whether the term 'philosophy' could be extended to traditional Asian ways of thinking is not very clear, for he adds, "Since the mid-nineteenth century, Japan and China have undergone reception, confrontation, and the making of their own philosophies." (Wing-keung Lam 林永強, "Assimilation and Dissimilation in Japanese and Chinese Philosophy," in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy: Facing the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lam Wing-keung Cheung Ching-yuen, vol. 4 [Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, 2009], 251.)

² John C. Maraldo, "Defining Philosophy in the Making," 225. By "philosophy," I take Maraldo to mean modern academic philosophy, or philosophy as recognized in the West.

and India by the 19th century, had already affirmed the possibility of non-Western traditions of thought, Japan's philosophical tradition, compared to the three great civilizations—i.e., Chinese, Indian, and European—seemed relatively young.

But what do we mean when we use the term “Japanese philosophy?” What is its scope? To answer this, there is a need to look first into the historico-cultural milieu against which a particular sense of thinking started to develop in Japan. This initial task, in preparation for a serious inquiry into the scope and rudiments of Japanese philosophy, is what this paper will undertake.

Historical Overview

Prehistory to 794 C.E.: Beginnings

One of the most significant events during this period was the creation in 604 C.E. of Prince Shōtoku Taishi's *Seventeen Article Constitution* (*Jushichijo Kenpo*), which was issued by the Wa government.³ Scholars assume that during the fourth and fifth centuries, the preliterate Japanese culture was highly animistic. The Japanese of this time understood the world as filled with awe-inspiring *tama* or “spiritual power.” Upon the arrival of Chinese texts and the succeeding introduction of Buddhism to Japan during the sixth and seventh centuries, this animism was confronted with new kinds of understanding. On one hand, as the Chinese texts brought by mostly Korean traders and immigrants were typically Confucian classics, the ancient Japanese started to assimilate Confucian social and moral values

³ The existence of Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574–622) is legendary, and his authorship of the *Seventeen Article Constitution* is subject to controversy. It is not certain whether the *Constitution* was actually configured and written by him or by the court aristocrats at that time. Some historians believe that he did not have writing skills to write the *Constitution*. It is just that it has long been the practice that the credit for legal documents is given to the reigning monarch rather than the actual scribe, most especially since it was written at a time when Japan had just begun to be literate. What is noteworthy, nevertheless, is that it is the first document ever recorded in the legal history of Japan, the spirit of which is still reflected in the 1890 constitution that replaced it. See Prince Shōtoku, *Seventeen Article Constitution*, trans. W. G. Aston, <http://www.duhaime.org/LawMuseum/LawArticle-1182/604-The-Seventeen-Article-Constitution-of-Japan.aspx>.

into their way of living. On the other hand, the immediate attraction that Buddhism exerted upon the local culture led to a deep interest in Buddhist culture, rituals, and texts that basically concentrate on psychological refinement, self-cultivation, and spiritual enlightenment.

The tension between confrontation and assimilation did not stop there. As understanding the newly arrived traditions not only meant practicing them but “reading” and “interpreting” the teachings as well, there sparked among the ancient Japanese, most especially the aristocratic elites, an awareness of the urgency to adopt a literary language. Thus, an experimentation with a Japanese writing system using Chinese characters began.⁴

It was this gradual development of an intellectual culture that led to the creation of the *Seventeen Article Constitution* during the first decade of the seventh century. This *Constitution* was supposedly meant for the courtiers’ (ruling class) management of the state. Prior to this constitution, Japanese laws and regulations were only either direct or modified codifications of Chinese models. The significance of this text therefore lies in its being the first recorded attempt at a creative integration of the old and new traditions that existed during that time. The Constitution did not simply prescribe legal functions but rather “extra-legal attitudes and behaviours”⁵ that emphasized making a lawful, centralized state “value harmony.”⁶ This

⁴ This will culminate in the invention of the two phonetic syllabaries, the *katakana* and *hiragana* in the ninth century.

⁵ James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 6.

⁶ The first article of the Constitution says: (I) “Harmony is to be valued, and an avoidance of wanton opposition to be honoured. All men are influenced by class-feelings, and there are few who are intelligent. Hence there are some who disobey their lords and fathers, or who maintain feuds with the neighbouring villages. But when those above are harmonious and those below are friendly, and there is concord in the discussion of business, right views of things spontaneously gain acceptance. Then what is there which cannot be accomplished!” In articles ten and fifteen, one also finds the same temperament: (X) “although others give way to anger, let us on the contrary dread our own faults, and though we alone may be in the right, let us follow the multitude and act like men”; (XV) “if a man is influenced by private motives, he will assuredly feel resentments, and if he is influenced by resentful feelings, he will assuredly fail to act harmoniously with others. If he fails to act harmoniously with others, he will assuredly sacrifice the public interests to his private feelings. When resentment arises, it interferes with order, and is subversive of law. Therefore in the first clause it was said, that superiors and inferiors should agree together.”

emphasis on social harmony reflects the Confucian spirit, which the Japanese started to embrace. This, however, is not achieved through the practice of ceremonial propriety, but through “earnest meditation,”⁷ the “temperance of emotions and desires,”⁸ “decorous behaviour,”⁹ “encouragement of the good,”¹⁰ and the “reverence of Buddha, the Dharma,¹¹ and the clergy”¹²—the core values and practices of Buddhism.¹³ Some Japanologists argue that “if we can say with Aristotle that Thales’ claim that all things are water was the origin of Western philosophy, we could say that Prince Shôtoku’s *Seventeen-Article Constitution* marked the birth of Japanese philosophy.”¹⁴

The rest of the seventh century was a time of political turmoil. It was only during the Nara period (710–794) in the eighth century that a greater degree of social stability was achieved, as the imperial center of power began to crystallize and Japan started to look more like a unified state.¹⁵ This was brought about by the construction of Japan’s first permanent capital¹⁶ in the city of Nara. Having a fixed cultural and economic center contributed much to the intellectual development that took place in that

Harmony is also the end point of the subject of the 17th article regarding the carrying out of decisions for the state. (Shôtoku, *Constitution*.)

⁷ Shôtoku, *Constitution*, article VII.

⁸ *Ibid.*, articles I, V, X, XIV, and XV.

⁹ *Ibid.*, article IV.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, articles VI and IX.

¹¹ The obedience of duty is also the spirit of articles III, VII, VIII, XI, XII, XIII, and XVI of Shôtoku, *Constitution*.

¹² Shôtoku, *Constitution*, article II.

¹³ Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo even go as far as to argue that the constitution suggested that Buddhism should become a state religion. They write, “Basically, the *Constitution* argued that court behaviour should follow Confucian norms, but that psychologically and spiritually, one should cultivate a Buddhist egolessness and control of emotions. The *Constitution* suggested that only an egoless Buddhist could act appropriately as an accomplished Confucian courtier. Buddhism is for personal psychological and spiritual development; Confucianism for social standards. The model of philosophizing here is that one can borrow ideas and values from outside, but the goal is to integrate them into something new, a system more suitable to the Japanese cultural context. This is the course that most Japanese philosophers have followed ever since.” (Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 6.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ The absence of a permanent capital before was because of the indigenous belief that after an empress or an emperor has died the capital must be relocated.

period. It led to the establishment of a number of Buddhist communities located in temples that served as centers for the study of Chinese Buddhist texts. This resulted in a sophisticated knowledge of Buddhist terminology and philosophical systems. Meanwhile, two large chronicles were also produced, the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*, 712) and *Nihonshoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720). The *Kojiki*, written in a mixture of Chinese and phonetic script, deals with the mythological origins of the imperial family in prehistoric Japan. The *Nihonshoki*, on the other hand, was written in classical Chinese and begins with a creation myth but proceeds to describe court events.¹⁷ These two most important Japanese historical texts will later on play a great role in the Western world's projected image of Japan in the 20th century.

Basically, in the prehistorical period up to the eighth century, the cultural background of Japan is characterized by an importation of ideas, literary language, traditions, and practices from China. There was still little philosophical creativity and development during this time. Nonetheless, what is certain is that despite the borrowing, Japan already had something of its own to begin with.

The Heian Period (794–1185 C.E.): The Flourishing of Japanese Buddhism

The succeeding Heian period is one of the most critical periods in Japanese intellectual history with the flourishing of Buddhism in Japan. In Japanese Buddhist history, this period had been called the “Heian Bukkyô.” Compared to the “Nara Bukkyô” (Buddhism in the Nara period), wherein Buddhism was under state control and for the most part centered in the capital of Nara,¹⁸ the schools of Buddhism during the

¹⁷ Insofar as the two chronicles codified creation stories and established the ideology of an imperial family descended from the sun *kami*, Amaterasu, they set the ideological foundations for what would eventually become a Shintô justification for imperial rule. (Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 7.)

¹⁸ One of the crowning achievements of state Buddhism during the Nara period was the establishment of a nationwide system of provincial temples, with the Tôdaiji temple at Nara as its center is. See Paul Groner, *Saichô: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School* (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1984), 4.

“Heian Bukkyô” established major monastic centers in the mountains away from the capital, which had then been moved to Kyoto.¹⁹ Also, whereas the monks of the Nara period focused only in mastering the academic Buddhist systems imported from China, those of the Heian period placed together with this, an emphasis on doctrinal innovation, religious practices, and their Indian and Chinese origins.²⁰

There had been two new schools in Buddhism during the “Heian Bukkyô”: the Shingon²¹ and the Tendai.²² The teachings of the Shingon School, founded by Kûkai (774–835), primarily stressed esoteric Buddhism as the ground of all Buddhist teachings and practices. Esoteric Buddhism is the form of Buddhism that concentrates on the full engagement of the physical and intellectual aspects of the person in terms of contemplating the mandalas, performing sacred hand gestures, and chanting mantras.²³ It emphasizes that one can only achieve enlightenment “with and through this very body.”²⁴ On the other hand, the Tendai School founded by Saichô (767–822) was concerned with the complementary nature of the exoteric and esoteric rituals and practices. Exoteric Buddhism was initially an import from the Tiantai School in China; it was brought to Japan during the Nara period and is related with the kind of Buddhism that is taught to common people. In the Tendai School, esotericism is integrated with these exoteric Tiantai teachings.

The developments in Buddhist creativity during the Heian period, according to Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, focused on three major philosophical motifs: first, Japanese Buddhism geared at making sense of

¹⁹ Groner further writes in a footnote, “Some temples were located in the mountains during the Nara period, but often these were small temples used by a few monks for intensive religious practice, not major monastic centers.” (Groner, *Saichô*, 3.)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Shingon is the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit word *mantra*. It means secret word or mystical syllable. (Ryako Urakami, “Introduction to Shingon Buddhism,” ed. Don Weiss [speech, Symposium on Cross-Cultural Cooperation based on Religion and Science, Bangkok, Thailand, December 8–10, 1995], <http://www.davidmoreton.com/echoes/shingon9.html>.)

²² Tendai School is the Japanese version of the Chinese Tiantai School. Tiantai is a mountain in Chekiang province, eastern China, where the doctrine was first formulated.

²³ Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

the wide variety of Buddhist ideas, texts, and practices that had been flowing into Japan for the previous three centuries; second, it diverted its attention to the nature of enlightenment and its relation to religious practices, or the connection between praxis and insight; and third, it engaged itself with the indigenous animism that kindled what was to develop as Shintôism, and therefore established a Buddhist-Shintô relation. Generally, the acculturation of new ideas to native sensibilities in this period has been referred to by scholars as “the blossoming of creative Japanese intellectual and aesthetic activity.”²⁵

The Kamakura (1185–1333), Muromachi (1333–1568), and Momoyama (1568–1600) Periods: Requestioning Buddhism

The almost four centuries of stability during the Heian period was disturbed by succeeding events that brought about change to the administration and mood of the time. As the aristocrats spent more time in Kyoto, the administration of their provincial domains was left in the hands of the samurai. Unfortunately, this resulted in the samurai waging war against one another’s provincial territories and eventually in the establishment of Japan’s first military government by Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1192. This regime was called the Kamakura feudal system or the Kamakura shogunate.²⁶

With the increasing importance of the shogunal patronage for cultural, intellectual, and religious institutions, the main administrative offices were then moved to Kamakura, and the samurai became the controllers of the government. In addition to this, Kyoto suffered from unfortunate disasters like typhoons, epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, making administration really unstable. With this ill-fated turn of events, the grand philosophical syntheses of the Heian Buddhists eventually lost their relevance, as their complex practices and rituals could no longer be performed or their teachings understood in depth. Aside from the cultivated intellectual elite,

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

the Buddhists were also confronted with the need to address the ordinary people with limited education. All these circumstances led to the gradual decline of intellectual activity. This was believed by some to be an age of degeneracy (*mappô*), but whether this is the case or not, the circumstances called for a simplification of the practices and teachings of Buddhism.

This period was not entirely negative as far as the development of Japanese philosophy is concerned. As these events challenged the newly established Kamakura schools—namely, Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren—Buddhist monks sought ways to still practice Buddhism despite the complications of the time. Most of them were simple single practices, like invoking the name of Amida Buddha, or simply sitting in meditation, or trusting oneself solely to the saving power of the *Lotus Sutra*.²⁷ Meanwhile, as Buddhism was preoccupied with problems of the time, there were also advancements in aesthetics during the 13th through the 16th centuries. New modes and theories of aesthetic expression—such as *waka* poetics—took shape, and new art forms, such as the tea ceremony and Nô drama, emerged.²⁸ In addressing the questions about the relation between reality and aesthetics or aesthetic experience, most turned to Zen Buddhist ideas and metaphors. And, because of the instability of that time, philosophizing generally took an existential turn.

The Edo or Tokugawa Period (1600–1868): The Arrival of Neo-Confucianism

The Edo or Tokugawa period has been widely known as Japan's period of isolation. During this period, Japan limited its external relations to Korea and China and its Western interactions to a minimal trade

²⁷ Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo write, "For the ordinary laity, the great advantage of focusing on a single practice was that, unlike the demanding and complicated rituals of Shingon and Tendai, it was open to anyone regardless of educational background. The greater philosophical problem was how to justify such practices to the other audience, the educated elite and especially the Buddhist scholars among them. By themselves, the individual practices all belonged to the comprehensive Tendai and Shingon repertoire, but the claim now being made was that a *single* practice sufficed to achieve enlightenment. What is more, each of the new Kamakura schools had to prove that *their* single practice, and theirs alone, was truly efficacious." (*Japanese Philosophy*, 10.)

²⁸ Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 10.

agreement with the Dutch. As the internal warfare between the samurai groups that existed for two centuries ceased under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan experienced a long-lasting peace and made the nation more favorable to cultural, intellectual, and economic progress. Japanese intellectuals of this time, mostly Zen monks, went to China and returned carrying new texts, among which were those of the great neo-Confucian thinkers, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529). These newly arrived ideas that presented a grand synthesis of Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist thoughts brought another set of vocabulary and problems for Japanese philosophizing.

Japanese thought then took a variety of directions, one of which is an attempt to build epistemological frameworks for moral values and natural phenomena—an attempt that was in part due to the influx of Western-modern science and technology and the inroads of “Dutch learning” (*Rangaku*) to Japan. With the need to stabilize social order during that time, another direction lay in the great attraction intellectuals had towards neo-Confucian moral, social, and political theories, and towards a return to the fundamental meanings of ancient Confucian terms. Other trends were inquiries related to language that emphasized the role of understanding the significations and interrelations of terms in understanding world harmony. The philological interpretation of texts, like classical poetry or the *Kojiki* chronicle, was also employed by the Kokugaku School or Native Studies. Finally, the retirement of samurais into civic life gave rise to inquiries about the values of samurai and the importance of death.

With these developments in thinking—dominated by neo-Confucianism—the Edo or Tokugawa period then set a mood for the Japanese intellectuals to be more creative and assertive for thoughts that are not merely importations, but are likewise reflective of their own values and traditions.

Modern Academic Philosophy (1868–Present): The Debate About “*Tetsugaku*” in Japan

As the need to open itself to Western relations became more pressing, Japan finally renewed its relations with the outside world at the Tokugawa shogunate’s downfall and the reestablishment of the imperial system in 1868. This became known as the Meiji Restoration. In order to protect itself from colonization by Western powers, Japan set out to turn itself into a modern industrial and military power. It sent its brightest young intellectuals to Europe and the United States to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for modernization. Since this goal inevitably involved an understanding of the Western way of thinking, the study of Western philosophy became significant, and has been decisive in the founding of what is now the modern academic philosophy in Japan.

Translating Philosophy: Nishi Amane

Attempts at translating and understanding the Western philosophical idiom became the defining feature of the early introduction of Western philosophy to Japan. The term “philosophy” was as foreign to the Japanese, as they were unfamiliar with the Western academic system. This foreignness has been one of the most significant factors in the judgment that philosophy had been lacking in Japan prior to its importation from the West.²⁹

Nishi Amane (1829–1897), a Japanese scholar who had been significantly influenced by the scientific positivism of Auguste Comte and the inductive logic and utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, was the one who introduced the term “philosophy” to Japan and established *tetsugaku* as the official translation of it in his work *Hyakuichi shinron* (*A New Theory on the Hundred and One [Doctrine]*) in 1874.³⁰ Nishi’s stand is that *tetsugaku* is an intellectual activity which seeks to clarify the laws of nature and the laws of

²⁹ Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 235–36.

³⁰ H. Gene Blocker and Christopher L. Starling, *Japanese Philosophy* (USA: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1.

man, while simultaneously establishing a doctrinal methodology.³¹ With this perspective, Nishi admits that “there is nothing that deserves to be called philosophy in Japan.”³² He was not convinced that the Japanese had been able to establish “doctrinal methodologies” in their inquiries or that they had been particularly preoccupied with the “laws” that govern nature and the human mind. It can be said that this emphasis on laws and methodology reflects what he inherited from the positivism of Comte. However, if one were to take only positivism into account as the measure of philosophy, then even continental philosophy might not qualify as philosophy.

But Nishi’s message was not all negative. Maraldo stresses that Nishi actually meant something broader than what his statement dismissed. Maraldo cites Takeshi Koizumi, who argues that for Nishi, “Philosophy can incorporate the kind of self-study and social value traditionally practiced in Japan.”³³ The preference for social value and the practice of self-refinement which could be considered as the core values of Japanese society, could be seen as something considered by Nishi as capable of enlarging the present scope of philosophy. Maraldo points out that for Nishi, philosophy is historically a Western discipline and a continuing achievement of the modern West; nonetheless, it is now open to development with the aid of Eastern learning.³⁴

Non-Existence of Philosophy in Japan: Nakae Chōmin

Other thinkers after Nishi Amane, like Inoue Enryō, also wrote treatises about the novelty of Western philosophy. In Enryō’s *Evening of Philosophical Conversation*, for example, one reads a dialogue about the problem of defining philosophy. It reflects the Japanese thinkers’

³¹ From *Nishi Amane zenshū*, ed. Ōkubo Toshiaki, vol. 1 (Tokyo, 1945), 288–89; cited in Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 227.

³² Nishi Amane, “Hyakugaku Renkan,” in *Nishi Amane zenshū*, 181; cited in Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 224.

³³ Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 227.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

perplexity at the face of the “new discipline from the West,” and their struggle to convey its meaning,³⁵ which implies that also for Enryô, philosophy is a discipline unprecedented in Japan.

The series of debates about the presence of an indigenous Japanese philosophy, however, became most famous with Nakae Chômin’s blunt declaration in 1901 that “from antiquity to the present day, there has never been any philosophy in Japan.”³⁶ According to him, the Confucians of the past had merely proposed new interpretations of the sages; the Buddhists, even if they showed creativity, had always done so within the limits of their religion; and, the Western-style thinkers actually did nothing but to parrot this or that European theory.³⁷ Even after a decade, this lamentation of Nakae went unchallenged and was even reiterated. For instance, another Japanese thinker, Sakamoto Hyakudai, when asked at international conferences about the essence of Japanese philosophy, expressed regret that “There is no such thing [in Japan], everything is imported, imitated.”³⁸ Even the joint work of Yoshimoto Takaaki, Umehara Takeshi, and Nakazawa Shin’ichi, entitled *Have the Japanese Done Philosophy?*, and Nakamura Yûjirô’s³⁹ question, “Is a Japanese philosophy possible?” likewise reflect this open suspicion.

These are the very criticisms against which Japanese philosophy has been struggling since Japan’s importation of academic philosophy from the West. The suspicion surrounding what could be termed “Japanese philosophy” speaks much of how it is put into question, not only by mainstream philosophers but by Japanese thinkers themselves.⁴⁰ In

³⁵ Ibid., 230.

³⁶ Blocker and Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, 1. “Nakae Chômin,” Maraldo comments, “is an inveterate advocate of liberal democracy, materialism, and atheism who had studied philosophy in France in the early 1870s and was impressed with the creative and theoretical, even impractical force of the European discipline, unprecedented in traditional Japanese thought and unachieved by contemporary Japanese professors.” (Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 233.)

³⁷ Blocker and Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 1–2. Blocker and Starling adds, “Even if Nakamura comes to acknowledge the existence of Japanese philosophy today, like many Japanese intellectuals he would still hold that there was none before Nishida Kitarô’s 1911 *An Inquiry into the Good (Zen no Kenkyû)*.”

⁴⁰ See Blocker Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*.

relegating the Nativists, Neo-Confucians, and Buddhist thinkers in Japan to a status not deserving of the name philosophy, the narrowness of the definition of philosophy is rendered questionable.

First Japanese Philosopher: Nishida Kitarô

It was the proclamation of Takahashi Satomi in 1912 of Nishida Kitarô's *Zen no Kenkyû* (*A Study of the Good*) as "the first, and only, philosophical work in post-Meiji Japan, . . . overflowing with original thought,"⁴¹ and Funuyama Shin'ichi's verdict in 1959 that Nishida's work moved philosophy "from the stage of enlighteners to a stage of originality,"⁴² which finally celebrated and drew attention to the existence of an original thought that is more than worthy of the name "Japanese philosophy."⁴³

Decades later, in 1977, a disciple of Nishida, Shimomura Toratarô, attempted to define his teacher's innovation. He affirmed that it was Nishida's mastery of the philosophical idiom which enabled him to incorporate into his thinking the history of Japanese thought using the language he learned from the West. He intimates that "Nishida became a model for grasping the rigorous methods and concepts of Western philosophy and yet possessing a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality."⁴⁴ Nakamura also expressed his acknowledgement of Nishida as Japan's first philosopher when he said that "One had to wait for Nishida for a work that could disprove [Nakae] Chômin's judgment that there was no philosophy in Japan . . . Nishida's work is the first to deserve the name of philosophy."⁴⁵

Regarding the criteria used to judge the work of Nishida to be philosophical or to be reflective of the Japanese mind-set, these were not really clear in their praises. Despite the little clues given by Shimomura, it

⁴¹ Cited in Maraldo, "Defining Philosophy in the Making", 234.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁵ Cited in Blocker and Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, 2.

was still uncertain how Nishida's work affirmed the identity of Japanese philosophy. Nevertheless, as pointing out what is original within a thinker's thoughts would require a deep knowledge and familiarity with what influenced him, what is certain is that these Japanese thinkers were already convinced that they could champion at least one Japanese "philosopher," who they could consider a representative of their thought.

Reception of Japanese Philosophy

Given the historical narrative about the development of philosophy in Japan, one may wonder why Japanese thought has only been recently recognized by the English-speaking world.⁴⁶ To address this, let me cite some political, cultural, and historical circumstances that led to this slow acknowledgment. The first of which is Japan's self-imposed 260-year isolation during the Tokugawa period.

The Isolation of Japan

At the time Indian and Chinese thought started to gain a steady flow into the Western world beginning in the 16th century, Japan could be said to have been in a disadvantaged position. If we recall, in the period between the 17th to the 19th centuries, Japan limited its foreign relations to the Koreans, Chinese, and the Dutch. Back then, Christian missionaries and international traders wanting to understand the basic spiritual and philosophical ideas of the people they were to engage with, translated the texts found in China and India. Because of these translations, Western philosophers like Leibniz and Hegel learned and recognized the existence of Chinese and Indian philosophical systems.⁴⁷ Because of Japan's 260-year

⁴⁶ Following Thomas Kasulis, the term "English-speaking world" will be primarily used to address scholarship in English published in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

⁴⁷ Kasulis adds, that "By the mid- and late nineteenth century, western thinkers like Schopenhauer, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud could refer to Asian ideas like 'nirvana' as if they expected their educated readers to be at least somewhat familiar with the term." (Thomas P. Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, 66.)

isolation however, its ideas, like *kokoro*,⁴⁸ could not be part of the Western discussion at that time. An opportunity for international recognition should have been opened by the Meiji Restoration; however, what the Americans and British initially thought to be a possible source of goods and labor that could serve European interest, had at that time already become strong enough industrially and militarily, to be perceived as a political and economic competitor instead. Rather than being a colony, Japan had grown to be an East-Asian colonizer. By the end of the 19th century, Japan turned out to be their “new imperial rival in Asia.”⁴⁹ As a result, even before they could romanticize the Old Japan, they had already been sensitive to the threat of the New Japan.⁵⁰

The Impact of Spiritual Ideology, Japanese Aesthetics, and World War II

Another factor that contributed to the delayed recognition of Japanese philosophy by the English-speaking world is the impression that only ideological and aesthetic thinking developed in Japan. In the late 19th century, British and American scholars who went to Japan found themselves amidst an intellectual scene defined by the impact of the ideas and values sprouting from traditions such as the Mito School, Native Studies, and Restoration Shintō.⁵¹ It happened that the English scholars came to think of the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* as the foundational texts of

⁴⁸ Kasulis interprets *kokoro* as a kind of responsiveness that is built into everything, or, from a personal standpoint, *kokoro* is something like a mindful heart. As a technical term, it designates the seat of thinking and feeling, and is the basis of sensitivity. Motoori Norinaga, the Kokugaku scholar who decoded the *Kojiki*—from which he derived the concept—developed a theory of *kokoro* and considered it as the heart or the basic responsiveness of all things. Kasulis extends Motoori’s argument even further and argues that the philosophy of *kokoro* is “the essence of Shintō” and “the essence of human.”

Although the concept of *kokoro* had been present since prehistorical Japan, it had not been read until Motoori decoded the *Kojiki*. Kasulis quotes Motoori who expresses regret that, “We so stupidly wrote these things down in a language we couldn’t read, that it ended up being preserved.” See Thomas Kasulis, “Japanese philosophy,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G100SECT7>. Kasulis also explains this in a short interview with Alan Saunders, “Japanese philosophy” (ABC, October 9, 2010), <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/japanese-philosophy--a-short-overview/2977908#transcript>.

⁴⁹ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” 67.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Japan.⁵² Because of the mythological nature of these narratives, the English-speaking world received the impression that there is little speculative power in Japan, and that the Japanese are rather ideological than philosophical. What Kasulis sees as a problem in characterizing Japanese philosophy based only on the two ancient texts, is that the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* had not actually been considered classics of ancient Japan until the 1800s. The *Kojiki*, for one, because it has been written in a hybrid of Chinese characters and phonetic script, was not readable even to the most educated readers from 800–1800.⁵³ Also, the British and American scholars were not fully aware that from 800–1600, the most creative and systematic philosophical thinkers were Buddhists and not Shintô. These Buddhist thinkers were later on joined by neo-Confucians, but, again, they were Confucians, not Shintô. In the end, because the state ideology of Meiji Restoration emphasized Shintôism over Buddhism⁵⁴ and relegated Confucianism to the limits of morality, the scholars focused greatly on what is just a part of Japanese thought.

Together with the stereotype that the Japanese are only ideological, they are also considered to be more artistic and literary than philosophical. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, texts that pertain to traditional Japanese culture and fine arts were published and gained popularity.⁵⁵ One

⁵² English scholars like William George Aston (1841–1911) and Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935) classically trained in Victorian Britain believed that every great civilization is built upon ancient foundational texts. Upon their arrival to Japan, they then looked for the textual corner stones of the Japanese civilization in the way the Greek classics served the west, the *Qu'ran* served the Islamic world, the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* served India, or the *Four Books* served China. Guided by the Japanese government at that time and academic informants enamored of the new State Shintô ideology, they turned to *Nihonshoki* and *Kojiki*. Given this context, Aston, a British diplomat-cum-philologist, decided to translate *Nibongi* (*Nihonshoki*) in 1896, and in 1905 published a book called *Shintô*. Meanwhile, the British philologist and professor at Tokyo University, Chamberlain, translated *Kojiki* in 1906. See Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World.”

⁵³ This only became possible when Motoori Norinaga decoded the text through his philological cryptology.

⁵⁴ The *Kojiki* explicitly avoids mentioning Buddhism. See Matsumura Kazuo’s “*Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* (*Nihongi*)” (March 28, 2007), <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=1243>.

⁵⁵ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” 69. He further comments, “Some European impressionists were fascinated with Japanese woodblocks and the Japanese displays of native arts and crafts were big hits at such venues as the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.”

of the proponents of such texts, was an English-literature teacher at the Tokyo University, Lafcadio Hearn,⁵⁶ who himself was nostalgic for the Old Japan.⁵⁷ He wrote books about Japanese folktales, ghost stories, and rural culture. Another was Ernest Francisco Fenollosa,⁵⁸ who taught logic and philosophy at Tokyo University; he, on the other hand, stirred among the Meiji era thinkers an interest in traditional Japanese forms of high art like Nô drama. Arthur Waley meanwhile contributed much in rousing the attention of Anglophone readers to classical Japanese literature in his translations of Nô plays, the *Pillow Book*, and the *Tale of Genji*. And George Bailey Samson presented comprehensive accounts of the development of Japanese civilization.⁵⁹ All these contributed much to the interest given to Japanese aesthetics and literature, for which Japan had gained prominence.

⁵⁶ Hearn spent the last fourteen years of his life in Japan who was a writer for the English-language *Kobe Chronicle* before he got his teaching post.

⁵⁷ Kasulis adds that “He even ‘went native’ and took a Japanese wife from a samurai family and gave himself a Japanese name (Koizumi Yakumo). His romantic works on Japan, such as *Glimpses of an Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *Shadowings* (1900), *Japan: An Attempt at an Interpretation* (1904), and *Kvaidan* (1904), were very popular among English readers. His interest in the traditional life of rural Japan also meshed with the burgeoning interest among Japanese themselves in their own ethnological and folkloric studies (some of which grew out of Kokugaku interests, starting with the peasant ethnography of Hirata Atsutane).” (Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” 69.)

⁵⁸ Fenollosa (1853–1908) is an American philosopher who studied philosophy and sociology at Harvard and was brought to Japan to teach in 1878. He was a mentor to some Meiji philosophers as Inoue Tetsujirô, Miyake Setsurei, and Inoue Enryô, who uniformly considered *tetsugaku* to be an Asian as well as Western enterprise. In their own philosophies they attempted East-West syntheses in contrast to scholars like Nishi Amane. Yet, as much as Fenollosa appreciated Japanese traditional material arts, he did not seem to have any interest in traditional Japanese philosophical ideas, even aesthetics. His writings, almost all published posthumously were on the history of East Asian art (*The Masters of Ukiyoe* and *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*) and Nô drama. Either Western or Japanese, he did not publish a book on philosophy. (Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” 69.)

⁵⁹ George Sansom’s works include *An Historical Grammar of Japanese*, 1928; *Japan: A Short Cultural History*, 1931; and the three-volume *History of Japan*, written between 1958 and 1963. His works became models of Japanese cultural history for the anglophone world, at least before the latter generation of American intellectual historians brought their leftist concerns about ideology to their historical studies of Japan starting the late 1970s. Because he was not so influenced by the State Shintô ideology at that time, he was able to present a historical narrative of Japan that seems likely to be able to breed a philosophical tradition among its people. It is said that Sansom’s lack of focus on Japan’s political ideologies had lent his work a refreshing independence in the 1930s, but that same quality seemed more a blindspot to the neo-Marxian Japanese historians writing in America during the late 1970s and 1980s. (Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” 71.)

Meanwhile, that Japan did have other intellectual achievements apart from its spiritual ideas was not totally lost in the academic scene. Again, like the Christian missionaries' translation of the texts from China and India, the same scholarship was extended to Japanese Buddhism. It primarily focused on the interrelation between Buddhist values and the Japanese mind-set and everyday life.⁶⁰ Although these works did not address the arena of Japanese philosophy, they were helpful enough in shedding light on the possible aspects of Japanese culture with a philosophical feature.⁶¹ Unfortunately, though, because they had been published between the periods of two world wars, these works were not widely read until recently.

Post-War Studies

The mid-20th century was certainly a good time for studies about Japanese philosophy to advance. Post-war engagements to this emerging area of philosophy were opened up by the translation to English of Nishida Kitarô's *Zen no Kenkyû* (*Study of the Good*, 1960) by Valdo Viglielmo, and of Watsuji Tetsurô's *Fûdo* (*Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, 1961) by Geoffrey Bownas. This project to translate Japanese texts, supported and endorsed by UNESCO, had an enormous impact on the Japanese academic scene; it established Nishida as a major philosopher worthy of national attention, and had in effect launched the Kyoto School of philosophy.⁶² This was followed by University of Hawaii's⁶³ offering of

⁶⁰ Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 70. One of these Christian missionaries was August Karl Reischauer (1879–1971). Besides founding what is now Tokyo Women's Christian University, Reischauer was deeply involved in the (frustrating) attempt to convert Japan to Christianity. He works on Japanese Buddhism were *Studies in Japanese Buddhism* (1917), and *Ôjôyûshû: Collected Essays on Birth into Paradise* (1930). His hope was to give Christian missionaries a grasp of Japanese spiritual ideas and values to help them in their task of conversion. Other important works on Buddhism from this early period included Sir Charles Eliot's *Japanese Buddhism* (1935), Arthur Lloyd's *The Creed of Half Japan: Historical Sketches of Japanese Buddhism* (1911), William Elliot Griffis' *Religions of Japan: From the Dawn of History to the Era of Meiji* (1904), and Robert Cornell Armstrong's *Buddhism and Buddhists in Japan* (1927).

⁶¹ Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 70.

⁶² Ibid., 73. The choice of Watsuji's work by the UNESCO committee was, however, a little idiosyncratic. It was an early work written by Watsuji right after his return from studying in Germany, but the topic was not one that would attract the attention of most Western readers and was hardly been considered as Watsuji's best work. Because of the limited publication run in Japan

a regular course in Japanese philosophy in the 1960s, and the subsequent assignment of Viglielmo and Robert J. J. Wargo in the university.⁶⁴

The university's core interest in Eastern ways of thinking led to the categorization of Asian thought into three, namely, Chinese, Indian, and Buddhist.⁶⁵ Japanese philosophy was then relegated under the heading of Buddhism.⁶⁶ Although much can be said about the dominance of Buddhist values in Japanese thought, a critical flaw of this categorization is that it openly disregards all other ways of thinking developed in Japan, such as Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Native thought, Shintôism, and even the secular academic philosophy of the modern period. If one does not consider Japanese philosophy as a distinct tradition, it would have been more natural to place it under the heading of Chinese philosophy.⁶⁷

and poor distribution for both books though, they did not achieve much visibility among Anglophone audiences.

⁶³ Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 74. Under its founding chairman, Charles A. Moore, the philosophy department of the University of Hawaii had an interest in Asian philosophy and had hosted a series of East-West Philosophers conferences beginning in the 1930s. In 1951, it established the only English-language journal in the Western world devoted entirely to articles on Asian or comparative (Asian-Western) philosophy entitled, *Philosophy East and West*. The University of Hawaii was the first institution to have officially offered Japanese philosophy as a course.

⁶⁴ Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 73. The university had been focusing on modern academic philosophy in Japan, not until the arrival of Thomas Kasulis there in 1975 where a sequence of courses on both pre-modern and modern had been offered. Because of these developments, Japanese philosophy began to have an identity on its own that led in 1977 to the field of "Japanese philosophy" as an area of specialization for the department's doctoral program, joining the already established options of "Indian philosophy," "Chinese philosophy," "Buddhist philosophy," and "Comparative philosophy."

⁶⁵ In the original Asian curriculum of the University of Hawaii, including in its early publication projects, its philosophy department used this threefold classification system for Asian thought. Kasulis adds, "This was the same categorization used in the plan for the first significant series of sourcebooks on Asian philosophy to appear in English and published by Princeton University Press. Although only two volumes ever appeared—the *Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy* (edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore) and the *Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy* (edited by Wing-tsit Chan)—the original project was to have three volumes, the third being a *Sourcebook of Buddhist Philosophy*. (Only many years later did the idea—also as yet unrealized—arise that there might be a fourth volume in the series, *A Sourcebook of Japanese Philosophy*.)" (Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 74.)

⁶⁶ The possible reason for this is that Charles A. Moore, in having co-edited books on Indian Philosophy and Buddhism, was influenced by the viewpoint that Japanese Buddhism is the culmination of all Buddhist traditions and could only be understood if one first understands Indian Buddhism.

⁶⁷ Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World," 74.

The recognition of Japanese philosophy was also reinforced by the publication of books, journals, and translated texts outside Hawaii. This would include major contributions such as the translations and articles of David A. Dilworth, Sophia University's *Monumental Nipponica* journal and monograph series, Ôtani University's journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*, and Nanzan University's *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy*. Developments on the consideration of pre-modern Japanese philosophy were also coincidental with Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarô and Zen Buddhism's increased prominence in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁸ These then made Japanese philosophical works available to English readers and spurred further interactions between Japan and the West. To some extent, the increasing interest the West showed in Japanese philosophical thought led to a heightened sensitivity among Japanese intellectuals about the importance of their own tradition.⁶⁹

Japanese Philosophy

Four Senses of Japanese Philosophy

The gradual recognition of Japanese philosophy as a discrete tradition and area of study in mainstream philosophy led to different interpretations of what the term "Japanese philosophy" means.⁷⁰ Any scholar on Japanese philosophy is immediately confronted with the challenge to articulate the basic features of this way of thinking in order to distinguish it from different philosophical traditions, and to introduce Japanese philosophy to readers who encounter it for the first time. Maraldo, in an attempt to address this issue starts with the nuances of the term "Japanese philosophy," and singles out four main senses of the term:

⁶⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁰ For the ensuing discussion on the four senses of philosophy in Japan, see Maraldo, "Defining Philosophy in the Making." These had also been listed in his two previous articles, "Contemporary Japanese Philosophy," 810; and "The Ambiguous Legacy of Japanese Philosophy," *Monumenta Nipponica* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 349. The present section offers an expansion of that classification. This may also be found in the introduction of *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 19–21.

The first sense reflects Nakae Chômin's sentiment about the non-existence of philosophy in Japan, that is, the kind of *philosophy in the European idiom* practiced by Japanese scholars. The practitioners of this sort of philosophy are experts on Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, for instance, who happen to be Japanese. Japanese philosophy in this sense does not manifest any quality that would make it peculiarly Japanese.

The second sense is the reverse of this—*traditional Japanese thought* as it was formulated prior to the introduction to Japan of the term *tetsugaku* and the European classification of philosophy as an academic discipline. Japanese philosophy in this sense would refer to Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintôism, etc., but is not informed by European philosophy. This definition presupposes that a thought can be considered philosophical as long as it deals with ultimate reality or the most general causes and principles of things.

The third sense is more sympathetic to both modern and traditional Japanese thought. It acknowledges the fact that *philosophy as a method or system is of Western origin, but, it could also be applied to pre-modern, pre-Westernized Japanese thinking*. For Maraldo, "People who practice Japanese philosophy in this sense understand it primarily as an endeavour to reconstruct, explicate, or analyze certain themes and problems that are recognizably philosophical when presented in a certain light."⁷¹ This approach to Japanese philosophy then requires a trained eye in engaging the texts and seeing what in them could have a philosophical import. This attitude towards philosophy aims at inclusion: it seeks to make the Japanese thinking part of an emerging, broader tradition of philosophy, with both contemporary and traditional thoughts enriching one another.⁷²

The problem with the first definition of Japanese philosophy is that it limits philosophy to what is Western and neglects the possibility of philosophy to be enriched by non-Western traditions. Meanwhile, the second conception of philosophy although is important in identifying

⁷¹ Maraldo, "Defining Philosophy in the Making," 240.

⁷² Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 20.

fundamental questions, it is less critical and has the tendency to forget its reconstructive nature.⁷³ The third approach is actually the soundest; what is unclear with this understanding of philosophy, however, is the criterion by which to judge a particular philosophy as Japanese.

This is what the fourth sense looks for—originality, that is to say, *an independent and distinctive “Japanese” feature that would make Japanese thought stand apart from its Western, Chinese, or Indian counterparts*.⁷⁴ It echoes the perspective taken by those who appraised Nishida’s work as the first philosophical work in Japan. Insofar as this meaning of Japanese philosophy concerns itself mainly in affirming the identity of “Japanese” philosophy, it is characterized by a going beyond one’s roots (in this case, both Eastern and Western), “where Japanese philosophy has something to say to philosophies of a different provenance.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, this perspective could also be easily mistaken as falling into the vainglory of national pride and could undermine the very conditions for its own innovation.

If one were to characterize Japanese philosophy by synthesizing these four senses, I would say, a satisfactory definition would be one that considers traditions in Japanese thought from the ancient times up to the present as part of a continuing tradition that has undergone and continues to undergo different stages of development (as in the third sense), but also one that is critically aware of the historical, cultural, and linguistic

⁷³ By reconstructive, I mean that philosophy indeed begins with questions. However, inasmuch as there is no philosophy outside a particular landscape and culture, philosophy is continually conditioned by the different social-historical-political-economic circumstances that come into play in that same culture and in the world at large. This then, for instance, necessarily includes the impact of wars, scientific and technological advancements, changes in economic system, revolutions in philosophy and art, etc., which in fact are the material conditions from which philosophy springs and which philosophy attempts to address.

⁷⁴ This sense explicitly sets Japanese philosophy off from non-Japanese philosophy. “Insofar as this approach highlights contributions to philosophy that are *uniquely* Japanese, it has been criticized as an instance of inverted orientalism: an appraisal weighted in favor of things Japanese, stereotyping differences from things non-Japanese, and minimizing the importance of historical variants.” However, this criticism, in the end, ends up just stripping *tetsugaku* its Japanese character and misses the point why it had been called “Japanese” philosophy in the first place. (Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 21.)

⁷⁵ Heisig et al., *Japanese Philosophy*, 21.

conditions that shaped its tradition (as in the fourth sense). This is in recognition of the fact that although *tetsugaku*, as a term used to refer to philosophy as an academic discipline, is imported from the West (first sense), it does not exclude the fact that aside from its method, the very power which moves philosophy and makes philosophy significant are those fundamental questions which it seeks to answer (second sense).

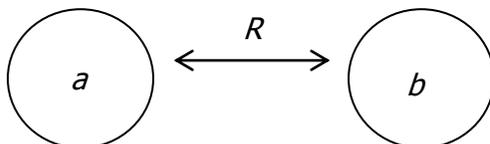
To look at Japanese philosophy as a continuing tradition and a creative confluence of Eastern and Western ways of thinking, in my opinion, reflects a more extensive understanding of philosophy itself. As an original body of thought that is capable of being enriched, Japanese philosophy must also be seen to be capable of enriching philosophy at large. The future directions of Japanese philosophy cannot be pre-empted. However, for now, it would be best if serious efforts will be extended to this philosophical tradition as there is yet so much to learn from it.

Four Major Features of Japanese Philosophy

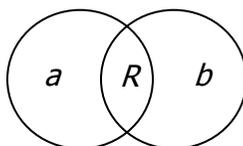
Having laid out an understanding of what the term “Japanese philosophy” means, the next task is to address the question of what this body of thought is about; that is, what were the Japanese thinkers aiming to accomplish? What were they looking for? This is not to present a universal-singular idea of what Japanese philosophy is about, more than it is a general picture of its functional pattern, which could serve as a departure point for scholars who are uninitiated with Japanese thinking. Kasulis points to four common assumptions and motifs that run throughout the Japanese tradition as tendencies in its philosophical thinking⁷⁶; they are: (1) *preference for internal relations*, (2) *holographic understanding of whole and parts*, (3) *argument by relegation*, and (4) *philosophy in medias res*.

⁷⁶ See Thomas P. Kasulis, “Helping Western Readers Understand Japanese Philosophy,” in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy: Confluences and Cross-Currents*, ed. Raquel Bouso and James W. Heisig, vol. 6 (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, 2009), 215–33. Kasulis’ discussion of the four features of Japanese philosophy had also been included in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 25–28.

*Preference for internal relations:*⁷⁷ Most Japanese philosophers have historically favored the understanding of relations as being internal rather than external.⁷⁸ That is to say, related things exist interdependently. In external relations, object *a* and object *b* exist independently and could only be connected by a third factor *R*.



In internal relations, on the other hand, *a* and *b* are intrinsically interconnected or overlapping such that *R* is a part of them which they have in common.



An example that could be used here is the relation between knower and known. If one looks at it from the viewpoint of external relations, the knower (subject) and the known (the object) exist independently and only become connected by the creation of a third factor, the relation called knowledge. Within this paradigm, various theories will arise in order to explain the validity or truth of the resulting knowledge. If, on the other hand, the relation is internal, knowledge represents not something independent but rather inseparable from the knower and known. This stresses that understanding is not achieved with a disengaged knower observing things disinterestedly, but rather through an engagement or praxis with what is known, wherein the ideal is the complete

⁷⁷ Kasulis gives a more extensive discussion of this preference for internal relations side by side its counterpart, i.e., external relations, in his book *Intimacy and Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (USA: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

⁷⁸ Kasulis, "Helping Western Readers," 219. This kind of thinking is I think something which the Chinese have influenced them.

interpenetration of the knower and reality.⁷⁹ The first corollary of this is the kind of knowing that involves both concrete practice and intellectual abstraction, a knowing with one's entire being. One of the Japanese words for mind, *kokoro*, which means mind-heart, reflects this kind of embodied consciousness. It carries the meaning of affective sensitivity as well as rational thought, wherein knowledge comes about with the unison of the mind and body. The second corollary concerns the transmission of knowledge. If knowledge is independent or objective, this then can be systematically passed on to any independent mind. In contrast to this, if knower and known are internally related, the interdependence between a teacher and a student would be stressed in the transmission and assimilation of knowledge. The student learns by emulating how the master engages reality. As Dōgen points out, "the student and the master practice together."⁸⁰ The third corollary is an emphasis on *how* rather than *what*.

⁷⁹ Being a pianist, for example, is not something achieved overnight or simply by mentally deciding to be one. One needs constant practice and rigorous training in listening to notes and memorizing the location of keys, so that one would gain proficiency in playing a particular piece exactly the way the piece requires. For instance, a child who had been playing a Beethoven, Liszt, or Tchaikovsky piece for five years would "know" more how to use a piano more than a student who merely studies its parts for ten years. One must engage oneself with the instrument and process in order to gain mastery—a mastery that relates with the instrument until such time that it will even seem to "disappear" in the sense that one need no longer needs to deliberately represent things in one's mind, like when one first encounters it, one simply understands intuitively how it is used. One can already play the piano without actually looking at the keys distantly. In informal language, it is akin with the expression: knowing things "by heart."

This kind of perspective is very much reflected in their understanding of Buddhism. In an article, Bret Davis writes, "An insistence on an embodied practice of awakening is perhaps most pronounced in the religion of Zen Buddhism, which maintains that the ultimate truth of its teaching is 'not founded on words and letters' . . . Zen practice and experience can no more be reduced to philosophical discourse than can (Judeo-Christian-Islamic) faith be reduced to (Greek) reason." See Bret W. Davis, "Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen," in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, 249.

He also interprets Nishida's view that "Knowledge of things takes place not by standing aloof and representing them as objects for a disembodied consciousness, but by engaging with them in praxis, by acting on them and letting them act on us." It is a standpoint of "knowledge-*sive*-practice, practice-*sive*-knowledge" for which "the dynamic non-dualism" of the "dialectical intertwining of self and world" and "the 'oneness of body and mind' and acting-intuition" are completely manifest. He likewise sees this in Keiji Nishitani who again reiterates that "at the level of this originary non-dualism, 'knowledge can only come about in unison with embodied practice, in the manner of 'the oneness of body and mind.'" (Davis, "Provocative Ambivalences," 265, 267.)

⁸⁰ Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō Kattō*; cited in Kasulis, "Helping Western Readers," 222.

Rather than talking all day, for example, about what the characteristics of a good poem are, how one can make a good poem is given primacy.

The second feature of Japanese thought that Kasulis mentions, is the *holographic understanding of whole and parts*. On the model of external relations, the parts comprise the whole and the external relationship of the parts with one another is what makes us understand the whole. Meanwhile in a holographic approach, the whole (holo) is inscribed (graph) in each of its parts. It is not only the parts which are in the whole but the whole is in each of the parts. Take the case of DNA, for instance. In normal circumstances, a strand of hair is considered a part of the body, but if it is removed there would not be much problem, the body is still intact. However, when it is found in a crime scene, the genetic blueprint inscribed in the hair actually points to the entire body, or the entire person. This perspective emphasizes that because everything is interconnected, every single part is not simply a piece of the whole, but is already a representative of it insofar as it contains the whole within it.⁸¹

The third feature is the use of *argument by relegation*. Rather than refuting an opposing position, this kind of argumentation relegates it to a more inferior position. An argument by refutation is devoted to countering or rendering the other argument as false or without validity and should then

⁸¹ During the Kamakura period, because the present instability at that time necessarily required the simplification of Buddhist practices, the underlying premise of many Buddhist philosophers was the principle of selection (*senchaku*): “If one selected just one practice or just one text and approached it properly, one would achieve the whole of perfect enlightenment.” (Kasulis, “Helping Western Readers,” 227.)

In the background of Nishida’s thought, this holographic approach could again be found. Certainly, Kasulis comments, “his emphasis on the concrete universal is clearly indebted to Hegel,” but perhaps, it could also be said that part of his understanding of the relation between the universal and particular also resonated with traditional Japanese Buddhist holographic thinking. “For Nishida the universal is not separate from the concrete particular, nor is simply made up of particulars. Rather, the universal is in every of its concrete particulars.” (“Helping Western Readers,” 228)

Kasulis further adds, “There are two incidental comments that might be helpful to mention here. First, although the holographic model of the whole in every part is strongest among Buddhist thinkers, we should note that there is a kind of holographic thinking in Japanese folk and Shintō practices where a part ritualistically functions for the whole. This is by no means unique to Japan but is found in animistic practices everywhere. In a Voodun doll, for example, one of my hairs can function for me as a whole. What is called ‘sympathetic magic’ sometimes operates along the principle of the holographic relation of whole and part.” (“Helping Western Readers,” 228)

be forgotten if not reconstructed. Contrary to this, relegation acknowledges the counter argument as one that has its own bearing to reality, only that it is partial and could be argued within a wider perspective. If my argument is stronger, it should be able to account for the other argument. This then engages in a kind of synthesis that is directed in showing not the complementary character of positions, but the superiority of one position over the other—it relegates rather than refutes, it includes rather than excludes. Kasulis notes, this view could explain why the Japanese have been fascinated with Hegelian dialectics.

The Japanese have espoused an understanding or appropriation of the Hegelian dialectics that is different from the classical interpretation. Rather than looking at where contradictions teleologically lead, Japanese philosophers trace the reverse of this, i.e., where the contradiction originated. They search for that logical, ontological, and experiential ground out of which oppositions can in the first place be oppositions, the initial unity from which they arise; hence, the fourth character of Japanese thought: *philosophy in medias res* (in the middle of things). Kasulis explains, that the preference for this way of thinking begins from the gaps created by distinctions. It does not look for ways to bridge the gap, but rather seeks that ultimate ground, which binds and makes possible the coexistence of contradictions. The use of negative language is primal here, for that out of which different singularities spring is intrinsically meaningless; it cannot be named, it is the ground of being and becoming, it is simply pure nothingness, out of which every meaning, every name, and every being emerges.⁸²

⁸² Kasulis again writes a very helpful explanation: “To characterize this intrinsic meaninglessness, Japanese philosophers emphasize terms like Nishida’s ‘emptiness’ (*ku*) or ‘nothingness’ (*mu*) or vacuous locutions like ‘suchness’ (*nyoze* or *immo*). This ground is the root enlightenment (*hongaku*) that must be initialized as praxis (*shikaku*) or Dōgen’s ‘presencing kōan’ (*genjōkōan*) that is itself meaningless but out of which expression (*dōtoku*) arises. Or, it is Shinran’s naturalness or ‘of its so-ness’ (*jin*) that is the ground of *shinjin* and the inseparability of delusional beings and Amida Buddha. These terms are not far from William James’ ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ out of which all thought and reflection emerges.” (Kasulis, “Helping Western Readers,” 232.)

Conclusion: Four Features of Philosophy

There has not been any definite theory that would explain the birth of cultures and more so of philosophical creativity.⁸³ This is the working assumption of this paper. What had been sketched is only an introduction to the vast plane of Japanese philosophy, which has undergone different stages of confrontation, assimilation, and dissimulation. I, of course, started with two problems, the first implicit in the second: that of defining philosophy, and of identifying Japanese philosophy. The latter has in a way already been answered in the discussion. The former, however, still needs to be addressed. As a conclusion to my confrontation with the question of Japanese philosophy, I wish to present what I think are the four major factors that characterize philosophy at large.

The first one is its *historicality*, which I take here to be vividly manifest within the ever unfinished determination of a culture. Philosophy is first and foremost born out of the need to answer problems and questions raised within a questioning horizon, which would always mean a cultural setting.⁸⁴ There is no single philosophical system that has not been identified with or has not been conditioned by the very historical forces that surrounded its thinker, no matter how logical and abstract its content might be. The very fact that language necessarily mediates thought and that language is itself a product of a collective informed by a particular socio-cultural understanding, already reminds us that every discourse is likewise mediated by the multi-layered semantics working within the very language used to formulate and answer problems. To reiterate the message of the Nigerian thinker Godfrey Onah, “it is the cultural humus on which a philosophy is grown rather than the national identity of its author,” which

⁸³ See Gino K. Piovesana, *Recent Japanese Philosophical Thought, 1862–1996* (London: Japan Library, 1997).

⁸⁴ Theophilus Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 64; cited in Godfrey Igwabuike Onah, “Dialogue Between African and Asian Philosophies,” *ACTA: Proceedings of the Quadricentennial International Philosophy Congress “Thomism and Asian Cultures, Celebrating 400 Years of Dialogue Across Civilizations,”* ed. Alfredo Co and Paolo Bolanos (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2012), 123.

makes any thought Japanese or Western.⁸⁵ Now, what then is a culture if not “the union of different determinations”⁸⁶ within its own historical unfolding? What is Japanese philosophy if not a body of intellectual history “that contains a multitude of stages and development”?⁸⁷ Insofar as philosophy is conditioned by culture, and culture continually determined by history, philosophy itself is determined by the movement of history.

The second one concerns a more particular character of philosophy, that is its *textuality*. I am following here, Maraldo’s claim that philosophy as a discipline embedded in cultures has always depended upon texts.⁸⁸ Textuality stresses the fact that even if it is possible to appropriate the content or message of a proposition apart from its medium, when two individuals coming from different cultures or traditions come into dialogue, unless they are to agree upon a common language, they would not be able to understand one another.⁸⁹ Textuality also highlights the fact that the transmission of philosophy has been possible from one generation to another and from one continent to another only because it has concrete textual artifacts or linguistic texts. We recall that the first stage of the Japanese philosophical underpinning is characterized by a reading of texts in a different language and a translation of these texts and their terms into Japanese. Some of the intellectuals went on reconstructing the philosophical idiom until they gradually reached the time when a philosophical breakthrough that silenced all suspicions (about the originality of Japanese thinkers) came about in the work of Nishida Kitarô. Maraldo claims that one of the major factors for Nishida’s originality is the very period from which his thinking was cultivated. It was a time when Japanese thinkers studying philosophy already reached that level of mastery in relation to the idiom of (Western) philosophy and could finally address their own questions.

⁸⁵ Onah, “Dialogue Between African and Asian Philosophies,” 124.

⁸⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; cited in Alain Badiou, *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*, ed. and trans. Tzuchien Tho (Australia: re.press, 2001), 23.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” 237.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 236.

The third would then be the very *universality* of philosophy. Insofar as philosophy is universal, it is “incompletable and open.”⁹⁰ Philosophy, inasmuch as it is thinking, could be extended to all humanity regardless of race, gender, continent, or even religion. It cannot be denied that philosophy known as an academic discipline is a creation of the West, but the spirit of philosophy as an intellectual activity that involves one’s entire being is for everyone. In this precise sense, I am following Alain Badiou in saying that to be inscribed within universality is thus “not a matter of possessing any particular determination.”⁹¹ One can point to some of philosophy’s features, as what I am now doing, but these features, rather than particularly “determining” philosophy, are actually those that formalize its very indeterminateness. As far as philosophy is historical, textual, and universal, its definition and appropriation will be infinitely unfinished. Thus, the task of every philosopher then, whether it be in Europe or in Asia, is to emphasize not so much the divide between the two, but on the deepening of philosophical consciousness that may perhaps be able to travel across the world and be articulated in multi-different ways and languages.

And lastly, together with these three, the one distinct character of philosophy that again affirms its openness is *creativity*. Philosophy is not simply a matter of importing ideas or theories; it is, at its best, an effort to creatively integrate one’s own concerns and experiences with what one has borrowed. Far from being a sign of inferiority, Japan’s willingness to borrow and assimilate foreign traits and cultural systems is to be interpreted as vitality.⁹² Japan was not the only country that was influenced by Buddhism or German Idealism, yet out of these resources, they were able to create schools like Zen Buddhism, and an appropriation of the Hegelian Dialectics in just a short span of time. Rather than passive receptivity, philosophy greatly demands creative adaptation.

⁹⁰ Alain Badiou, “Thinking the Event,” in *Badiou and Žižek: Philosophy in the Present*, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 47.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² See Gino K. Piovesana, *Recent Japanese Philosophical Thought*.

To end this paper let me rephrase Gino Piovesana’s message—the budding of a tree is to a great extent thanks to those who tilled the soil, and what rains fell upon it; one should not forget, however, that it also significantly depended on the inner quality of the seed.

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