

The Predicament of Speaking about Cultural Differences: Two Readings of Watsuji Tetsurō's Cultural Typology and the Context of American Multiculturalism

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade I have been given several opportunities to lecture on the comparative studies of culture at a few Japanese universities. One of the problems that has surfaced from my teaching experience is how to problematize and eventually overcome a tendency toward an “abhorrence of culture” in the contemporary studies of culture.⁽¹⁾ Foremost for undergraduate students in Japan was their desire to actually touch the vivid attractiveness of people’s cultural activities rather than the negative or oppressive nature of cultural scenarios seen solely from the standpoint of “politics.” How can scholars of culture best pursue the lure of culture?

In this paper, I will explore these theoretical problematics by dealing with Watsuji Tetsurō’s wartime essay “The National Character of the Americans” (1944) and its two important critiques. In the essay, Watsuji ruthlessly attacks the materialistic nature of the Anglo-American civilization, tracing its origin back to the philosophy of two seventeenth-century philosophers: Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon. The postwar Japanese public has always regarded this essay as evidence of Watsuji’s wartime collaboration with Japanese fascism. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, two American scholars of Japanese intellectual history, Naoki Sakai and William Lafleur, shed a new light on this notorious essay by Watsuji. These recent critical reappraisals were made possible by the adoption of postmodernism, which both Sakai and Lafleur passionately espouse, but the details of their arguments differ distinctively. Sakai harshly criticizes Watsuji’s anti-Westernism as a reversed form of Orientalism, whereas Lafleur tries to rescue Watsuji’s moderate liberalism by interpreting Watsuji’s vehement attack on the West as a deliberate dis-

guise for his support for the rationality of the modern West, embodied most prominently in the philosophy of Hobbes and Bacon.

Where does this standoff come from? This problematization will necessarily entail scrutiny of the Janus-faced nature of postmodernism and the culture war in the United States.

2. The Predicament of the Comparative Studies of Culture and the Dilemma of Speaking about Watsuji Tetsurō

In postwar Japan, Watsuji Tetsurō has often received somewhat undeserved blame for the political overtones of his works, which has made scholars and critics hesitant to praise the works openly. This dilemma of speaking about Watsuji exacerbates the predicament of pursuing the comparative studies of culture in Japan, for Watsuji's extraordinary scholarship is at the intersection of the cultural history of Japan and the comparative studies of culture. The latest critique launched from the deconstructionist standpoint denounces Watsuji's works of cultural typology as a disguised form of racism bolstered by a strict distinction between the East and the West. However, some scholars of modern Japanese intellectual history and the comparative studies of culture have recently begun to unearth Watsuji's intellectual heritage in a positive and constructive manner. I also take a side on this new trend.

2.1 The Predicament of the Comparative Studies of Culture

In recent years, the comparative studies of culture in Japan seem to have fallen into a serious predicament. Such a predicament might have lurked behind the scenes for a long time, but it came to light primarily

as a result of the importation of postcolonialism and cultural studies in the 1990s, mainly from the English-speaking world. These two new academic trends have so far achieved remarkable results by bringing a new perspective on “politics” into the studies of culture. For example, proponents of a postmodern perspective on culture have succeeded in exposing, through their detailed examinations of so-called “quasi-colonialist discourses,” a concealed relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘culture’ in the modern nation-states, or a disguised complicity in the construction of “alterity” between the East and the West. As a necessary corollary of this theoretical position, the proponents of postmodernity went on to target directly the traditional methods of the comparative studies of culture, denouncing them as accomplices to the crime of colonialism or racism in their cunning attempt to subordinate “culture” to “politics.”

A typical picture of the methodological negotiations or clashes between the new and old approaches to the contemporary studies of culture is seen clearly in the recent critiques of Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a celebrated, classical work in the traditional field of the comparative studies of culture. As is well known, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is concerned primarily with a comparison of the national characters and customs of the United States and Japan. According to the newest critiques from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, this “comparative” aspect is at the root of all kinds of problems in the field, because the ostensible neutrality of “comparison” actually conceals a culturally and socially imbalanced relationship of domination/subordination between the two nation-states. Furthermore, the proponents of those critiques eventually detect the origin of such disproportionate cultural exchanges in the power politics of the modern nation-states. Thus, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is labeled as a work of

both “racism” and “nationalism.”

The labeling of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as a racist work is a fatal blow to those who have followed the traditional methods of the comparative studies of culture. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has been widely regarded as a masterpiece, or at least a classical book even in the traditional field of the comparative studies of culture, where with the scholars and critics representing diverse, even eclectic, views and methodologies being involved, it has become extremely difficult to find some common ground and understanding about the scholarship itself. Few would argue against the proposition that *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has been, for better or worse, canonized. Moreover, in the realm of cultural anthropology, which is Benedict's original specialty, she generally has been considered to be a great figure who made enormous intellectual contributions. Now that one of the representative works of such a great scholar has been singled out and labeled as “nationalism” or “racism,” it is inevitable that other innumerable mediocre, offhand discourses on cross-cultural comparison, which are based neither upon a strict methodology nor upon specific exemplifications, cannot rebut properly to the theoretically sophisticated criticism of postcolonialism and cultural studies. That is why many traditional approaches to the comparative studies of culture have fallen into the plight.

2.2 The Dilemma of Speaking about Watsuji

A similar predicament of scholarship can be found in the field of modern Japanese intellectual history and ethics. In this case, Watsuji Tetsurō displaces Ruth Benedict. Speaking about Watsuji in a positive manner seems extremely difficult in contemporary Japan. Watsuji has hitherto been criticized as being philosophically tepid or politically reactionary.

This type of criticism has been especially prevalent since the 1990s, when it became even more difficult to rescue Watsuji's thoughts from mounting contemporary theoretical criticism of culture, notably from a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective. Such recent criticism, at the cutting edge of Western-born philosophical apparatuses, has astutely succeeded in raising a series of new questions, such as the following: "In what political phase was the scholarship of cultural history and philosophy institutionalized in modern Japan?," "What kind of objects have been selected, and how have those objects been dealt with in that scholarship?," and "From what kind of subjectivity or scholarly position have academic inquiries been enunciated?" If these types of questions are applied to Watsuji, he immediately receives a death sentence for "cultural nationalism" or "racism." Masayuki Shimizu, a Japanese scholar of the ethics and intellectual history of modern Japan, who faithfully follows Watsuji's academic tradition, summarizes the dilemma of speaking about Watsuji as follows:

In the whole episteme of modern Japan, the philosopher's role of speaking about Japan generally has been limited. Therefore, for many people, Watsuji's presence itself has been a continual object of careful avoidance. Any attempt to speak about Watsuji could be regarded as deplorably inappropriate and impurely nationalistic, because most scholars of the humanities in modern Japan have had a firm belief that they could deal with Japanese things as a part-time job. However, Watsuji's entire oeuvre, especially his philological studies of Japanese and Oriental culture, covers materials that are too wide-ranging and profound to be dismissed as just a part-time job. Delving critically into the depth of Watsuji's specific interpretations is more than ordinary scholars and critics can easily handle. As a

result, only the ideological anti-Watsujian criticism comes to people's notice. In recent years, the critical arguments about the intervention of politics, or more specifically of nation-states, into culture provide nourishment for previous anti-Watsujian criticisms. In addition, weapons of "deconstruction" deal an additional blow. There is no end to the supply of intellectual apparatuses for speaking about Watsuji in negative terms.⁽²⁾

In sum, most of the students of culture in postwar Japan have deliberately evaded Watsuji, precisely because he exceptionally ventured to inquire about the cultural history of Japan from the standpoints of modern Western philosophy. For those who are liable to seclude themselves within the territory or culture of a modern nation-state, Watsuji's ideas are nothing but a potential cause of East-West friction. Even for the contemporary critics of culture who denounce the enclosure of culture within the boundaries of a modern nation state, Watsuji remains a target of criticism. As Shimizu insinuates with such phrases as "the ideological anti-Watsujian criticism," and the anti-Watsujian criticism with "weapons of deconstruction," the newest version of Watsuji-bashing was instigated by proponents of postcolonialism and cultural studies.⁽³⁾ For such reasons the intellectual dilemma described here regarding the study of Watsuji's ideas is analogous to the current plight of the comparative studies of culture mentioned earlier. In other words, Watsuji Tetsurō stands at a crossroad, with two paths leading into the whole dilemma of culture.

The predicament the study of Watsuji has incurred seems to be far more substantial than that of the comparative studies of culture. As Shimizu properly and somewhat audaciously states in the beginning of the above-cited passage, philosophers in modern Japan have consistently hesitated to speak about Japanese matters from philosophical standpoints,

for most of them have generally regarded the term “philosophy” as synonymous with “Western philosophy,” thus excluding the possibility of Japanese scholars opening up a “Japanese philosophy.” In modern Japan, philosophical inquiries of Japanese matters have never been authenticated, with a few rare exceptions such as the works of Watsuji, Nishida Kitarō, and Kuki Shūzō. This might be a great restraint or predicament that is beyond the imagination of worry-free, lighthearted scholars belonging to the traditional school of the comparative studies of culture. Even such *pococuranti*, however, would not be able to escape from the dilemma of studying culture, because Watsuji was also deeply committed to the discussions of cross-cultural studies in his celebrated works, *Climate and Culture* (1940) and others. It seems that, unless the students of the comparative studies of culture seek a theoretical basis more seriously, they will not be able to make further progress.

Shimizu is one of a group of scholars and critics endeavoring to re-examine Watsuji's writings from a broader range of theoretical viewpoints such as comparative ethics and intellectual history. This paper is intended as a part of such attempt. I will begin with Watsuji's wartime essay titled “The National Character of the Americans.”

3. Watsuji's “The National Character of the Americans” and Its Critiques

In his wartime essay “The National Character of the Americans,” Watsuji analyzes the traits of Anglo-Americans in terms of colonialism and imperialism. The essay's highlight is his historical perspective on tracing the origin of modern colonialism and imperialism back to two seven-

teenth-century English philosophers: Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon. In the postwar period, this essay has long been seen as nothing but Watsuji's flattery or cooperation with the fascist regime of Japan. Such an acrimonious critique was recently replayed by Naoki Sakai, an American postmodernist scholar heavily armed with a new methodology of postcolonialism and cultural studies.

It is important to note that Watsuji's critique of materialism is not an anomaly. For example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer raised a similar question about Bacon during the same period of the 1940s, and more recently another postcolonialist critic, Charles Whitney, explicitly described Bacon as one of the ideologues who laid the philosophical foundation of Western colonialism. Meanwhile, another American postmodernist scholar of Japanese culture, William LaFleur, endeavored to excavate a more positive and encouraging aspect of Watsuji's essay, concluding that Watsuji's attack was no more than a disguise for his support for the Anglo-Americans.

3.1 Watsuji's "The National Character of the Americans"

At the end of the Pacific War, Watsuji Tetsurō, a philosopher and historian of Japanese culture, published an essay titled "The National Character of the Americans." Watsuji originally drafted this essay for a special lecture at the Japanese naval academy in 1943.⁽⁴⁾ Echoing a wartime mood of militant jingoism, Watsuji pushed forward his criticism of the Anglo-American people, who were at war with Japan at the time.

In the essay, Watsuji, citing Bernard Shaw's words, argues that the Anglo-Americans have a strong conviction that it is a religious and moral duty to conquer those who possess what they want. Watsuji continues to argue that they are audacious enough to flaunt their sublime ideals of

freedom and national independence, while committing worldwide atrocities without qualm: they in fact conquered almost half of the world, eventually incorporating the conquests into their own territory. Thus, a notable feature of this essay is Watsuji's analysis of the Anglo-American civilization in terms of colonialism and imperialism.

Watsuji also turns his eyes to world history. The Britons seized suzerainty over overseas territories for the first time when they embarked on the colonization of America around the end of the sixteenth century. According to Watsuji, the high spirit of this age, or Britain's audacious zeal for colonization in the early modern period, is best epitomized in the works of two English philosophers who were actively involved both in politics and in scholarly investigations during this time: Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon.

Watsuji's reference to Bacon deserves special attention here. Bacon, argues Watsuji, established a logical connection between "philosophy" and "invention" and laid the philosophical foundation upon which the act of inventing something new is based. In this argument of Watsuji's, he essentially equates human invention with the dominance of people over things. He writes:

Invention means nothing but the act of making it easier to skillfully harness the forces of nature, producing something useful for human beings, thus facilitating people's way of living. Therefore, invention is neither the improvement of men's moral quality nor the process of artistic maturity⁽⁵⁾.

Watsuji's critical negation of Bacon, as suggested here, stems from the fact that Watsuji is heavily indebted for his intellectual nourishment to the German concept of specific 'Kultur' as opposed to the Anglo-American concept of universal 'Civilization.' Throughout this essay, Watsuji

harshly denounces “the national character of the Americans,” by constantly referring to Bacon as a central figure who laid the philosophical groundwork that would later support the rise of imperialism and colonialism.

3.2 The Critique of Watsuji’s Cultural Nationalism and the Genealogy of Anti-culturalism

In the postwar period, people in Japan have paid less attention to this essay of Watsuji’s than it still deserves, at best leveling cursory criticisms against its political overtones of anti-Americanism.

The problematic nature of the essay that has bewildered many readers in postwar Japan would be better explicated through a comparison with other wartime writings of Japanese intellectuals. Some might have associated Watsuji’s essay on Americans with a series of debatably “notorious” discourses on anti-Americanism during the wartime. For example, in the symposium “Overcoming the Modern” (1942) held in the midst of the Pacific War, participants, including a wide range of intellectuals such as philosophers of the Kyōto school (Nishida Kitarō’s disciples) and a literary critic Kobayashi Hideo, took up a theme of Americanism, among other things. They started the second day with a discussion of the then current trend of artistic modernism, which was introduced into Japan together with American films in the early Shōwa era. They then shifted the topic from art to social agenda, scathingly criticizing Americans for adhering to an arrogant belief in the omnipotence of their materialistic and mechanical civilization.

The participants in the 1942 symposium have been mostly accused of making unfair, biased observations about colonialism and imperialism: they were eager to denounce Anglo-American colonialism and imperial-

ism as wicked, whereas they completely closed their eyes to the atrocities of the Japanese counterparts. In the postwar period, the Japanese public has consistently regarded critiques of this kind either as pernicious demagogues of anti-Americanism, or as intellectuals' collaboration with the Japanese fascist regime; postwar Japan has always blamed this symposium in connection with the war-guilt of Japanese intellectuals. Likewise, people have interpreted Watsuji's essay exclusively along the line of intellectuals' complicity with the war regime of Japan.

In the prevailing mood of such accusations, leftist scholars and critics have consistently provided leadership in the critique of Watsuji's cultural nationalism at large, and of "The National Characters of the Americans" in particular. As mentioned earlier, this trend has been taken over by the proponents of postcolonial and cultural studies perspectives. A prolonged period of accusation has forced scholars other than leftists to hesitate even to mention this essay, let alone to appreciate it. In short, remarks about this essay have consisted of nothing but negative criticism.

3.3 Sakai's Recent Critique of Watsuji

The newest version of leftist critique is "Subject and/or Shutai and the Inscription of Cultural Difference" (1994) by Naoki Sakai.⁽⁶⁾ In this provocative article, Sakai hurls harsh criticism at Watsuji's works concerning the comparative studies of culture, such as *Climate and Culture* and "The National Character of the Americans." Its harshness particularly stands out among recent critical observations of Watsuji's work. First, as a theoretical presupposition, Sakai draws a distinction between *shukan* and *shutai* in Japanese. In Sakai's theory of culture, "shukan" refers to epistemological subjectivity delineated by Immanuel Kant. Sakai further argues that, if the concept of 'shukan' is introduced into the field of the

comparative studies of culture, it unavoidably gives birth to the prejudices of Orientalism by authenticating the cultural differences between those who observe (the West) and those who are observed (the East). Second, with a lofty goal of overcoming such a quandary in the studies of culture, Sakai presents a new concept of “shutai,” which is juxtaposed with “shukan.” According to Sakai, “shutai” is categorized not as epistemology but rather as a kind of *practices*, although Sakai never gives any specific account of how this concept of “shutai” really materializes in the actual field of cultural practices. Another alleged feature of “shutai” is that it is able to *deconstruct* the dichotomy between the observer and the observed, which, as mentioned earlier, is an inescapable pitfall of Orientalist thinking. Based upon his *shukan* vs. *shutai* theory, Sakai critically analyzes Watsuji’s works of cultural typology, accusingly concluding that Watsuji’s comparative descriptions of the diverse national characteristics around the world are constructed upon the notion of “shukan,” and therefore cannot escape from the biases of racism. As is easily guessed even from this short summary, the intellectual position Sakai ardently holds is that of postcolonialism and cultural studies, which came onto the scene of the Japanese academy in the 1990s, after the vogue of postmodernism.

It is extremely difficult to make a direct frontal critique of Sakai’s extraordinarily elaborate argument, but what I would like to suggest, at least in this beginning stage of my argument, is that Watsuji’s analysis of the national character of Americans is not necessarily as prejudiced as Sakai is eager to declare. Not that I intend to propose a reactionary claim of historical revisionism here. I must humbly admit that, given the international position of wartime Japan, Watsuji’s claim of anti-Anglo-Americanism covers only one side of the matter. Clearly, Watsuji closed his eyes to the fact that, while claiming the pretext of liberating Asian

countries from the domination of the West, Japan was also committed to the dreadful crime of colonialism and imperialism throughout Asia during the time of the series of wars between the invasion of Manchuria (1930) and the end of World War II (1945). I also claim, however, that, if such complexities of Japan's wartime position are set aside for the moment, Watsuji's portrayal of Americans still has some degree of validity. We do not necessarily have to negate Watsuji's view in the hasty and derogatory language as leftist scholars of culture, typified by Sakai, are desperately trying to do.

3.4 The Critique of Bacon in *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment*

As a first step in my argument, I point out that Watsuji's view of Americans is neither a bizarre isolated phenomenon nor a mere product of intolerant cultural nationalism of wartime Japan; in fact other authors negatively observe modern American civilization by interpreting Bacon as an ideologue of human dominance over nature. For example, around the same period as Watsuji wrote this essay, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who were exiled from their native country, Germany, singled out Bacon for criticism in the land of California, where the prosperity of material civilization was at its zenith during that time. These two German philosophers, who inherited the grandeur of the European intellectual tradition, didn't even attempt to conceal a strong sense of disgust with the material civilization that emerged with the development of machine technology in America. The beginning of *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (1945), written together by the two, is widely known. They write:

Despite his lack of mathematics, Bacon's view was appropriate to

the scientific attitude that prevailed after him. The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstitions, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers.... Power and knowledge are synonymous.... Not "satisfaction," which men call truth," but "operation," "to do the business," is the "right mark": for ... what is the true end, scope, or office of knowledge, which I have set down to consist not in any plausible, delectable, reverend or admired discourse, or any satisfactory arguments, but in effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before, for the better endowment and help of man's life.⁽⁷⁾

The following citations are from Watsuji's text:

...America is now standing on the edge of a machine civilization. Although mechanical power is enormous, it neither helps the Americans improve their morality nor refines their artistic sense. It only makes people's living much easier, and pleasure of life far more exciting.⁽⁸⁾

In a machine-dominated world, everything is quantified. The spirit of the humans does not control a machine, but conversely is subordinate to a machine that far surpasses the human spirit in terms of quantity. Thus, everything is articulated by number, which is regarded as the most civilized language. Such numerical articulations are said to be the soul of the Americans. This is an extreme case of the development of Baconian spirit in America.⁽⁹⁾

Here, the Anglo-Saxon concept of civilization as distinctively opposed to culture raises its head. In the Anglo-Saxon context, "civilization"

has always implied the materialistic aspects of civilization, the development of which does not necessarily mean the advancement of culture. Therefore, civilization is a useful thing, but it does not deserve respect for being so. That is why Bacon acknowledged the power of scholarship in its usefulness and practicality. This idea satisfied the Britons very much. Henceforth, their respect for scholarly attainments in terms of usefulness became a distinct characteristic of the Anglo-Americans.⁽¹⁰⁾

As these quotations clearly suggest, the distance between Adorno-Horkheimer and Watsuji is not so great, in that both regard Bacon as a thinker who legitimized the dominance of machine over nature. Although the authors of *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment* do not directly relate Bacon to America, at least in this passage, their abhorrence for the frivolousness of the fevered materialistic civilization in America is widely acknowledged. At first sight, it seems strange that the two prominent leaders of Marxist critical theory—which has had an enormous influence over the American cultural Left, including postcolonialism and cultural studies since the 1970s—share the critique of a materialistic civilization in America with a Japanese conservative philosopher whom leftist scholars and critics have persistently accused of being an advocate of cultural nationalism and the Japanese emperor system. What significance does this seemingly bizarre coincidence actually have for the studies of modern Japanese intellectual history and the comparative studies of culture?

3.5 Recent Postcolonialist Critique of Bacon

Another reference to a recent critical analysis of Bacon also point out the bizarreness of this coincidence. Charles Whitney, a literary critic and

vigorous proponent of postcolonialism, traces the origin of modern colonialism back to the episteme of seventeenth-century Europe, the very epitome of which was eloquently articulated in Bacon's works such as *New Atlantis*. Whitney writes:

On the whole, the *New Atlantis* offers a vision of science linked inseparably to external and even internal colonialism. The implication of the *New Atlantis* is that European colonialism in the form of explicitly racist exploitation abroad and disciplinary technologies at home is a reality that finds an ideological counterpart in Bacon's far-sighted and influential vision of scientific freedom and power.⁽¹¹⁾

Ironically enough, here again, a leftist critique of Bacon shows an unforeseen correspondence with Watsuji's anti-Anglo-Saxonism. Although these two critics of culture have intellectual backgrounds that are antagonistic to each other, they both unanimously see Bacon as an ideologue of colonialism. To reiterate my interrogative proposition, *What does this seemingly bizarre correspondence really stand for?* What can be suggested, at least in this stage of my argument, is that Watsuji's critical analysis of Bacon in terms of modern colonialism and imperialism has some measure of persuasiveness despite the storm of criticism it has received thus far. In other words, the more intensely Sakai devotes himself to denouncing Watsuji's cultural typology as sheer "prejudice," or as "Orientalist-thinking," the more evident it becomes that Sakai's harsh criticism is prejudiced in its own way.

3.6 Lafleur's Defense of Watsuji

If we want to explore this problem of adjudicating the conflicting interpretations of Watsuji's text further, we cannot overlook the opposite end of the spectrum. That perspective is well represented by "Reasons for

the Rubble: Watsuji Tetsuro's Position in Japan's Postwar Debate about Rationality" (1988) by William Lafleur, who seems to belong to a group of liberal intellectuals in American academe.⁽¹²⁾

Lafleur claims that Watsuji used a kind of camouflage strategy in "The National Character of the Americans." Watsuji intentionally concealed a message that comprises the following three propositions. First, despite his seeming accusation, Watsuji disguisedly tried to describe a good "rational basis" intrinsic in the Anglo-Saxons. Second, Watsuji thought that such rationality was not monopolized by the Anglo-Saxons, but was shared by the Japanese as well. Third, therefore, the wartime reckless follies of the Japanese were, Watsuji concluded, nothing but a temporary aberration from such proper rationality.

Behind this new, somewhat unusually flexible, interpretation of Watsuji's problematic text are discussions of what is generally called "postmodernism." Broadly defined here for the convenience of readers' understanding, postmodernism is a critique of modern reason and subjectivity, delineated primarily by René Descartes and Kant. Criticizing such modern epistemology, proponents of postmodernism argue that scholars should critically examine the production process of modern knowledge and culture in terms of "politics." On one hand, as typically shown in the works of Michel Foucault, French postmodernists focus on exposing and criticizing the modern status of reason and subjectivity, which they surmise have provided ample breeding grounds for various types of social oppressions and injustices. In the context of my argument, this is exactly the direction Sakai follows. On the other hand, some American philosophers and critics have quite a different view of postmodernism from their French counterparts. For example, Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish affirmatively and rather optimistically interpret postmodernism as a

defense of the whole picture of Western modernity by associating post-modernism with the philosophy of pragmatism. It is this American post-modernism in defense of modernity that Lafleur largely depends upon. If such theoretical reinforcements are brought to Watsuji's text, Watsuji's ostensible accusation of the Anglo-Saxons can, in fact, be reinterpreted as a disguised form of praise for good rationality and modernity, which have been best epitomized in modern history by the Anglo-Saxons. This is the general picture of Lafleur's argument.

4. How Can Sakai be Offset Against Lafleur?

Why do the interpretations of the same single text show such a big difference? I want to propound this question as a second problematization of my argument.

4.1 A Case of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*: Richard Rorty's Suggestion

There is another example of conflicting readings in the field of modern Japanese cultural and intellectual history, as briefly mentioned earlier. In my previous essay, I analyzed the differences in the two readings of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, by Ruth Benedict, offered by Douglas Lummis and Clifford Geertz.⁽¹³⁾ Lummis reads *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as political propaganda that implicitly promotes racism.⁽¹⁴⁾ Contrary to this somewhat strident interpretation, Geertz interprets *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as embodying an idea of "deconstructing" the West and urging Americans to reflect upon their self-image, which has become too familiar and self-evident for them to face afresh.⁽¹⁵⁾ In

the background of Lummis' reading clearly lies an ideological disposition toward denouncement and contestation among American academic Leftists, especially since the 1960s. Geertz's interpretation undoubtedly resonates with the middle-of-the-road ideals of American liberals throughout the twentieth century.

This essay of mine reached a tentative conclusion in favor of the liberals by invoking Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1998), which is a harsh critique of the American cultural Left.⁽¹⁶⁾

One of the features of Rorty's analysis is that it critically traces back the historical development of the leftism in twentieth-century America. In the first half of the century, the "reformist left" energetically flourished in close association with diverse social movements such as trade and labor unions. In the 1960s, the Vietnam War triggered a drastic change in American leftism, giving birth to the New Left that abandoned a moderate line of reformist left in favor of a more radical idea of communism. After the New left rapidly ebbed away in the 1970s, the cultural Left made a fleeting appearance. However, the cultural Left eventually secluded themselves from society into the ivory towers of the humanities departments, abandoning their initial aspirations toward social reform. Rorty sees one of the most serious defects of the cultural Left in the fact that their excessive interests in theory have forced them to lose their first and foremost attitude favoring greater participation in actually promoting social reform. This is the outline Rorty historically describes of a relationship between leftism and intellectuals in the latter half of twentieth-century America.

Although Rorty criticizes the cultural Left in such acrimonious language, he also prescribes a convincing, albeit simple, idea as a remedial move. That idea is a temporary suspension of theoretical overindulgence

disengaged from social reality, then a return to the original ideals of American leftism. Rorty gives prominence to the fact that the early reformist left embraced not only those who had a radical faith in revolutionary communism and socialism but also a wide-range of people who worked together toward achieving a grandiose ideal of social equalities and justices within the existing social framework. Rorty by no means, however, suggests that theory has lost its meaning. As for the theoretical aspect of social reformism, Rorty attaches great importance to the practicality of pragmatic liberalism rather than the philosophical sophistication of French-born postmodernism.

Returning to the two conflicting interpretations of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by way of Rorty's panoramic look at American Leftism in the twentieth century, the preeminence of the liberals over the cultural Left is easily discernible. Lummis' interpretation of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as a disguised form of racism represents a tendency of American Leftism since the 1960s toward a critical and theoretical analysis of culture. Meanwhile, Geertz's reading of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as an encouragement for reciprocal understanding among different cultures and ethnic groups is firmly based upon his philosophy of liberalism. Given Rorty's analysis, it reasonably follows that a promising means of revitalizing discussions of culture in the contemporary world can be found in the ideals and methodologies the liberals have nourished thus far. This was the tentative conclusion of my previous essay.

The next question to be asked is how this specifically historical observation and future-oriented analysis of Rorty's can be accommodated to the problematic standoff, concerning Watsuji's essay, between Lafleur and Sakai; how these two distinct interpretations can be reconciled, or at

least brought closer to each other. Like the case of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, will a high mark be given to the liberal interpretation? A rash conclusion would be yes. Before jumping at such a conclusion hastily, however, it should be noted that a mountain of problems remains unsolved: Lafleur leaves his argument half-finished, whereas Sakai provides some worthwhile ideas. For reasons of space, a detailed examination of these problems must be set aside for another occasion. The rest of this paper is intended as a preliminary consideration, wherein two common frameworks underlying this seeming antagonism will be outlined from a broader perspective: the *political* nature of postmodernism, and its relevance to *multiculturalism*.

4.2 Two Intellectual Parties' Political Rivalry over the Culture War and Multiculturalism

Postmodernism is by no means a monolithic entity, and its multiplicity is deeply related to the Janus-faced nature of "text." Postmodernism powerfully claims that a text itself ultimately is open to a wide range of interpretations, and therefore each reader is totally responsible for how he or she reads it. This is one of the key ideas propounded by postmodernism. Meanwhile, postmodernism also proposes that textual interpretations can never escape from a tangled web of "political relationship" or "social restraint" that externally surround the texts, all things considered. In other words, the processes by which a text is first discursively produced and then interpreted repeatedly are constantly in "political" battle, and thus the conflicting readings of that text in question specifically reflect the differences of political stance among those who read it. After oscillating between these two seemingly contradictory sets of propositions, proponents of postcolonialism and cultural studies, both of which

are loosely categorized as the latest variants of postmodernist criticism, have drastically shifted the focus of the whole argument in their own way from the first, apolitical proposition to the second, highly politicized one.

This claim of 'textual politics' surfaced in the form of an antagonism between the cultural Left and the liberals in the United States, which even went so far as to be called the "culture war" in the 1980s. Behind heated discussions of the culture war or multiculturalism in contemporary America lies the fundamental reality that America is a multi-cultural and multi-racial society, and the ethnic and racial turmoil have been the bane of the nation ever since its establishment. Americans have continuously made serious efforts to find some way out of this predicament. Whether belonging to the cultural Left or to the liberals, American intellectuals, if conscientious at all, are critically aware of the connection between their specialized scholarship and a broader spectrum of society in general, and they never hesitate to get involved in actual social problems and advocate solutions based upon their various academic viewpoints.

Both parties, intentionally or unintentionally, have so far failed to make reference to each other. The conspicuous absence of reciprocal negotiations seems to have caused unnecessary confusion among those who read their criticisms, consequently making it extremely difficult for readers to break the entanglement with the hostile standoff in question. As far as the scholars of the cultural Left are concerned, they do nothing but adhere to their own claims in a factional manner, thus neglecting to pay attention to opposing opinions. Especially in recent years, they seem to have been inextricably entangled in the ordeal of criticism, eventually failing to propose anything positive and constructive for the future of cul-

ture, or to provide any encouraging images of culture for the future. In short, they have fallen into a dilemma of an approach of “criticism for the sake of criticism.” Those who insist on opening up the politically constructed enclosure of culture from within the political territories of modern nation-states towards the open space of sociality in fact are most likely to hold on to sectarianism. Inconsistencies of this kind are exasperating. This is all the more reason to re-examine, from a broader framework of *multiculturalism*, some knotty problems caused by the antagonism between the cultural Left and the liberals.

4. 3 Japanese Studies as a Proxy War of American Multiculturalism

Now, let us shift the focus of the argument from American multiculturalism to Japanese studies in the United States.

The claim of ‘textual politics,’ as mentioned above, appears particularly applicable to the problematic aspects concerning the two conflicting readings of Watsuji’s text. The intrinsic nature of this standoff can be explicated more persuasively, if we adopt a view that the quandary concerning Watsuji’s text exactly reflects the “political” antagonism or conflict over the nature of “culture.” In other words, the discrepancy between Sakai and Lafleur accurately coincides with the opposition between the cultural Left and the liberals in the intellectual arena of contemporary America. Sakai, who pioneered the new trend in Japanese studies in the United States by adopting a new methodology of cultural studies and postcolonialism, evidently belongs to a group of the cultural Leftist scholars. On the contrary, Lafleur, who does not necessarily make clear his own intellectual stance and political creed, might be categorized loosely as a scholar affiliated with the liberals, given the fact that his

argument is heavily indebted to Rorty's pragmatic philosophy. Sakai and Lafleur, representing the two distinct intellectual parties of the cultural Left and the liberals, respectively, are in fact each using the field of modern Japanese intellectual history for their own advantage.

In sum, the discrete interpretations of Watsuji's "The National Character of the Americans" have become a proxy for the culture war carried on by the American critics of culture. As in the case of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the two conflicting readings of Watsuji's essay can be interpreted broadly as remedial prescriptions for the culture war or the reaction to multiculturalism. Each of the two American Japanologists' observations on Watsuji can be read as a response of their own to the social agenda in the United States rather than the Japanese studies proper. In the long run, the validity of their interpretations should be examined at full length in line with Watsuji's texts and thoughts. More important here, however, is to be fully aware of the fact that the disparity in these two interpretations is an unfortunate by-product of the culture war in the contemporary United States.

Geertz, Lummis, Lafleur, and Sakai—all these students of culture, who I believe are equally sincere in their academic creeds—actually represent a good portion of the American intellectual tradition, wherein even a highly specialized scholarly work never breaks a bond with society. The sincerity of American scholars' commitment to society is quite impressive.

Nonetheless, it appears that, despite their initial success in raising new types of questions, both Sakai and Lafleur have ended up in a theoretical collapse, due to their excessive dependence upon theory or precedence of theory over reality. Deplorably, the two political parties of U.S. academics have constructed their own arguments without paying enough

attention to opposing opinions. As a result, the discrepancy between Sakai and Lafleur still remains irreconcilable. Just as the culture war in North America has become aggravated, its proxy battle on Japanese soil seems far from being over. The problems of American multiculturalism and its aftermath into Japanese studies in both the United States and Japan will be examined minutely in another paper.

5. Concluding Remarks: Multiculturalism and Japan

On the Japanese side, some people still might wonder about the connection between the North American agenda of multiculturalism and the specific context of modern Japanese intellectual history; why has the culture war in a land beyond the Pacific spread all the way to the other side? Others might dubiously say that a violent disturbance such as a war is nothing but a major annoyance to Japan, where, in sharp contrast to the United States, the homogeneity and tranquility of society generally has been held in high esteem as the most important virtues. In this vein, a discussion of multiculturalism does not come across well to Japanese audiences, who seemingly are unaware of the “conflictive” nature of multiculturalism.

Such an attitude, however, seems naïve and thoughtless. Japan allegedly has never experienced, throughout its history, the agonies of multi-racial, multi-cultural environments like the great melting pot of races in the United States. Still, after the Meiji era, Japan has consistently incurred internal ethnic-minority problems such as the displaced Koreans with permanent residence in Japan or the people of Ainos and Ryūkyūans in the peripheral islands of Hokkaido and Okinawa. Thanks

to the strenuous efforts of scholars and activists, primarily belonging to the Left, such historical conditions of race and ethnicity in modern Japan, which had received very little recognition for a long time, have rapidly come into people's view in recent years. The importance of intercultural negotiations over race and ethnicity within the Japanese territory has thus come to be widely acknowledged. Furthermore, the internationalization or globalization of culture, whether one likes it or not, has become a real and imminent problem around the world. People on the Japanese side, especially scholars of Japanese culture, no longer can avoid facing up to myriad cross-cultural interactions taking place in Japan as well as worldwide, although they might have been long accustomed to confining Japanese concerns mostly within the boundaries of the modern Japanese nation. No one will object to the idea that diverse kinds of problems concerning multiculturalism have assumed more and more importance everywhere.

The increasing tendency of contemporary Japanese society toward multiculturalism provides ample room for non-Japanese scholars to get involved critically in the discussion. Some people might continue to hold a groundless assumption that foreign scholars are lagging several steps behind their Japanese counterparts in terms of insight into the cultural idiosyncrasies of Japan or the dauntingly esoteric nature of Japanese culture and language, both of which have long been supposed to fend foreigners off uncompromisingly. Such an assumption should be temporarily discarded here. Although their arguments leave much to be desired, the American scholars of Japanese studies have succeeded in at least shedding a new light on a group of almost forgotten, musty texts such as Watsuji's "The National Character of the Americans" and Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which most contemporary Japanese

readers have rather thoughtlessly regarded as simply outdated and stale for a long time. Moreover, Americans' remarkably new interpretations were firmly based upon their hopes and aspirations for multicultural society. Such a strong orientation toward sociality conspicuously features some current trends in Japanese studies in the United States and elsewhere in the West. The extent to which American scholars and critics of culture are committed to solving their social problems through their scholarly approaches must strike a responsive chord with Japanese counterparts.

It cannot be overemphasized that scholars on the Japanese side should pay more careful attention to the distinctly social aspect of American scholarship. Unless Japanese scholars become more closely associated with actual social environments, they surely will fail to tackle, let alone overcome, the predicaments latent in their own scholarship, and consequently they will lag far behind their American counterparts in terms of their scholarly contribution to society in general. In this sense, I firmly believe that scholars of Japanese culture on the Japanese side can still learn something important from the insights of their opposite numbers in the United States.

Endnotes

- (1) As for "abhorrence of culture," see Kazuhisa Yoshida, "Two Readings of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in the Contemporary Perspective of the Comparative Studies of Culture," in *Studies in Humanities & Social Sciences*, Nihon University, no. 72, 2007.
- (2) Masayuki Shimizu, "Watsuji Rinrigaku to Nippon no kaishaku (Watsuji's Ethics and His Interpretation of Japan)," in Sato et al., ed., *Yomigaeru Watsuji Tetsurō (Reviving Watsuji Tetsurō)* (Kyōto: Nakanishi-ya-shuppan, 1999), p. 159.

- (3) Sato, *ibid.*, pp. 159–160.
- (4) Watsuji Tetsurō, “America no kokuminsei (The National Character of the Americans),” in *Watsuji Tetsurō zenshū* (*The Complete Works of Watsuji Tetsurō*), Vol. 17 (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1963).
- (5) Watsuji, *ibid.*, p. 458.
- (6) Naoki Sakai, “Subject and/or Shutai and the Inscription of Cultural Difference,” in *Translation & Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- (7) Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1969), p. 4.
- (8) Watsuji, *op.cit.*, p. 477.
- (9) Watsuji, *ibid.*, p. 478.
- (10) Watsuji, *ibid.*, p. 458.
- (11) Charles C. Whitney, “Merchants of Light: Science as Colonization in the *New Atlantis*,” in *Francis Bacon’s Legacy of Texts*, ed. by W. A. Sessions (New York: AMS Press, 1990), p. 257.
- (12) William Lafleur, “Reason for the Rubble: Watsuji Tetsuro’s Position in Japan’s Postwar Debate about Rationality,” in *Philosophy east and west*. 51. 1. (January 2001) (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 17.
- (13) Yoshida, *op.cit.*
- (14) Douglas Lummis, *A New Look at The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Tokyo: Shōhaku-sha, 1982).
- (15) Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologists as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- (16) Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).