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Cultural Identity in Interwar Japan.
The Kyoto Paradigm

Abstract

While retracing the history of the rise of Japanese militarism, this contribution will focus primarily on the identity discourse, intended as reaction to the process of Westernization, and on the social and cultural dimensions of Japanese national experience (i.e. respectively, «the revolt against the West» and the *Chūōkōron* debates), which were closely related to the country's entering the war.

Specifically, the aim of this article is to highlight the complexities of the cultural discourse standing behind the rise of Japanese militarism: it is centred on interwar year's socio-cultural dimension, which expressed Japanese internal malaise, emerged simultaneously with the forces that enabled the rise of militarism in the country. The search for a new cultural identity, able to effectively manage the comparison with the West, became the main purpose of intellectuals and radical activists who evoked a distinctive experience for Japan.

1. Japan's descent into the «Dark Valley»

Among the specific characteristic in the development of Japanese militarism was the fact that it never took, as we have seen, the form of a Fascist revolution with a mass organisation, seeking to conquer the State from the outside. The process was rather that of a gradual maturing of a Fascist structure, carried out by the political institutions of the army, the bureaucracy and the political parties. Despite this, the activities carried out by right-wing movements, consisting of civilians and Young Officers, was very important. In fact, the tendency toward Fascism in the lower strata of society was a continuous incitement to the growth of the movement from above. Turning government structures into Fascist ones was carried out gradually, with the army and the bureaucracy as the cornerstones. The 15 May incident put an end to the short history of government by political parties in Japan. A coalition formed by the army, bureaucracy and political parties emerged for the first time in Saitō Cabinet¹.

During this period, coinciding with the development of monopolistic State capitalism, under the banner of war-time economics, and along with the process of repression and mobilisation that took place at a social level, the dominant structure of the imperial system was completely transformed at the top and the base, creating the conditions for the emergence of a «Japanese mass reactionary regime», the so-called «Imperial Fascism».

The process was to accelerate after 1934. By the bloody coup d'état on 26 February 1936 certain important political figures were physically eliminated (including two previous Prime Ministers, Saitō and Takahashi Korekiyo). The military uprising was heralded by premonitory rumblings caused by a factional conflict within the army, and by the end of 1934 the *Kōdō-ha* had begun

¹ M. Maruyama, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 65.

to lose ground to the *Tōsei-ha*. The attempted coup was the work of junior *Kōdō-ha* army officers, with a radically Fascist propensity. These Young Officers issued a manifesto in which they declared that the evils of Japan were due to *genrō*, the *zaibatsu* and the political parties, and that the perpetrators should be killed.

The incident was suppressed by top military officers (the *Tōsei-ha* Generals), because neither the army or political and financial entities adhered to the coup. Also, the Emperor disapproved the Young Officers, declaring that they were rebelling against his will. The leaders of the revolt were therefore executed. It was the repression of the incident on 26 February which provided the opportunity for the army to take power in totalitarian terms. The repression of the «grassroots Fascism» of the Imperial Way Faction allowed the establishment of «Fascism from above» by the Control Faction, which was now firmly in power. The incident in February 1936 proved to be the last open attempt to carry out a «Shōwa Restoration» by assassination.

The main objective of the Young Officers and their supporters was the reorganisation of the State, based on a reassessment of society and its institutions. They wanted to take over the government and defend the homeland by killing all those who were guilty of having prevented the «Shōwa Restoration» and had stained the prestige of the Emperor². The incident was not defined as a coup because the Emperor's consent was sought, since he was the guarantor of balance and of the power system, although in vain. It was not defined as a counter-revolution because of the low level of political and trade union conflict, which was unable to turn the balance of power in their favour.

The new government led by Hirota Kōki, a right-wing politician tied to the military, immediately carried out a total purge of the army, and then used the threat of new military revolts to obtain new and tougher repressive laws against press freedom and thought³. Simultaneously, the old rule that the Ministers of the two arms could only be appointed from among the higher ranks on active duty was reintroduced, thus ensuring military control over the formation of governments.

Shortly after the incident, the ruling circles in Japan developed a more moderate policy towards northern China, a policy to avoid friction with the Kuomintang, Great Britain, the US and USSR (but not with the Chinese Communists). The corollary of this new policy based on the pact, was the displacement of the expansive Japanese thrust towards the South Seas.

On the international stage, in December 1936 Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, through which the two countries agreed to cooperate for common defence against the disintegrating effect of International Communism⁴. An additional secret protocol highlighted anti-Soviet content, committing Germany and Japan to avoid strengthening the position of USSR, should the latter attack one of the parties to the agreement. On the domestic level, the Minister of Education prepared a new book on the fundamentals of the *kokutai* to be distributed in all schools. The army insisted on all aspects of policy being subordinated to the needs of the national strategy, also increasing its claim to independence in military affairs. No government could now be formed without the involvement of the Ministers of War and the Navy, as well as the cooperation of the high command. Hirota fell due to opposition from the military, which also prevented General Ugaki Kazunari from taking over. The military now held the government in a stranglehold. The Prime Minister's role was subsequently taken over by Konoe, which was supported by the «authorities group» and certain parts of the military. He was also tied to financial military groups and also enjoyed great sympathy from the public.

² E.K. Tipton (ed.), *Society and the State in Interwar Japan*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 125-126.

³ S.S. Large, *Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan: A Political Biography*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 71.

⁴ N. Tajima, *The Berlin-Tokyo Axis Reconsidered: From the Anti-Comintern Pact to the Plot to Assassinate Stalin*, in C. Spang (ed.), *Japanese-German Relations, 1895-1945: War and Diplomacy*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 161.

However, although Konoe was a fierce nationalist, his government was weak⁵. On 7 July 1937, Japan was thrown into a catastrophic war against China (the second Sino-Japanese War). In 1937, the Japanese military's plans regarded Soviet Russia as the biggest threat in East Asia. Nevertheless, the problem of northern China had become increasingly alarming. After the occupation of Manchuria, the army continued to advance in the border areas, pushing towards Beijing and using the subterfuge of buffer zones to obtain independent indirect control. However, it was becoming more and more clear that to achieve a worthwhile defensive block it was essential to have a solid grip on northern China, with its cotton and coal resources, and its huge market for Japanese goods. The need for an «independent» northern China that was friendly with Japan was proclaimed. But the constant refusal of the Chinese to «collaborate» sparked a strong desire in Japan to solve the Chinese problem through direct action. However, on the night of 7 July 1937, near the Marco Polo Bridge in Beijing, some units belonging to the so-called men of the Japanese garrison in Beijing were attacked by unknown assailants. The troops returned fire, the Chinese soldiers were taken by storm, and despite an attempt to put a stop to the conflict, it spread, quickly reaching the plains of northern China. Konoe opted for war, believing that the Chinese army could easily be defeated with a blitzkrieg. On the home front the war gave him the opportunity to obtain the full cooperation of the political and financial institutions and mobilise public opinion in favour of the war effort. The Liaison Council of the Imperial Headquarters was instituted (but not before 1940) as the supreme decision-making body within the government in order to unite all the forces of the ruling class through the war⁶. It was formed by the Prime Minister, the ministers of the two military entities, with the occasional participation of the Minister of the Interior and the Secretary of the Treasury. The establishment of this body, which was not influenced by political parties, sanctioned the monopoly of power by the bureaucracy and the military, in the name of imperial authority. The conflict was characterised by enormous atrocities committed by both sides, although it was mainly the Japanese who carried out a massive campaign of terror against the civilian population. Shanghai was completely devastated, and after the fall of the city the devastation was made even worse by the systematic removal of metals to be used by the war industry. Without doubt one of the most horrific events was the infamous rape of Nanking⁷. In this city the Japanese army committed numerous atrocities, such as rapes, looting, arson, murder of prisoners of war and civilians. Although the killings had begun with the excuse of eliminating Chinese soldiers disguised as civilians, it is believed that a large number of innocent people were intentionally executed as the massacre began to take shape. However, this massacre and the way in which it is recounted in textbooks continues to be the subject of controversy in the relations between China and Japan. The Japanese carried out a vigorous propaganda campaign against China, claiming that their troops were engaged in a disinterested «holy war» to free China from communism and Western influence⁸. Konoe tried to retain his influence over the army by letting it do whatever it wanted to do, but soon complained of being nothing more than a puppet in the hands of the military. This resulted in the uncompromising declaration, which he made public on 16 January 1938, announcing the end of negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek. The Japanese government declared that it would no longer have any relationship with the Kuomintang regime and proposed,

⁵ M.B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 619.

⁶ A. Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1841-1945*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 40.

⁷ Cfr. T. Yoshida, *The Making of the "Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁸ J.H. Boyle, *China and Japan at War, 1937-1945: The Politics of Collaboration*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1972, p. 104.

instead, to establish and develop a new regime in China with which it would cooperate to determine Sino-Japanese relations and to build a young China. This was also the first hint by Japan of a «new order» to be established in China, while war's purposes appeared, at the beginning of the conflict, to be very different.

Probably, it was this declaration, more than any other factor which ensured that the so-called «China incident» would turn into a prolonged war. Konoe later acknowledged that his decision was a serious mistake and continued to conduct secret negotiations with the Chinese Nationalists. This aggression against China led to the emergence of hostility on other fronts, which would eventually be fatal for Japan.

The war with China was anything but short-lived. The conflict was conceived as a «total war» that would lead to the restructuring of the economy based on the war effort, further restrict the authoritarian control of society and the reorganisation of the party-political system. The government was increasingly controlled by the military, while nationalistic and patriotic slogans were used to incite people to consecrate themselves to the national effort. In 1938, as mentioned above, the government passed the National General Mobilisation Law, which placed the entire economy under the control of the State, allowing the government to intervene directly by decree in all matters, including labour, wages, and prices⁹. The «mobilisation» was carried out between 1938 and 1945, and one of the fundamental principle of liberalism was therefore eliminated: the separation between legislative and executive power. The parliament was deprived of any possibility of intervention in economic policy. Now the government, freed from the need to submit its decisions, had extraordinary and independent powers that allowed it to achieve a planned economy to enforce price controls and rationing, as well as allocating materials and labour. Furthermore, the imposition of State control of economic life accentuated the concentration of a big business monopoly in heavy and chemical industries even more, by gradually merging small and medium-sized enterprises into large industries and increasing the degree of exploitation of labour, while the conversion of industry for the purpose of war deprived the people of the most basic consumer goods. In essence, the State's control of the economy and social forces, particularly the industrial proletariat, was reinforced.

The regulation of the economy did not happen only through laws, decrees and ordinances. In October 1937 the Planning Section that drafted the plan for the mobilisation of resources was established. Between 1939 and 1940, the Department developed plans to further tighten control of trade, labour, capital, transport and electricity.

In this way, the «New Order» proclaimed by Konoe was also being developed in the economy. The on-going war in East Asia, the stiffening of diplomatic relations with Washington and a possible conflict with the US, resulted in further controls on the economy. In fact, between 1941 and 1942, various associations were founded to control key industries, including steel, coal, cement, automobiles etc. A State-controlled economy was established in the years of «total war»¹⁰.

After the outbreak of war with China, a headquarters of the imperial army and navy was established to conduct the war, and it became the place where the country's most important decisions were taken. On 18 October 1941, General Tōjō, the army Minister, became Prime Minister.

Thus, the war with China, which began as a short term limited operation, increasingly became a vortex able to overwhelm and ruin Japan, which had achieved such success from 1868 onwards. What came out of Japan in the 1930s was something far away from the unanimous and united society of old times and the natural unity of ideals and objectives of the Meiji period leaders. An

⁹ M.A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 72.

¹⁰ N. Choucri, *The Challenge of Japan Before World War Two and After*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 156.

artificial unity imposed by force had been created in a society that had now been completely changed from a military dictatorship divided between an army and a navy with wide autonomy, to a dictatorship which, after having subjected the civilian government, had embarked on a series of dangerous adventures abroad. The new Konoe government re-launched the programme to build the «New Order» in Asia through the establishment, in the name of pan-Asiatism, of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, under Japanese hegemony¹¹.

This programme represented the culmination of the aspirations of imperialist domination and the subjugation of Asian peoples by Japan, whose empire was about to reach its peak. This plan, which aimed to make Japan the absolute and unchallenged power in Asia and the Pacific, was hidden from the idea of emancipation and independence of the continent. Through the launch of a Co-Prosperity Sphere, an anti-Western crusade took hold in the Far East, with the participation of both the puppet governments established in the occupied territories and the most important nationalist movements. Japan claimed a dominant position as a moral and cultural agent on behalf of the East. As stressed out by Franco Gatti, the design of imperialist domination had problems of unification of national thought in the New East Asian Order that were not trivial, thereby revealing that Japan's intentions in relation to the Co-Prosperity Sphere was to represent, not just an empire dominated economically, but a culturally colonized area¹².

Therefore, during the 1940s, Japan tried to impose the «nipponism» with the purpose of countering Western imperialism. The ambitious Japanese project for the economic and political union of all the countries included in the area covered by the Pacific Ocean, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, provided for the division of these countries into three spheres (Internal Sphere; Smaller Co-Prosperity Sphere; Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere)¹³. According to Japan's intentions, the Internal Sphere was to constitute the vital area of the empire, namely Japan, Manchuria, northern China, the lower Yangtze area and Soviet sea area. The Smaller Sphere was meant to constitute a small independent area in East Asia, including the Internal Sphere and Eastern Siberia, China, Indochina and the South Pacific. Finally, the Greater Sphere, which was to be the largest autonomous sphere in East Asia, was to have included the Smaller Sphere, as well as Australia, India and the island groups of the Pacific. In the early years of the war the Japanese goal was aimed at the construction of the Small Sphere as to stabilise national defence. In order to achieve the unification of Japan, Manchukuo and China, it was necessary to re-define Sino-Japanese problems by crushing hostile forces within China, while Indochina and the South Pacific should be freed from British and American influence, in order to make these areas fall within Japan's defensive sphere. The war with USSR was also envisaged in order to destroy Russian influence in Asia and take eastern Siberia away from it. If necessary, this war should break out while the Sino-Japanese and southern problem was being sorted out¹⁴.

In a subsequent period, the independence of Australia, India etc. was to be provoked, while in the northern area the construction of a large Mongol State would be favoured. The forecast was for a period of about twenty years, starting in 1942, to build the Small Co-prosperity Sphere. In addition, in order to meet industrial needs, in particular, the large scale industrial development of East Asia was envisaged. After the Second World War the Japanese Empire envisaged a new war in order to build the Great Co-prosperity Sphere. However, all of the territories captured

¹¹ M.B. Jansen, *op. cit.*, p. 630.

¹² Cfr. F. Gatti, *Il fascismo giapponese*, Venezia, Cafoscarina, 1997.

¹³ W.M.T. De Bary, C. Gluck, A.E. Tiedemann (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition, 1600 to 2000*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 313.

¹⁴ C.W. Spang, R.H. Wippich (eds.), *Japanese-German Relations, 1895-1945: War, Diplomacy and Public Opinion*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 188.

during the conflict (Manchuria, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and New Guinea) were gradually taken over by the Allies¹⁵.

Thus, the plan of imperialist conquest included «three spheres» to be built later on. The justification for this gradual approach was based on military reasons resulting from the intense use of personnel and resources by the Japanese army in China, although it also depended on economic reasons, because large-scale Japanese business operated in the area of the Inner Sphere, whose top priority was the defence of vested interests.

Among the main aims of imperialist domination in that area of the world clearly emerged from the idea of the Co-prosperity Sphere, which arose among the Army and Navy. It reflected the country's belief that it should exercise its absolute primacy in Asia, and it should prove the moral, cultural and economic superiority obtained by its *moral energy* over the individualism and Western materialism.

However, the «New Order» advocated by Tokyo's Pan-Asian policy, soon proved to be a very different thing from the perspective of independence desired by many people at the time of the collapse of old administrations. Despite having undermined European colonialism in Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia, Japan established puppet regimes which were entrusted the task of brutally taking vital resources for the imperial economy. The «forced Japanisation» betrayed the expectations of those who had praised the arrival of an army which was expected to provide a rigorous and efficient administration. However, the liberating force soon turned out to be a rapacious occupation force. Moreover, in the conquered countries, the Japanese army was not just committed to defending military and industrial targets and fight the resistance forces that opposed the new rulers in some of these countries, but also to support the ruling classes, a predominantly semi-feudal structure, without which it could not take possession of the agricultural surplus needed at home.

In general, Japan opted for direct military administration of territories, even if formal independence was recognised for some of them (Burma, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia) in 1943. The logic of occupation prevailed over cooperation, especially in view of the use of «liberated» countries' economic resources: military conquest resolved the Japanese deficit in terms of energy and raw materials needed to continue the war effort. This predatory logic took credibility from their claim to emancipate colonial peoples from European domination and gave a strong contribution to the development of national and independence movements. Like Germany and Italy, the Japanese Empire aimed to gain its own «living space», freeing itself of the encirclement it was subjected to by the European colonial empires and American presence in the Pacific.

The primary concern of the new order was to dismiss the incident in China and normalize Japan's relations with Russia to be able to focus attention and action on other problems, and to deal with the political situation of a global nature.

If, during the years of great industrial and social transformations that followed the Meiji Restoration, Japan's leaders considered the need for the country to «leave Asia» (*datsu-A*, meaning that areas of Chinese influence) and «enter Europe» (*nyū-Ō*), this position was reversed during the 1930s, when politicians spoke of the urgency of «returning to Asia» and «leaving Europe». This was characterised by a dual political and cultural meaning¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cfr. P.H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, London, C. Hurst & Co, 1998.

¹⁶ The slogan recalled, on the contrary, the one formulated by Fukuzawa Yukichi during the period of *bakumatsu*. According to the *bunmeika*, the main purpose was to accompany the values of the Japanese tradition with those dictated by the new process of modernization under the slogan of *wakon-yōsai* (Japanese spirit and Western techniques). The ambition was, ultimately, to wed the challenge of modernity with Chinese particularism.

Politically, it meant that Japan, as a new industrial power, would have to deal with the development of other countries in the region: in other words, it would mean favouring Japanese hegemony in Asia and the removal of external interference. Culturally, «returning to Asia» would mean Japan returning to its cultural roots and dominating its geopolitical sphere.

The various attacks and murders of the early 1930s, often perpetrated under the political slogan of *ishin* (restoration) and *kaizō* (reconstruction), were all completed under the assumption that the times require direct actions aimed at creating a new order in Japan, free from the corrosive influences of the West. Thinkers and political activists such as Ōkawa Shūmei, Inoue Nisshō, Tachibana Kosaburō, Kita Ikki, Gondō Seikyō and others, pushed for a programme to «expel the barbarians» (*jōi*) in the name of culture and spirit (*Nihon seishin*)¹⁷. In this context, some showed themselves willing to undermine the political structure of the country through violent confrontations, denouncing the inadequacy of the State's constitutional structure. Others, however, opposed the predominance of the «structure» on individuals and advocated a return to a communitarian dimension of public life.

Among the best known exponents of the first group was Kita Ikki, while Gondō Seikyō and Tachibana Kosaburō expressed the orientation of fraternal communalism¹⁸. By opposing class struggle and advocating social harmony, they hoped for a new restoration (*Shōwa ishin*) to re-establish the direct link, usurped by politicians and the new capitalists, between the Emperor and the people.

Kita is traditionally acknowledged as being one of the leading right-wing intellectuals of pre-war Japan: Maruyama Masao described him as «the ideological father of Japanese Fascism»¹⁹. His turbulent life and his radical nationalism made Kita a highly controversial intellectual, balanced between conservative and modernist impulses. His response to the political and social effects produced in Japan by the Meiji Restoration was clear and determined. The «servile» acceptance by the country of Western capitalist culture and its bourgeois ideas had turned the Japanese into a population of «moral slaves» and helped create sudden and severe social inequalities. The on-going process of industrialisation was inspired by heteronomous models that were culturally alien to the most authentic tradition of the country, a mere imposition «from above». More specifically, his theory originated from the National Socialist approach of the late Meiji period, so the assumption that the Meiji Restoration had changed the political structure of the country by establishing a democratic government from the ashes of *bakumatsu* was an illusory myth. The new Japan was moving well on the road to social reform policies. It could now count on a «democratic base» represented by a class of independent farmers with the

However, the reversal of the position along the 1920s and 1930s, led to a reverse-course that required to reconsider Asia as the key geo-cultural sphere of reference: the rediscovery or the return to the roots of Japanese culture would have served against the threat of Western hegemony. Cfr. F. Mazzei, *Japanese Particularism and the Crisis of Western Modernity*, Venezia, Università Ca' Foscari, 1999, pp. 51-79.

¹⁷ The formula used here intended to resume the *sonnō-jōi* formula (respect the Emperor, expel the barbarians) of late Tokugawa period conceived by the members of Mito School (founded by Tokugawa Mitsukuni in the late seventeenth century) and reported in *Kōdōkan-ki* (1838). The motion called on the restoration of the imperial power and, at the same time, the proscription of the barbarians (the Christians).

¹⁸ Among Kita's disciples was the well-known Ōkawa Shūmei (1886-1957), the philosopher who founded in 1925 the Gyōchisha (Heaven and Earth Society). He advocated the need for a «return» to the ancient traditions of Japan. In one of his most famous contributions to *Kakumei Yoroppa fukkō Ajia* (1922), Ōkawa reflected on the possible disastrous consequences of European domination in Asia and called on the urgency of an «Asian Renaissance» and political renewal of the country. In its ideal State (probably deriving from his readings of Plato), private interests had been abolished in the name of «public good». Tempering political passions would serve also as an antidote to the problem of corruption and partisan rivalries. Cfr. *Ōkawa Shūmei shū*, 21, Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō, 1975; S.Y. Barnett, *India in Asia: Ōkawa Shūmei's Pan-Asian Thought and His Idea of India in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, in «Journal of the Oxford University History Society», 2004.

¹⁹ M. Maruyama, *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 28.

right of ownership of the fruits of their labour and a middle class that was now the backbone of the national economy. However, if the country's more «genuine» social and productive forces were initially «liberated», Kita saw a radical decline of the class of small landowners and the collapse of a true democratic politics during the years following the revolt of Satsuma (1877). To bring about a true revolution – an opportunity that the Restoration had missed - became the *leitmotif* of his turbulent life. The oligarchs represented the Japanese expression of a modern national myth, which originated with the French Revolution, and which had transformed Japan from a *kachō koku* (a patriarchal State headed by the Emperor) into a *kōmin kokka* (a State of citizens headed by the State itself), thereby damaging the ancient principle of loyalty to the Emperor, now replaced with loyalty to the State. In his first work, *Kokutairon oyobi junsei shakaishugi* (*Kokutairon* and pure socialism, 1906), he sought to redefine the concepts of socialism and *kokutai*, emphasising their alleged complementarity²⁰. The *kokutai* would, in itself, have a «social-democratic» character that *kokutairon* would eventually overshadow. Claiming the urgency of formulating a new philosophy of Japanese history, he interpreted the country's past from the perspective of *social evolution*, trying to demonstrate that the concept of social-democracy was, after all, inherent in this evolutionary process. According to the official interpretation given by the *kokutairon* to the country's history, the figure of the *Tennō* had reigned continually since the era of the first Emperor Jimmu (660 BC) up to the usurpation of power carried out by the first *shōgun* in the Kamakura era (1185-1333). The Meiji Restoration therefore had the merit of restoring full power to the *Tennō*. Kita started from a completely different perspective, opposing a vision that would make sense of the history of the country in terms of loyalty/disloyalty towards the Emperor. The figure of the *shōgun* should not be seen as antithetical to the *Tennō*: it was the expression of a new stage of social evolution in the country. The Meiji Restoration was, from a historical point of view, a further step taken in this direction²¹. He interpreted the *kokutai*, the «essence of the State» as the historical model that should be emulated, the most appropriate tool to remove problems of social inequality²². It was precisely in the years when the country seemed to have become the «England of the East» and the culture of industrial capital was now consolidating throughout Japan. The spirit of the people seemed to have rehabilitated the concept of the «essence of the State». As is known, during the Meiji period Buddhism began to lose official favour and was separated from Shintō. A few years later, the intolerance of Shintō believers towards «national studies», and the difficulties common to Confucian believers in terms of thinking about the law and technology, led the ruling elites to break away from such religious sentiments. Shintō continued to be the de facto State religion, but from that moment on the «pure» Shintō believers became an ultra-Orthodox opposition, influential in relation to thought control, but not very creative from other points of view²³. However, Confucianism had productive years (especially during the initial Meiji era - 1868-1889), in relation to the paternalism of work, and more generally, the public sentiment of *kunshin-ikka* (Japan as one big family with headed by the Emperor) and *chū-kō itchi* (loyalty and filial piety as unique and identical concepts)²⁴. Kita makes it clear from the first pages of *Kokutairon oyobi junsui shakaishugi*, that his main goal was to counter the relentless academicism that was «contaminating» the whole intellectual structure of the

²⁰ I. Kita, *Kokutairon oyobi junsei shakaishugi*, in *Kita Ikki chosaku shū*, 1, Tokyo, Misuzu Shobō, 1959, p. 2.

²¹ G. Wilson, *Kita Ikki's theory of revolution*, in «The Journal of Asian Studies», 26, 1, November 1966, pp. 89-99.

²² T. Najita, H.D. Harootunian, *Japanese Revolt Against the West: Political and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century*, in P. Duus, P. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan*, 6, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 717-718.

²³ P. Lavelle, *La pensée japonaise*, Paris, Presse Universitaire de France, 1997, pp. 78-79.

²⁴ Y. Sekiguchi, *Economic Development and Fascist Economic Thought in Japan*, in S. Cho, N. Runeby (eds.), *Traditional Thought and Ideological Change*, Stockholm, University of Stockholm, 1988, p. 135.

country. Science imported from the West could not explain, or suggest appropriate tools to interpret, a social reality as complex as the Meiji State. Japan had simply introduced products based on know-how from other countries, without importing the historical processes that had developed them. The product of *another* culture had been imposed on the Japanese spirit, in some cases generating intellectual figures alienated from the surrounding reality. Alain Marc Rieu, who partly repeated some of Maruyama's thoughts, stated that:

Être un intellectuel, c'était s'engager dans la modernisation, y participer en trouvant des bénéfiques, même s'ils n'étaient que symboliques. Que vont devenir ceux qui ont acquis une éducation supérieure, qui se sont spécialisés dans l'importation et la distribution des idées ? Ne pas participer à la modernisation, c'est être marginalisé, n'avoir pas pu monter à bord du train du progrès, rester sur le quai de la gare²⁵.

Meian (Light and Darkness, 1916), the famous novel by Natsume Sōseki (published as an unfinished work in the year of his death), contains several descriptions of these intellectuals, often «imprisoned» in their hometowns in search of work, of a form of social recognition, or simply the meaning of their existence. The cultural disadvantage of the moment seemed to come directly from the new «orthodoxy» that the government had officially favoured through its *bunmei-kaika* (civilisation and enlightenment) programme. Kita was particularly critical of the submissive attitude of some intellectuals with regard to the system; those who obsequiously accepted the acquisition of new theories and new forms of knowledge from the West, translated and transplanted in Japan²⁶. Kita's accusation was probably the expression of a deep crisis that was not simply a reflection of an objective reality, but the image of a world that he perceived as a drama in black and white. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution in 1911 had attracted Kita to China, where he participated in the first insurgency episodes. Kita's experience in China was followed by the publication of *Shina kakumei gaishi* (A private history of the Chinese Revolution), written between 1915 and 1916, but that was only made available to the public in 1921 (Kita, 1959)²⁷. His admiration for the revolutionary spirit of the Chinese people was very deep: the conquest of freedom and democracy took place, like an eternal confirmation of history, through conflict and the activism of Young Officers and soldiers²⁸. According to George Wilson²⁹, the title conceals the dual objective that the work aimed to achieve. On the one hand, it provides an interpretation of the Chinese Revolution and its meaning, and on the other hand it tries to prove that Japan's national interest required a radical change in foreign policy. Kita showed himself deeply outraged by the prospect of commercial hegemony that the government was nurturing for some time in relation to China. Considering China from a mercantilist perspective, instead of emphasising the political issue meant, in his eyes, to create a «crisis in Asia», exacerbating the «Asian crisis», generated by the

²⁵ A.M. Rieu, *Savoir et pouvoir dans la modernisation du Japon*, Paris, Presse Universitaire de France, 2001, p. 75.

²⁶ In the dock sat intellectuals such as Hozumi Yatsuka and Inoue Tetsujirō.

²⁷ Kita had been affiliated since 1906 to the circle of political activists, prone to socialism, related to the *Kakumei hyōronsha*, headed by Miyazaki Torazō. He was soon in contact with Toyama Mitsuru and Uchida Ryōhei, leaders respectively of the well known *Gen'yōsha* (Black Ocean Society) and *Kokuryūkai* (Black Dragon Society). Kita was fascinated by the revolutionary ideas that dominated in these circles, based on a geopolitical expansion of Japan in Asia and the liberation of the continent from the burden of the Western presence. It was Sung Chiao-jen (who founded in 1912 of the Kuomintang together with Sun Yat-sen), which had built strong contacts in the Japanese socialist circles, to urge Kita to closely follow the first episodes of insurgency that were producing China in October 1911. Kita was sent overseas with the official task of overseeing the funds from Kokuryūkai aiming at supporting the rebels. Cfr. G. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-49.

²⁸ Y. Sekiguchi, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²⁹ G. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

imperialist policy of the Western powers. His prophecy seemed likely to come true with the looming in China's of anti-Japanese sentiments in the explosive atmosphere of the «4th of May Movement» (1919). In order to counter the emergence of a «crisis in Asia» Kita defined his plan for a total political reorganisation of the country in his *Nihon kaizō hōan taikō* (Fundamentals for a proposed reorganisation of Japan, 1923)³⁰, defined by Kuno Osamu as «the *Mein Kampf* of the ultranationalist movement» in the Shōwa era which later became the bible of the young soldiers inscribed in the ranks of the *kōdō-ha*³¹. The main objective of the paper was to provide guidance for radical action aimed, from a domestic point of view, at dismantling the system of social privileges that had been created in Japan by the Meiji State: surplus land would be redistributed among those who did not possess any land and «industrial capital» would be confiscated to reduce the power of the important section of the bourgeoisie. The current constitutional order in the country would create new classes and definitely separated elites from the rest of society³². In order to achieve revolutionary aims Kita proposed a decisive coup d'état. By rebuilding a new power structure, a sort of domestic re-definition, Japan could also establish itself externally between the major Western powers, a crucial step for a final confrontation in Asia. The national reorganisation programme sharply condemned the *Tennōsei* and advocated the ideal of an «Emperor of the people» (*kokumin Tennō*), a religious expression of the country's cultural and ethnic diversity. The «new *Tennō*» would be «returned» to its people. To this end, it appeared to be necessary to dismantle all imported institutions and forms of social organisation, which were therefore «foreign» to the country and its more authentic past³³. The abolition of the House of Peers and the destruction of the *zaibatsu* were the first steps that needed to be taken. Finally, the establishment of the *kokumin Tennō* and the introduction of a series of very precise reforms would allow the implementation of the desired socialist order³⁴.

Kita admired Karl Marx and Peter Kropotkin, who he considered pioneers of socialism, but relegated to the past: «Marx and Kropotkin are acceptable, as long as they are considered respectable ancient philosophers (*that are out of date*) from the previous barbarian century»³⁵. Unlike these, he believed that a «real» revolution was determined by geo-cultural factors rather than by a strict sense of historical necessity. In his eyes, in the case of China, for example, the revolution would be mediated by a specific «Asian reality», free from external pressures. To talk about class struggle would have been inappropriate. The reorganisation of Japan would be achieved through the people's revolution, in which national unity would replace class struggle, including the new forces of industry and the scientific community³⁶.

³⁰ Written in Shanghai in 1919, the work was outlawed by the Japanese government, but nevertheless circulated clandestinely and then published in 1923. Cfr. B. Tankha, *Kita Ikki and the Making of Modern Japan: A Vision of Empire*, Kent, Global Oriental, 2006.

³¹ This case decreed, to some extent, the dramatic end of Kita's life, who was executed for his direct involvement in the 1936 incidents. However, according to Sekiguchi, the execution of Kita was linked, more than any other reason, to his propaganda for a «grassroots revolt» that would overturn the established order. Cfr. Y. Sekiguchi, *op. cit.*

³² O. Tanin, E. Yohan, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1975, pp. 91-94.

³³ A group of officers and political activists have appealed to the sovereignty of *Tennō* as to invalidate the constitution and declare the martial law. A new constitution would then be enacted through the universal male suffrage and the replacement of the House of Lords with a new Chamber of Control appointed by the Emperor. The reorganization of the country would be aimed at preparation for war. Large companies were entrusted to the State which would direct the economy. Cfr. I. Kita, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-312.

³⁴ All companies with capital in excess of ten million Yen were nationalized proceeding, together with the establishment of the seven departments of banks, shipping, mining, agriculture, crafts, trade and railways (See Kita, 1959, pp. 308-311).

³⁵ I. Kita, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

³⁶ T. Najita, *The Intellectual Foundations of Modern Japanese Politics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 131.

The Japanese people must face the imminent, never seen before crisis of the State, immediately reorganising the country's political and economic system on the basis of this *Nihon kaizō hōan taikō*. Like ancient Greece, Japan had already beaten the powerful Russia, just like Persia had been defeated in the naval battle of Salamis. It was time for the seven hundred million Chinese and Indians to wake up. Peace, without war, is not the way to heaven³⁷.

The question of the political organisation of the «new Japan» and its critical aspects was by no means limited to Kita's analysis, even though his contribution is acknowledged as having had an important central role in the debate. Gondō and Tachibana were among the few conservatives who, according to Kevin Doak³⁸, emphasised the link between cultural criticism and political action. Both shared an utopian vision of society that they imagined could be harmoniously based on the idea of «communitarianism agriculture», and in the same way, both criticised the capitalist order, advocating a return to a primitive purity that would allow Japan to rediscover its Asian identity. The social organisation models and distinctive lifestyles of the peoples of Asia are (rather than shared religious and philosophical aspects) pillars of a unique regional identity. The importation of Western administrative models focusing on forms of centralised government appeared artificial, an affront to the centuries-old tradition of local self-government of the *han*, the feudal domains ruled by the *daimyō*. Similarly to Kita, also in this case the Emperor was meant to play a key role in the success of the new political design. The creation of a popular government would finally recover the age-old and exclusive bond the Japanese people had with the *Tennō*: the union of the Emperor with his people, a new social model ready to leave behind the Western idea of parliamentary politics. In order to aid the realisation of such aspirations, both Gondō and Tachibana did not disdain resorting to acts of violence and terrorism. Gondō's involvement in the murder of Inoue Junnosuke, finance minister and head of the *Rikken Minseitō* (Constitutional Democratic Party) and Dan Takuma (general manager of the Mitsui) in the first days of 1932, as well as the participation of both in the killing, on 15 May of the same year (*go-ichigo jiken*) of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi at his residence, firmly demonstrated the enormous political clout of their ideas in the general and already controversial climate that was increasingly worsening the political and cultural landscape of the 1930s³⁹.

2. The «return to the roots»

The position of Gondō (1868-1937), unlike that of Kita, was not based on anxiety to remove the conditions of social inequality, but rather - as, moreover, already mentioned - the quest for a «reassessment» of cultural and historical ties (that had already been compromised) of the Japanese people to agriculture. If Kita considered it a priority to solve the issue of industrial capital and the relationship with the political power of the bourgeoisie, its objective was also to improve the living conditions of the workers who lived in the city. On the contrary, Gondō had idealised (certainly not without pathos) the *return* to a farming community independent of the State; «a sanctuary free from the erosion of contemporary history»⁴⁰. His thoughts were based

³⁷ I. Kita, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

³⁸ K.M. Doak, *Dreams of Difference. The Japan Romantic School and the Crisis of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. XXV.

³⁹ Gondō and Tachibana joined the *Ketsumeidan jiken* (The League of Blood Incident) consisting of extremist insurgents whose action program had identified twenty victims, all leading figures in the world of liberal politics and finance.

⁴⁰ T. Najita, H. Harootunian, *op.cit.*, p. 722.

on the reinterpretation of classic Japanese myths and the «golden age», as well as the deep conviction that the rapid industrialisation of the country in those years was developing rather slowly. The anxiety he felt reminded him of something «intrinsically Japanese» that was being lost.

In his major work, *Jichi minsei ri* (Principles of popular self-government, 1936), agriculture was proposed as a basic element of Japanese culture, coloured with mythological shades, as demonstrated by the reference to the figure of the goddess Amaterasu: «The five grains are necessary because they give life to the people»⁴¹. All this had been debased by the tumultuous events with which the modern age seemed to have crippled the cultural identity of the country. From this perspective, the imperial institution could not represent the source of royal authority monarchy, but assumed the role of a sacred symbol of the «natural community». The new bureaucracy seemed oppressive and distant from the people. Gondō attributed the cause of this crisis to the insensitivity of the modern State, centred in Tokyo, heedless of the needs of the agricultural class. He urged farmers to stop migrating to cities. Only by remaining in the countryside could Japanese society «better express its genuine nature»⁴². It is through agricultural work that men build the natural order of relationships, where the individual becomes naturally inclined towards *reciprocity* (*aidagara*) on which the human relations (*ningen kankei*) was founded. If agriculture was where the Japanese people had developed in the *hito to hito no tairin* concept through its history, the village (*mura*) assumes absolute centrality in socio-anthropology. In all likelihood, this kind of «modernisation from below» ended up constituting the reason and the historical model that inspired Gondō's revolutionary ideal. In his analysis, the farming village seems to represent the sociological dichotomy of private/public issues (similar to that of *uchi/soto*, or *nai/gai*), the natural basis for self-government by the people. It became a symbol of the dimension sacralised by the *uchi*, that since ancient times had characterised family life in Japan and deeply characterised the psychological dimension of its inhabitants. The new, almost irreverent forms of modern politics, that were bureaucratic and centralised, had eroded the true spirit of the country, irreversibly compromising its future direction. The Japanese countryside, which was desolate and no longer «dignified», was soon to have the same cultural value as the Egyptian pyramids whose presence, even after thousands of years, is certainly a custodian of the glorious past of a great civilisation, but at the same time sanctions its inexorable decline. The pessimism that emerges from Gondō's conclusions explain, without legitimising, the belief in direct action to shake popular consciousness and favour a new restoration⁴³. The proposal of his «self-governed villages» was a desperate appeal for Tokyo's new policy to provide greater assistance from the State in respect of small landowners in their efforts to adapt to the new conditions imposed on agricultural production from the market, accentuating the farming crisis⁴⁴. The political machine should have been able to extend the functions of local government entities, thereby decentralising its responsibilities, and increasing the funds available to support agriculture. Large landowners would manage these finances and offer paternalistic assistance to individual village communities. From this perspective the position taken by Gondō cannot be found within a progressive movement that looks to the

⁴¹ S. Gondō, *Jichi minsei ri*, in B. Hashikawa (ed.), *Chōkokkashugi - Gendai Nihon shisō taikēi*, 31, Tokyo, Chikuma shobō, 1975, p. 241.

⁴² The thought of Gondō, as noted by Lavelle, was essentially Confucian. He claimed the return to a proto-type social organization, where local communities enjoyed total autonomy, while the central government was concerned exclusively with the national defense and the Emperor catered to imperial rites of Shintō (See Lavelle, 1990, p. 73).

⁴³ Gondō had a great influence especially on Young Officers born in distant rural provinces of Japan, who were not descent from samurai families (See Rieu, 2001, p. 202).

⁴⁴ O. Tanin, E. Yohan, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

modernisation of agriculture, but rather from the point of view of certain semi-feudal landowners who rejected the logic of financial capital.

The support of agrarian fundamentalism was best expressed by the thoughts of Tachibana (1893-1974)⁴⁵. The basic issue that inspired his ideas is outlined in the preface of his *Nihon aikoku kakushin hongî* (The basic principles of Japanese patriotic reform, 1932), where he stated: «No peoples are separate from the earth. A national society separated from the people cannot exist»⁴⁶. Tachibana also believed it was time for a «return» to the rural world and its values. He recognised the validity of Kita's ideas but he wished to express them in terms of radical humanism, pursuant to agricultural fundamentalism. The true spirit of Japan was that of its countryside, a group solidarity based on the *han*: the only dimension, both in physical and spiritual terms, from which it was possible to effectively contrast the materialistic spirit of Western culture and the lifestyle of its cities:

I am reminded of what Tagore said: Western civilisation has developed 'within strongholds'. In other words, the social and political crystallization on which the Western materialistic civilisation of pre-modern capitalism is based has developed the concept of the city. The result could only be the birth of the city dweller⁴⁷.

Like Gondô, Tachibana was deeply convinced that the farming and the village communities represented the roots of Asian civilisation, unlike the Western focus on urban culture. A group of activists, led by the two «healthy» sections of society - the soldiers and peasants - would set up an extraordinary government, the promoter of ancient local self-government, in the name of anti-interventionism. Tachibana advocated the need for re-identification of the people with agriculture as an essential source of spiritual regeneration that would culminate in a reorganisation of the patriotic nation. Hindering the process of capitalization in relation to the Japanese economy seemed to be the only way forward: removing the existing political and economic institutions (political parties, interest groups and large industrial corporations such as the *zaibatsu*). The first goal for Tachibana was to rid the country of an inadequate government⁴⁸. The lifestyle of his people was dedicated to the logic of consumption and showed increasing tendencies for «Western things». As in the West, it had begun to think about the world in terms of goods and money. This unhappy state of affairs was due to the conduct taken by the country, which was increasingly involved in the international market. It had ended up putting up not only material goods, labour, land and women, but the country itself for sale. Tachibana was convinced that the assumption of typically Western concepts such as class struggle, Marxism and the materialist dialectic, were too rigid and structured to be applied to the Japanese, and Asia in general. While Western thought uses logos, on which the ancient Greeks had based speculation and science (legitimising the belief that it is present in all things, ensuring the rational unity of the whole cosmos), Asia instead had great intellectual and religious systems such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. The dialectic difference between self and the other, between subject and object, has been completely surpassed. Human

⁴⁵ Tachibana was leader of *Aikyôjuku* (Native-Land-Loving School), founded by his father around a farming community, made up initially of only five families and gradually transformed into a real colony. He was welcomed by certain political figures, thanks to the support offered by his brother, the editor of the journal *Roshiago* (The Russian Language) and linked, apparently, to the secret services. His town received in 1930 the award of «model village» in the Ibaragi Prefecture. This seems to have greatly contributed to his popularity throughout the country, especially among the rural population. Cfr. O. Tanin, E. Yohan, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-221.

⁴⁶ K. Tachibana, *Nihon aikoku kakushin hongî*, in B. Hashikawa (ed.), *Chôkokkashugi - Gendai Nihon shisô taikêi*, 31, Tokyo, Chikuma Shobô, 1975, p. 213.

⁴⁷ K. Tachibana, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁴⁸ K. Tachibana, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-238.

reciprocity, the triumph of not about being individual, is the fundamental principle of Confucian civilisation.

The only choice left to Japan would be to get rid of this western burden through direct action, by a patriotic revolution (to be carried out in the name of «patriotic brotherhood») able to restore the historic union between the Emperor and the people:

If we wish to become the pillar of universal peace, with a large offensive or defensive national army which can be self-sufficient, it is necessary to think very carefully about how to organise such a large army, an expression of agricultural militarism⁴⁹.

3. Conclusion: for a new philosophy of World History

Between 1941 and 1942, faced with an escalation in military episodes and the delicate position that Japan had recently adopted through its foreign policy, the main concern of the disciples of Nishida (who had by then retired to a private life in Kamakura) was to make the main concepts developed by their teacher more «tangible», setting them in the historical context of the time. Nishitani, Kōsaka, Suzuki and Kōyama worked on the organisation of three famous, or infamous, round tables, which have gone down in history as «*Chūōkōron* debates», that took place within a year, between 1941 and 1942⁵⁰. A summary was initially published by the magazine *Chūōkōron* itself. The detailed works were then presented in a book, *Sekaiishi no tachiba to Nihon* (The world historical standpoint and Japan, 1943)⁵¹. (Kōsaka, Kōyama, Nishitani, Suzuki, 1943). The available copies immediately sold out and a reprint was soon necessary. The enthusiasm with which the work was received was the result of the climate of oppression and tension in those years, combined with a desperate desire to make sense of what was happening in those days. In the post-war period, the round tables of the *Chūōkōron* group were not seen in a positive light: the theme of their discussions was regarded as a symbol of the intellectual endorsement of the Japanese expansionist approach. The main aims of the debates included an imposition of thinking about modern Japan's position in the evolution of world history. It was a subject on which each of the participants was asked to express their points of view. The first systematic analysis of this work appeared in 1959, in an essay by the sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977), entitled *Kindaika to dentō* (Modernisation and tradition). This person must be credited with having brought the question of the Kyōto School's «involvement» with the regime from a different point of view to the attention of intellectuals and academic circles, especially those in Japan.

In his analysis, Takeuchi seems to distance himself from those who, in the post-war years and beyond, had condemned the work of the *Chūōkōron* group without any possibility of reconciliation. Although he did not take a clear position and depicted these intellectuals as the victims of a historiographic scapegoat process, he clearly stated the role that they had been asked to take on.

The debate that characterised the three round tables aimed to «explain» the position that the country was occupying in an international context. Those who took part in the work would not have been able to develop any theoretical system that could actually determine the course of events. In fact, the context in which the need for such meetings developed was determined by a dual internal and external crisis: a crisis of modernity, generated by the Meiji opening-up

⁴⁹ K. Tachibana, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

⁵⁰ The three sessions were held in Kyoto on November 26, 1941, March 4 and 24 November 1942.

⁵¹ Cfr. M. Kōsaka, I. Kōyama, K. Nishitani, S. Suzuki, *Sekaiishi no tachiba to Nihon*, Tokyo, Chūōkōron, 1943.

process (*kaikoku*) and the *bunmei kaika* programme with which, on the domestic front, Japan had to face: the project involving the creation a large Asian sphere, for which the country would resort to war in order to liberate the continent from a Western presence. From this perspective, the club's work was probably interpreted as a self-absolutist attempt to create a new system of values, the geopolitical vision of a hierarchical system centred on Japan, which the militarist government could easily abuse. The spirit of the roundtables came to be dominated, in part, by some kind of need to provide a logical framework for the imperial declaration of war. In his work, Takeuchi does not appear to ask a crucial question. The entire community of Japanese intellectuals must have been aware of the crisis that the country was going through at international level: for what reason was the formulation of a rational framework to their thoughts only carried out by *Kyōto gaku-ha* philosophers?

Takeuchi (like Oketani) merely considered the factual aspect of the circle's work, without paying as much attention to the intrinsic meaning of the subject they debated, that of a new «philosophy of world history». The concept of «world» that the participants in the discussions presented was projected into an «objective universal horizon that transcends the points of view of individual nations». In a world seen as one big stage (Nishida's *basho* rooted in the culture of «humanity»), the «self» would fulfil its full self-awareness. Seeing the «world» as a centre (your nation, or the «self») and a periphery (the *other*) would constitute the most serious impediment preventing the achievement of subjectivity. In this case, the «world» would be reduced to an abstract concept: in the *I-Thou* relationship, the «self» would not be realised *with*, or *in*, the understanding the *other*. It is only through self-awareness that we can reach a global understanding and create a world that can include the *I-Thou* combination from a wider point of view. The new image of the world that responded to the historical situation of the moment could only result from a philosophy placed in a historical context, far from its metaphysical dimension. In a philosophy mediated by history, self-awareness would coincide with the «historical manifestations of history»⁵². On the basis of these premises, the *Chūōkōron* group presented the participation of Japan in the war to create a *Great Asian Sphere* as an expression of its truer historical manifestation. This sounded like a clear statement of ideological support for the war that the country was undertaking. But what was the meaning that the participants in the debates attributed to the idea of a *truer* Japanese historical manifestation? The answer is a moral duty that the country felt was «the duty» of world history: overcoming modern civilisation and promoting a new culture. Japan was the only non-Western country that, having completely understood modernisation, could *use modernity to overcome modernity*. Putting an end to Western dominance in Asia, and creating a more pluralistic international system, seemed to be the country's truer historical manifestation. It would be relevant to note that neither the minutes of the round tables published by the journal *Chūōkōron*, or the minutes that appeared in the book *Sekaiishi no tachiba to Nihon* were totally faithful records of the works in question. Before being sent to press, the writings were subjected to careful censorship by the authorities, and what we now find is recorded in these sources is the result of numerous omissions «veiling statements in two or three layers of cloth»⁵³. The central theme of the first round table (which took place a few weeks before the calculated attack on Pearl Harbor), «How to avoid the war», was changed into «How to bring the war to a favourable end as soon as possible, in a way rationally acceptable to the Army». According to Graham Parkes⁵⁴, the essay by Najita and Harootunian, which appeared in the *Cambridge History of Japan* (1988), does not take into

⁵² Y. Takeuchi, *Kindaika to dentō*, in *Kindai Nihon shisōshi kōza*, 7, Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō, 1959, p. 94.

⁵³ Cfr. Y. Ōshima, *Dai-TōA sensō to Kyōto gaku-ha. Chishikijin no seiji sankā ni tsuite*, in «Chūōkōron», 80, August 1965.

⁵⁴ G. Parkes, *The Putative Fascism of the Kyōto School and the Political Correctness of the Modern Academy*, in «Philosophy East and West», 47, 3, July 1997.

account some crucial aspects related to the historical circumstances that characterised the political context in which the *Chūōkōron* debates took place and that, in many ways, exerted a decisive influence on the work. Their treatment of these debates seems to be based almost exclusively on Takeuchi's work (*Kindai no chōkoku*) which, as noted above, is based more on a factual analysis of the discussions and the influence they exerted on society at that time. Najita and Harootunian's contribution, and the positions of the intellectuals who took part in the debates, appear obscured by the Fascist brand with which the entire Kyoto School was marked. The omission of complex political circumstances that influenced the club's declaration has helped fuel the unique and indistinct image of an ultranationalist nature attributed to Kyoto's philosophers in the post-war years. According to Parkes, what is historically pressing is not forgiving Japan for the infamy perpetrated by its military during those years, or absolving the intellectuals who expressed themselves in favour of their actions, but rather a need to emphasise the complexity of the historical and political context and qualify the nature of the support that some philosophers offered their government⁵⁵. Ōshima Yasumasa's contribution helps shed light on some aspects of the climate around the round tables. A disciple of Tanabe, worked in those years Ōshima as secretary to a secret society established within the department of philosophy of the Imperial University of Kyoto, at the behest of the Imperial Navy, six months before the attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor. On the basis of what Ōshima stated, the purpose of this secret society should have been to halt the military escalation advocated by the Army Ministry. Contrary to the logic that the military had followed in recent times with respect to the war, but split internally, the Navy was aware that it could not represent a united front against the Army. The only thing they could do was count on public opinion as a potential ally. Securing the favour of the Kyoto School, which was already very influential in the intellectual community, would allow it to exert a strong influence on public opinion in Japan, mainly thanks to the widespread esteem enjoyed by Nishida and Tanabe within the country. Nishida had also personally met the Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, and the hopes of the Navy seemed to be based on the direct intermediation of the former over the latter in order to create a turnaround in the country's foreign policy. The taking over of Konoe's position by Tōjō thwarted all the Navy's efforts and hopes. Control over the work of the Kyoto School became more pressing: both Nishida and Nishitani were investigated by the police at the behest of the new prime minister, and all criticism expressed by the *Chūōkōron* group on the work of Tōjō was censored. According to Ōshima one of the main historical reasons for the Army Ministry's hostility towards the club was its attempt to emphasise the «point of view of world philosophy» and to address the meaning of war in this sense. According to Najita and Harootunian⁵⁶, the philosophers of the group thought that history consisted in the interaction of «blood» and «land», a conclusion that had already in fact been reached by the apologists of German Nazism. Japan was the only country able to overcome history because it could successfully merge Eastern humanism with Western rationalism, reaching a higher level of human development. The idea discussed by the club of vision of history in which the world was characterised by a pluralistic system, with multiple centres, would give Japan the «historical potential» to create this order. This potential was to manifest itself in its «moral energy», the principle that the country had been called on (by the world) to *discover*. As it results from the minutes of the debates, the philosophers who participated in the work related this principle to the thought of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), according to whom history would not be the exclusive product of economic progress and knowledge. It is tied to the vital energy, to the *Moralische Energie*

⁵⁵ G. Parkes, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

⁵⁶ T. Najita, H. Harootunian, *op. cit.*, p. 759.

that is inherent in a people, both culturally and politically⁵⁷, not being related to individual or personal morality, nor to a matter of purity of blood. As stated by Horio, the *Moralische Energie* is far from the idea that the French thinker Joseph Arthur Gobineau (1816-1882) understood as being purity of blood. By identifying the philosophical message the debates with the Nazi binomial «blood and soil», Najita and Harootunian are meant to have implicitly and indistinctly condemned the Kyōto School and its members for having provided moral justification of the war in the Pacific. In agreement with the observations of Parkes, the true meaning of the *Chūōkōron* group's work was expressed in the ambition to develop a new philosophy of history on the basis of which a pluralistic international order could be built, even if Japan was meant to be one of its leaders.

⁵⁷ M. Kōsaka, I. Kōyama, K. Nishitani, S. Suzuki, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.