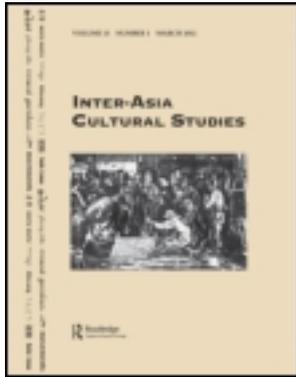


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Kuan-Hsing Chen

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## Takeuchi Yoshimi's 1960 'Asia as Method' lecture

Kuan-Hsing CHEN

**ABSTRACT** *Takeuchi Yoshimi was a leading thinker in Postwar Japan. The originality of his work has been rediscovered in the past decade. Based on the present author's Asia as Method—toward De-Imperialization (2010) as a point of dialogue, this essay rereads Takeuchi's intuitive formulation of 'Asia as Method' in the 1960 and tries to pinpoint different characteristics of knowledge conditions between now and then. It discovers that the 'Inter-Asia methodology' imagined in Takeuchi's time is still a viable proposition to be implemented today, if we hope to break away with the dominant mode of thought that has been trapped in the colonial structure of academic institutions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Takeuchi Yoshimi, Asia as method, Inter-Asia methodology, mode of thought

Instead of repeating what has been done elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> I will take this opportunity to trace back to an earlier moment of East Asian intellectual history so that a genealogical relation with Inter-Asia Cultural Studies can be established, which will connect the contemporary formation with its predecessors whose concerns have moved and shaped the project to follow. More specifically, I will concentrate on Takeuchi Yoshimi's 1960 'Asia as Method' lecture.

Takeuchi has been a controversial figure, attacked by the right and the left in the prewar and immediate postwar eras. The recent revival of his thought in Japan testifies to the historical reality that a creative and critical thinker cannot be buried simply by one's political tendencies. Neither an expert of modern Japanese thought, nor a reader of Japanese language to access existing research on Takeuchi, I limit my scope of analysis to this intuitive lecture.

A lecture is a peculiar genre of publication. Oftentimes, a speaker does not have enough time and space to work out one's argument with meticulous precision and to expand the discussions in detail. The advantage to read the text of a lecture is that it is more straightforward than fully developed writing, and hence may well be easier to

understand; and the disadvantage is that the problematic spoken about tends to be briefly touched upon and is not gone into depth. Takeuchi's lecture, in my reading, is a highly intuitive one, full of lights flying in the air. We will have to slow down to read his text closely in the mode of an imaginary dialogue. For my part, the basis of the dialogue is not simply what I have developed in *Asia as Method* (published in 2010), but also the physical and emotional experiences acquired through moving across Asia in the past two decades, which will be mobilized when necessary. Before entering the text, I shall emphasize again that I rely on English and Chinese translations of Takeuchi's text to arrive at partial understanding on the level of theoretical abstraction. This exercise is to fulfill a delayed will to supplement what *Asia as Method* could not engage with, and therefore dialogue with Takeuchi's 'Asia as Method' is an attempt to remove a deep psychic and intellectual regret.

Takeuchi's 'Asia as Method' was given as a lecture to presumably members of the critical intellectual circle in Tokyo, around January 1960, and subsequently published in 1961. If you read Takeuchi's work carefully, you would have a sense that he is modest but nevertheless honest and straight.

He begins his talk by saying that he is not someone who is capable of giving a systematic lecture but could not really refuse the sincere invitation, so he comes. Indeed, reading the text makes one feel that he does not organize his thoughts logically, step by step; he discusses issues in different blocks and then jumps back and forth along the timeline within a block. But in the end one does grasp clearly the points he wants to make. So when he says that he cannot talk systematically, it means that when tracing events back historically, linear progression is not the way history works. How to cut close to the reality and to present in a way to help the audience grasp the driving force of the speaker's articulation of the problematic, and to generate vibrating effects between the speaker and the audience is what is at stake.

Takeuchi's first point circles around his own involvement in the Study of China. He talks about the initial encounter with the field in a bit of an embarrassing tone, indicating that it is 'something personal' (Takeuchi 2005a: 149). I take this 'private' to mean that it is prohibited to speak about personal matters in public for Japanese intellectual practice. This something private turns out to be an attempt to inform the audience of the evolving mind-set of how he first entered the field. Once starting the narrative, he jumps back and forth again. It was first around 1934 after graduating from Tokyo University that he organized with other friends to establish a society to study Chinese literature, including publishing a journal to translate modern Chinese literature. When the war started in 1941, it became difficult to publish the journal and the society ended in 1943. Then he jumps back to talk about the deep and painful sentiment before establishing the Society. In his view, there was a huge gap between the China understood and thought about by Japanese and the real existence of (contemporary) China. What has contributed to his painful agony about the gap is the key problematic of the entire lecture, which we have to follow patiently to understand the conditions of pain throughout his talk. This

painful gap is what Mizoguchi Yuzo (1996) calls the 'Study of China without China'.

The more immediate reflection is how he sees the notion of literature as a field of inquiry:

My field is literature, which I define quite broadly. Here I take as my object of study a nation's people in regard to their thoughts and feelings, through this (although at a much deeper level), their everyday existence. It is the task of literature to examine this everyday life or existence from the perspective of heart as opposed to from that of things, and I have thought to maintain this attitude throughout all of my work. (Takeuchi 2005a: 150)

I do not have the historical knowledge to tell whether the 'methodology' he put forwards here contradicted the mainstream Japanese academic community's take on literature at the time. But in this text Takeuchi is evidently challenging formalism and textualism. For him, literature is a medium to enter everyday life, and the object of study is the 'soil of everyday life' which generates feelings and thoughts. What is at stake is how to grasp this everyday life of the 'nation's people'. This cannot be done from the surface of life, but has to enter the 'heart' of the everyday existence. In this sense the study of literature is to understand, share and sympathize with the material and mental conditions of people living in that specific nation. Isn't this precisely the task for cultural studies?

To use contemporary language, Takeuchi liberates the narrow understanding of the object of literary study from 'literary' text and elevates to the wider level of 'thought and culture' or the endemic soil (*feng-tu*) upon which people live out their life and create and produce work like literature. Without being able to comprehend the larger historical environment as the seedbed to conditions of life, one cannot grasp how subjectivity is shaped and formed. To move one step further, his unique contribution is to insist on the mode of thoughts and feelings of a nation's

people, who are social subjects sharing the same language environment and historical events. These 'people' are in some contexts expressed as 'Japanese people', which is then and now understood as being politically incorrect, or even closer to right-wing populist interpellation. It is exactly in this political incorrectness that Takeuchi's mind-set resonates with many third-world intellectuals of his time and even after. Unlike their counterparts living in advanced capitalist societies, anti-colonial intellectuals and writers in the Third world could not afford to indulge in the individualist sadness of the one's own life in the world, but have to account for the psychic life of people's inner difficulties. Moreover, they tend to imagine on the ground about their own people, rather than abstractly address to the entire mankind in universalist terms. Perhaps, this is exactly where the Japanese left (politically insisting on class politics and looking down on nationalist sentiment) has given up the popular energy to the right; and this is where the politically-correct leftist condemns Takeuchi to speak right-wing politics. History proves that anti-Japanese nationalism still operates within the limit of Japanese nationalism, but moves away from and gives away 'a nation's people's feelings and thoughts' to the politically incorrect right-wing sector. Is there not anything to reflect upon by the left, beyond Japanese intellectual circles? Right or left is not the basis for 'a nation's people' to act. To disassociate from 'a nation's people's feelings and thoughts' is the common practice of the elitist left, and has, in effect, resulted in the left's exit from history.

Perhaps, because of Takeuchi's stand on literature, he found the courses offered around Chinese literature in Tokyo University very boring and unsatisfying, and he said he seldom went to school, and the diploma was gained carelessly. His frankness gives us a chance to see the embarrassing conditions of liberal education, which cannot offer students a lively knowledge environment. Is this crisis resolved today? Besides issuing a diploma what has a university to offer?

If university life is nothing but boredom, then the best thing to do is to escape. Eager to leave Japan (and there was no need for a visa to enter China at the time), Takeuchi in his sophomore year bought a ship ticket to join the tourist group heading for Manchuguo, from where he went to Beijing on his own. Once arriving in Beijing, he suddenly realizes 'the dream or vision that had all this time been lying dormant inside me, a longing within my heart' (Takeuchi 2005a: 150). What is this dream? He is deeply moved by Beijing because 'I felt extremely close to the people there. I was moved by the fact that these people seemed to have the same ideas as I did' (Takeuchi 2005a: 150). This strong emotion of being moved has to do with Takeuchi's resentment towards the conditions of knowledge in which he has lived in Tokyo:

Although my classmates and I were all registered for Chinese literature, not one of us had imagined that there were actually people on the Chinese mainland who resembled ourselves. In thinking about this afterward, I acutely realized that this was due to the kind of education we had received. (Takeuchi 2005a: 150)

Courses such as history and geography taught at school involve no real people, and therefore we cannot see and sense 'people who resembled ourselves'; not to mention the widely spread sentiment that there is no need to learn the life of the Chinese people and the anxiety shared by the Japanese. Takeuchi's sense of being moved by the people and life in China cannot be found in Europe and America, or at least not the same kind of emotional feel. He says, 'If one went to Europe or the United States, there would be a sense that people there are superior to or better than oneself' (Takeuchi 2005a: 150). It is because Europe and US are defined by our nationalist modernization agenda as the objects for us to catch up/overtake, that's why we feel they are superior and that's precisely why China is in exactly the same condition to share the anxiety and complex of having to catch up/overtake with Euro-America.

The problematics Takeuchi encounters are a widely shared mental condition of the Third World people. Intellectuals orient our eyes towards Euro-America and identify with them 'upwards', with the hope that one day we can be as 'superior' as they are. When facing people who are like us, we turn our head away to avoid seeing the shadow of ourselves. But what makes Takeuchi different is precisely that he does not turn his head away and is deeply moved and wants to know what is on people's minds. He hopes to understand how the Chinese confront their difficulties so that he can find keys to deal with his own questions and problems back home.

This is what 'Asia as Method' is all about.

For Takeuchi, the problems confronting Euro-America are different from ours. The troubled questions on his mind cannot find resonance there and cannot find interlocutors who share the same structural anxiety; and in the end, the back and forth dialogic process cannot take place to clear his own problems. This highly intuitive excitement (to finally find a key) is, however, blocked by the barrier of language. 'In reflecting upon how to resolve these questions, I felt it was a fatal problem on my part that I was unable to enter into the hearts of the many people who were living similar lives in the neighboring country' (Takeuchi 2005a: 151), Takeuchi says. His aroused excitement comes from those unclear, ambiguous, unspeakable feelings, although at the same time it makes him uncomfortable. Today, we may term this as anxious tension and the intellectual emotions as an attempt to untie the commonly shared psychic complex so as to enter the hearts of people dwelling in our neighboring countries. But without the capacity to speak and read local-national language so as to communicate with the people there, one feels hopelessly defeated, trapped and 'fatal'. It is this fatal defeat motivating Takeuchi's drive to learn Chinese literature.

When the inner demand cannot be satisfied by the existing conditions of knowledge, one then has to rely on oneself. At that time,

even university has professional field of Chinese literature, modern Chinese literary work was rarely translated into Japanese. This gap motivates Takeuchi and his colleagues to start the Society of Chinese Literature. The main mission is to translate and introduce modern Chinese literature to Japan.

It was at this moment that Japan invaded Korea and Manchuria. As Takeuchi recalls,

It was extremely painful for us that Japan, the land of our ancestors, was invading China, a country to which we had all grown close through our studies. Yet we were unable to think about this situation in depth. It was all we could do to retreat and protect our own narrow scope of research. (Takeuchi 2005a: 151)

As a citizen of a country who declares war against the country one studies, with emotional intensity, Takeuchi could have performed like a normal scholar who takes a neutral stand to behave indifferently to politics. But no, he does not conceal his pain felt in his heart and decides to stick to his role to dedicate himself to studying Chinese literature. In my view, this is the key to understanding critical thinkers such as Takeuchi. When one is overwhelmed by the immense historical forces and finds no way to counter the tendency of the directions from which history is moving, he does not abandon the commitment to his own work. What he does is to retreat to where he can reserve a small space to continue promoting the long-term research agenda. Takeuchi's loyalty to his own intellectual spirit is later to be inherited in Mizoguchi's work.

In 1945, when Japan was defeated, the intellectual drive and problematic for studying China suddenly shifted. Before the defeat, Sinology and China Study were 'dead knowledge'. The self-centered Japanese academic world prevented itself from understanding China in its own terms, and therefore Takeuchi has attempted to change such a way of learning by entering deeply into the psyche and mind-set of the

common people via modern literature, to study China from the inside out. But a new question arises after the defeat: to understand China is no longer enough, as Takeuchi proposes: 'In order to shed light on the grounds upon which we now lived, therefore, it was necessary to first determine where this history had gone wrong' (Takeuchi 2005a: 152). The necessity for self-critical reflections on the historical processes, Takeuchi maintains, is in fact grounded in the widely shared sentiment of the Japanese people. That is, the change of Takeuchi's mode of thought in the postwar era has combined two problematics (i.e. the study of China as a way to understand Japan, and consequently, the need for self-critique) in that China/Asia as method has found a concrete intellectual agenda to search for the explanations of where exactly Japanese history had gone astray and wrong.

Takeuchi mediates through the practices of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) as a reference point to bring out his insistence on the problematic comprehended in his own way. First, Takeuchi does not totally negate the practices and considers their recovery to be a welcome tendency. His reservation is that the JCP has neither made any effort to prevent the war from happening, nor critically reflected on the fact that many JCP members actively supported and advocated the war. What Takeuchi is getting at is that the JCP did not leave behind the influence of European communism to search for local-historical explanations for the war on the level of thought. That is, the master narrative of the left or the Marxist did not become the spiritual resource to stop the war but was in complicity because it suggests that to move through the necessary stages of capitalist development, it is logical to endorse and participate in war; but the defeat did not become the momentum for the left to confront the historical development specific to the history of Japan. That is why he says, the 'roots of the problem lay deeper' (Takeuchi 2005a: 152).

Takeuchi's method to find the 'roots of the problem' is to compare different patterns of modernization processes in Asia.

Interestingly, he begins the analysis with Dewey's discussions of the differences between China and Japan. Like most people, Dewey's initial contacts with Japan and China led him to praise the former against the chaotic situation of the latter. But, increasingly, Dewey discovers that Japan looks modern on the surface but its basis is very shallow; if it continues like this, Japan may well be on the way to destruction. On the other hand, China appears to be out of order, but after carefully examining the May Fourth movement, Dewey finds in trivial things—such as students all bringing toothbrushes with them, so they are prepared to be arrested—something more admirable, in that beneath the chaos is 'the emergence of a new spirit and modernity' (Takeuchi 2005a: 155). Dewey's take on the situation is quite different from the common views of the time, which maintain that China is at the stage of collapsing and the country is quickly falling apart and the nation is on its way of death. From the behaviors of the students, Dewey detects strong energies to struggle for the nation to survive; it reveals 'the essence of the civilization' (Takeuchi 2005a: 155). In other words, the formation of Chinese modernity is based on its own internal demand and develops in the way of its own necessity. Takeuchi deeply appreciates that Dewey had such an insight already formulated in 1919, whereas no Japanese intellectuals specializing in China could come up with such an insightful idea even after the defeat in 1945.

It is through Dewey that Takeuchi is convinced that Japan should not be compared simply with so-called advanced countries of the west; that had always been done. 'I began to realize that the importance of conceiving of Japan's modernization trilaterally by reference to different types of modernization, such as, for example, that of China and India' (Takeuchi 2005a: 156). He goes even further to suggest:

It is important in analyzing Japan to refer to the United States and Western Europe, for they represent the advanced nations of modernization. Nevertheless,

we must also look elsewhere. In studying China, for example, we should not limit ourselves to seeing this nation only vis-à-vis the West. It was at this time that I realized the importance of conceiving of modernization on the basis of a more complex framework than that of simple binary oppositions. (Takeuchi 2005a: 156–157)

It is here that Takeuchi articulates a whole set of problematics confronting us today: so-called late developing countries (including Japan) embody a mind-set in binary mode to confront Euro-America; this ‘catching up’ sentiment represses objective analysis; these countries bypass each other so that a more complex framework has been avoided to effect more productive inter-referencing. Even until today, comparative studies of China, India and Japan (with reference to each other) still do not really exist in the Chinese speaking world or in Japan, not to mention mobilizing other regions in Asia or other parts of the third world. In this sense, Takeuchi formulated the Inter-Asia problematic half a century ago. For instance, the most comparable country for China is India. Both are agriculture-based countries with large peasant populations. But most intellectuals in China do not have an interest in India, for India is a ‘backward’ country, not worthy of ‘comparison’. Trapped into the logic of ‘catching up’, an important reference point is thus lost. The result is clear: the normative-evaluative plane distracts from the analytical problematic and thus Euro-America remains the reference system in binary opposition to China, Japan or India.

It seems that to bring Dewey to the forefront is a strategic choice. To adopt a perspective outside Asia is to persuade an audience in terms of the intellectual relevance of the comparisons among the three. In fact, Takeuchi himself has, long before, done the analysis, now he is bringing in Dewey to impress what he wants to say. In the 1948 essay, ‘What is modern—Japan and China as examples’, Takeuchi proposed a highly original proposition. In that essay, he compares Meiji Reform with the 1911 Chinese revolution and ends with the theoretical

formulation of ‘returning to heart vs. turning away’ (centripetal vs. centrifugal).<sup>2</sup> This theory in postwar Japan has been influential for younger generation thinkers to inherit and to move forward with.<sup>3</sup> But Takeuchi is very humble in his talk, saying he is too lazy and has not studied enough to produce his own system, and hopes the younger generation can move forward. He says,

A great deal remains to be known about China. Yet such knowledge is not be gained by studying China alone; rather this nation must be situated within a larger framework such as would exceed the efforts of any single individual. There must thus be collaboration. (Takeuchi 2005a: 157)

From the more theoretical discussion, Takeuchi closes his talk by returning to a seemingly technical question but detrimental to the attitude of study. He cites the example that there are hundreds of universities in Japan, but very few teaching the Chinese language, and even fewer offering courses in Korean or Russian. English is very prevalent. European-languages teaching only includes French and German. We cannot guess whether world languages taught in Japanese universities have been changed, and if so whether it has to do with people like Takeuchi’s criticism. But to my knowledge, Japan has one of the largest translation industries in the world and one would think that things would have progressed immensely since 1960. What about the situation in Taiwan? I used to teach in the department of foreign languages (which is considered a top-level institution) for 20 years and know well that ‘foreign language’ is almost always equal to English, more precisely American English; Japanese and French are like decoration, and there is no full-time teacher in German (mentioned by Takeuchi), not to mention languages of neighboring countries, such as Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian and Malay. The department is recognized as one of the top institutions of foreign language teaching and one can then realize how poor foreign language education

is throughout Taiwan. As Takeuchi says, 'This tendency has come to affect both our research and our approach to scholarship' (Takeuchi 2005a: 158). Of course, one can say that Takeuchi does not know English-speaking places, such as the UK, the US and Australia, are mainly monolingual; intellectuals basically only read materials in English and some imagine that that is the only universe worth knowing or that matters.

After the audience raised their questions, Takeuchi supplemented his talk by turning to Tagore. He said, in 1910s and 1920s, Tagore was considered to be a national liberation fighter in China. 'Suffering under the same kind of oppression, many Chinese writers identified with Tagore's opposition or resistance from their position as fellow colonized' (Takeuchi 2005a: 159), whereas in Japan Tagore's sincere advice to Japanese intellectuals not to learn from western imperialism to use force to invade and conquer neighboring countries of Asia was treated as some irrelevant fantasy of 'a poet of a ruined nation, whose poetry represented the grievances of the weak' (Takeuchi 2005a: 159). These opposing receptions reveal fundamental differences between the two countries. Takeuchi's observation is clearly derived from the proposition of 'centrifugal vs. centripetal' turn mentioned earlier; he mobilizes the difference to critically reflect back on the self. Takeuchi even goes to the extreme, to criticize the shallowness of Japan to be 'Japan is nothing' (Takeuchi 2005b: 197). This view was later alerted by Mizoguchi (1996) as being too a-historical. But what is worth discussing is that how do we consider Takeuchi's negation of the society in which he lives? In my view, it commonly and often happens to the mind-set of third-world critical intellectuals who look to other places more sympathetically for reference points and reflects back to critique of our own living environment. Such a gesture (romanticizing the positivity of others, wholesale demonizing of the self) is understandable. The reverse is like the nationalist defense of the self. But Mizoguchi is also

right to remind us of the possible problems in this process of inter-reference. Knowledge production cannot be built on the total negation of the 'X is nothing'. Only with the emerging differences can we capture the momentum to change ourselves via others.

I hope by now I have made my points clear. My purpose is to read Takeuchi's account of the knowledge production in his 1960 essay on 'Asia as Method' in terms of the present, to identify changes and the unchanged over the past 50 years. In this short lecture, we see how the intellectual passion of an important postwar Japanese thinker, coming out of the discontent with the present, refines his own methodology, and then deepens the critique of the wider structure of knowledge. Simply put, Takeuchi's method of critique operates outside the binary framework of the East and West, progressive and backward. On the one hand, he proposes comparing the modernization process of India, China and Japan, in addition to Europe. On the other, he makes the more substantial move to suggest that only by inter-referencing places, which are closer to each other or share similar historical experiences, can we leave the mistake of the 'catch up' type of normative mode of knowledge, and to produce more grounded knowledge and understanding that come closer to historical reality. Reading 'Asia as Method' 50 years after its production, we discover that the current crisis of our conditions of knowledge has not yet gone beyond Takeuchi's problematic. Intellectual circles in East Asia are still operating within the 'catch up' mode and binary opposition between Euro-American theory and Asian empirical reality. With the economic rise of India and China, 'Asia as Method' has increasingly become an inescapable demand. It has been elevated to be an issue of subjectivity in dealing with the globe. It is in the conjuncture of intellectual crisis as well as the momentum for change that we need to continue the critical spirit of, and intellectual agenda set by, Takeuchi Yoshimi, to challenge our present conditions of knowledge, although it may well be hopeless.

(6 June 2011, in Hong Kong)

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### Notes

1. See Chen and Chua (2007) and Chen (2010a).
2. See Takeuchi (2005b).
3. See Mizoguchi (1996), especially Chapter 1, and Takeuchi (2005a and 2007).

### Special term

feng-tu 風土

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### Author's biography

Kuan-Hsing Chen teaches in the Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies, National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan. His most recent publication is *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010).

**Contact address:** Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies, National Chiao Tung University, 1001, University Road, Hsinchu, Taiwan.