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Towards the (Im)possibility of Knowing


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The author might object to my choice of book to review. Since the publication of his first book, *Takeuchi Yoshimi: Displacing the West* (2004), which was followed by his translation of Takeuchi’s critical essays, *What is Modernity: Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi* (2005), Richard Calichman has maintained his devotion to the critiquing and translating of Japanese thought and literature. He has translated critical essays by Japanese intellectuals such as Karatani Kōjin and Ukai Satoshi, a record of the wartime “Kindai no Chōkoku” [“Overcoming Modernity”] symposium, and essays and a novel of Abe Kōbō. Besides, he has edited a collection of essays on the work of Sakai Naoki and published a monograph on the work of Abe. Given the continual development and change of a theme in Calichman’s theoretical thinking, it might be more appropriate to take up his latest monograph, *Beyond Nation: Time, Writing, and Community in the Work of Abe Kōbō* (2016). Nevertheless, I would like to choose his first work because I believe it demonstrates his aspiration to question the grounds of knowledge itself most clearly. Calichman attempts this task through close analysis of the essays of Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977), one of the most influential thinkers and critics in post-war Japanese intellectual history.

Calichman’s approach in this book is very imaginative in that he focuses on the philosophical dimension of Takeuchi’s works rather than the political dimension on which most previous studies cast a spotlight. His intention is to clarify the state of the unsettlement of the
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major concepts of theory, experience, feeling, and alterity in Takeuchi’s essays—to name but a few—that is historically linked with the West (xii-xiii). Such radical investigation of concepts reminds me of Barbara Johnson’s definition of “critique.” Johnson, in the introduction to her English translation of Jacques Derrida’s La Dissémination, defines “a critique of any theoretical system” as “an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system’s possibility” (xv). Calichman’s analysis can be said to be a “critique” in that it patiently examines the power of each attractive concept that is embedded within Takeuchi’s essays, without jumping to some simple conclusion.

Displacing the West consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 examines Takeuchi’s notion of literature by focusing mainly on the relationship between transcendence and immanence. Calichman interprets Takeuchi’s critique of the literary establishment (bundan) not as a challenge to authority but as an attempt to question the binary opposition between a transcendent idea of literature and concrete literary works. While the literary establishment emphasizes the supremacy of the transcendent, its unity is forced to be unsettled by the process of its translation into the concrete. Conceiving literature in terms of worldliness and immediacy, Takeuchi envisions a community in which writers and readers face each other without any mediation. While evaluating Takeuchi’s radical rethinking of these literary concepts, Calichman criticizes “an immanent view of literature” inherent in his argument of national literature (kokumin bungaku) and attempts to overcome Takeuchi’s limits by indicating the fundamental impossibility of integrated community.

The concept of translation plays a crucial role in Chapter 2. In this chapter, the relationship between experience and knowledge is at issue. According to Calichman, Takeuchi shows that the translation from the former into the latter is destined to suffer from disturbance because experience marks the body “in the ways that consciousness is
unable to fully take into account” (89). This recognition enables Takeuchi to problematize the formation of a subject. Unlike Hu-shi, a Chinese pragmatist who believes in the possibility of translating the East into the West, he recognizes the inevitable limits of such translation caused by the self’s essential otherness to itself.

Chapter 3 and 4 present a close reading of Takeuchi’s prominent essay, “Kindai to wa nanika: Nihon to Chūgoku no baai” [“What is Modernity? In Cases of Japan and China”]. Clarifying Takeuchi’s endeavors to expose the historical constructedness of the signifiers “West” and “East,” Calichman pays particular attention to a sentence in this essay: “Japan is nothing.” He understands it not as the expression of Takeuchi’s despair at his country but as his idea that all subjectivities are empty. This notion must be distinguished from the philosopher Nishitani Keiji’s conception of “shutaiteki mu no tachiba” [“standpoint of subjective nothingness”], which treats the concept of nothingness as a guarantee of Japan’s identity, because Takeuchi’s idea is a complete negation of the possibility of identity. Such a radical problematization of subjectivity is Takeuchi’s way of overcoming Japan’s ultranationalism during the Fifteen-Year War.

Chapter 5 examines Takeuchi’s notion of history. In Calichman’s view, history, which is regarded as a movement of discontinuity in Takeuchi’s essays, disrupts the possibility of objective knowledge and progress, which are essential grounds of modernization. Calichman argues that Takeuchi evaluates Lu Xun not as a proponent of modernization/westernization but as a radical thinker who problematizes the framework of progress and development. As shown in a metaphor of “ways” that Lu often uses, meaning must be produced through the repetition of an act of knowing, and as this repetition inevitably generates difference, it undermines the ground of objective knowledge, rendering progress impossible.

A brief summary of Calichman’s productive and dense
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discussion above might clarify a very important point, made repeatedly in this book: the impossibility of both objective knowledge and a formation of subject. He attempts to elucidate how Takeuchi’s texts resist “the transferential relation between subject and object” (5) in which the former establishes its subjectivity through the appropriation of the latter as the object of knowledge (this reading of Takeuchi might reflect Calichman’s own antipathy towards the institution of Asian Studies in the United States). He opens Takeuchi’s texts to the upmost limit to reconsider fundamental questions of what knowledge and subjectivity are. His subtle analysis describes vividly both Takeuchi’s possibilities and limits as a thinker, distancing us from an oversimplified understanding of him as a mere Asianist or nationalist. Acknowledging this book’s unique achievements in comprehending Takeuchi’s complexity and ambiguity as a thinker, I will conclude this review by pointing out some unclarified issues in this book for further discussion.

First, the relationship between Calichman’s argument and previous studies on Takeuchi seems to remain unclear. There are many important previous studies not referred to in this book. Especially, Mizoguchi Yūzo’s criticism of Takeuchi might be of great importance in a context of Calichman’s discussion. Mizoguchi, a scholar of Chinese thought, points out that Takeuchi problematically ignores the fact that China took its own way of modernization completely differently from that of Europe and Japan, by consistently relaying on a schema of the advanced (Europe) and the backward (Asia). While Calichman’s understanding of Takeuchi as someone who reconsiders the structure of knowledge is partly valid, it cannot be denied that Takeuchi fatally fails to put into question his limited view of China in a way. Therefore, there remains a question about the relationship between anti-essentialism and a biased view of that country in Takeuchi. If this book devoted more pages to respond to criticisms
towards Takeuchi such as Mizoguchi’s, a richer accomplishment of Calichman’s imaginative interpretation would become clear.

The second point concerns Calichman’s attitude towards historical context. In his review of this book, Sebastian Conrad properly points out that “The sociocultural context and the political concerns that are clearly present in Takeuchi’s writings, . . . in Calichman’s treatment recede to the background” (271), and it is true that a historical background against which Takeuchi’s essays are written is not sufficiently elaborated in this book. This problem comes to the surface when Calichman refers to the Allied Occupation in postwar Japan as a cause of a primordialistic dimension in Takeuchi. While his analysis of anti-essentialistic elements in Takeuchi’s thought is careful and minute, he interprets Takeuchi’s persistence in the nation as a reaction to the Occupation without fully examining this context. It is regrettable because an analytical framework of this book, which involves the investigation of a concept of history, can potentially reexamine in a profound way the relationship between text and historical context. Takeuchi’s ambiguous attitudes towards the nation, as Calichman astutely exposes them, can be further analyzed, together with attitudes of other writers such as Ōoka Shōhei, to enable a clearer understanding of the Occupation.

Nevertheless, this book is still a crucial starting point for people who attempt to analyze Takeuchi’s essays from a sociopolitical or historical viewpoint. We must face a multiplication of questions initiated by Calichman squarely in order to eschew the interpretation of Takeuchi in which we project our own belief or desire upon him. This book, as a beginning of Calichman’s philosophical and conceptual investigation of literature, deserves to be called a radical critique in that it so conscientiously attempts to think with Takeuchi.
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Works Cited