

# Nishida Kitaro and Japan's Interwar Foreign Policy: War Involvement and Culturalist Political Discourse

**Kosuke Shimizu**



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**Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies**

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# **Nishida Kitaro and Japan's Interwar Foreign Policy: War Involvement and Culturalist Political Discourse**

Kosuke Shimizu\*

## **Introduction**

Inoguchi Takashi once stated that Japan's international relations (IR) theory is characterised by its exclusive disciplinary orientation towards constructivism. The constructivist tendency of Japanese IR inevitably led researchers to the question of subjectivity, thus to a perspective on the basis of structuration. Inoguchi also states that this is well represented by Japanese IR scholars' devotion into historical and cultural aspects of IR rather than theoretical one (Inoguchi 2007). This is because Japanese scholars have been very much aware of one of the characteristics of constructivism in which subject and structure are mutually influencing each other, thus no way to be fixed. When we track down the origin of this tradition of Japanese IR, Buddhist and Confucian thoughts may well be presented as possible sources. However, there is another possibility in more recent history in the form of philosophy, and may well be more likely to be one of the direct sources of Japanese constructivist tradition – the Kyoto School. The Kyoto School philosophy, Nishida Kitaro's in particular, developed an influential philosophical theory of constructivism in the beginning of the twentieth century. Although his writings have not been well received in IR community in general, particularly in Japan, mainly because of his confusing and obscured vocabulary and his infamous involvement in the war time regime, his theory of construction of subjectivity seems to be subconsciously adopted by many Japanese IR scholars even today.

Christopher S. Jones published an article "If not a Clash, then What?: Huntington, Nishida Kitaro and the Politics of Civilizations" on this journal five year prior to Inoguchi's article and contend that Nishida's political philosophy contains a fertile ground for further development of IR theory by calling "attention to the special practical importance of non-Western traditions of political thought in an inter-civilization world" (Jones 2002: 223). Inoguchi indeed cited Jones contention in his article as a good example of applicability of Nishida's thought to IR literature, although, because Jones's main aim in the article was to display Nishida's theory's magnitude to the comprehending the contemporary world affairs, Nishida's involvement in the wartime regime was not well discussed (Jones 2002: 229).

In terms of IR, Nishida's contribution can be found in the introduction of culture and nation (*Minzoku*) to the context of world affairs. In writing his theory of world history, he deliberately used *Kokka Minzoku* (State Nation) in referring to the subject of world construction rather than

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*Minzoku Kokka* (Nation State). By putting the words other way around represents his political engagement in the production of counter narrative to the dominant imperialist regime. His attempts to influence the Japan's foreign policy and to change its course to more cooperative relationships with other Asian countries were, however, by no means successful. This article attempts to illustrate historical and theoretical background of Nishida's political challenge to the wartime regime and its unfortunate consequences. It also strives to find possible reasons for the failure of his attempt and to draw lessons to contemporary international relations.

My intention in the present article is to argue that Nishida's theory of world history was based on the perception towards subjectivity of contradiction, thus exclusively culture-oriented. By emphasising the cultural aspect, he tried to disturb the coherence and consistency of colonialist discourse on which the dominant regime of Japan of the time was totally relied upon. However, because Nishida's contemplation of world history completely lacked an attention to material relations of the coloniser and the colonised which was direct consequence of his understanding of the term "culture", his attempt became incomplete.

The term "culture" is indeed confusing. Recent IR seems to have started focusing on this aspect ever since the end of the Cold War. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilization", Francois Fukuyama's "The End of History" make prominent examples of the earlier stages of the literature, and there have been numerous books and articles published in English as well as in other languages. What strikes me in those texts is the total lack of perception that these texts are in fact cultural products. They often unintentionally subscribe particular cultural rules and norms in which these texts were formulated, and the lack of attention to this dimension is extremely dangerous in a sense it produces and promotes confrontation of the West and the Rest. It is quite clear to me that the failure of Nishida's intention to influence on the imperial policies and the provision of justification for them, which resulted in the devastation of citizens' lives in the colonised areas, were because of his deficient in self-reflective insight which could have revealed that his political philosophy was indeed formulated in the culture of modern nation-state system and imperialist narratives.

In order to clarify my argument, I start with a brief introduction of Nishida's philosophy and its historical development with special attention to the concept of "subject" and "contradiction". Here I will analyse *Zen no Kenkyu* (an Inquiry into Good) in which he developed contradictory perception towards subject, and Nishida's political argument on universality and particularity which directed him to political engagement in his later years. Secondly, I will scrutinise his articles specifically dealing with nation-state, *Sekai Shinchitujo no Genri* (The Principles of New World Order) in particular which was reportedly the draft for Prime Minister Tojo Hideki's declaration of "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere". There I will contend that, although there are a number of claims which indicated similarities between the two manuscripts – *Genri* and Tojo's declaration, there are clear and vital differences in between, particularly in relation to

the concept of subject of world affairs. I also discuss there that these clear difference proves that his intention was not to actively support the government's stance, but to influence and change the course of Japan's foreign policy. Thirdly, I will focus on Nishida's theory of state sovereignty developed in his article *Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Problem of *Raison D'etre*) and indicate logical inconsistency, total lack of attention to self-critical understanding of culture in particular, in his articulation of foreign relations which may well be the reason why Nishida's attempt eventually failed. Fourthly, I will derive some lessons out of Nishida's theory as well as his experience which are presumably indicative to contemporary intellectuals.

## **1. From Pure Experience to the Theory of *Basho* (Place): Nishida's Philosophy**

Whoever asked if there is any intellectual body of thought which deserves the name "philosophy" in Japan, it is definitely the Kyoto School one would come up with in the first place. As often claimed, it is considerably difficult to indicate concrete names constituting the school thus to define who is in and who is out (Fujita 2001: ii). Some would indicate such names as Miki Kiyoshi, Nishitani Keiji, Kosaka Masaaki, and Koyama Iwao. Others may contend to include Suzuki Daisetsu and Tosaka Jun. It should be also mentioned here that some would deliberately avoid the use of *Kyoto Gakuha*, and employ *Kyoto Tetsugaku* (Kyoto Philosophy) instead (Ueda 2006: 3) in order to avoid the confusion often emanated from Kyoto School's close association with the Kyoto Imperial University.

However no one would disagree that Nishida Kitaro is the most prominent figure of the School and certainly his name should be listed on the top of the member list of the School. Nishida was born in Kanazawa Prefecture in 1870, and trained at the Tokyo Imperial University. His life in Tokyo Imperial University was miserable according to his memoir as he was not a regular course student, but an "elective course" student who were treated in a discriminatory manner (Nishida 1965c: 242). His misfortune was not limited to his university life. Indeed his life was full of tragedies such as unwelcome marriage, loss of the wife as well as children. His life was indeed coloured with miserable and tragic tones. Some observers see such miserable life to be the main source of his theory of contradictory identity. Indeed he wrote that philosophy starts with the fact of our self-contradictory life. The motivation of philosophy must be out of deep sorrow rather than astonishment as Aristotle contends (Nishida 1965a: 92)<sup>1</sup>.

He published numerous articles and books, and the most well-known among them is needless to say, *Zen no Kenkyu*. Throughout the years of contemplation and publication, he was always searching for something deep down in human minds, something can be called fundamental and universal to our existence regardless of cultural or traditional differences. What he saw as the key concept in this context was "pure experience" or *Junsui Keiken*. It was the most fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Comparing sorrow with astonishment here was, of course, out of Aristotle's statement that philosophy starts with astonishment.

existence in our practice of comprehending the world, according to Nishida, which can be attained by getting rid of all the words and intellectual concepts which are wrapping, and sometimes disturbing, the process of comprehension. However, it is not just an ordinary experience. It must be “pure”. This purity becomes obtainable only when this experience occurs before the division of subject and object. Thus it is before language. It is an experience occurs when subject *is* object and *vice versa* in other words.

According to Nishida, pure experience is a genuine phenomenon of consciousness (Nishida and Kayama 2005: 75-76). When we dig into the mind of subject to the extent that subject itself is dissolved into nothing, we encounter something universal in the form of pure experience and the pure experience in turn constructs the subject. Nishida states;

If we are to understand true existence and true appearance of everything, we must conduct our investigation on the basis of direct knowledge which is impossible to be questioned any further. (Nishida and Kayama 2005: 75-76)

This paragraph explains his initial intention of philosophical inquiry which is to dig deep into one’s mind by casting doubt about the existence of anything he/she may encounters in the process. And this process contributes to philosophy by understanding the world in a way that “pure experience” constructs and constitutes the subject.<sup>2</sup>

If the subject is constructed on a series of different pure experiences, how could the subject maintain its integrity of identity rather than dissolved into different pieces? This was a question to which Nishida took long time to answer. After he obtained a professorship at Kyoto University, he started working on neo-Kantian theory and phenomenology. This is because he was criticised by Japanese neo-Kantians for his too much concentration on human consciousness thus his theory did not contain any possibility of generalisation (Fujita 2007: 85-86). Nishida addressed this question of subject by extending the theory of pure experience explicitly towards universalist orientation which eventually led him to answer the subject integrity.

As pure experience was theorised in terms of individual consciousness, Nishida was in need of expanding and re-formulating it in order to make it applicable to more general context. In order to understand the continuity of human consciousness, he considered that experience must transcend

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<sup>2</sup> “Pure experience” in Nishida’s early years of writing is actually a multilayered concept. Kosaka insisted that there were, at least, three different sorts of pure experience. They are narrowly defined pure experience, widely defined pure experience and universal pure experience. The first means pure experience as genuine experience while the second is defined as self-reflective thought. The third integrates the first and second. In the later writings, they were transformed into “*Chokkan*” (Intuition), “*Hansei*” (Self-reflection) and “*Jikaku*” (Awakening) respectively (Kosaka 1994: 102 [fn. 5]). Here intuition connotes particularity and awakening means universality. Therefore in “pure experience” in *Zen no Kenkyu* simultaneously contained particularity and universality within it although its universal orientation was not as explicit as particularity.

time. Otherwise, human integrity would fall apart. Yesterday's self-consciousness must be connected to today's self-consciousness. In this way, the integrity of the subject is guaranteed. In the same manner, experience must transcend space – one self-consciousness is connected to another self-consciousness. This was what enabled Nishida to apply his theory to socio-political context. What is important here is that his inquiry into subject in which he regarded integrity of experience as more essential than individual distinction led him to the point where he came to consciously deal with the issue of universality (Kosaka 1994: 94).

His universal orientation was further developed in his logic of “the place of absolute nothingness” which was articulated in “*Hataraku Mono Kara Miru Mono e*” (From Acting to Seeing) by which his thought reportedly transcended the limit of self-reflective consciousness. If one is to be perfectly self-reflective, he/she needs to be self-reflective to the self-reflective consciousness. Nishida saw this process as infinite. It means it is always incomplete. In order to transcend this incompleteness, he reached the concept of the “place of absolute nothingness” which is a space where the subject disappears (Fujita 2007: 99-100) while the things appear in their “suchness” (*Ari no Mama*).

Nishida's anti-subjectivist tendency to dismiss consciousness as a theoretical reference point brings him to define the True Subject as ‘the Predicate that cannot become Subject’, this Predicate being the extreme limit of universal: the Place (or universal) of Absolute Nothingness, being Nothingness, is actually identical with the True Individual Thing, disappearing in it. This approach to the problem, though an internal movement of consciousness, is already opened to the world of things. (Cestari 2008: 50)

As often said, his argument was substantially influenced by Buddhism, Mahayana tradition in particular (Goto-Jones 2002: 232). This perception towards his writings is widely shared by Japanese as well as Western specialists of Nishida's philosophy. However, equally important in understanding Nishida's texts is the fact that he also frequently cited western philosophers' arguments more than Buddhist ideas. The philosophers by whom Nishida was inspired in this era include, at least, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and James. Indeed some went on to argue in this context that he was a philosopher of neither western nor eastern tradition, and he was rather a philosopher of the universal (Nagai 2006: 48; Sakai and Nishitani 1999: 188-190). The wide range of reading of Nishida from Buddhism to Western philosophy was precisely the reason why he came up with the idea that particularly is universal and universal is particular. The intellectual conversation and spiritual negotiation with those giants of Western philosophy of the past and present as well as Buddhist texts engendered him to think that universal knowledge is possible (Sakai and Nishitani 1999: 189-194). What was underlying here was his long lasting hope for reconciliation of the West and the East. He states;

I think my intention is to find an origin of human culture... (Even though there are different cultures in the world), we can reveal a deep essence of the human culture by comparing different cultures and mutually complementing each other. I am not sure how significant Eastern culture currently is... However, it is not acceptable that development of Eastern culture absorbs the Western culture or the Western culture absorbs the Eastern. Nor it is that East and West remains distancing from each other. We should rather see them as two branches of the same tree. They are physically apart, but same in the root. It is impossible to imagine the world culture without finding a deep root from which both of the cultures emanate from. (Nishida 2007: 35)

This passage shows that his motivation of philosophical inquiry is to find the “root” of human culture which encompasses the entire humanity – thus the culture of universal quality.

Although his earlier works were more concerned with human consciousness and its logical extension, he gradually started direct engagement in writing about political issues in his later years. This was partly because of his immediate colleague Tanabe Hajime’s criticism of his philosophical discourse in 1930 that Nishida only formulated abstract level arguments and neglected their connection with material forces (Hosoya 2008: 146). Although it has been occasionally said to be an irrelevant criticism (Nagai 2006: 76-88), Nishida indeed turned his attention unswervingly towards political issues around this period.

Although he started direct engagement in political discourse around this time, it can be said that he was political from the beginning of his academic life. Indeed as I explicated above, *Zen no Kenkyu* was very much political in a sense that he attempted to provide an explanation of agency-structure relations which are supposedly transcending the boundaries of cultures or history. His persistent interest in universality was because of his hope to establish a concrete space in subjects differently constructed in terms of culture become able to communicate each other. He firmly believed that this communication would facilitate mutual understanding of different existence and avoid the confrontation which was one of the political characteristics of the world in his time. In sum, he was very much normative and prescriptive from the beginning of his career. He presumed, albeit his confusing writing style, that this universal space was in need at the time of the West/East division and that mutual understanding of different subjects was essential in constructing the world of peace. In fact, some of the readers of his time found that *Zen no Kenkyu* is a book on world democracy. For them, Nishida’s book appeared as his manifestation of straight-forward political philosophy (Ueyama 1998).

In 1938, Nishida delivered a series of lectures in Kyoto University, which was specifically targeted at public audience.<sup>3</sup> The lectures were later published in the form of speech record. The

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<sup>3</sup> The open lecture series of Kyoto University is still organised even now. See Fujita (2008).

manuscript of it was also published as an academic book with substantial changes made by Nishida himself.<sup>4</sup> While the book was coloured with his peculiar wording and confusing concepts, the lecture manuscript was more accessible and easier to comprehend for the readers as it was exclusively directed to public audience.

In the lectures, Nishida distributed a pamphlet, entitled “*Gakumonteki Hoho*” (Academic Method) which he used for another lecture a year before (Nishida 2007b). The Kyoto University lectures were planned along the theoretical line of the distributed pamphlet. His intention in this series of lectures was to make sense of contemporary world affairs in which the audience were witnessing confrontation of imperial powers at the beginning of the twentieth century. He started his first lecture by explicating the relationship between time and space. Usually, time and space are regarded as opposite, Nishida said. Time is linear and vertical, while space is even and horizontal. As a result, they are usually seen as mutually exclusive. However, our world is a place where time and space become one in a contradictory manner (Nishida 2007a: 23). Then how does this contradictory unification become possible? For Nishida, it is a consequence of the embedded characteristics of the time. He maintains;

The time is not a series of moments. The past, which is left behind, remains present, and the future, upcoming events, has already come. Therefore the present must be spatial. (Nishida 2007a: 23)

In the present moment, we see a number of remnants and memories of the past, while we also make plans and preparations for the future. In order for them to be present in one moment, space is in need. For Nishida, the present is a space where the past and the future encounter. Therefore, the world is always spatiotemporal.

However, at the same time we must be aware that the present inevitably contains contradiction. The time generates and fosters lives. Every individual grows and changes in accordance with the time line. This is problematic because space is essentially given and static. In this way, life generates contradictions with its surroundings. This contradiction leads one to change its environment while it was born out of the environment. The relationship between time and space is fundamentally dialectic, and this dialectics becomes the driving force for future changes in the world (Nishida 2007a: 24). This contradiction of driving force for social construction is what he named the “*Mujunteki Jiko Doitsu*”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Both manuscripts are collected in one volume and published recently. See Nishida (2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Mujunteki Jiko Doitsu* is a problematic word, because it is very much abstract and confusing. However, his usage of the word was relatively consistent in a sense that he uses the word interchangeably with *Mujunteki Toitsu* (Contradictory Unification). In this sense, he presumably used the term to represent a similar but slightly different concept to Hegel’s “Sublation”.

## 2. Nishida's Direct Engagement in Political Philosophy

In his later years' works, although some would argue they were more political than philosophical, we can still clearly see his consistent interest in the dialectic relationship between universality and particularity based on the logic of experience.<sup>6</sup> However, the time was of "state of exception" (Agamben 2005), because of the long lasting wars and imperialist expansionist orientation of Japan which already had reached to the Asian continent. Any intellectuals to publish political discourses inevitably faced police censorship and considerable social pressure to write in favour of the dominant regime. As a result, Nishida's works, among others, were written carefully and moderately.<sup>7</sup>

There were not many works of Nishida published which overtly dealt with political issues such as nation-state and governance even in the era which is now regarded of his political engagement. Such articles as "*Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri*" (The Principles of New World Order) (Nishida 1965d), "*Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Question of the State Reason) (Nishida 2007c), and "*Kokutai*" (National Polity) (Nishida 2007d) are the few exceptions. *Genri* was written for the Prime Minister Tojo Hideki's declaration of the Great East Asia (Co-prosperity Sphere) which was announced in 1943 at a conference organised by the military of Japan allegedly with national representatives from all over Asia. *Mondai* was written in 1941, probably his first attempt to directly deal with the issue of nation-state. *Kokutai* is an infamous article which was once published with a different title "*Testugaku Ronbunshu Daiyon Hoi*" (The Fourth Appendix to the Selection of Philosophical Writings) in the Nishida's fear that this article would provoke the right wing's outrage if it was published with the original title (Nishida 2007d: 142-144).

In these articles, he deliberately used some widely circulating words of imperialist taste such as *Hakko Ichiu* (Eight Cords under One Roof), and *Daitoa Kyoeiken* (Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere). In these articles, his ambiguous wording and confusing writing style often gave readers an impression that he actively became an apologist for the wartime policy of expansionism (Shillony 1981; Dale 1986; Sharf 1993; Levelle 1994). There is another interpretation however. Some researchers argue that Nishida intentionally but covertly tried to re-interpret each word and replace them with philosophical meanings (Yusa 1995; Ueda 1995).<sup>8</sup> Although his articles definitely looked similar at a single glance to the right wing discourses which were dominant in that era, thorough reading of them immediately reveals that the way his used the terms are substantially different from and unconventional to the right wing narratives of the time.

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<sup>6</sup> In the later years, he ceased using "pure experience", and started using "conductive intuition" instead.

<sup>7</sup> His writing in this era was extremely difficult to comprehend almost equivalent to Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebook* which was also written in obscured language and confusing vocabulary. See Gramsci (1971).

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent summary of the debate regarding Nishida's wartime complicity, see Arisaka (1996).

Among these, the article which appears to be most attractive as well as controversial to those who study the connection between his philosophy and political engagement in the war time regime is probably *Genri*. It was partly because this article presumably had three versions and no one knows where the original version is, and partly because it was written for a specific purpose which could have provided an opportunity for Nishida to influence the future direction of the foreign policy of Japan – writing for Prime Minister Tojo. With his hope of influencing Tojo’s and Japanese government’s political direction, Nishida carefully states that Japan should not be inward looking by isolating or distancing itself from the West. It is only detrimental if Japan overemphasises its peculiarity whether it is grounded in culture, history, tradition or language. Particularity should be open to universality, Nishida maintains, in order to contribute the construction of the new world order by transcending itself. If this becomes possible, the new world constructed in this way can be called *Sekaiteki Sekai* (World of World History).<sup>9</sup>

Nishida uses the term “World History” to refer to a globalised world. This global world became real because of the process of mutual interdependence and frequent exchange of goods, money, peoples and ideas transcending state borders, which he regarded as peculiar to his day. Nishida, in this context, states that the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a century of individual awareness, the 19<sup>th</sup> was one of state awareness, and the 20<sup>th</sup> is a century of awareness of individual state mission to the world history. The world is not an abstract entity any longer when it is constructed with the concrete experiences. In this way, the world became rather “real” (Nishida 1965d: 1).

In this world of concrete reality, particular is simultaneously universal, and universal is particular simply because no particularity resides outside of the world like the mountain in the landscape. In the previous era, the particular did stay outside of the world, as world was abstract and thus located somewhere “out there” for those who resided in the particularity. Now the world appears to us as real existence, and the world is “out there” *and* “right here”. Thus he regards the particular as simultaneously universal, and *vice versa*.

If the world is “out there” and “right here” simultaneously, then the particular, he obviously had Japan in his mind here, should not be isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, Nishida contends that the universal history of the concrete world only becomes possible when it is constructed upon and emanated from the experiences of the particulars. The particular only exists in relation to the other particulars, and this relationality guarantees the entire picture. Without these particular experiences, the world remains to be an abstract principle. This principle does not work in any sense, Nishida bluntly contends, as the failure of the League of Nations well exemplified (Nishida 1965d: 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Arisaka translates *Sekaiteki Sekai* as “global world”. See Arisaka (1996: 101 [fn. 96]). I agree with her that “global world” captures the sense of *Sekaiteki Sekai*, which literally means world-ly world. I use world of world history and global world interchangeably hereafter.

In defining the particular, Nishida uses the term “*Minzoku*” (people or nation).<sup>10</sup> *Minzoku* is a problematic word in translating into English. Although it is often translated as “races”, “ethnic-peoples”, “national folks” or “nationals” (Arisaka 1996: 101 [fn. 97]), none of them seems to be relevant as the term contains various meanings. Nishida uses it to refer to a social and ethnic group constructed upon shared cultural and historical heritages. But it is not necessarily directly connected to blood or racial origin. Again, here we can witness Nishida distancing himself from the institutionalised form of rigid existence, and expressing himself in favour of culturalist constructivism.

In the *Genri* article, Nishida deliberately limits the meaning of the word by putting *Kokka* (state) in front of it – *Kokka Minzoku* (state-nation) in referring to the subject in the world of world history. However, *Kokka Minzoku* was not a widely used expression to refer to nation-state in Japanese. *Minzoku Kokka* or *Kokumin Kokka* (nation-state) were, and still are, the words commonly used in this context. Then why did he put the word other way round? As I stated above, here it becomes very much clear that his intention of writing the *Genri* was indeed to re-interpret and transform meanings of particular words towards an alternative direction. In the case of *Kokka Minzoku*, it was about the meaning of “state”. By using *Kokka* as adjective modifying the noun *Minzoku*, Nishida presumably attempted to privilege *Minzoku* over *Kokka*. This is because he was well aware that state is an institution which is not constructed for containing contradiction within itself, and rather it has natural predisposition to avoid them. In this sense, he was more in favour of culturally constructed subject than institutionalised universal entity. While coherence and consistency are the most important aspect of modern state, *Minzoku*, by definition, involves full of contradictions. Although *Kokka* does limit and intervene the richness of *Minzoku* by adding the institutional aspect to it, *Minzoku* still remains to be the main body of the subject in Nishida’s perception towards the world history.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of the order of the word can be proved by analysing the second version of *Genri*, which were substantially amended for Tojo’s speech mainly by Tanabe Juri who were, a sociologist and Nishida’s acquaintance, closely associated with the central government (Ohashi

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<sup>10</sup> In order to clarify Nishida’s argument, I use “nation” to refer to *Minzoku*. Although it is not a perfect translation, ethnic group, people, or nationals do not seem to fit Nishida’s usage of *Minzoku* as it mainly connotes “Japan”. It should also be mentioned here that nation-state is usually translated as *Kokumin Kokka* in Japanese. However, it is also, though not frequently, translated as *Minzoku Kokka* in Japanese IR literature.

<sup>11</sup> In his earlier writings, *Zen no Kenkyu* in particular, Nishida gives special meaning to state (*Kokka*). He contends that state is a mediator which connects individual to the cosmopolitan world or the unity of humanity. Thus his understanding of state is different from the prevailing definition of the word which mainly refers to an institutionalised political body. His contention there was more prescriptive than descriptive. In that sense, he was concerned to what state should be than what it is. In the *Genri*, it seems that he uses *Kokka* not to refer to what he contemplated in *Zen no Kenkyu*, but to an institutionalised political body as commonly understood. In either case, what he was in favour of was a socio-political body which contains flexibility and relationality with others than one which is institutionalised and isolated. For a detailed discussion of the term in Nishida’s earlier writings, see (Goto-Jones 2005: 62-63).

2001: 49-50).<sup>12</sup> In the second version, *Kaku Kokka Minzoku* (each state-nation) was replaced with *Kaku Kokka Kaku Minzoku* (each state and each nation)<sup>13</sup>, thus both *Kokka* and *Minzoku* were used as nouns.<sup>14</sup> This means that Tanabe was well aware of Nishida's intention of using *Kokka Minzoku* to privilege culture over state and regarded it to be irrelevant to Tojo's speech.<sup>15</sup> This conversely well explains the Nishida's intention in using *Kokka Minzoku*.

If Nishida was not willing to incorporate with the wartime regime, why did he wrote the infamous article for Tojo in the first place? Is it because he was actually a committed apologist of the government and his dislike of it was simply disguise? Or was he too naïve to believe that his discourse of nation-state would affect the course of foreign policy of wartime regime? Or as some critics have contended, was it because he was forced to write by government's threat to arrest him? (Ohashi 2001: 52; Ienaga 1974: 96-97). To address this question, a thorough investigation of his theory of state sovereignty in his interpretation becomes essential.

In an article entitled *Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Problem of State Reason or the Problem of *Raison D'etre*) which he wrote in 1941, Nishida initially aimed to explain his understanding of state reason, and to develop a theory of it. This article was written right before the Pacific War, and it is reasonable to presume that it was his answer to the rapid emergence of enthusiastic nationalism and the imperialist orientation of militaristic government. This article was largely inspired by Friedrich Meinecke's theory of *raison d'etre* (Meinecke 1997), and ended up with arguing state sovereignty instead of state reason (Kado 2007: 73).<sup>16</sup> Thus this article appears to readers to be more about state legitimacy and its relation to nation and culture.

He starts with comparing Machiavelli and the natural law tradition of western philosophy, and shows sympathy to the former. He criticises the natural law tradition for its lack of concrete foundation in human experience and argues that it is too much relying on universalised human conscience and the laws of reason (Nishida 2007c: 148). On the other hand, Nishida agrees with Machiavelli on his recognition that "state has had its practicability and its own cooperative personality". He maintains that "what the will of this state personality commands is the state

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<sup>12</sup> Ohashi contends that the amendment was actually done twice. Thus, according to his theory, there are four versions of the manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> The second version of the article largely written by Kanai and Yatsugi was reprinted in (Kawanishi 2005: 79-83).

<sup>14</sup> Here, I am presuming the *Genri* collected in the *Nishida Zenshu*, which is actually the third version of the article, is similar to the first draft of it. To be precise in terms of chronological order, it must be said that it was Nishida who amended the Tanabe's second version. However, if the first version is somehow similar to the third, as I presume, then it can be said that Tanabe's use of *Kaku Kokka Kaku Minzoku* was to change Nishida's *Kaku Kokka Minzoku*.

<sup>15</sup> In the Tojo's speech, *Kokka Minzoku* was not used at all. There was even no mention of *Minzoku Kokka*. *Kokka* was exclusively used as subject instead. See *Tojo Hideki Daitoa Kaigi Kaikai Enzetu*, Yomiuri Hochi Shimbun 5/11/1943, reprinted at "Shiryō 4" (appendix 4) in (Kawanishi 2005: 85-86).

<sup>16</sup> In this context, Kado raised an extremely interesting question of why Nishida tried to discuss *Kokka Riyu* (state reason) or *Shuken* (state sovereignty) instead of *Kokuze* (state purpose) whose translated meaning might come closer to *raison d'etre*. For a detailed discussion, see Kado (2007: 70-72).

reason” (Nishida 2007c: 147). His perception towards state is confirmed by the French Revolution which was based on the natural law, but ended up with harsh oppression and mass murder. This resulted in the Restoration and universalised humanity which Nishida calls the backlash of the State Reason (Nishida 2007c: 149).

The divided tradition of European politics between the State Reason and the natural law, which can be called realist state-centrism and political idealism, were eventually reconciled by Hegel. Hegel famously dissolved the confrontation by claiming “whatever real is rational, and whatever rational is real” on the basis of his logic of dialectics concerning reason (universal will) and reality (particular will). In this sense, Hegel was also constructivist as Nishida was. It was therefore not surprising that Nishida develops his theory of state reason largely grounding in the Hegel’s dialectical theory.

Nishida contends that a state should be rational. To be a rational state here means that it is established on the basis of law (Kado 2006: 72). How can a state as a manifestation of world history be constructed on the basis of law which are created in accordance with particular socio-political context? Nishida argues that the command of world history can only be substantiated by “legislators who do not produce legislations subjectively, but do so according to the historical fate of the “from-produced-to-producing” relationship at each phase of the historical world” (Nishida 2007c: 171). Otherwise, the law will be turned into the representation of tyrannical arbitrariness. What guarantees the historical nature to be substantiated in the legislators whose existences are spatiotemporally specific is again *Minzoku*. In fact, Nishida sees the origin of laws in religion and contends that it has been developed historically (Nishida 2007a: 168). Thus, it was reasonable for him to say that the very foundation of law lies in the “self-formation of *Minzoku Ishi* (national will)” (Nishida 2007: 169). Obviously, *Minzoku* as representation of the particular is a manifestation of the world history.

In this sense, Nishida was not totally agreeing with Machiavelli. Indeed, Nishida saw the origin of state legitimacy in the particular’s cultural and historical tradition rather than functionality of state existence. For him, a state should not be a manifestation of power politics. It should be rather a manifestation of the absolute contradictory self-identity. However, Nishida contends “it is transformed into a state by developing itself as individual self formation of the world self.” Thus a state is a society with “world (historical) nature” (Nishida 2007c: 171). His argument with very strong prescriptive intonation was very much dialectical again in a sense that his main contention about state formation was on the basis of the relationship between the world and individual, or universal and particular.

To become a true state must mean, Nishida maintains, that “one national society becomes the subject of individual self formation in the historical world as a finite self of the absolute present which contains the past and future.” This must also mean that the society becomes the infinite

power of value production and the subject of historical world creation. This can be said only when “a national society becomes one of the centres of world formation”. Nishida continues that this must be executed by becoming pregnant with a centre of the absolute contradictory self-identity within itself. This is what he calls state sovereignty (Nishida 2007c: 172). Only in this way, state sovereignty truly becomes state sovereignty. In this sense, the absoluteness of state sovereignty does not mean the oppression of state over citizens. It is rather “a reflection of a centre of the absolute contradictory self-identity world which consists of the whole one and individual many” (Nishida 2007c: 173).

What does state mean to individual lives in Nishida’s theory? Nishida argues that through the state which is formulated by systematised law with sovereignty on its centre, all individuals become public existence. Thus, all nationals will be historical existence. They will obtain the rights of non-intervention as creators of history. Now, even a newborn baby has its rights as a national. Every individual obtains the rights of historical subject (Nishida 2007c: 174). Unlike the ordinary interpretation of the relationship between individuals and rights in IR literature in which rights of individuals should be protected because of his/her legal status as a citizen of a nation-state, Nishida’s interpretation opens up the possibility of Kantian cosmopolitan politics in that rights of individuals should be protected for the sake of his/her world historical existence.

Nishida consistently saw nation-state as a manifestation of world history on which state sovereignty totally depends. If we take this account other way around, it can be said that state will lose its legitimacy when it ceases to be a representation of historical world. This is precisely the reason why *Mondai* was constantly written with prescriptive tone. In other words, Nishida implicitly contended that Japan as a state of his time not to be the “true state” and tried to question the legitimacy of state sovereignty of the nation-state status. Indeed, it is now reasonable to speculate that the real intention for writing *Genri* for Tojo’s speech was the same reason why he wrote *Mondai*.

In this sense, the debate whether Nishida was nationalist or universalist is misleading. It is very much clear that he was nationalist<sup>17</sup> and universalist, and this is precisely what his theory of absolute contradictory self-identity conveys to us. He was nationalist in a sense that he admired the tradition of Japan as nation, while he was universalist in a sense that he was keen on developing his theory of cosmopolitan history. Indeed, David Williams contends “The nineteenth-century expression ‘liberal nationalist’ offers a much more accurate description of where the wartime Kyoto School stood on the ideological spectrum of Imperial Japanese society” (Williams 2004: 152). In this sense, Nishida was conservative and liberal, as he was particularist

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<sup>17</sup> “Nationalism” here is very much a problematic word. If nationalism is defined as synonymous with conservatism, he was not. If it means an ideology to support a militaristic orientation of the dominant regime, he was not either. If it is defined as an ideology which supports the importance of *Minzoku* (nation), then the answer is yes definitely.

*and* cosmopolitan. Any efforts to define him with the series of dichotomies are destined to fail, simply because he appears to be a contradictory figure to the eyes of the theorists on the basis of the Right/Left confrontation.

### **3. Culturalist IR and Its Consequence**

Given that his intention of writing a series of articles on nation-state as well as state sovereignty in his later years was to show his disagreement with the government policies as well as to question the legitimacy of statehood of Japan of his time, he was far from successful in capitalising his intention. Then we need to ask why he failed to achieve this goal. What prevented his strategy from achieving the initial purpose? Why did Nishida seem to have ended up with only providing the justification for the wartime regime's expansionist policies rather than changing the course of Japan's foreign policy? To answer these questions have an immense implication to those who engage in culturalist interpretation of international relations of the present.

First of all, what was unfortunate in this context was that he did not provide any concrete programme to materialise his theory of state-sovereignty. Indeed his theory of world history did not seem to have connected enough the abstract argument with the reality despite his courageous attempt to do so. Although it is probably unfair to blame him for the relative lack of provision of concrete programme for implementing his idea of state sovereignty, this was not ignorable. Probably, the absence was because of his intellectual style in which he largely spent his time for contemplation and being isolated from social interaction, this academic fashion undoubtedly reveals the limit of his rational deductive approach to world history.

This leads to another lack of attention in his political writings. Because of his relative lack of a concrete connection with the reality, sufficient attention to those whose lives were colonised and devastated by Japanese imperial army in the name of the East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere was totally absent (Hiromatsu 1989). This lack of attention to the colonised was not confined to Nishida, but almost all of the Kyoto School scholars (Tosaka 1977). This problem emanates out of the dilemma that too much attention was paid to the West/East confrontation in their writings although this was, to a certain extent, inevitable in the age of state rivalry. Nishida's theory was, as I analysed in detail above, based on his initial intention to find a universal ground for mutual understanding by tracking down the origin of one's own culture and history. He believed that there is something universal, which was actually represented by the place of absolute nothingness, in which subjects with different cultures and histories may well exchange with each other, and this would develop into the world history. However, in practice his universality was only configured on the basis of the West/East confrontation, particularly in his political writings.

Underlying insufficient attention to political programme and to the concrete lives under the Japanese colonisation was his peculiar theoretical structure in which he saw culture and state are

the only main elements in constructing the history of the world. In other words, there was a complete lack of political economy. This is decisively important as this proves that Nishida was unintentionally taking a political position of classical political liberalism which often disregards the power relations between the dominant regime and the subordinated. This was rather problematic in a sense that while Nishida was exclusively concerned with the possibility of universal history, but his contemplation of history itself was very much partial and biased by the typical intellectual framework of the colonisers, the Western perception towards the rest, to which he was striving to provide an alternative perspective. Nishida indeed presumes the equal relationship among the actors like many liberal philosophers in the West did in their understanding of politics and economy by advocating the universal value of humanism and rationality. In any historical accounts of imperialism, home countries constantly attempt to justify their aggression and successive dominance of territories of others with cooperative liberal narratives in which the core and periphery are presumably gain mutual benefit. This was precisely the reason why Nishida's severest critic Tosaka Jun called Nishida's philosophy as "liberal hermeneutics" (Tosaka 1977). It is by no means unclear that construction of any imperialist empires, after the Edward Said's discourse of Orientalism, involve the power relations between the core and periphery, the colonisers and colonised, and the oppressors and oppressed, regardless of time and location, although these relations have been hidden, veiled by the discourses of humanism and universality (Said 1995). It was no doubt that this indeed ended up with devastation of the lives of the colonised.

While the insufficient attention to political economy made his theory incomplete, there is another aspect which led him to the wartime involvement. That is something to do with his understanding of the term "Japan". Nishida was, indeed, totally occupied with the idea of "Japan" whether it means state or nation in configuring world affairs. This resulted in the neglect of the fact that the term "Japan" itself is very unstable and changeable in the context of globalising world in which interactions between individuals, economic actors, and emigrants all become decisive factors in determining the course of history. Thus there are many "Japans" based on plurality rather than Japan as a singular unified existence. For Nishida however, there were only two forms of "Japan" – Japan as a state which is constructed on the basis of institutionalisation, and Japan as a culture which would provide a place of nothingness, thus absorbs elements of other cultures and integrate them in one cultural piece. Indeed, the term "integration" is the key to understand his interpretation of "Japan". In any phase of Nishida's theory, whether it is pure experience, self-awakening, place of nothingness, or absolute contradictory self-identity, he was always concerned with identity and integration. While he recognised the contradictions within a subject in his philosophical inquiry, he was completely occupied with the coherence and consistency of subjectivity in political writings. This is because his configuration of world affairs was solely constructed upon the West/East divide and his attempt of establishing the world history was largely coloured with the strict boundary of rationalist/spiritualist tradition.

Ever since the emergence of Said's critic of the Occident/Orient dichotomy in which he contended that Occident only exists in reflection to Orient, it became intolerable to ignore the question of West/East and Rational/Spiritual dichotomies in understanding contemporary world affairs. In this comprehension of the world, a mere subversion of the privileged status in each dichotomy for the sake of the underprivileged does not seem to generate much useful result. Hannah Arendt also points out that West/East dichotomy and Rational/Spiritual dichotomies were intimately related with each other, or in a complicity relations, in a sense that the late comers of world political economy needed to resort to the alleged spiritual and historical origins in order to construct their identities. This was because they suddenly found themselves having nothing equivalent to what the advanced countries relied upon in terms of their identities such as economic development and historical achievements, when the former states started to compete with the latter (Arendt 1968: 232). Nishida's search for an alternative world history makes a good example of this point. Indeed, Nishida's emphasis on culture was a strong manifestation of his intention to confront the Western political philosophy and to provide a unique alternative reading of world politics.

What he was missing there was that he was indeed within the "modernist" cultural discourse when he was emphasising the Eastern or Japanese "culture" as far as his articulation was based on the modern nation-state system of strict demarcation (Koyasu 2003). While he was very aware that the term "culture" has a possibility of reconciliation between the West and Japan, this possibility immediately faded away in the very moment he used the concept of peculiarity of "Japanese culture". This was an unsolvable dilemma. As far as one is to discuss peculiarity of a culture in its relation to the universality, he/she needs an adjective which modifies the noun "culture". In Nishida's political philosophy which mainly dealt with the Western/Eastern thoughts, his contention inevitably resulted in emphasising "eastern". This was a typical modernist understanding of the world in a sense that it is based on the objectivist divisions of the subject/object, inside/outside, and west/east. Moreover, Nishida goes on to say that Japan is the leader of the East, by which he added another modernist characteristic of state-centrism to his political discourse. In this sense, Nishida's political articulation was profoundly influenced by what Ralph Pettman calls "world affairs as modernist project" (Pettman 2004). This project gives us an ontological premise about what to talk about, such as nation-state, and what not to, such as who "we" actually means, in the IR discourse. Slavoj Žižek provides an excellent account of culture one of the primary rules of which is to know how to behave as if he/she does not know what happened or as if it did not happen (Žižek 2008: 8). Indeed the imperialist culture in Nishida's time was, and is of course, substantially coloured with its neglect of the devastating state of mind of those who were living in the occupied area, as if such devastating effects of colonisation and state-centrism did not exist. His insufficient lack of attention to the colonised by Japanese imperialist expansion vividly clarifies the fact that he was indeed within the imperialist culture and the modernist project. It was indeed ironic that at the very moment he used the term "Japanese culture", he was destined to draw into the culture of Western modernity.

## **Conclusion: Lessons of the Kyoto School to International Relations**

What can we learn from the theory and experience of the School in relation to IR literature after all? First of all, I must express my admiration of Nishida's attempt to change the course of Japanese foreign policies of his time. It was definitely a brave move, and should not be disregarded or undervalued. He boldly tried to steal the meanings of the vocabulary circulating at his time, and replace them with his philosophical meanings. He was very honest that he actually risked his life. He indeed encountered not just a few times physical and mental threatening by right wing activists. He continued to write according to his conscience and put them in lines in a very truthful way. He was a very honest intellectual, honest to his readers, honest to his conscience, and honest to his own existence. And this should be well recognised in any attempt to situate him and his philosophy in the context of the War.

Nevertheless, I am obliged to point out that we cannot and should not miss the fact that he did cooperate with the imperial government and, though unintentionally, resulted in providing a decisive justification for aggression of Japanese imperialists on other nations in Asia. His experience tells us that even with a good will and good intention with extreme honesty, we may well end up with incorporation with a political regime which is devastating and shattering peoples' lives by establishing a culturalist general theory of IR. This indeed seems to have influenced Japanese IR literature in the post-war period which is often described as providing more particularistic historical account of IR than pure theories of universal orientation (Inoguchi 2007).

The culturalist understanding of IR must take seriously the devastating consequences which Nishida's articulation of the world history brought to the colonised and oppressed by providing the justification for the imperialist Japanese foreign policies. What we need to understand in the first place when we get ourselves in engaging in cultural politics is to become aware that while the term "culture" provides a new possibility of comprehending contemporary world affairs, but at the very same time it indeed becomes a weapon which results in almost equivalent devastating effects of weapons of mass distraction may provide on everyday lives. To avoid the latter, we must take seriously the confusing meaning the term "culture" conveys to us in order to eschew the uncritical acceptance of definition of the term as non-political and non-economic sphere. Culture is definitely political and economic. In doing so, the double-edged sword of "culture" is never be too much emphasised.

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