

CHAPTER TWO

"WHAT IS ASIA?": A QUESTION

Europe is a concept that does not originate from itself, but from its essential antithesis to Asia.... Europe is originally, and as long as it remains true to itself, politically and spiritually an anti-Asian power.

—Karl Löwith¹

Inquirer: Here you are touching on a controversial question which I often discussed with Count Kuki—the question whether it is necessary and rightful for Eastasians to chase after the European conceptual systems.

Japanese: In the face of modern technicalization and industrialization of every continent, there would seem to be no escape any longer.

I: You speak cautiously, you say '... would seem ...'

J: Indeed. For the possibility still always remains that, seen from the point of view of our East Asian existence, the technical world which sweeps us along must confine itself to surface matters, and ... that ...

I: ... that for this reason a true encounter with European existence is still not taking place, in spite of all assimilations and intermixtures.

—Martin Heidegger²

1. K. Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche, 1983), 475: 'Europa ist ein Begriff, der nicht aus ihm selber stammt, sondern aus seinem wesentlichen Gegensatz zu Asien.... Europa ist ursprünglich, und solange es sich treu bleibt, politisch und geistig eine gegenasiatische Macht.'
2. M. Heidegger, 'A Dialogue on Language', in *On the Way to Language*, tr. P.D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 3.

§6. The QUESTION 'WHAT IS ASIA?' (9 TCS)

Is it legitimate to raise the question 'What is Asia?' Is this question possible today? Indeed, was it possible at all in the past?

Let us start by questioning the legitimacy of this ontological question: What is Asia? To ask what Asia is, as one asks what Europe is, we will have to essentialise, asking what makes Asia Asia, as we might ask what makes a tree a tree: namely, we will have to ask after the essence of Asia. In this respect, the question 'What is Asia?' is in itself nothing Asian. It is a European question, not because this question has never been posed in Asia, but because it is a question concerning the being of Asia, an ontological question. Recall here that Kitaro Nishida once claimed that Western philosophy is centred on the question of Being, while Eastern philosophy inquires into the question of Nothing:

From a metaphysical standpoint, then, how do we distinguish the forms of culture east and west from one another? I believe we can distinguish the west as having taken being as the ground of reality and the east as having taken nothing as its ground. Or, we might say, the one looked to form, the other to the formless.³

If Nishida is correct here, then 'What is Asia?' is either an illegitimate question, or one that may produce a completely unexpected answer. François Jullien, without referring to Nishida, also concluded that there is no ontology in China,⁴ and that the identification of ontology with *ben ti lun* (本體論, literally 'theory of the original substance', often translated as 'ontology') is false. This may sound puzzling, since in everyday language one often asks 'What is X?' It is not that non-Europeans have never raised such questions, but

3. Heilig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 86.

4. F. Jullien, 'Between Is Not Being', *Theory, Culture & Society* 40:4–5 (2023): 239–49.

rather than when they did, these were never inquiries into essence. Essence is that which doesn't change—which is also why substance, as distinguished from accident, was also understood as essence. The inquiry into essence is through *logos*. *Logos* means talking, and also bears other names such as reason, logic, etc. *Logos* comes from *legen*, to lay something in front of. *Logos* means the pursuit of a rationality which is able to reveal the essential by way of ontological inquiries.

To ask 'What is Europe?' is therefore to conduct an inquiry into the essence of Europe. Husserl responded to this question in his 1935 Vienna lecture, in which he states that Europe is not a geographical location, but a spirit. Husserl tries to paint us a '*geistige Gestalt*', a spiritual figure of Europe, in which the European spirit is described as the infinite task of the pursuit of the universal and the rational:

'The spiritual figure of Europe'—what is it? It is exhibiting the philosophical idea immanent in the history of Europe (of spiritual Europe). To put it another way, it is its immanent teleology, which, if we consider mankind in general, manifests itself as a new human epoch emerging and beginning to grow, the epoch of a humanity that from now on will and can live only in the free fashioning of its being and its historical life out of rational ideas and infinite tasks.⁵

The European spirit is its philosophy; if one can talk about an image of such a spirit, it is an immanent teleology in which history is the history of the rational idea. The progress of the rational idea is its search for the universal, and it is only through such an infinite task of searching that new epochs of humanity are made possible. It is difficult, if not impossible, to define Asia in terms of such an image, or in terms of any image at all. Another Kyoto School philosopher,

5. E. Husserl, 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man', Lecture delivered by Edmund Husserl, Vienna, 10 May 1935, also discussed in chapter 1, above.

Tetsurō Watsuji, gave us rich images of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe in his treatise on *Fūdo*.⁶ The term *fūdo* is composed of the two Chinese characters for wind [風] and soil [土], and is often rendered into English as 'climate'; however, *fūdo* is more than climate, since it also means customs and traditions; to some extent, *fūdo* is the formation of culture conditioned by a cosmological and geographical particularity. Asia is heavily affected by monsoons, and according to Watsuji the resulting relative lack of seasonal change creates an easygoing personality—in Southeast Asia especially, since the weather is always very warm, nature provides a plenitude of foodstuffs, and therefore there is no need to labour too much in order to survive, or to worry about the possibility of day-to-day living. Similarly, the lack of natural resources in the deserts of the Middle East creates solidarity between peoples, so that the Jewish people, although they live in diaspora, remain united, while in the meadowlands of Europe, clear and regular seasonal changes demonstrate the constancy of the laws of nature, thus suggesting the possibility of mastering nature with science. In comparison with Husserl's determination of the European spirit, Watsuji didn't give us a typology of ideas, images of spirit, but a topology of tendencies determined by the cosmo-geographical milieu.

Many authors have already pointed out, in retrospect, the Eurocentrism of Husserl's argument on the spiritual image of Europe, in the sense that for him, European humanity seems to mean humanity in general. In comparison with the spiritual unity of Europe, Asia is fragmented; it was not united by a monotheism as Europe was. In mediaeval Europe, despite wars both internal and external and the existence of borders, Christianity nonetheless brought the separated countries together by endowing the individual with an overriding universal and religious identity.⁷ Europe was once

6. T. Watsuji, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, tr. G. Bownas (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1961).

7. C. Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 20–21.

to topology in Watsuji

religiously defined by universal Christian love and philosophically defined by universal rationality; therefore, it was able to claim a spiritual figure, and one that is ontologically universal. In the 1930s Husserl laments the crisis of European science and of the European spirit, now dominated by naturalism and objectivism.⁸ He wants to return to the lifeworld, understood as the primary condition of science and of phenomenology as rigorous science. It is beyond us to judge whether phenomenology is capable of saving Europe from its crisis—it was also the deconstructive task of the Derridean school to make such a judgment. What interests us in this context is its generalisation and affirmation of a unified European spirit. In comparison, owing to the lack of monotheism and any discourse of the universal, there has never been any unifying Asian thought. One might find greater similarities among East Asian countries owing to the common adoption of Chinese characters and the early influences of Chinese culture, but when we look at Southeast Asia and Central Asia, these are very different cultural landscapes. A European thinker today can still respond to the question 'What is Europe?' But it is almost impossible for an Asian thinker to ask 'What is Asia?' because Asia includes so many different regions and cultures that one must surely fail in any attempt to generalise *an* Asia.

In the summer of 2022, when I took a taxi to Warsaw Chopin Airport, the driver—a retired lawyer, so he told me—complained about the government, and said to me, 'Poland is as corrupt as Asia'. I didn't understand what he meant, so I remained silent. Because of my silence, he started to explain: 'I didn't mean Asia like Japan and Korea, I mean Kazakhstan and...'. This was a good lesson for me, since this taxi driver had a very different imaginary of Asia from mine. We East Asians often talk about Asia and Asianism, but we imagine that East Asia means Asia, and unconsciously already

8. E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, tr. D. Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

exclude central Asian countries. Therefore, with this title 'What is Asia?', while I claim to be speaking about Asia, in fact I myself am only able to speak, *marginally*, about East Asia.

In the context of East Asia, at least, the question of spirit only arrived when nationalism emerged in the face of colonisation. Attempted essentialisations of Chinese thought, Japanese thought, Korean thought, etc. came to the fore as responses to the external challenges. These supposed national modes of thought were reactions to colonisation and modernisation, but mostly to the domination of Western universalism. There were exchanges between different regions, but they were not united by any common identifier. The Japanese project of creating a prosperous circle of East Asia, or a Schmittian *Großraum* (Schmitt's term, adopted by the Kyoto School thinkers during the Second World War) could be seen as an attempt to create a unified Asia. However, one might well ask whether this attempt to unify Asia through industrialisation (in the name of Asianism) was in fact a mimicry of Europe, even though it claimed to be an anti-European movement, since the industrialisation and mechanisation of Europe was, according to these thinkers, one of the sources of its decadence. So we must inquire not only whether the question 'What is Asia?' is legitimate or not as a philosophical inquiry, but also, and probably far more importantly, whether such a 'Europeanisation' (and subsequently Americanisation) is still a desirable future for Asia. If so, then one has to affirm modernisation and even push it to extremes (as is happening now, in fact). If not, are we going to follow an anti-European path? Or, instead, should we ask whether the past and present of Asia could provide other resources for understanding the future, or shed light on the future of the world in the current planetary condition?

It is undeniable that Asia has long been engaged in Europeanising (and then Americanising) itself; as Heidegger's Japanese interlocutor admitted in the mid-twentieth century, 'in the face of modern technicalization and industrialization of every continent, there would seem to be no escape any longer'. In other words, Asians are becoming Europeans no matter how much one would like to deny it.

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This can be easily observed not only in political and economic systems, but also in everyday activities such as reading, drinking, eating, and consuming—whereas in Europe, even in some capital cities, all one finds of Asia is a few poor Asian restaurants and a great many esoteric clichés. In his book *Eurotaoism*, Peter Sloterdijk described European modernity as acceleration towards total mobilisation; this mobilisation also produces a fatigue which then demands a Eurotaoism—a quest for some oriental wisdom that can fill the vacuum left behind by the Christian religion after secularisation.⁹ This 'Eurotaoism' is of course a satire, but it is also a confirmation of the Heideggerian diagnosis of the occidental illness: Daoism and Buddhism will not help Europe to recover from this fatigue or from this drive to mobilisation. Really, this phenomenon attests only to the ultimate irrelevance of Eastern thinking to the West, while the West continues to mobilise the East with its techno-scientific knowledge and the market economy:

Even if we recognize Eastern wisdom as an impressive and singular greatness, Asian imports alone will not save the Western-mobilized world. The initiative of 'Americotaoism' is just that—a response to the 'crisis of the West' by importing holistic fast food from the Far East.¹⁰

But this verdict on the irrelevance of Buddhism and Daoism to the West, just as much as the admission of them as elements of New Age philosophy, excludes these modes of thought from any participation in future world history. And this exclusion might not be all the fault of hippies giving Eastern philosophy a bad name, but could also

9. See P. Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization: Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics*, tr. S. Berjan (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); the original title in German was *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987).
10. Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, viii.

Heid's 'occidental illness' leads to Eurotaoism

be owing to the fact that Eastern thought has long been considered inferior by the West, except among specialists of Eastern culture. In the famous symposium 'The Standpoint of World History and Japan' (26 November 1941), Nishitani clearly stated that

Asia has been for Europeans something to act upon, and it is from that viewpoint alone that they have viewed this part of the world. Europe has acted upon Asia, which has served as the object of its action; not the other way around. It is an 'I' and 'Thou' relationship, and Europe has assumed the role of the 'I': this is its standpoint. But this also explains why the transformation now under way is the stuff of crisis for Europeans, while here it takes the form of a new world order.¹¹

For Nishitani, the crisis of Europe is indicated by the breaking down of the I-Thou relation; the Thou is becoming the I, in juxtaposition to the Western I. This I-Thou relation doesn't only exist between the West and the East, but is also internal to the East. That is, the East is also considered inferior by Easterners themselves. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, race and thinking were considered inseparable. The concept of race was not only present, but was also considered to determine the destiny of a people. Before the encounter with Europeans, the Chinese had already made a distinction between *hua* (China, mainly *han* ethnics) and *yi* (barbarians), but such a distinction was not yet based on race or nation. The Sino-barbarian dichotomy [*hua-yi* distinction, 華夷之辨] is dependent on the practice of *li* (rituals, rites), since *li* is at the core of *wen hua* (culture, literally meaning to transform through the teaching of reading and writing), and the *yi* can also be integrated into *hua* by practicing *li* (or being cultivated in the Han's way). The

11. D. Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance: A Reading, with Commentary, of the Complete Texts of the Kyoto School Discussions of 'The Standpoint of World History and Japan'* (London: Routledge, 2014), 116.

Ming Confucian Gu Yanwu (顧炎武, 1613–1682) made a distinction between losing the country [亡國] and losing *tianxia* [亡天下]. The former refers only to the change of emperor or dynasty, the latter refers to the destruction of moral order, leading to a situation similar to Hobbes's state of nature.¹² This could be read as an affirmation of the *hua-yi* distinction. But this distinction lost its hold in the nineteenth century, when a theory of race was popularised through the translation of the work of Huxley and Spencer. In China, we can read the implication of this theory of race, for example, in the writings of one of the most important intellectuals, Liu Shipei (劉師培, 1884–1919), considered a great genius:

When the barbarians invaded China, because Han is a superior race, so China lost the country but not the race; when the Westerners came to the East, in comparison, the Asian race is inferior to the Western race, so one worries not about losing the country [亡國], but more about the extinction of the race [亡種].¹³

Liu considered the Han as a superior race in comparison with the barbarians, so that, even though China was conquered by the Mongolians and the Manchurians, while the country or state is lost, the Chinese race still survives. The Westerners, however, are no barbarians. Indeed, in comparison with Westerners, the Asians are an inferior race. Liu therefore feared for the extinction of the Asian race because, according to the Darwinian theory of evolution

12. Gu Yanwu, *Ri Zhi Lu* (《日知錄》), chapter 13: 「有亡國，有亡天下。亡國與亡天下異。亡國，易姓改號，謂之亡國。仁義充塞，而至於率獸食人，人將相食，謂之亡天下。」，<<https://etext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=614214>>.

13. Cited by Yuzo Mizoguchi (溝口雄三), *China as Method* (Taipei: National Institute for Compilation and Translation, 1999), 51; from 《劉申叔先生遺書》卷一，「中國，當蠻族入主時，蠻族劣而漢族優，故雖有亡國而無亡種；當西人東漸後，亞種劣而歐種優，故憂亡國，更要亡種。」

popularised during Liu's time, the Chinese as a race would become obsolete or disappear. Following this logic, one might arrive at the conclusion that Chinese thought couldn't compete with Western thought, since the former is the product of an inferior race. Of course, Liu was not the only person who espoused a race-based political thinking; it was a dominant theory at the time. Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858-1927), a reformist and one of the most prominent intellectuals of the late Ching dynasty, in his *Datong shu* (大同書, *The Book of Great Unity*) also declared that the white race was superior, followed by the yellow, and lastly the brown and black. In order to achieve the great unity, then, it was necessary to eliminate the difference of races by turning everyone into whites. According to him, if the yellow race were to change their diet to medium rare beef steak and immigrate from the warm south to the cold north then, after two or three generations, they would turn into whites.¹⁴ Although it seemed to him an insurmountable problem, he nevertheless also proposed ways to turn the black into white, which we shall not detail here. This theory of race, coming from one of the most important intellectuals and reformists of the late Ching dynasty, seems laughable today, but it shows that biopolitics has always been in play since the beginning of colonisation.

In the eyes of the Kyoto School thinkers, at least those who participated in the symposiums of 1941 and 1942, China became the 'Thou' and Japan the 'I'. They argued that China's subordination to Western civilisation was able to take place because China had long considered itself the centre of the world and as superior to other Asian countries; when it encountered Western civilisation

14. Kang Youwei (康有為), *The Book of Great Unity* (《大同書》), 「凡日用煎牛肉半生熟、血高紅潤者、行之數月、面即如雲脂矣。若多行太陽之中、攝受日光、游居通爽之地、吸受空氣、加以二三代合種之傳、漸移商人於北地、更易山人於江濱、不過百年、黃種之人、皆漸為白色、加以通種、自能合化、故不待大同之成、黃人已盡為白人矣。是二種者已合為一色、無自辨別、惟餘、第二種與白人遠絕、真難為合者也。」 <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=547649>.

with its more advanced science and technology, China promptly abandoned its sense of superiority. The result, as Suzuki concludes, was 'a new kind of Europeanized Chinese'. Japan, on the contrary, exhibited a very different psychology in its encounter with Western civilisation.¹⁵ Japan didn't subordinate itself to the West. Instead its *moralische Energie* (in Leopold von Ranke's sense) grew, and with its self-consciousness of its role in world history, Japan became the leader of Asia as well as the world. Nishitani recalled how, during his trip to Germany, he passed by Shanghai, and a Filipino sailor told him how much he admired Japan and he wished that one day the Philippines would follow its lead. Commenting on the Filipino sailor's wish, Nishitani claims:

Over the course of its long history, Japan has fostered a [sober and disciplined] culture, and therefore we have completed the apprenticeship of civilization. In other words, well before the arrival of European civilization on these shores, Japan could boast a highly developed culture, one animated by an affective life force. The Philippines lacks such foundations. Therefore, even if the Philippines absorbed the products of European civilization on a Japanese scale, the result would be very different.¹⁶

In the transcripts of the symposiums, we can read many more comments on Japan's superiority in comparison to the Chinese, Koreans, Indonesians, etc. This superiority comes first of all out of a belief in *Blut und Boden* (when Nishitani read in a book that Indonesians are aristocrats, he added that he had heard that the Indonesians have Japanese blood...), and secondly from a historical self-consciousness on the part of Japan—a people is able to feel that they are creating a new world order, writing world history.

15. Williams, *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*, 199.

16. *Ibid.*, 202.

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In the twentieth century, postcolonialism attempted to destroy the hierarchy of cultures, namely the superiority of Western culture and the inferiority of non-Western culture, which was also defined according to the degree of paleness of the skin. More than a hundred years after Liu Shipei and Kang Youwei, racial politics became politically incorrect in mainstream discourse, although it continued to exist in people's minds. Today, Asian thought is becoming more respected in terms of historical and comparative studies. However, its relevance to contemporary society is still not seen as significant. One of the key reasons for this is that Asian thought is apparently unable to engage with contemporary technological society: apart perhaps from being able to provide an ethics of technology, be it Buddhist, Daoist or Confucian, it no longer speaks to the world of today. It is for this reason we must look into the question concerning technology.

§7. TECHNOLOGY and the LIMIT of COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The Europeanisation and Americanisation of Asia is undoubtedly underway, something that was evident in Husserl's 'Crisis of European Science', where he speaks of the 'Europeanisation of other peoples [*Europäisierung aller fremden Menschheiten*]'.

Our question is: Can Asia contribute a different perspective on the becoming of the world? Can Asian thought contribute to contemporary thought? We can only speak in the future tense here: Asian thought without doubt harbours important resources for thinking, but their relevance to contemporary society is yet to be ascertained. This doesn't mean that they have no role to play in the present. It is undeniable that Asian modes of thinking, no matter how implicitly, play a significant role in everyday life in Asian communities, as an unconscious that intervenes in the formation of tastes, gestures, and values. However, in the landscape of contemporary thought, their contribution has yet to be elaborated and developed.

Between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the West was considered to be a more advanced culture, and Europe

meant the 'world'. However, as the Japanese historian and sinologist Yuzo Mizoguchi (溝口雄三, 1932-2010) argued in his famous *China as Method* (方法としての中国), once we give up using the 'world' (i.e., the "European world") to measure China, and recognise the world as a diversity and China as a singular element of this world alongside Europe, then we can rediscover a *noodiversity*. Mizoguchi was partially responding here to research on China in Japan, which still placed China on a timeline defined by the West, on which China was inevitably revealed to be backward and behind. For Mizoguchi, concepts such as 'freedom', 'state', 'law', and 'contract' could be understood in ways other than how they are defined in European thought, and the world would then appear to us as a diversity instead of a homogeneity within which one can compare the advancement of different nations.¹⁷ Writing in 1989, Mizoguchi believed that using Europe as a monistic standard for Asia was already an obsolete approach.¹⁸ One cannot help but relate this to Nishitani's claims regarding the peripherality of Europe before the Second World War, and Patočka's concept of Post-Europe after the Second World War. According to both of them, Europe ceased to be a world power—in other words, Europe lost the privilege of being the dominant force of the world civilisation. This reopening of the world as diversity or pluralism already signifies the end of European domination. This *noodiversity* implies a diversity of intellectual histories, concepts and ideas.

However, I think that this idea of a liberation from the domination of Europe might be only an illusion, albeit one motivated by goodwill. We find this illusion—but in a rather intriguing way—in Yoshimi Takeuchi's 'Asia as Method', a precursor to Mizoguchi's *China as Method*. Takeuchi, like Mizoguchi, was also a China scholar. He compared modernisation in China with modernisation in Japan following John Dewey's observations and his own experience. Takeuchi claims that modernisation in Japan takes place largely from outside, and

17. Mizoguchi, *China as Method*, 105-7.

18. *Ibid.*, 109.

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therefore that it is superficial and will fall apart, while modernisation in China is internally generated.¹⁹ The evidence he gives to support his claim that modernisation in China arose internally is the protests during the May Fourth movement in 1919. It so happened that during this time, both John Dewey and Bertrand Russell were in China, and both of them also compared Japan with China. During the protests, the Chinese students knew that they might be arrested, but they still took to the streets. In other words, for Takeuchi, the craving for democracy in China was not caused by external forces, but rather emerged from a self-awareness and self-affirmation among the Chinese students. Takeuchi's encounter with the writings of Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936) confirmed his observation, and supported his view that modernisation in China was grounded in its 'ethnic-national characteristics'.²⁰ However, isn't Europe still the standard of reference here, since modernisation and its related mode of individuation is still considered as the standard of comparison among Asian countries and as the ultimate aim of the nation?²¹ For Takeuchi, paradoxically, modernisation also means resistance against colonial power, in the sense that the East has to catch up in order not to be defeated.²² Therefore there is no real dichotomy between the East and the West, but rather a Hegelian dialectics. This is revealed in the intriguing conclusion of 'Asia as Method':

19. Y. Takeuchi, 'Asia as Method', in *What Is Modernity?*, ed., tr. Galichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 156.

20. *Ibid.*, 164.

21. There is unfortunately a lack of distinction between modernisation and modernity in Takeuchi's writing. In 'What Is Modernity? (the Case of Japan and China)', Takeuchi gives a definition of modernity which is fundamentally Hegelian: 'the self-recognition of Europe as seen within history, that regarding of itself as distinct from the feudalistic, which Europe gained in the process of liberating itself from the feudal (a process that involved the emergence of free capital in the realm of production and the formation of personality qua autonomous and equal individuals with respect to human beings)' (54).

Takeuchi - must not change the West
- elevate West to the universality

Rather the Orient must re-embrace the West, it must change the West itself in order to realize the latter's outstanding cultural values on a greater scale. Such a rollback of culture or values would create universality. The Orient must change the West in order to further elevate those universal values that the West itself produced. This is the main problem facing East-West relations today, and it is at once a political and cultural issue.²³

How could the East elevate the West toward true universality? Is this done in order to produce a universal more modern than the West? This might be what Takeuchi means, but he often seems to be confused by the 'dual structures' he himself created.²⁴

The decline of the West had already been announced by Paul Valéry, Oswald Spengler, and many others. In his short 1931 book *Man and Technics*, Spengler argued that the West was making a huge mistake by exporting its technology:

[A]t the close of last century, the blind will-to-power began to make its decisive mistakes. Instead of keeping strictly to itself the technical knowledge that constituted their greatest asset, the 'white' peoples complacently offered it to all the world, in every Hochschule, verbally and on paper, and the astonished homage of Indians and Japanese delighted them.²⁵

22. 'The history of resistance is the history of modernization, and there is no modernization that does not pass through resistance.' Takeuchi, 'What Is Modernity?', 57.

23. Takeuchi, 'Asia as Method', 165.

24. Above, we discussed his 'dual structure of the Greater East Asia War', namely that Japan's war in Asia is a decolonial project at the same time as an imperial project.

25. O. Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, tr. C. F. Arkinton (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), 100-101.

As a result, continues Spengler, the Japanese became 'technicians of the first rank, and in their [1904-5] war against Russia they revealed a technical superiority from which their teachers were able to learn many lessons'.²⁶ Japan exposed the dilemma of technological globalisation: on one hand, the spread of technology constructs a global axis of time through which European modernity becomes the synchronising metric of all civilisations; on the other, the same spread frees modern science and technology from being the exclusive asset of European modernity, rendering the West vulnerable to global competition. This apparent decline [*Untergang*] confirmed what Patočka and Mizoguchi were claiming. However, undoubtedly the story is not this simple.

Perhaps we can contrast this claim with what Martin Heidegger says in his 1964 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking'. Heidegger claims here that 'The end of philosophy means: the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking'.²⁷ What Heidegger means is that cybernetics is the fulfilment or realisation of Western metaphysics, and that this technological world will be the foundation of the world civilisation; therefore, even though it looks as if the world is liberated from Europe, in fact the world-civilisation will inevitably build upon European metaphysics (now in the form of technology). We might say that Heidegger was cynical, nevertheless he was not wrong. Therefore, turning to *China as Method or Asia as Method*²⁸ gives us a different intellectual history or histories, which without doubt are important for understanding the history of thought and how it was repressed by colonialism; they also affirm a pluralism which is what makes the world (no longer in a European sense) possible. However,

26. *Ibid.*

27. M. Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', in *On Time and Being*, tr. J. Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 59.

28. See also K.H. Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Desimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

this affirmation of diversity is only the first step; that is to say, it is not yet sufficient to respond to this new condition of technological planetarisation, otherwise it would quickly become nothing more than the introduction of a cultural relativism.

I have no intention of undermining the significance of Takuchi, Mizoguchi, and other scholars who have been on the same front fighting against Western hegemony, indeed I have a great deal of respect for intellectual historians and postcolonialist scholars who give us different landscapes of thought than those we had become accustomed to taking for granted. I just want to suggest that we have to go further by tackling the question of technology, which has been conceptually underestimated during modernisation in Asia. In general, during the process of modernisation, technology is considered merely an instrument. We may recall how, during modernisation in the second half of the nineteenth century, East Asian countries thought that they could master Western technologies using their own thought. The British historian Arnold Toynbee raised an interesting question in his 1952 Reith Lectures for the BBC: Why did the Chinese and Japanese refuse European visitors in the sixteenth century, but allow them to enter their countries in the nineteenth century? His answer was that in the sixteenth century the Europeans wanted to export both religion and technology to East Asia, and Asians realised that that would mean a change in their form of life. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, according to Toynbee, something happened in Europe: technology and religion became separated (this is a passage heavily commented on and criticised by Carl Schmitt).²⁹ In the nineteenth century, the Europeans understood that it was more effective to just export technology without Christianity. And the Asian countries easily accepted that technology was something inessential and instrumental, that they were 'users' who could decide how to use them. Toynbee continues as follows:

29. See C. Schmitt, 'Die Einheit der Welt', in *Staat, Großraum, Nomos: Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1995), 496-512.

Technology operates on the surface of life, and therefore it seems practicable to adopt a foreign technology without putting oneself in danger of ceasing to be able to call one's soul one's own. This notion that, in adopting a foreign technology, one is incurring only a limited liability may, of course, be a miscalculation.³⁰

What Toynbee was saying is that technology in itself is nothing neutral; it carries particular forms of knowledge and practice, with which it obliges its users to comply. If one does not take this into consideration, one is liable to adopt a rather dualist approach, undermining the importance of technology by treating it as merely something instrumental. In Asia during this period, we find very similar slogans such as 'Chinese substance and Western function' [中體西用], 'Japanese soul and Western knowledge' [和魂洋才], or 'Eastern Dao and Western Qi' [동도서기론]. All of these movements share the conviction that Eastern thinking will be able to master Western science and technology, which are mere instruments. Today, those familiar with the criticism of dualism and modernity know that this wishful thinking is only a variation of Cartesian dualism, and it is doomed to fail since it was a product of early modernity. However, this stereotype is still prevalent in Asia, for industrialism is separated from traditional thought, except where the latter is mobilised as compensation for the catastrophe caused by the former. The problem is, however, that if we continue to undermine technology by seeing it as an instrument to be mastered by Asian thinking, or if we simply see it as inferior to any intellectual discourse, we are not far away from the attitudes of the late nineteenth century, and a modernity which we thought had been overcome will go on and on.

A similar observation and testimony is to be found in the writings of Karl Löwith, an exile in Japan from 1936 to 1941. In his

30. A. Toynbee, *The World and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 67.

'Afterword to Japanese Readers', an appendix to the Japanese translation of the long essay *European Nihilism*,³¹ Löwith commented on the problem of modernisation in Japan and the need for Japan to confront its naive adoption of Western science and technology, while also lamenting that such awareness would already come 'too late':

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Japan began to make contact with Europe, it took in European 'progress' with admirable energy and zealous speed. European culture, however, while it had advanced and conquered the entire world on the surface, had itself actually decayed internally. But, unlike the Russians in the nineteenth century, the Japanese at that time did not confront Europe in a critical manner. And what the leading figures of Europe from Baudelaire to Nietzsche saw through and sensed a crisis in, the Japanese at the beginning adopted tout court, naively and uncritically. And when they came to know the Europeans better it was already too late; the Europeans had already lost faith in their own civilization. Moreover, the Japanese never paid any attention to self-criticism—which is the best thing about the Europeans.³²

This appendix to Löwith's book is arguably more interesting than the rest of its ramblings from Hegel to Nietzsche via Flaubert, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. Löwith claims that in Europe there is a

31. K. Löwith, 'Nachwort an den japanischen Leser', in *Sämtliche Schriften 2. Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte*, 532–40. 'Afterword to Japanese Readers' (日本の読者に与える跋), in *European Nihilism* (ヨーロッパのニヒリズム), tr. Jisaburō Shibata (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1948).

32. Cited in K. Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, tr. G. Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), 176; from K. Löwith, 'Der europäische Nihilismus. Betrachtungen zur Vorgeschichte des europäischen Krieges', in *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte: Zur Kritik der Geschichtstheorie*, 533–34.

culture of self-criticism. Self-criticism, according to Löwith, sets out from a polar opposition, and finally achieves reconciliation. However, he observes that in Japan, the opposition between East and West was not taken seriously. This claim comes out of one of his observations of his Japanese students' attitude towards the West and the East. What Löwith saw was a confusing parallelism between two modes of thought that did not really make contact: Japanese students studied Western philosophy without relating those concepts such as 'will', 'freedom', and 'spirit' to Japanese thought, as if what they were learning was self-evident.³³ Löwith was amazed that his students at the university in Sendai were able to read Hegel in German, Plato in Greek, Hume in English, the Old Testament in Hebrew, and that his assistant was able to read mediaeval German literature in its original language, which even Löwith himself didn't understand. However, he lamented that 'all these books were merely books for them, unrelated to their proper historical background and unrelated to the Japanese feeling and thinking'.³⁴ Löwith characterised this tendency in Japanese culture as a 'unity without opposition [*gegen-satzlose Einheit*]'.³⁵ Whether this observation is accurate or not is a question I have attempted to analyse in *Art and Cosmotechnics*, therefore we will not elaborate upon it here.³⁶ However, the phenomenon he

33. Löwith, 'Der europäische Nihilismus', 537.

34. K. Löwith, 'Japanese Westernization and Moral Foundation', 546. It is interesting to note that the late Löwith seemed to have changed his attitude when he compared Japan with America. In Japan, he was able to teach in German as a European philosophy, but in America, he could not be a European anymore. This separation that he found problematic in Japan seems to be a countermodel to America, and in this sense, Japan allows an old Europe to co-exist within its own culture. I am grateful to professor Tanehisa Otake for sharing this observation with me, which he presented in an unpublished paper with the title 'Karl Löwith and Japanese Thinking That Consists of Two Floors: A Contribution to Intercultural Aesthetics' (2010).

35. Löwith, 'Der europäische Nihilismus', 538n9.

observed, namely the mutual irrelevance of Western knowledge and Eastern thinking, remains a problem today. As we saw in the introduction above, Nishitani found it necessary to respond to Löwith's formulation: '[W]hat [Löwith] says is true [...]. As a European, Löwith let the question lie there. It is our problem, a problem of will.'³⁷ For Nishitani, the problem is even more serious than Löwith's description implies. Because there is a continuity in the West from Greek philosophy to Christian theology and then to modern science and technology, even when science and technology become deterministic, other traditions can still actively participate in it. However, Nishitani states,

For us in Japan, things are different. In the past, Buddhism and Confucian thought constituted such a basis, but they have already lost their power, leaving a total void and vacuum in our spiritual ground. Our age probably represents the first time since the beginning of Japanese history that such a phenomenon has occurred.³⁸

The 'total void' here is alarming, since it implies a complete disorientation. Nishitani's response was logically sound and probably cannot be improved upon: 'the point is to recover the creativity that mediates the past to the future and the future to the past (*but not to restore a bygone era*)'.³⁹ This resonates of course with Heidegger's approach of returning to the Greeks without restoring a Greek epoch, as well as with Masao Maruyama's proposal to reactivate the *kosō* (古層, literally 'ancient layer') from the present.⁴⁰ However, as we have tried to show already in *The Question Concerning Technology in China*,

36. See Y. Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (New York and Minneapolis: e-flux/University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

37. Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 176.

38. *Ibid.*, 175.

39. *Ibid.*, 179.

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Nishitani's rejection of modern science and technology is largely responsible for the failure of his project of overcoming modernity. A response proper to our epoch seems to necessarily proceed in two important directions. Firstly, concerning the relevance of Asian thought to the technological epoch in which we are living, I feel that the obsolescence or absence of Asian thought in the landscape of contemporary thought owes to the fact that it failed to address the question of technology beyond a classical humanism which emphasises the value of human morality and responsibility. This humanism might have functioned well in certain socio-economical settings when technologies were limited to simple tools, but once the technological condition radically changed, for example with a high degree of automation of machines and a large technological system, it might cease to produce the same effect within society. Since Asian thought set itself against technology in an opposition between tradition and modernity, it has been slowly retreating to the status of new age therapy as antidote to the burnout society, even in Asia. We therefore have a techno-scientific modernisation in parallel with a preservation of tradition or traditional thought. The separate existence of the two in parallel cannot last long, though, since it only presents a melancholia which will finally be left behind by rapid technological transformation; everything of the past comes to take the form of nostalgic cultural commodities, i.e., memories become souvenirs. Therefore, this parallelism has to be rethought, and for traditions to have value other than as projects of preservation, it is imperative that Asian thought is rethought or even reconstructed from the perspective of technology; otherwise it will always fail to address contemporary society; and if the debate today continues to be dominated by 'authentic' interpretations

40. See M. Maruyama (丸山眞男), 'The Kōso of Historical Consciousness' (「歴史意識」の古層), in *Collected Work of Masao Maruyama Vol. 10* (『丸山眞男集 第10巻』) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2003), where Maruyama starts with a rereading of the myths in the *Kojiki* (古事記, 'Records of Ancient Matters') in order to demonstrate the *kōso* as a force which is always at work throughout history.

of Asian thought (although these are not without historical importance), it can only fail. In his earlier work, Bernard Stiegler attempted to reconstruct European philosophy from the perspective of technology, and proposed technology as first philosophy. The reconstruction of Asian thought has to set out in a similar but differently nuanced way: it is not a question of comparative philosophy, but rather of reading the history of philosophy and exposing its limits from the perspective of technology.

This is only the first step, however, because such a project cannot avoid the essentialising tendency, and therefore risks falling back into an ethnocentrism, or even worse, a tribalism. This brings us to the second direction, or second step, which concerns what I call the individuation of thinking. This second direction is closely linked to the first, and we will explain why below, but for now let us explore the meaning of the individuation of thinking.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we take the concept of individuation from Gilbert Simondon. For Simondon, individuation explains how an individual comes to be an individual. Simondon critiqued traditional theories of individuation in Western classical philosophy, namely hylomorphism and atomism: since hylomorphism already presupposes the individuated form, it is something to be explained by individuation rather than an explanation of it; as for atomism, it is rejected on the grounds that it relies on mere chance events, and fails to explain the necessity of individuation. The critique of hylomorphism also rejects the promotion of form [*eidōs*] as essence [*ousia*], because, according to Simondon, it is genesis rather than form that accounts for the individuality of a being, a thinking, or a culture. By the same token, the essentialisation of culture does not facilitate the individuation of thinking, but only reinforces a reluctance to change.

According to Simondon, individuation presupposes a system full of incompatibility and tensions; when a certain threshold is reached, the system begins to destructure and restructure, before reaching a metastability. Simondon frequently employed the example of crystallisation to demonstrate the process of individuation. Consider

a supersaturated solution of sodium chloride (salt) in which tension between the positive and negative ions arrives at a threshold. Now, when a small amount of energy is applied, the solution starts forming crystals as a way to resolve the tensions, while at the same time heat is released and triggers crystallisation in other regions of the solution. This crystallisation will stop when the system arrives at a metastable state, namely when it becomes relatively stable but not at equilibrium (absolute stability). Crystallisation is only a primitive example of the individuation of physical beings, and it is far from being able to fully account for the individuation of a living being or a psychical being. Nevertheless, it represents a paradigm of individuation in which relations and system, rather than substance and form, are the determining factors in the process. A system sets boundaries so that one can isolate the analysis of relations included in the system. Individuation presupposes tension or, more precisely, incompatibility in the system. Individuation means the discovery of incompatibilities and the resolution of them in order to arrive at a metastable state. We hesitate to call it dialectical, because individuation is not necessarily dialectical—on the contrary, dialectics is a form of individuation.

Simondon's example provides us with some key elements to understand what we call the individuation of thinking here. By elaborating on the individuation of thinking, we also wish to extend his theory of individuation, which, in his *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, he limits to the levels of the physical being (crystallography), living being (modern biology) and psychical being (Jungian psychology).⁴¹ If we look for an incompatibility (therefore also differences) between Asian thought and European thought (and this is not limited to only Asia and Europe) against the backdrop of our own epoch, it is not that we want to essentialise Europe or Asia, but rather that we want to identify a condition in which an individuation of thinking could become possible.

41. See G. Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, tr. T. Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

§8. INDIVIDUATION OF THINKING and the PURSUIT of the UNIVERSAL

In the conversation between Heidegger ('the Inquirer') and the Japanese guest quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, we can hear the embarrassment of the Japanese guest: Asia has been imitating Europe in terms of technological and economic development, but a profound dialogue, a 'true encounter with European existence', is still missing. A true dialogue is not only about communication but rather individuation—therefore it is less a question of what is called *thinking*, and more of the *individuation of thinking*.

I want to make a distinction here between individuation and cross-breeding or *métissage*, or what Édouard Glissant calls creolisation. Creolisation normally means that elements of different cultures are blended together to create a new culture, but for Glissant it means something more. Creolisation is like a rhizome that creates multiple roots. For Glissant, creolisation is a diversification, 'one of the poetic dreams of the expanding West', but at the same time an 'antidote to the universal empire that this expansion subsumed'.⁴² This diversification through language, literature, and technology is essential for our imagination of a world to come: Glissant asks 'How is it possible to come out of seclusion if only two or three languages continue to monopolize the irrefutable powers of technology and their manipulation, which are imposed as the sole path to salvation and energized by their actual effects?'⁴³ To give a concrete example, during the colonisation of Hong Kong, the locals invented a drink called *yuenyewng* (literally mandarin duck), which is a mixture of milk tea (a strong black tea with condensed milk) and coffee. Therefore, this kind of *métissage* might be important for one's everyday life once it develops into a habit, and it might stand as an identity of a community, but

42. E. Glissant, 'Creolization in the Making of the Americas', *Caribbean Quarterly* 54:1-2 (2008): 82.

43. E. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, tr. B. Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 108.

it doesn't take thinking further. On the contrary, thinking is not a patchwork: it actualises itself not through collage, but by individuating itself. I am doubtful whether creolisation is equivalent to what we call individuation of thinking here, although they could both be seen as efforts to diversify. If creolisation could be understood as a historical process, maybe the individuation of thinking could be understood as an analytic model, and may give us some hints about future strategies.

We should say a few words here also on the difference between the individuation of thinking and what Peter Sloterdijk called Eurotaoism, 'holistic fast food' or 'tender aquarian chop-suey'. Sloterdijk went to the ashram of the Indian new age guru Godman Rajneesh in 1979 and stayed there for four months. In an interview with the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Sloterdijk recalls:

Something I once called the eastward expansion of reason began. With this impulse came a profound uplifting of my being. I was suddenly freed from the psychosocial depression that had hung over my life and that of my generation.⁴⁴

Ten years later (*Eurotaoism* was published in 1989) Sloterdijk realised that this uplifting experience of the relief of his psychosocial depression was synonymous with the West's Asiamania or its desire for a renaissance of antiquity, even if that antiquity is no longer Western but rather comes in a foreign form.⁴⁵ Retrospectively, this Asiamania was also a byproduct of globalization, as exhausted young

44. P. Sloterdijk and S. Michaelstein, "Man denkt an mich, also bin ich" (2014), <<https://ss-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/wissen/man-denkt-an-mich-also-bin-ich-80778>>.

45. 'If a logic of the Renaissance really exists, then the new Asiamania should be read as a sign that creative members of the post-Christian civilization hope to come to an understanding of themselves by grasping at antiquity once again—but this time not so that it can be appropriated as one's own antiquity, but as antiquity in a foreign form.' Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, 26.

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American and European expats had the privilege of meeting their spiritual guru and enjoying the exoticness of Asia. It is the mis-en-scène of a Hegelian comedy in which, by travelling to the East, European *Geist* recognises its own provenance; however, now the Eastern world is transformed into a replica of the Western world, and the 'eastward expansion of reason' is seen as the beginning of an unhappy consciousness.

Apparently, Sloterdijk's observation that apocalypticism has already triumphed as the goal of the world history has been proved right.⁴⁶ However, the task of thinking is still far from being elaborated. Heidegger's return to the presocratics in his quest for the thinking of Being is still a pursuit of a European essence against its post-European destiny. The individuation of thinking, which we set up as a task of a post-European philosophy, has to spread its wings before the dusk falls. I want to give two examples of how the individuation of thinking could be understood, and I hope with these two examples to be able to clarify the opportunity and how it could help us to think about the future, if we still believe in philosophy. I will take Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945), two representative figures of twentieth-century East Asian thinking, as examples with which to sketch a *method* that was followed in practice, without being explicitly elaborated.

Mou Zongsan performed an individuation of Chinese thinking through and with Kantianism, which for him stood as the culmination of Western thinking. Mou set out by creating an incompatibility between Chinese thought and Western thought through his reading of Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon. Kant limits scientific knowledge to phenomena, since human beings only

46. 'The warning disaster is itself supposed to be the disaster warning. The actually occurring transformation into light is supposed to critically examine our civilizational process. Those who follow this logic to its conclusion will arrive at a fatal conclusion: only an apocalypse could act as a convincing warning against an apocalypse.' Ibid., 41.

have sensible intuition and therefore can only experience phenomena. This is also the limit of scientific knowledge, beyond which there are only postulates and speculations which may fall prey to *Schadirmerei*, overenthusiasm or fanaticism. Opposed to the phenomenon is the noumenon, which can only be grasped via an intellectual intuition, something which is absent in human beings, and present only in God. In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, noumenon also bears the name thing-in-itself. Mou Zongsan claimed that if the strength of Western thought lies in its theorisation of phenomena, which gives rise to science and technology, the strength of Eastern thought lies in its pursuit of the noumenon (where the noumenal entities are not treated as postulates). Now, Chinese thought and Western thought are opposed via this reading of Kant. We find here an incompatibility that is not immediately resolved: Chinese thought cannot be reduced to Western thought, and vice versa. With his reading, Mou Zongsan wants to overcome this incompatibility, but also seeks to show that it is possible to give a new framework to Chinese thought, so that it can also accommodate the possibility of modern science and technology. This leads to Mou Zongsan's reinterpretation of the dictum 'one heart opens two doors' from the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* [大乘起信論]. That is to say, Chinese thought, even though it is centred on the understanding of the noumenon, is able to produce a theory of knowledge based on the phenomenon through a self-negation [自我坎陷]. Mou Zongsan's interpretation of Kant and especially the noumenon is not uncontroversial,⁴⁷ but for us his philosophical method is more important than the defects of his interpretation.

Chinese historians of philosophy are sceptical of Mou's writing since, according to them, Mou distorted Chinese thought by Westernising it, and therefore Mou's elaboration of Chinese thought is far from being authentic, and may even be completely misleading. This criticism is rather tragic, since it fails to understand that Mou was actually looking for a different framework within which an individuation of thinking could take place. If Chinese philosophers limit themselves

47. See *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, §18.

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to Chinese thought and dedicate themselves solely to the elaboration of the uniqueness of Chinese thought, an individuation of thinking will not take place; instead, we will only be reminded again and again of the absolute difference between self and other. It is probably not uncommon to find in the East experts in this or that Western philosopher, but it is rare to find an original thinker. Recall that above, we saw how Löwith (1943) lamented that his Japanese students were not able to relate their studies of Western philosophy to their own tradition, and according to him, in the Japan of that time there was only one original thinker: Kitaro Nishida, whose methodology, however, remained still an adaption of the Western one.⁴⁸

Nishida began by asserting that the central question in Western philosophy is Being and that in Eastern philosophy it is Nothing (Nishida was inspired by Zen Buddhism, as he had set himself the task of producing a communication between Zen and philosophy). It is debatable whether this categorisation can be justified or not. However, for Nishida, Eastern thought and Western thought have different beginnings, namely Being and Nothing, and this opposition also implies an incompatibility between Western and Eastern

48. 'The Japanese have today only one original thinker, Nishida, who is comparable to any of the living philosophers of the West in depth of thought and subtlety[...]. But even this man's work is no more than an adaption of Western methodology, the use of it for a logical clarification of the fundamental Japanese intuitions about the world. He attempts to understand in terms of Western philosophy the Buddhist experience and notion of "nothingness".' Löwith, 'The Japanese Mind: A Picture of the Mentality that We Must Understand if We are to Conquer', in *Weltgeschichte und Heilgeschichte: Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 360. In the beautiful biography by M. Yusa, *Zen & Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitaro* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), a book which is essential for understanding the intellectual trajectory of Nishida and his personal life, we read about Nishida's correspondence with Husserl, Rickert, and others via Japanese students studying in Germany, and learn that Husserl claimed that he failed to see the originality of Nishida's thought (132).

Mou

thought. Nishida, however, wanted to take up the challenge to invent a thinking that would be *more universal* than Western thought. Questioning the universality of formal logic, Nishida asks to what extent it is only a special feature of the life of history:

Must we assume western logic to be the only logic and the eastern way of thinking simply a less-developed form of it? [...] [W]illing as I am to recognize western logic as a magnificent systematic development, and intent as I am on studying it first as one type of world logic, I wonder if even western logic is anything more than one special feature of the life of history [...]. Things like formal, abstract logic will remain the same everywhere, but concrete logic as the form of concrete knowledge cannot be independent of the specific feature of historical life.⁴⁹

Therefore, Nishida would have to discover a new logic which is *truly* universal. On his late work Nishida came up with his famous logic of *basho*, which established the so-called 'Nishida philosophy'. The logic of *basho* is an attempt to reconcile Being, which occupies space, and Nothing, which negates space, through a philosophy of place.⁵⁰ Nishida reverses the Aristotelian logic which considers subject as substance and predicate as accident.⁵¹ He desubstantialises the subject by putting it in a place of the predicate, or in the field of consciousness. For example, when we say a rose is red, then according to Aristotelian

49. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 36.

50. K. Nishida, 'The Logic of Basho', in *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitaro*, tr. J.W.M. Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

51. In a letter to Risaku Mutai, Nishida wrote "This essay, 'Basho,' is not yet clear, but what I endeavored to do was to define consciousness logically as "that which becomes the grammatical predicate and not the grammatical subject" over against Aristotle's definition of substance as "that which becomes the grammatical subject and not the grammatical predicate." Quoted in Yusa, *Zen & Philosophy*, 205.

logic, the rose is the subject and red is the predicate, so the predicate is a property of the rose, hence being red is subordinate to the rose as substance and grammatical subject; Nishida reverses this by placing the rose in the predicate red. Red is not simply a property of the rose, because now the rose is placed in red. The concept of the *basho* is that of a field of consciousness which contains. If we continue by saying that 'red is a colour', then we also place 'red' in the *basho* called 'colour', and this *basho* is also that which allows non-red to appear. Non-red is the negation of red, it negates red to nothing, so it is the nothing of 'red', but it is not that which yields redness, since both redness and non-redness are contained in another *basho*. This is also the case with actions, since each action can be identified with a causality situated in time and space. If we understand the concept of *basho* as 'that which contains', then we will find that *basho* is contained in another *basho*, and so on ad infinitum. Now, this might seem to risk giving rise to a bad 'infinity' in Hegel's sense—a problem Aristotle also encountered in seeking a first cause, and which prompted him to assign the non-moving mover as the first cause. Nishida designates absolute nothingness as the ultimate container. However, didn't Nishida therefore just replace the Prime Mover with Absolute Nothingness? And does the Absolute Nothingness itself have a place? If yes, then isn't it particular? If not, then is it not only an abstract universal? Nishida has to connect his logic of *basho* with a philosophy of history, and the absolute nothingness will have to be situated in a social-historical world.⁵²

Let us restate here that it is not our aim to elaborate on the philosophies of Mou Zongsan and Kitaro Nishida, both of which deserve more dedicated monographs.⁵³ What we are seeking to do here is

52. This may sound perplexing at first glance, namely that the universal is again resituated in the local; it is perhaps consistent with one of Nishida's core concepts: oppositional unity, which was partially inspired by Nicholas of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*; in *Art and Cosmology*, I developed 'oppositional unity' and 'oppositional continuity' from a different source, namely Daoism.

to explain how an individuation of thinking was already practiced in the work of Mou Zongsan and Nishida. Both Mou and Nishida wanted to appropriate Western philosophy, while they were also reluctant to let go of the East; their thinking individuates in the tension between *Heimatlosigkeit* and *Heimat*. What Mou and Nishida did was not comparative philosophy; and therefore it is not entirely missing the point to criticise them for having westernised Eastern thought and to question their authenticity. But precisely, if there is a reason to oppose Eastern thinking to Western thinking, it is only so as to set up a condition of individuation, not to affirm a uniqueness or an exceptionalism. Therefore, this opposition that we find in Mou Zongsan and Nishida is not about essentialising Chinese thought or Japanese thought and making East and West strangers to one another. Instead, we might say that this opposition is only strategic, to the extent that it elucidates an incompatibility to be resolved and calls for a new structure to emerge.

There hasn't been any Mou Zongsan or Nishida in Europe yet. It is true that there is increasing interest in Chinese philosophy and Japanese philosophy under the umbrella of comparative philosophy. But where does comparison lead? Here we shouldn't forget about the work of François Jullien and other sinologists, however. Jullien often emphasised that he was *not* a comparative philosopher and that he was not interested in such a discipline, and he had good reason to say this, because his work is not about historical studies on the exchange of ideas, but rather on the gap or divergence [*écart*] between

53. For a more systematic comparison between the two philosophers, see Tomomi Asakura (朝倉友海), *Does East Asia Have No Philosophy? Kyoto School and New Confucianism* (「東アジアに哲学はない」のち: 京都学派と新儒家) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2014). Asakura's book is probably one of the first and so far the only systematic comparison available, which also interrogates the future of East Asian philosophy. Asakura even asks if it is possible to develop a unified theory between the two schools, a question I believe to be ill-posed, see 205–18.

two philosophies.⁵⁴ In other words, Jullien's work could be read as an effort to establish the condition of the individuation of thinking. Perhaps this view will not be easily accepted, because his approach could be reproached for positioning Chinese thought as the exotic other or the absolute other, hence condemning itself to orientalism or neo-orientalism. However, such accusations can only originate from an illusory idea of authenticity and authority.

The individuation of thinking has never become a subject in contemporary philosophical discussions. Instead, we only have comparative philosophy and postcolonialism. But aren't these themselves projects of searching for *Heimat*? The history of colonisation has to be remembered and condemned from generation to generation. If decolonisation in the non-West means negating the West, it is still a search for *Heimat*—that which is not yet contaminated or that which is able to contain the impure without being affected by it. Walter Dignolo was right when he said that the formation of nation states of the formally colonised countries wasn't decolonisation, but the continuation of colonisation.⁵⁵ And on the other hand, if the West wants to decolonise itself by imposing a political correctness upon discourse, it also risks refusing the possibility of individuation by pretending that incompatibilities don't exist. It is very probable that colonialism and imperialism will continue to exist, disguising themselves in different forms, for example the market, soft power, etc. Neither the state nor the *Großraum* will prepare for the individuation of thinking; on the contrary, they will only eliminate any such possibility, because enmity is the condition of its own survival.

Thinking doesn't individuate itself; thinking individuates through individual humans, through every one of us. It is through the individuation of thinking that we search for the universal, because the

54. F. Jullien, *L'écart et l'entre Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire sur l'altérité* (Paris: Galilée, 2012).

55. See W.D. Dignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

universal is not something given a priori and to which everyone is subordinated. This would only be a linear and most obvious form of universality. There is a non-linear form of universality which could be understood in Kantian language as purposiveness without purpose, pleasure without interest. If we assume that there is already the universal, and go on to apply it to different things in the world, we have only recognised linear universality; but we are still far from understanding this other universality, which is not yet given. Nonetheless, it exists, and demands a new interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis*. It is the task of reason to look for the universal; and reason can only progress toward the universal through the individuation of thinking—in other words, by recognising differences, it searches for restructuralisation and diversification, and constantly does so.

We now return to the first direction concerning the relation between Asian thought and technology. Earlier we said that there is an intimate relation between these two directions, because they inform one another. We no longer live in the same epoch as Nishida and Mou Zongsan, who in their systematic writings were trying to construct a broader framework into which to absorb Western thinking (but also to go beyond it). If for Nishida and Mou Zongsan the medium of individuation is writing, today, we might need to identify other mediums if not new mediums. And that is how the question concerning technology reenters our discourse.

If the question "What is Asia?" is valid today, it is not as an attempt to raise an ontological question, to essentialise something common to all Asian countries; nor to construct a *geistige Gestalt* in the way that Husserl or Valéry did. Such attempts will inevitably end in failure. Instead, we have been trying to show that it is difficult if not impossible to give any definite answer to such a question. Our question was rather, given such difference and asymmetry, what could Asia contribute to contemporary thought today?

We know that today, in terms of technological development, Asian countries are moving at a much faster pace than most European countries. There is probably more modern architecture in Asian

metropolitan cities than in those of Europe. Capitalism finds little resistance in the lands of Asia today, since the economy has been the priority and therefore also the most important indicator of national pride—a pride measured in GDP. Technological acceleration and economic growth have increasingly been bundled together, especially when digitalisation became a technical tendency that no country could refuse. Certain accelerationist proposals suggest that, with technological acceleration toward full automation, it is possible to dialectically negate capitalism. This imaginary is projected onto East Asia, since the East Asian countries have been highly modernised and the technological infrastructure allows faster development. However, accelerating technology does not contribute to biodiversity any more than it does to technodiversity or even technodiversity.⁵⁶ Accelerating technology will only give us a world that is becoming more and more uniform, for technology is knowledge concretised and materialised; it is the continuation of what Mizoguchi criticised, namely the West as the universal, a concept of universal which moreover is only a linear one.

It remains to be seen how Asian thought could contribute to the reconfiguration of the technological world. Maybe at least, as a first step, it can contribute to the reconfiguration of technological thought (i.e., following the correlations between biodiversity, noodiversity, and technodiversity). The two inquiries into individuation that we discussed in these two chapters are attempts to renew the discussion on 'overcoming modernity'. The attempts to undermine the 'overcoming modernity' movement by viewing it as a discourse of aesthetics, or a nationalist and culturist ideology, or as testifying to a blindness towards capitalism that appeared after the Second World

56. On the relation between biodiversity, noodiversity and technodiversity, see Y. Hui, 'For a Planetary Thinking', *e-flux* 114 (December 2020), <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/366703/for-a-planetary-thinking/>>; for a more elaborated and systematic exposition of the subject, see Y. Hui, *Machine and Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2024).

War in Japan don't really offer us a genuine occasion to philosophise. Instead, we will have to confront the Marxist critique by looking for new models of individuation in face of the new technologies that serve consumerism; we will also have to confront the temptation of essentialisation by facilitating the individuation of thinking. This search of a new theory of individuation will be a task of speculative philosophy: the search for a theory which necessarily extends and enlarges the classical theory of individuation which searched for a principle of individuation in order to explain the particularity of being. It is only with such a speculative philosophy of thinking that it will become possible to re-orient ourselves in the epoch of *Heimatlosigkeit*, and to respond to what Heidegger once said concerning the end of philosophy marked by cybernetics: 'The end of philosophy means: the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking.'

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