

In 1948, after returning from China and publishing an influential book on the Chinese leftist writer Lu Xun, the famous Japanese literary critic Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977) developed a provocative account of modern Japanese culture in his influential essay 'What is Modernity?'. He contrasted Japan, whose modernity merely aped the West, with China, whose modernity grew out of fundamental resistance to European invasion. Takeuchi's theory anticipates the ideas of contemporary critics of Eurocentricism, which makes his work particularly relevant today.

# Takeuchi Yoshimi and the dilemmas of resistance to global capitalist modernity<sup>1</sup>

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Like contemporary post-colonial theorists, Takeuchi stresses that Europeanisation is often achieved by Asian nations' attempts to resist colonialism through nationalist movements. With respect to East Asia, where discourses of resistance and modernisation are salient but often do not penetrate the deeper structures of cultural domination, his thought is especially meaningful. However, Takeuchi's blind spots are as significant as his contributions. He often gestures toward but does not grasp the expansive dynamic of capitalism that makes his discourse possible. To understand the significance of Takeuchi's thought, we need to rethink his concept of resistance in relation to both capitalism and geographical distinctions such as Europe and Asia.

Takeuchi Yoshimi's life spanned from the end of the Meiji to the Showa periods, during which time Japan became a major competitor in the global capitalist system. While there have been a number of excellent works on Takeuchi Yoshimi,<sup>2</sup> few have attempted to understand his ideas in relation to Marxist theories of the cultural antinomies of capitalism. Scholars may have avoided linking Takeuchi's analysis to Marxism because he famously opposed scientism and evolutionary theories of history, both of which were affirmed by most Marxists of his time. However, a Marxist theory that could explain scientism and progressive visions of history as misrecognitions of the logic of capitalism would also provide a framework to grasp Takeuchi's discussion of modernity.

## Misrecognising capitalism: the dynamic of capitalism as evolutionary history

On this point, Moishe Postone's suggestion to read Marx's *Capital* not as a text about economics but as a metacommentary on the history of philosophy is helpful. Postone compares Hegel's idea of Spirit and the movement of capital:

*'For Hegel, the Absolute, the totality of the subjective-objective categories, grounds itself. As the self-moving substance that is Subject, it is the true causa sui as well as the endpoint of its own development. In Capital, Marx presents the underlying forms of commodity-determined society as constituting the social context for notions such as the difference between essence and appearance, the philosophical concept of substance, the dichotomy of subject and object, the notion of totality, and, on the logical level of the category of capital, the unfolding dialectic of the identical subject-object'.<sup>4</sup>*

Postone distinguishes between two levels of capitalism, the level of the commodity form and the level of the category of capital. The commodity form consists of the opposition between exchange-value and use-value, which corresponds to antinomies between object and subject and appearance and essence. From the standpoint of exchange-value all things are equal and denuded of their particularity; they are all commodities that can be measured by money. We find this type of levelling out of difference in the rationalising tendency embedded in modern forms of bureaucracy. Since Max Weber, scholars have associated rationalisation with modernity; however, this is only one side of modern society. Equally essential to the commodity form is use-value, which is often associated with particularity and feeling. Many movements against modernity attempt to counter the alienation associated with exchange-value and the abolition of difference by affirming the use-value side of the commodity form, expressed as feeling or irrationality. We see this, for example, in the reaction against Hegel by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

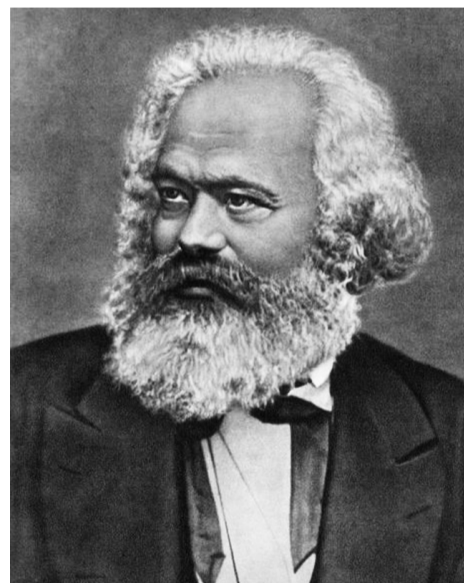
The level of capital involves both sides of the commodity form and refers

to a historically specific movement to ever higher levels of productivity. In Postone's view, Hegel misrecognises the dynamic of capital as a transhistorical development of Spirit. We could further stipulate that proponents of evolutionary visions of history similarly construct a moral narrative of development by generalising a dynamic of history specific to capitalism.

## I expand, therefore I am: Europe in Asia, behaving like Marx's capital

Takeuchi describes something similar to the above mentioned dynamic of capitalism, with his concepts of modernity and European expansion. In the beginning of 'What is Modernity?' Takeuchi suggests a connection between modernity, European expansion and capitalism, but remains inconclusive:

*'I do not know if the European invasion of the Orient was based upon the will of capital, a speculative spirit of adventure, the Puritan spirit of pioneering, or yet another spontaneous capacity (honnō) for self-expansion. In any event, it is certain that there existed in Europe something fundamental that supported this capacity, making the invasion of the Orient inevitable. Perhaps this something has been deeply intertwined with the essence of what is called modernity.<sup>5</sup>*



'Takeuchi's Europe behaves like Marx's capital, which must expand to remain itself'.

Takeuchi refers to an unknown dynamic associated with European expansion and gives a number of possible sources of which capitalism is but one. Later, however, he returns to this theme and refers to the spirit of capitalism as a constant self-transcending activity:

*'The constant activity to be their own selves makes it impossible for them (Europeans) to simply stop at themselves. They must risk the danger of losing the self in order for the self to be itself. Once liberated, people cannot return to their originally closed shells; they can only preserve themselves in activity. This is precisely the spirit of capitalism. It grasps the self in the course of its expansion through time and space. The notion of progress, and hence the idea of historicism, first came into being in modern Europe'.<sup>6</sup>*

Takeuchi's Europe behaves like Marx's capital, which must expand to remain itself. Moreover, Takeuchi connects European invasion, the

spread of capitalism and the misrecognition of history as evolutionary progress.

*'Europe's invasion of the Orient resulted in the phenomenon of Oriental capitalism, and this signified the equivalence between European self-preservation and self-expansion. For Europe this was accordingly conceptualised as the progress of world-history and the triumph of reason'.<sup>7</sup>*

Imperialism presents itself as global historical progress or the triumph of reason, and like anti-colonialists, Takeuchi's fundamental concern is resistance (teikō) to such domination. But writing in post-War Japan, he sees the significance of European imperialism not just in terms of political sovereignty. Like post-colonialists, he stresses that liberation movements themselves reproduce aspects of European hegemony<sup>8</sup> and describes this process as objectification, which recalls the denuding of the qualitative dimension of things. Thus Takeuchi explains that even 'resistance could not change the thoroughgoing rationalist conviction that all things can ultimately be objectified and extracted...through resistance the Orient was destined to increasingly Europeanise'.<sup>9</sup> Takeuchi grasps European domination at a fundamental level, but, consequently, real resistance appears impossible. The dialectic between resistance and re-incorporation makes it difficult to imagine a movement that twists free from European domination broadly conceived.

However, Takeuchi contends that as Europe invades Asia it also becomes other and its movement thus opens a space for resistance through the production of heterogeneity. 'At the same time that world history was approaching its completion with the comprehension of the Orient, the contradictions of this history surfaced through mediation of the heterogeneity contained in the Orient'.<sup>10</sup> The key to transformative resistance is intimately connected to affirming this heterogeneity, which is constantly concealed through dominant epistemological categories.

## Like a slave: putting despair into action

Throughout the essay, Takeuchi highlights the difference between Japan, which does not resist, and China, which does, and contends that China's resistance, embodied in both Lu Xun and the Chinese revolution, actually succeeded in producing an alternative to the West. Japan competes with the West but does so on the West's own terms, namely capitalism, and hence is unable to think of an alternative. China, on the other hand, is like a slave, but it is precisely because slaves have nothing that they are filled with potential. They must awaken to their own nothingness. Because everything, including Being, has been colonised, their individuality or heterogeneity appears as nothing, and the only standpoint from which to resist is nothingness. In Takeuchi's view, Lu Xun's despair is precisely a result of this nothingness.

According to Takeuchi, the slave in Lu Xun's poem 'Wild Grass'<sup>11</sup> faces this nothingness and thinks of an alternative at a point when all paths seem to be occupied by the oppressor/imperialist. Takeuchi describes this existential crisis with characteristic poignancy:

*"The most painful thing in life", awakening from a dream, occurs when the slave rejects his status as slave while at the same time rejecting the fantasy of liberation, so that he becomes a slave who realises that he is a slave... Such a slave rejects being himself at the same time that he rejects being anything else. This is the meaning of despair (zetsubō) in Lu Xun and what makes Lu Xun possible. Despair appears*

as resistance which travels a path when there are no paths. Resistance appears as putting despair into action (*zetsubō no kodōka to shite arawareru*).<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Japanese intellectuals who were caught in the same general framework of capitalist competition and historical progress, Lu Xun represents a new form of resistance, like the slave who follows a path when all paths have receded.

### A path beyond paths: resistance to modernity haunted by global capitalism

Takeuchi's analysis of modernity leads him to a path beyond paths, which implies a negative standpoint outside of history, such as death or nothingness, two constant themes in his reading of Lu Xun. Indeed, as Nakajima Takahiro argues, Takeuchi develops an eschatological theory of history.<sup>13</sup> This is in line with Takeuchi's claims that history and Europe make each other possible,<sup>14</sup> which parallels Postone's idea that the temporal structure of capitalism makes history possible. However, because Takeuchi does not specify the source of the dynamic of modernity and often identifies it with a geographical site, it is difficult to give direction to his phrase 'putting despair into action'. Thus Takeuchi at times simply asserts that resistance to Europe, modernity or capitalism was embodied in the communist revolutions in China and Russia.<sup>15</sup> This of course suppresses the tensions between Lu Xun's literature and party politics, which Takeuchi so eloquently discusses in his *Lu Xun*.

Takeuchi attempted to use Lu Xun's concept of despair to deal with the impasse between a conservative critique of Eurocentric visions of modernity expressed by Kobayashi Hideo and the Kyoto School, and a Marxist critique of capitalism wedded to a progressive vision of history. Moreover, he identified something fundamental that gave rise to the above antinomy and called this modernity. Although he could not think of a concrete way to negate modernity, throughout his life he tried to develop a politics of despair that brought various sides of modern antinomies together. Thus, in the post-War context, his politics constantly involved drawing on resources discarded as fascist or conservative in order to develop a politics of resistance for the present. However, this resistance would constantly be haunted by what it left untheorised, namely its conditions of possibility in global capitalism.

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#### Notes

- 1 The author would like to thank Arif Dirlik and Prasenjit Duara for reading and discussing this essay.
- 2 Yoshimi, Takeuchi. 1948, 2005. 'What is Modernity? (The Case of Japan and China)'. Calichman, Richard F., trans., *What is Modernity: Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 53-81. Japanese text: 1993. 'Chigoku no kindai to nihon no kindai: rojin wo tegakari to shite'. *Nihon to Ajia*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 11-57. Throughout this essay, I refer to Calichman's translation and the above Japanese text. I have amended the translation where I have deemed appropriate.
- 3 See suggested readings at the end of the essay.
- 4 Postone, Moishe. 1993. *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 156.
- 5 Op. cit., Takeuchi, Eng. 54, J., 13.
- 6 Ibid., Eng., 55, J., 14.
- 7 Ibid., Eng., 55, J., 14.
- 8 For an analysis of the complex dialectic between imperialism and national liberation, see: Duara, Prasenjit. Winter 2006. 'Nationalism, Imperialism and the Case of Manchukuo: A Response to Anthony Pagden'. *Common Knowledge* 12-1:47-65.
- 9 Op. cit., Takeuchi, Eng., 55-6, J., 15.
- 10 Ibid., Eng., 56, J., 15. Arif Dirlik discusses the problem of resistance to global capitalist modernity in a similar manner in the contemporary context in: Dirlik, Arif. 2007. *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 158-159.
- 11 Xun, Lu. 1982. 'Yecao' (Wild Grass). Ishangwen, Shi and Deng Zhongqiang, eds. *Yecao qianxi* (Wild Grass, with a Preliminary Analysis) Hubei: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe. For Lu Xun's parable of the slave, see pp. 153-161.
- 12 Op. cit., Takeuchi, Eng., 71, J., 41.
- 13 Nakajima, Takahiro. 2007. 'Fufukujū no isan: rokuji nendai no Takeuchi Yoshimi' (The Legacy of Disobedience: Takeuchi Yoshimi in the 1960s). *Hō to bōryoku no kiyoku: tō ajia no rekishi keiken* (Law and Memories of Violence: The Historical Experience of East Asia). Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 207-233, 214. An English version was recently presented as 'An Eschatological View of History: Takeuchi Yoshimi in the 1960s' at the *Conference on The Writing of History in 20th Century East Asia*, Leiden, June, 2007.
- 14 Op. cit., Takeuchi, Eng., 54, J., 13.
- 15 For Takeuchi's remarks on the Russian Revolution, see op. cit., Takeuchi, Eng., 56, J., 15.

#### Suggested reading in Western Languages:

1. Calichman, Richard. 2004. *Takeuchi Yoshimi: Displacing the West*. Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series.
2. Guex, Sameul. 2006. *Entre nonchalance et désespoir : Les intellectuels japonais sinologues face à la guerre (1930-1950)*. Bern: Peter Lang.
3. Uhl, Christian. 2003. *Wer war Takuchi Yoshimis Lu Xun: Ein Annäherungsversuch an ein Monument der japanischen Sinologie*. München: Iudicum Verlag GmbH

#### Suggested reading in Chinese and Japanese:

1. Okayama, Asako. 2002. *Takeuchi no bungaku seishin* (Takeuchi's Literary Spirit). Tōkyō: Ronshōsha.
2. Shunsuke, Tsurumi and Kagami Mitsuyuki, eds. 2007. *Mukon no nashunaru ismu wo koete: Takeuchi wo zaishikō* (Going Beyond Rootless Nationalism: Rethinking Takeuchi). Tōkyō: Nihon heironsha.
3. Sun, Ge. 2005. *Zhu Neihao de beilun* (The Paradox of Takeuchi Yoshimi). Beijing: Beijingdaxue chubanshe.
4. Nakajima, Takahiro. 2007. 'Fufukujū no isan: rokuji nendai no Takeuchi Yoshimi' (The Legacy of Disobedience: Takeuchi Yoshimi in the 1960s). *Hō to bōryoku no kiyoku: tō ajia no rekishi keiken* (Law and Memories of Violence: The Historical Experience of East Asia). Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 207-233.

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