

A History and Tradition of Philosophical Practice in Japan

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Abstract:

In Japan, from the pre-war to the post-war period, unique indigenous philosophizing cultures have been nurtured outside academism. The contemporary new philosophical practices which have been recently imported from Europe and North America are welcomed and widespread in Japan because of this indigenous traditional cultural soil cultivated by those local forerunners in the past. In this paper, the 'Life Experience Writing Movement', which was popular from the late Taisho era until the early Showa era, as well as the *Science of Thought* journal, which was founded by Shunsuke Tsurumi and the other six coteries in 1945 and continued to be published for fifty years until 1996, are discussed.

Key words:

Philosophical practice; Dialogue; Philosophy for/with children;

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1. Introduction

Philosophy was imported, with modernization, from the West to Japan in the early Meiji era, and introduced into the emerging modern national academia. With Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy - namely Chinese and Indian-also gained prominence as academic disciplines, studied exclusively in universities. Going beyond the university, there were other noteworthy educational and intellectual activities, which were considered philosophical, though they were not considered 'philosophy'. In retrospect, from the present perspective of philosophical practice, these activities could be re-evaluated as indigenous Japanese philosophical practices.

Teachers at rural elementary schools engaged in dialogues with children, who were asked to write essays on quotidian topics. While each topic could be picked from everyday life, it also entailed important problems that each child experienced and reflected upon. The children argued about the ultimate reason for human existence and that of the world, and teachers responded without using any metaphysical jargon. Some intellectuals conducted their research with ordinary citizens and published a journal, thus distancing themselves from academism, following the end of the Asia-Pacific War. They continued the publication for over fifty years until it ceased in the last decade of the twentieth century. Such activities in the past were not necessarily linked to the present movement of philosophical practice, but they might have formed the foundation upon which the Japanese people philosophize in the local educational and intellectual climate of Japan.

2. Life Experience Writing Movement 「生活綴方運動」

Osamu Kuno 久野収 (1910-1999) and Shunsuke Tsurumi 鶴見俊輔 (1922-

2015) argue in *Contemporary Japanese Thought* 『現代日本の思想』(1956) as follows:

In the early Showa era, pragmatism did not exist in Japanese academism of philosophy.... As for pragmatism in educational thought, the American pragmatic educational theory was imported and introduced into the curriculum of the national Higher Normal School [established in 1886 and closed in 1949. It was reorganized and restarted as Tokyo University of Education in 1949, and reorganized again into the School of Education, Tsukuba University, which opened in 1978]. Apart from this, there used to be another one: the 'Life Experience Writing Movement' was conducted by those rural elementary school teachers who graduated from local normal schools. (Kuno and Tsurumi, 72-73).

They further point out that, 'This movement began without importing and introducing any specific academic theory, but started as a spontaneous, indigenous educational movement initiated by teachers' everyday school life experience with children at local elementary schools in rural area' (Kuno and Tsurumi, 72-73), and also point out that, therefore, it was a kind of 'methodic pragmatism for inventing ideas' (Kuno and Tsurumi, 72-73). They further explained this as follows:

Pragmatism is a school of thought in which the participants in this movement take care of feeding themselves to grow their thoughts, train themselves by solving those questions that are applicable to their life experiences, and always make efforts to soften their cerebral arteries to prevent their thinking from suffering from arteriosclerosis in the state of perpetual mutual communication of thinking and acting (Kuno and Tsurumi, 73-74).

The Life Experience Writing Movement originated from Enosuke Ashida 芦田 恵之助(1873-1951), a rural elementary school teacher of the Japanese language. Ashida published books on essay writing methods: *The Teaching of Essay Writing* 『綴り方教授』(1913), *Teacher Training Regarding The Teaching of Essay Writing* 『綴り方教授に関する教師の修養』(1915), and *The Teaching of How to Read* 『読み方教授』(1916). His turn 'from a loyal follower of Japanese language

education that matched the Imperial Rescript of Education 教育勅語 to a supporter of the liberation movement of children' (Kuno and Tsurumi 79), was inspired by his encounter with Torajiro Okada 岡田虎次郎 (1872-1920), a priest of the derivative new religion of Zen Buddhism, who invented the Seiza Approach to Self-Harmonization 岡田式静座法,¹ which was then quite popular. Okada left no writing; rather, '[w]hat he did was simply to sit down with those people who came to him and teach them how to relax. He sometimes had a dialogue with each of them on the topics of their own personal problem' and, 'having a dialogue, he guided each one to find a tip to solve his or her problem by himself or herself' (Kuno and Tsurumi, 77).

Interestingly, Okada's method resembles the American non-directive counselling method, which appeared after World War II. He could also be re-evaluated as a forerunner of the philosophical counselling movement, a popular philosophical practice today. According to Kuno and Tsurumi, 'Okada's method of Seiza Approach to Self-Harmonization was such as to provide his followers with a certain aesthetic of life rooted in their own nature' (Kuno and Tsurumi, 78). Okada did not have any disciples, however, Ashida was inspired him after an encounter, since he had been so averse to the modern pedagogies imported from the West, that it convinced him that 'You do it for yourself, that's the basis of writing'. Eventually, Okada's spirit was reborn with Ashida's Life Experience Writing Movement. Here, elementary school children were invited to pick themselves a topic of writing, out of their everyday life, reflect upon the problem involved, and pose questions regarding the problem. The entire process would then be written as an essay for themselves.

Miekichi Suzuki (1882-1936), then devotedly connected The Life Experience Writing Movement through a nationwide network, with the launch of a juvenile journal *Red Bird* 『赤い鳥』 (1918-1936), and continued to publish it from the late Taisho era until the early Showa era. With his strong belief that '[c]hildren's essay should be the record of their life experience', Suzuki and his network groups collected and archived such essays from across Japan, and thus endeavored to reform writing education. For example, from the *Red Bird* issue of January 1935, Tsurumi quotes an essay, titled 'A Sad Record' 「悲しき記録」, written by Masako Toyoda, a fourth grade elementary school girl, whose father

1 https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/cd2df5_595a647fa00c4f7a96f7a22483af1fe1.pdf

was a tin-craft worker and whose mother had external affairs regularly for money. It reads, 'My family can never survive with the money earned and brought home by my father, who is a man of simple-minded honesty. Actually, my mother's income supports all of my family. I know she is a liar, though' (Kuno and Tsurumi, 91). As it was remarked worthy of quoting, this essay was an important record of the girl's metacognitive development that reached such a stage of self-awareness.



Figure 1. Cover of the journal *Red Bird*『赤い鳥』, the first issue.

Retrieved from <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

Finally, we can re-evaluate the Life Experience Writing Movement as a forerunner of today's Philosophy for/with Children, or P4/wC, movement practiced through the medium of a juvenile journal linking local practices.

3. *Science of Thought* 『思想の科学』 (1946-1996)

In 1945, when Japan was defeated in the Asia-Pacific War, there were six coterie members recruited by Kazuko Tsurumi 鶴見和子 (1918-2006), including Kiyoko Takeda 武田清子 (1917-2018), Taketani Mitsuo 武谷三男 (1911-2000), Shigeto Tsuru 都留重人 (1912-2006), Shunsuke Tsurumi 鶴見俊輔 [Kazuo's younger brother], Masao Maruyama 丸山眞男 (1914-1996), and Satoshi Watanabe 渡辺慧 (1910-1993). They were scholars in fields ranging from the history of ideas to physics, who came together as the coterie of *Science of Thought* journal. They shared a common thought that they 'did not express their approval to the war before and during the wartime' (Kurokawa, 182). In the following year, the coterie began publishing their journal, *Science of Thought*, which continues to be published for fifty years, until May 1996. Shunsuke Tsurumi, who edited the journal from the very beginning to the end, recalls the sale of the first issue as follows:

The first issue was a booklet of thirty-two pages.... I brought one hundred copies to a kiosk on the platform of Shinbashi 新橋 train station by myself and consigned those copies to sell there. Then, I brought another 100 copies to a kiosk at Yurakucho 有楽町 train station, again by myself.... The next morning, I was sitting alone at the desk in the room that was located downstairs at the Shisei-Kaikan 市政会館 Clock Tower in Hibiya 日比谷 district, where the coterie members had met face to face for the first time. They usually had editorial board meetings after the first meeting. The time had far advanced, unnoticed. It was getting dark, and then a man whom I did not know abruptly came into the room and spoke to me. 'Excuse me. I have just dropped by because I bought and read this booklet and wrote down my impression of it. I would like to send a letter to the editor. However, glancing at the editor's address, I noticed that the place was nearby. So, I walked here to bring in my letter,' he said. In fact, he was the Saburo Ichii. It was just a coincidence that I met him for the first time in this way.... I had brought 100 copies to sell at a kiosk in a train station. Then, he bought one of them there, and he came here. Eventually, my sales led him to become involved in our activity. He became the eighth writer who contributed a paper to our journal. A reader becomes a writer; that is, the way. (Tsurumi, 203)

Interestingly, Saburo Ichii 市井三郎 (1922–1989) is the author of a book *What is Historical Progress?* 『歴史の進歩とは何か』 (Ichii, 1971), which is a kind of introduction to philosophy. He wrote it with the intention 'to let the readers form an attitude toward the destiny of the entire humankind (which, as the author repeatedly mentioned in this book, is extremely difficult to form when it matters to get themselves engaged) and reflect on it as much as they can' (Ichii, Post Scriptum). In the above quoted episode, Tsurumi recollecting the memory of the sales of the first issue, speaks of the journal's characteristic as well. It was like a free citizens' meeting place, a virtual *agora*, where people could discuss any topics and exchange opinions. Through the medium of this journal, people began to engage in philosophical dialogue.

Tsurumi himself contributed to the first issue of this journal with a paper, titled 'On Talisman-like Usage of Language' 「言葉のお守りの使用法について」. Talisman-like usage of language implies the habit of using those languages, wherein the speakers themselves do not understand the meaning very well. He criticized this bad habit, blaming it for Japan's wars. He said, 'It is important for people to use language that they are used to' and started to write a serial, titled *Ordinary People's Philosophy*,² as its theme, through which he investigated how philosophy mattered for ordinary people. Reflecting on the research he conducted with Yoshiyuki Tsurumi 鶴見良行 (Shunsuke's nephew, social anthropologist, 1926–1994), he recollected as follows:

As Japanese people have been living on this land for over thousands of years, there must be an interaction between the people and the land, as well as between groups of people. There must also be people's own way of thinking and their own thoughts. When we started to issue our journal, I invited Yoshiyuki Tsurumi, my nephew, to join us, and I went with him to the underground path in Ueno 上野 district to interview people who stayed there. We asked what philosophies they had. We asked them questions such as, 'Do you think this world really exist?'; 'Will the sky still be blue after your death?' Those people who stayed on the underground path responded in a variety of ways. We collected their

2 [Philosophy of] "Ordinary People" (See Reference, Uehara 1990) is taken as a part of the title of the book by Takashi Uehara 上原隆, wherein the author investigates Shunsuke Tsurumi's philosophy.

answers and published them under the name 'Ordinary People's Philosophy.' We will restart again together with them. Let us begin from the very star. I was determined back then. (Tsurumi, 208)

This idea should always be employed when collaborating to localize philosophical practices in developing countries. That is, we should start by getting to know the indigenous people's way of thinking in any place. In Japan, *the Science of Thought* journal was born in the post-war situation after the defeat, an unconditional surrender of the nation.



Figure 2. Cover of the journal *Science of Thought* 『思想の科学』, No.12, January 1982. Retrieved from <http://karaimobooks.shop-pro.jp>

This journal was edited with the spirit of freedom from such an ideology as academism or Marxism that could not resist the Imperial Rule Assistance Movement during wartime. It placed an emphasis on the readers' contributions

(thus, it was different from other usual coterie journals). However, the published articles were not a simple collection of personal opinions, as noted in Prospectus of the first issue: 'To introduce the method of logical positivism' means, in other words, to provide one's own opinion with 'reasons'. Therefore, a dialogue mattered. The editors of this journal intended to promote a dialogue with reasons, which is the core of all philosophical practices today.

Finally, we may assert that philosophical practice in Japan still keeps and shares the spirit of the Science of Thought in that sense, and that the journal played an important historical role in nurturing the local tradition of Japanese philosophical practice.

4. Conclusion

In Japan, from the pre-war to the post-war period, unique indigenous philosophizing cultures have been nurtured outside academism. However, these local cultural practices were on a small scale, and were overwhelmed by the central culture of academism, which increasingly became larger, ruling, and authoritative after the late 1950s. Nevertheless, the contemporary new philosophical practices which were recently imported from Europe and North America were welcomed and become widespread in Japan because the cultural soil cultivated by those local forerunners in the past has not completely eroded. Since the late 1990s, these new philosophical practices which began in different places have been gradually organized. The Japanese Society for Philosophical Practice (JSPP) was thus inaugurated and held its first congress in August 2018. The prospectus for the creation of JSPP is as follows:

'Philosophical practice' refers to the activity of collaborative inquiry into philosophical themes, mainly through dialogue. As an intellectual activity, in which citizens discuss important topics, deepen their philosophical thinking, and strengthen cooperation, it has been found in many parts of the world since ancient times. (JSPP)³

3 <https://philopracticejapan.jp/about-en/>

Certainly, this is a new way of thinking. However, the new philosophical practice in Japan should be grafted onto seedlings stemming from the old, indigenous local practices that were uniquely nurtured in the Japanese cultural environment. This will help it continue to evolve in a unique way in Japan.

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