
*The making of “Japanese philosophy”:
Nishi Amane, Nakae Chōmin and Nishida Kitarō*

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Prologue

This paper attempts to examine how “philosophy” is being philosophized in Japan and how “Japanese philosophy” is made accordingly, with a focus on three Japanese thinkers, namely, Nishi Amane (1829–1897), Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901), and Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). By translating the Greek origin term, “philosophy,” with two ideographs, 哲学 *tetsugaku*, it indeed does not confine to an “assimilation” of “Western” philosophy, but also entails a “dissimilation” in line with other intellectual traditions, Confucianism for instance. In 1901, however, regardless of Nishi’s innovative terminology, *tetsugaku*, Nakae Chōmin asserted that there is no such thing as “philosophy” in Japan, that which the scholarships of Confucianism and Buddhism in Edo period, and Western philosophy in early Meiji were merely repetitions of the ancient traditions and Western learning respectively. They somewhat did not carry a kind of “originality.” Not until the praise of “Nishida Philosophy” given by Sōda Kiichirō in 1927 to Nishida Kitarō’s idea of *basho* 場所, which claimed that it has entered an “original realm,”¹ Chomin’s criticism seems to be valid. Our concerns are, why and how Nishida would come up his own “unique” or “original” philosophy fifty years after Nishi’s introduction of philosophy to Japan?

1. This is a translation of “独自の境地” [*dokuji no kyōchi*] given by Yusa Michiko. See her work, *Zen and philosophy: an intellectual biography of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 205.

Should the logic of *basho* be considered as the birth of “Japanese philosophy”? What does it exactly mean for the term “Japanese philosophy”? How “Japanese philosophy” is established and what potentialities and problematic does it carry, especially in line with the above three thinkers? Alongside the study of the problematic term, the contribution to “philosophy” from “Japan” demonstrates clearly why “Japanese philosophy” should not be overlooked, and hence, it does deserve enjoying the same status of Western philosophy, Indian philosophy and Chinese philosophy for instance uphold. In so saying, the making of “Japanese philosophy” as an “academic discipline” may be one of the most proactive ways among others. Without upholding a “proper” position in the academia and beyond, it is hard for making more people get acquaintance with or interested in “Japanese philosophy,” especially those young researchers who would like to dedicate themselves to the respective field or “discipline.” It is, therefore, a timely and urgent agenda.

Philosophizing “philosophy” through importation: Nishi Amane

Speaking of establishing “Japanese philosophy” as an academic discipline, it is without doubt that we should explore what and how the term refers to, which indeed remains in dispute. In the first issue of the groundbreaking journal, 『日本の哲学』 [*Japanese philosophy*], the first and the only academic journal specified to Japanese philosophy at this point, Ueda Shizuteru points out,

There are at least two aspects that “Japanese philosophy” can contribute to the foundation of “philosophy of the world [*sekai no tetsugaku*].” In a place like Japan, the world understanding [*sekai rikai*] and self understanding [*jiko rikai*] through Japanese language has been undergoing, which are not only come from Japan, but also from various traditions, including India, Central Asia, China, Korean Peninsula and so on, which have deposited a soil and constituted a huge non-Western tradition. They can be considered as a meaningful inspiring root for the formation of “world philosophy.” Furthermore, in a place like Japan, the large-scale encounter and confrontation between non-

Western tradition and the culture and products of civilization has accumulated more than a century of experience of interchange....It can be a way of world-scale counter culture in line with the trans-systematization of the world.²

It seems no surprising that Ueda’s framing of “Japanese philosophy” sounds like Nishida’s notion of “worldly world” [*sekaiteki seka*], which conveys that Japan as one of the “worlds” of the “worldly world” may have her contribution on the one hand, and the “worldly world” does also have its impact on Japan on the other. In terms of “philosophy,” Ueda reminds us that there is a kind of “non-Western” tradition which undergoes its encounter with the “Western” tradition in “Japan” through Japanese language. Nevertheless, although we may agree that there is “distinctiveness” of Japanese language, the non-Western and Western interchange may not be confined to a place like Japan by using Japanese language, as it may induce the problem of “descriptive contradiction” [*seiyō mujun*] that Hashimoto Mineo argued, who emphasized that Japanese as an adjective signifies particularity, where as philosophy stresses universality.³ Fujita Masakatsu suggests, however, that “the study of universal principle does not refer to the freedom of philosophy, since it is restricted by the language that being used.”⁴ Accordingly, does it mean that “Japanese philosophy” is a study of universal principle which must be relied on Japanese language? Or, does it mean that Japanese language is the prerequisite or even an indispensable component of “Japanese philosophy”?

It is without doubt that nobody can avoid using a language or languages while doing philosophy. It does not mean that Chinese philosophy, for instance, is confined to an activity of philosophizing

2. Ueda Shizuteru, “Japanese philosophy” 「日本の哲学」 in *Japanese philosophy* 『日本の哲学』, vol. 1 (2000/11), 4.
3. See Hashimoto Mineo, “The principle supporting metaphysics” 「形而上学を支える原理」 in *Iwanami Lecture on Philosophy—Japanese philosophy* 『岩波講座哲学——日本の哲学』, vol. 18. Furuda Hikaru and Ikimatsu Keizō, eds. (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1969), 53.
4. Fujita Masakatsu, “Japanese philosophy?” 「日本の哲学？」 in *The axial of knowledge: the formation of philosophy and its potentialities in Japan* 『知の座標軸——日本における哲学の形成とその可能性』 (Tokyo: Koyo shobo, 2000), 4.

through Chinese language. Chinese philosophy has in fact become a subject that being studied in languages other than Chinese. It is also the case in “Japanese philosophy.” There is no convincing reason for confining “Japanese philosophy” to an activity of philosophizing with Japanese language.

Another common understanding or definition of “Japanese philosophy” is the emphasis of a place, that is, Japan. That is to say, the activity of philosophizing undertaken in Japan may refer to “Japanese philosophy.” With this token, however, studies on Western philosophy, Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy for instance that widely conducted in Japan may also be considered as “Japanese philosophy,” of which we may have serious reservation. More importantly, it seems unquestionable that “Japanese philosophy” can be and in fact also studied or flourished outside Japan.

What is “Japanese philosophy” then? According to John Maraldo, “Japanese philosophy” can be considered as a “transformation of philosophy by the addition of Japan perspectives, and these perspectives apply to the reading of traditional text and of texts yet to be traditionalized.” The uniqueness of “Japanese philosophy” is embedded in the “trans-lation” of Western philosophy through the transformation and addition of Japanese culture.⁵ Questions are, however, what does it mean by “Japan perspectives,” and how are they added to the texts through “trans-lation” of Western philosophy?

As is well known, Nishi Amane is the one who did the “trans-lation” of “philosophy” to Japan by employing two ideographical characters, *tetsu* 哲 and *gaku* 学, which in fact are assimilated with the teaching of Confucianism. In so doing, however, neither did Nishi take Confucianism as philosophy,⁶ nor did he intend to establish a kind

5. John Maraldo, “Tradition, textuality, and the trans-lation of philosophy,” in *Japan in traditional and postmodern perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine, (New York: State University of New York Press), 239.

6. Fujita Masakatsu argues that the Confucian flavor embedded in the Japanese term, *tetsugaku*, does not mean that it is framed without disparities with Confucianism, but rather the opposite. In the case of Nishi Amane, the criterion of truth that philosophy strives for is not derived from what the ancestors said, like Confucius and Mencius of Confucianism. It is the “positive knowledge 実理” that based on the indisputable ground and lucid reasoning deserves the name of truth. See “Reception of ‘philosophy’ in

of “Japanese philosophy” by confining it with “Japanese language,” including the use of Japanese kanji. Nishi emphasized that philosophy is “the science of sciences,” which does not merely strive for “objective contemplation,” but also incorporates “subjective contemplation.”⁷ Hence, Nishi’s “trans-lation” of “philosophy” does not signify “an addition of Japan perspective,” but only refers to the place, Japan, where the activity of philosophizing through “trans-lation” is undertaking. In other words, although “Japanese philosophy,” in the case of Nishi Amane, may embrace some “different” understanding of “philosophy” that “Western” philosophy conveys, the Confucian flavor for instance, Nishi’s “importation” of “philosophy” does not demonstrate any addition of “Japan perspectives,” since it is hard to find out its respective “reference” or “essence.”

Philosophizing “philosophy” through irritation: Nakae Chōmin

Saying that the phrase “Japan perspective” is questionable, we may now come to understand why Nakae Chōmin proclaimed that there is no such thing as philosophy in Japan in 1910. For Chōmin, even though Nishi had provided an innovative “trans-lation” of philosophy as *tetsu-gaku* in 1874, “philosophy” has been absent in Japan. As John Maraldo points out, Chōmin’s criticism is threefold.

First, his lambasting of the antiquated efforts of “Native Studies,” Neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism is expressed in a traditional and now archaic style. Secondly, Chōmin is considered much less a philosopher than the Katō [Hiroyuki] and Inoue [Tetsujirō] he denigrates. And, thirdly, the importation of philosophy in his day was

Japan” 「日本における『哲学』の受容」 in *Iwanami lecture: philosophy* 『岩波講座 哲学 14』, vol. 14 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2009), 261–266.

7. Here is the analysis given by John Maraldo on Nishi Amane’s understanding of “philosophy”. See his manuscript, “Beginnings, definitions, disputations: overview [of modern academic philosophy in Japan],” in *Sourcebook in Japanese philosophy eds. James Heisig, Thomas Kasulis and John Maraldo* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 533–537, forthcoming.

indeed related to commercial exchange.⁸

It is without doubt that the critique of Chōmin may not be perceived as something diachronic. Its meaning indeed might be confined by its respective time and space, that is, the early twenty century of Japan. By 1910, it is not surprising for Chōmin to say that “philosophy” is absent in Japan, especially for the term itself and its connotation that were settled as “*tetsugaku*” not more than a half century.⁹ It remains debatable, however, that whether “Native Studies,” including pre-Meiji the traditional currents of Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism, and the discourses posited by Katō Hiroyuki and Inoue Tetsujirō in Chōmin’s day could or even should be considered as “philosophy.” Nevertheless, it seems that what Chōmin intended to point out is, “philosophy” should entail “originality.” It should not remain as “a matter of importing doctrines as they are” and to be converged with religious belief.¹⁰

Emphasizing “originality” for “philosophy,” not only does it refer to the past and contemporary intellectual currents of Chōmin, but also relates to the understanding of “Japanese philosophy” that John Maraldo elucidates, that is, the “transformation of philosophy by the addition of Japan perspective.” As repeatedly said, even though we may not be able to grab the “essence” of “Japan perspective,” Chōmin somewhat reminds us that “philosophy” is an activity of philosophizing that looks for “originality.” Even without embracing a kind of “Japan perspective” or in other words, “Japanness,” the activity of philosophizing in Japan without exception should not be remained as an importation through imitation of “Western” philosophy and a repetition of traditional intellectual currents of Japan. That is to say, the “originality” of philosophy may refer to a kind of “uniqueness” that the activity of philosophizing aims at. And such activity can in fact be undergone

8. John Maraldo, “Beginnings, definitions, disputations: overview [of modern academic philosophy in Japan],” 542, forthcoming.

9. According to Fujita Masakatsu, the word philosophy, philosophia, filosofie, were translated for the first time as “ヒロゾフイア” in Japan in 1951. See Fujita Masakatsu, “Reception of ‘philosophy’ in Japan,” *Iwanami lecture: philosophy*, vol. 14, 255–256.

10. *Ibid.*

anywhere, including but not confined to Japan.

By irritating the traditional and current intellectual currents or intellectuals as “non-philosophical,” Chōmin gave a very clear message that, the absent of “philosophy” in Japan points to the lack of “originality.” Any form of importation and repetition should be not considered as “philosophy.” It is not a matter of “Japanese language” or “Japan” that determines whether there is “philosophy.” Even if “Japanese philosophy” should be defined as a “transformation of philosophy by the addition of Japan perspective,” it is not the “Japan perspective,” “Japanese culture” or “Japanness,” which entails a kind of “nationalistic” or particularity” that makes its definition sound or valid, but it is the “originality” that really counts. By the time of 1910, a year before the publication of Nishida Kitarō’s *Zen no kenkyū* [*An inquiry into the Good*], a book that is recognized by Takahashi Satomi as the first and only philosophical book produced by Japanese, we may show our support to Chōmin’s irritation.

Philosophizing “philosophy” through innovation: Nishida Kitarō

Following the criticism given by Chōmin, we may proceed to our discussion of “Japanese philosophy” with the case of Nishida Kitarō, who is widely considered as the first philosopher in Japan. Of course, the question does not lie on the nationality and the use of language of Nishida, but whether his philosophy entails “originality.”

As mentioned above, Takahashi Satomi had demonstrated his praise to Nishida’s maiden work, *Zen no kenkyū*, as the first and only philosophical book, alongside his critique in his book review in 1912, entitled “Facts and meanings of the phenomena of consciousness: reading Nishida *Zen no kenkyū*,” a year after the publication of *Zen no kenkyū*. Takahashi’s critique basically lies on the idea of *junsui keiken* [pure experience], arguing that there is a difference of degree between a strict unified state and the unified work embedded in judgment and thinking. Nishida later wrote a sincere reply to the twenty-five years old youngster Takahashi in the form of an article, which is also published in the same renowned philosophical journal, 哲学雑誌 [*Journal of phi-*

losophy], emphasizing that the notion, *junsui keiken* is a kind of monism 一元論, that is, the non-duality of intuition and thinking, rather than a dualism 二元論 that Takahashi prescribed.¹¹

As Fujita Masakatsu points out, “pure experience” signifies a critique of dualism. In *Zen no kenkyū*, Nishida paid a great effort on overcoming the subject-object duality that “Western” philosophy posits.

According to Nishida’s “pure experience,” it can be said that Nishida intends to convey a state that priors to the “artificial hypothesis” induced by the composition of “subject-object.”¹²

Saying that “pure experience” is aimed at “overcoming dualism,” the subject-object duality for instance, it does not mean that Nishida denied “dualism.” As Fujita added elsewhere, Nishida does not aim at abnegating the duality of subject-object, which in fact is “a request of thinking,”¹³ but rather intends to heading for the “root,” that is to get out of any form of “artificial hypothesis.”

In the stage of “pure experience,” Nishida had tried very hard to make something “original,” which is somewhat different with “Western” philosophy. Not until 1926, however, fifteen years after the publication of *Zen no kenkyū*, Nishida had come up his own “*ronri*” (not in the Aristotelian, Kantian and Hegelian sense of logic),¹⁴ *basho*

11. For Takahashi Satomi’s critique, here we refer to the article, “Facts and meanings of the phenomena of consciousness : reading Nishida *Zen no kenkyū*” [意識現象とその意味——西田氏著『善の研究』を読む] that compiled in the book *Selected writings of Nishida philosophy, supplementary volume 2: a history of studies in Nishida’s philosophy* [西田哲学選集 別巻二——西田哲学研究の歴史] ed. Fujita Masakatsu (Kyoto: Tōeisha, 1998), 8–43.

12. Fujita Masakatsu, *Nishida Kitarō as a modern thought* [現代思想としての西田幾多郎] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1998), 42.

13. *Ibid.*, 73.

14. Nishida stated in his final essay that, “In Aristotle, contradiction cannot be the very form of logic. But in Hegel’s logic, contradiction is precisely the discursive form of logic’s own self-development. Now can’t we say that Kant’s and Hegel’s logics are indeed logics, each in its own way? If we take this question seriously, we have to rethink the whole question of what logic is. Logic is the discursive form of our thinking. And we will only be able to clarify what logic is by reflecting on the form of our own thinking.” Nishida Kitarō, “My logic” [私の論理について] in *Last writings: nothingness and the religious world-view*, trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 126.

[place]. This led to the praise of a new term, “Nishida Tetsugaku” [Nishida Philosophy] given by Sōda Kiichirō, advocating that the articles, “*hataraku mono*” and “*basho*” demonstrate a philosophical system, not only for Nishida himself, but also for the academic study [*gakumon*]. For Sōda, Nishida has entered an “original realm” that cannot be found from ancient time to the present (of Nishida’s day), as well as in the East and the West.¹⁵

The “originality” embedded in the philosophy of place is its emphasis on judgment, which indeed is made on the subsumption of subject and predicate. Unlike Western “logic,” the Aristotelian tradition in particular, instead of highlighting the subject of judgment, Nishida put the focus on the predicate. It is the predicate, or to be more precise, the transcendental predicate, that is, the limitedness of the unification of predicate that makes a judgment possible. As Robert Wargo smartly denotes,

Nishida considers a subsumptive judgment of the form “A is B” to comprise three distinguishable element: the subject or the particular, the predicate or the universal, and the copula that expresses the relationship between them....In short, for the judgment to be a judgment, the subject must be immediately in the universal; the universal must be the “topos” [*basho*] of the subject.¹⁶

In this short essay, it is definitely not possible for us to discuss thoroughly how “original” Nishida’s notions, *junjui keiken* [pure experience] and *basho* [place] are, not only from its comparison with “Western” philosophy, but also from the perspective of “Eastern” philosophy. What we can say is, Nishida had dedicated his whole life for doing “philosophy” in his “own” way, entering an “original realm” by innovating “unique” philosophical systems, rather than going through

15. For Soda Keiichiro’s article, “Concerning the method of Nishida philosophy: asking Dr. Nishida’s teaching” [西田哲学の方法について——西田博士の教えを乞う], in *Selected writings of Nishida philosophy, supplementary volume 2: a history of studies in Nishida’s philosophy* [西田哲学選集 別巻二——西田哲学研究の歴史], 44–65.

16. Robert J. J. Wargo, *The logic of Nothingness: a study of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 126.

importation and repetition of “philosophy” from the West as well as the East. In this connection, Nishida philosophy may be considered as (at least one of the manifestations of) “Japanese philosophy,” which embraces “originality” in the activity of philosophizing in Japan.

“Japanese philosophy” as an academic discipline: the potentialities and problematic

Accordingly, if it is true to say that there is something called “Japanese philosophy,” not in the sense of having Japanese language, Japan or “Japanness” as its essence, but rather of embracing “originality” that is derived from Japan, which is considered as a family resembled term, we may now proceed to explore the problematic and potentialities of making “Japanese philosophy” as an academic discipline, which aims at uplifting its status that Western, Indian, Chinese philosophy for instance enjoy.

It is undoubtedly that Japanese philosophy has found an international platform in the last couple of decades. A growing number of translations, monographs and articles in different languages can now be found. Unlike other philosophical traditions, however, Japanese philosophy has not yet received wide recognition in the academia as a formal discipline. Either it is treated as an area or courses in Area Studies, for examples, Asian Studies and Japanese Studies, or an area or courses in the department of philosophy. Of course, in certain research centres, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture for instance, Japanese philosophy is captured as one of the research focuses. And in 1995, Japanese philosophy was officially established as a “major” (*kōza*) at Kyoto University in 1995. There remains, however, many works to do for developing it as an academic discipline.

Reasons for making Japanese philosophy as an academic discipline are very simply: first, Japanese philosophy entails rich philosophical potentialities. Not only can they refer to the philosophical waves somewhat stirred up by Nishida Kitarō in post-Meiji, but also can point to the pre-Meiji currents constituted by Kūkai, Hōnen and Dōgen for instance. The latter in fact offers a huge amount of “philosophical”

insights, rather than limited to repetitions that Chōmin asserted. Second, the growing number of researchers, within and outside Japan, which at least can be seen in the list of contributors to the book series, *Frontiers of Japanese philosophy*, compiled by Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture and the hundreds of members of Nishida Philosophy Association, also demonstrate the need of making Japanese philosophy as an academic discipline. In so doing, it is believed that experts on Japanese philosophy may have an international platform for professional interchange. Otherwise, it may induce a vicious cycle, discouraging those who are or would be dedicating themselves to the research of Japanese philosophy, since it is undervalued and receiving no proper recognition and support from the academia.

The current problematic or difficulties for making Japanese philosophy as an academic discipline include (though definitely not limited to): the lack of an international association of Japanese philosophy, which may help organize regular conferences and other academic activities, and an international journal of Japanese philosophy, which may enhance the quality of publication through a blind peer-review mechanism. For my part, the above two are timely and urgent. Others like book series, textbooks, sourcebooks, and dictionaries on Japanese philosophy are also indispensable. Although some of them are available in the market or have been put on the printers for publishing, there are different and growing needs from regions of different languages. Of course, it would be ideal to have an international research centre of Japanese philosophy. This may only be realized till Japanese philosophy is widely recognized as an academic discipline.

By promoting Japanese philosophy as an academic discipline, it does not carry the meaning of making it as another field or specialization for experts. As Dominik Perler has noted, “It [Japanese philosophy] poses a challenge for all Western philosophers (as well as Eastern philosopher for my part) to critically reflect on their own tradition.”¹⁷ More importantly, it is believed that Japanese philosophy may help enrich the activity of philosophizing of “philosophy” itself. In face of

17. Dominik Perler, “Preface,” in *Frontiers of Japanese philosophy*. ed. James Heisig (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2006), X.

the centennial of the publication of *Zen no kenkyū* in 2011, not only does it provide another opportunity for memorial, but also reminds us what “Japanese philosophy” has contributed to the “forum of world philosophy.”¹⁸

18. This is an idea conveyed by James Heisig. By means of the “forum of world philosophy”, Heisig suggests that “the philosophers of the Kyoto School have given us a world philosophy, one that belongs as right fully to the inheritance as much as the western philosophies with which they wrestled and from which they drew their inspiration.” See James Heisig, *Philosophers of nothingness: an Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 8–9 and “The place of Japanese philosophy: a view from Europe and America” 「日本の哲学の場所——欧米から見た」, in *Japanese philosophy* 『日本の哲学』, vol. 3 (2002), 125–140.