

JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY IN THE MAKING 2  
*BORDERLINE INTERROGATIONS*

*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*  
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# Japanese Philosophy in the Making 2

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*Borderline Interrogations*

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JOHN C. MARALDO



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*In deep appreciation of*  
*Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照 (1926–2019)*  
*whose silence composed volumes*



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## Prologue

How might we responsibly respond to Japanese philosophy? In the Prologue to *Japanese Philosophy in the Making*, Volume 1, I proposed that philosophies practiced in Japan come to light both retrospectively, looking back at texts from a juncture in modern times, and prospectively, creating new investigations that are inspired by those texts. The presence of Japanese philosophy, then, unfolds in a domain between identified past and projected future—where “Japanese” designates the evolving forms of the language that identifies the texts and names the source of translations. One implication of this proposal is that philosophizing occurs via trans-lation, the transformation of textually embedded problems, methods and terminologies both across and within natural languages. A related implication is that Japanese philosophy in the making can now occur in languages other than Japanese, insofar as new investigations find their roots in Japanese-language texts. Essays in Volume 1 illustrated some Japanese practices of trans-lation. Nishida Kitarō’s philosophy in particular emerged out of a sustained trans-lation of Anglo-European texts and East Asian practices, and I attempted to meet it on its own ground and carry on what I learned from it. The present volume collects essays that endeavor to trans-late the import of a few Japanese philosophical texts that arose alongside or after Nishida’s innovations. (I leave to Volume 3 the question of how philosophy might exceed the bounds of linguistic texts.)

There is another, equally significant implication to the proposal that philosophy occurs via trans-lation. Current academic practice, in Anglo-American and European universities at least, describes the study of Japanese and other “non-Western” philosophies as “compara-

tive,” “cross-cultural,” or “intercultural.” More often than not, these descriptions assume that practitioners stand within their own tradition or culture and from there engage with the thought of a “foreign” tradition or culture. Whether or not one’s own tradition counts as the standard, and the alien tradition as aberrant, the vantage point is from one side or the other. Our proposal undermines that assumption. If Japanese philosophy emerges from translation and becomes apparent in a space that interprets the past and envisions a future course, then it presents itself inherently as a field in-between. To study and to create Japanese philosophy requires that one stand in this field in-between. Nishida, for example, placed himself between the European or American philosophers he interpreted and the Buddhist heritage epitomized by the notion of nothingness, and he strove consistently to philosophize within the space that emerged.

But what does it mean to philosophize from within this intermediate domain? Essays in the present volume seek to further exemplify that practice. They engage with a selection of innovative Japanese philosophers whose thinking emerged from their twofold encounters—those with other thinkers whose work previously belonged to a separate tradition, and those with Confucian and Buddhist thought identified hitherto as their native traditions. The Japanese thinkers I have selected transformed both heritages by appropriating and reworking traditional concepts and problems, and the essays presented here aspire to reexamine and apply their work. It is my conviction that the philosophers I draw upon were themselves exemplary practitioners of intercultural philosophy. They moved in a field in-between traditions and cultures once held apart.

#### WHAT DOES THE *INTER* IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY MEAN?

If the description *intercultural* is preferable to the terms *cross-cultural* and *comparative*, it is because of the connotations of *inter*.

Rather than a word referring to any thing or any matter, *inter* functions as a prefix that precedes concepts and suggests an interval where two or more are present. Deriving from Latin, the pre-word *inter* can mean *amidst* and *among* as well as *between*. To *interpret* means to mediate between things in order to convey one side of some matter to others. Our *interest* in some person or matter is aroused when we experience the intervening being, the *inter-esse*, between the other and us and take part in it. For many phenomenologists, human experience is essentially *intersubjective* experience that opens the world to us as a world we share, that I share with others. Whether the “we” or the “I” has priority may be a matter of contention, but the existence of language itself implies the prevalence of a common space between us.

In the modern Japanese language, one expression for this sense of *inter* is *aida* or *ma* (間), a sinograph that as a stand-alone noun can mean a space between, an interstice or an interval. The pictorial roots of this logogram suggest the sun 日 (or, in ancient forms, the moon 月) shining through a gap or opening like a gate 門. In compound words, 間 can be pronounced as *kan* or *gen*, as in the modern expression for human being, *ningen* 人間, a word implying that the personal is at root interpersonal. This expression already hints at the frame in which some modern Japanese philosophers practice intercultural philosophy, a matter to which we shall soon return.

The word *intercultural* has nuances distinct from those of *multicultural* and *cross-cultural*, even as they all presuppose a sense of *culture*. (The term *culture* has ambiguities of its own, whose clarification I leave to other discussions.<sup>1</sup>) *Multicultural* connotes a manifold of different cultures that may exist together in a common location but nevertheless are kept distinct or apart, intentionally or not, and that retain some independence from one another. *Intercultural*, in contrast, has to

1. “The Problem of World Culture” in MARALDO 2017, 159–77 and the essay “Placing in Question the Quest of a Worldview for the Twenty-First Century,” in the present volume, reflect further on the notion of culture.

do with different, mutually dependent cultures within a society or a global world. *Multicultural* is not necessarily *intercultural*. The common English expression *cross-cultural*, on the other hand, has distinct nuances of an exchange between two or more cultures, which may not need to contact one another at all, which may indeed remain alien to one another. Logic calls this latter sort of relationship an external relation, one in which two domains remain entirely outside one another. Picture a Venn diagram of two circles, representing two cultures, that do not touch each other at all.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, *intercultural* recognizes differences between cultures but also a necessary relationship between them. It implies what logic calls an internal relation between two or more domains. Think of a diagram of two circles that overlap. But the overlap need not be a matter of shared content; in the concept of interculturality, it may instead indicate an intermediate domain within which we find ourselves when we intermingle with others, as is increasingly the case in a global world.<sup>3</sup> In the world today, cultures with all their differences co-exist in mutually dependence, so that one cannot live without the other; conceptually, too, they are internally related to one another. When we practice intercultural philosophy, we find ourselves in an intermediate domain between culturally distinctive intellectual traditions, where we not only make comparisons and see contrasts but also redefine and reconfigure the traditions.

At the same time, the *inter* in *intercultural philosophy* implies a space of difference—not an opposition between one culture or tradition over-against others, but rather a zone between them where they meet beyond presumed boundaries that are supposed to keep them apart. The boundary presumed to lie between “Western philosophy”

2. See KASULIS 2002, 37.

3. Evidently the term most often translated as *intercultural* in current Japanese sociological research deviates from this usage in English and European languages: the term 異文化的 stresses the differences (異) between cultures (文化) rather than an intermediate domain or conceptual overlap. It seems to express primarily an encounter with what is foreign.

and non-Western philosophy (or “non-Western thought”) is a case in point. The Prologue to Volume 1 attempted to turn the tables on the distinction between “Western philosophy” and “Japanese thought.” The qualifier *non-* presupposes an opposing or contrasting area, and a boundary between what belongs and what does not; it implies an inside and an outside to the presumed area. I and other Europeans and European Americans presumably belong to a tradition in which philosophy is undoubtedly a part, even as we debate just what should count as philosophy. And outside that Greco-European tradition are other textual traditions in which the existence of philosophy is thought to be questionable. The *inter* of *intercultural philosophy* works against this presumption, against the exclusion, against the notion of an outsider itself, insofar as it indicates a transgression of boundaries that allows philosophy to pursue its investigations from an area that challenges and sometimes erases boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

More common than the expression *intercultural philosophy* in English- and Japanese-language investigations is the term *comparative philosophy* or 比較哲学. And one approach often taken in comparative philosophy is to set two texts beside one another—like a bilingual book with facing pages in two different languages—and then proceed to uncover similarities and differences. Comparative philosophy has more to teach us, I believe, when it points out contrasts, for contrasts have the power to expose hidden assumptions and highlight distinctive concepts and ways of thinking. As a discipline, comparative philosophy functions best by challenging commonplace ways of thinking and bringing background questions to the fore. Philosophizing in an

4. An example of the import of intercultural philosophy appears in Raúl Fornet-Betancourt’s article, “Philosophische Voraussetzungen des interkulturellen Dialogs,” <<http://them.polylog.org/1/ffr-de.htm#s1-1>>. This article presents intercultural dialogue as a perspective from which to critique the globalization of Western civilization and as an alternative way to re-vision the relationship between cultures. But it also examines some philosophical presuppositions of intercultural dialogue, such as the notion of human being as a free and “singular universal.”

*intercultural* mode shifts the emphasis a bit: it moves beyond highlighting contrasts and oppositions and acts as an intermediary—not a messenger that conveys messages back and forth between different cultures, each remaining distinctly itself, but a bridge that allows initially different sides to communicate and transform one another. Intercultural philosophy thus has effects on the history of philosophy; it transforms our understanding of the past through the process I have called *trans-lation*. Intercultural philosophy is the philosophical practice that most explicitly recognizes this *trans-lation*, and often functions as the most historically informed style of philosophizing.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHIZING

If the essays in this volume clarify what it means to philosophize interculturally, it is more by way of method and theme than of explicit reflection on this description. The Japanese philosophers I discuss never used the term *intercultural philosophy*, but some of them have explicitly thematized the experience of the “between” that underlies it. It might be instructive to offer here some analysis of that theme and so exemplify the meaning of the term more directly. We turn, then, to two reflections on the nature of language, in which poetic models of conversation clarify experiences of “the domain between.”

#### *Language as a phenomenon that displays “the between”*

It seems so obvious that language manifests a realm in-between that this observation hardly merits discussion. Yet philosophers have not taken this for granted. Especially since the “linguistic turn” in the twentieth century, they have taken pains to clarify the mediary aspect of the phenomenon of language. One particular difficulty lies in the fact that we are unable to place ourselves outside language in order to examine it; we inevitably think in (or within) a language, and insofar as thought occurs only via language, we understand things only by means of language. Evidently, we understand the phenomenon of language



only by way of language—or more precisely, by way of some particular language. “Language” appears as a more or less abstract generalization of different languages. And we humans too commonly live and think so immersed in a language that we are barely aware of this fact, as if the language we happen to speak is the only language there is, one that has neither history nor limit.

Hans-Georg Gadamer described language as the medium in and through which we experience things. Language is not merely a means or tool for communicating; rather it is a medium of living as human beings, just as water is the medium of life for fish. But if fish do not know they live only in water, how do we humans come to know that we live in the medium of language? We come to know this, I suggest, through our encounters with a foreign language. And if we are raised bi-lingually or as polyglots, we come to know it when we recognize the difference in languages we speak. In the domain *between* different languages we become aware that we live our life within language. In this intermediary domain, this in-between, we are able to make comparisons and discover contrasts that elucidate the phenomenon of language. In my experience, the activity of translation is an exercise that makes us acutely aware of the intermediary nature of language. Translating between languages occurs not as a leap from a “source language” to a “target language,” but a venture out of an intermediary domain that lies between them, and it requires an interval of time dwelling in this space. Conversation is another practice that reveals this space, this place where we may dwell, as the root meanings of the word suggest: the Middle English *conversation* denotes a place where one dwells intimately among others, and the Latin prefix *con* placed before *versare* suggests habitual turning about or mingling with others. Two poetic models of conversation may illustrate the movement out of the intermediary, and the translation of two poems I offer here epitomizes the challenge of moving into and out of an intermediary abode.

Gadamer opens his magnum opus *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*) by quoting part of a poem by Rainer Marie Rilke that

thematizes the dynamic function, the back and forth, of conversation, thus illustrating the very nature of language.<sup>5</sup> The poem speaks of two players who throw a ball back and forth, in a way that can never be completely predicted, so that the game of catch always leaves something open for a surprise—just as is the case in every genuine conversation. Translation proceeds like a conversation that, for Gadamer, requires the kind of creativity depicted in Rilke's poem. This creativity is not a free-for-all; it has bounds measured by the cadence and sense of the words, lest its message is missed like a ball not caught.

Catch what you yourself have thrown  
and it's no more than a passable feat  
of agility. But when suddenly you turn to catch  
the ball thrown by an eternal teammate,  
flinging it precisely at your middle  
in an arc right out of God's vast bridging,  
only then does the ability to catch  
become the potential to match—  
a power not yours, but a world's.

Solang du Selbstgeworfnes fängst, ist alles  
Geschicklichkeit und läßlicher Gewinn -;  
erst wenn du plötzlich Fänger wirst des Balles,  
den eine ewige Mit-Spielerin  
dir zuwarf, deiner Mitte, in genau  
gekonntem Schwung, in einem jener Bögen  
aus Gottes großem Brücken-Bau:  
erst dann ist Fangen-Können ein Vermögen,—  
nicht deines, einer Welt.

5. Rilke's poem, composed in Muzot, Switzerland, 31 January 1922, is partially quoted in GADAMER 1960, frontispiece. The complete poem can be found in RILKE 1922, 683. A translation of the lines Gadamer quotes is found in the English version of Gadamer 1960, and the complete poem is translated by Damion Searls in *The Inner Sky: Poems, Notes, Dreams by Rainer Marie Rilke* (Jeffrey, New Hampshire: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2010), 9. Another translation is that in D. JOHNSON 2014, 64–65. I offer an alternative here.

In fact, Rilke's poem goes on to make the power of letting-go decisive for the play of creativity. The poem continues beyond Gadamer's quote:

And were you to beget  
 strength and daring to return the throw  
 —or, more wondrous still,  
 were you to forget daring and strength  
 as if you had already cast the ball  
 (as each year casts forth  
 flocks of migrating birds  
 when old warming turns to new  
 and hurtles them over oceans)  
 only then, in this venture, do you really play along,  
 no longer making your throw easier,  
 no longer making it harder. Out of your hands  
 a meteor appears and hurls through space.

Und wenn du gar  
 zurückzuwerfen Kraft und Mut besäße,  
 nein, wunderbarer: Mut und Kraft vergäße  
 und schon geworfen hättest... (wie das Jahr  
 die Vögel wirft, die Wandervogelschwärme,  
 die eine ältere einer jungen Wärme  
 hinüberschleudert über Meere-) erst  
 in diesem Wagnis spielst du gültig mit.  
 Erleichterst dir den Wurf nicht mehr; erschwerst  
 dir ihn nicht mehr. Aus deinen Händen tritt  
 das Meteor und rast in seine Räume....

By omitting these lines Gadamer seems to underplay the significance of this letting-go of exertion, this release of will, that Rilke requires of really, effectively, playing the game of catch or engaging fully in the play of life. Only much later in his treatise does Gadamer recognize its effectiveness. In a paragraph on the primacy of play over the awareness of the player, when considering the “medial sense of playing,” he writes:

It is apparent that play displays a dimension in which back and forth movement happens of its own accord. Part of play is movement that occurs not only without purpose or intent, but also without exertion. It occurs of itself. The lightness of play, to be sure, does not have to consist in a lack of exertion, but phenomenologically on its own it means that play goes on without strain. Subjectively it is experienced as a kind of release.<sup>6</sup>

I cannot say that translation, in order to be fluent, has to occur without the intent or exertion that Gadamer removes from true play, nor that intercultural philosophizing simply proceeds on its own, out of a field of play between different cultures or traditions. But when the translation at the heart of intercultural philosophy occurs as a genuine conversation, then the analogy of play is quite revealing. What is decisive is the moment of release from trying self-consciously to control all movement back and forth.

*Linked verse (renga) as a poetic form exemplifying the “between” of language*

Precisely this release is the dimension that Ueda Shizuteru sees at play in the genre of Japanese poetry known as *renku* (連句) or linked verse. Ueda chooses this poetic form to express the experience of moving in-between that he discerns in genuine conversation, a model of how language lives. *Renku* is the historical source of the better-known *haiku* form, which originally served as the opening verse in a series of thirty-six.<sup>7</sup> Three or more poets take turns to compose a linked poem. The first verse typically consists of 5, 7, and 5 syllables; the next of 7 and 7, then 5–7–5 again, until a closing verse concludes the theme. The opening verse might picture a momentary scene or allude to seasonal experience, and the following one must connect to this and then present something new. Creating a poem in this mode is a venture in

6. GADAMER 1960, 100; my translation.

7. *Renku* are also called *renga* (連歌); *ku* (句) suggests the line or verse, *ga* (歌) refers to the entire poem.

releasing the words one composes, letting them out of one's hands and passing them on to a fellow poet to move them on. The back and forth of *renku*, and analogously of genuine conversation, calls upon one to listen receptively to the words offered by another, then to come up with one's own words, and finally to release those words to yet another person's *interpretation*.

A short *renku* by Bashō and his disciple Kyorai serves as an example.

In thick grass	草群に
startled by frog	蛙に怖がる
the evening settles.	夕まぐれ
Picking buds of sweet coltsfoot	露の芽採りに
the lantern shakes and goes out.	行灯揺り消す
Devotion arises	道心の
when flowers	おこりは花の
are budding.	つぼむ時 <sup>8</sup>

According to Ueda, each *renku* poet must understand all the previously written verses, discover a link between the two immediately preceding verses, and then compose a verse that stands on its own, creating a new world between it and the preceding one. It is as if one poet challenges the next, saying to him,

How do you understand my verse? Can you re-interpret it so that you escape my world and disclose a new world of your own? If you are not able to do so, you will remain only a part of my world; you will not be yourself.

Ueda continues:

This means that the second poet quite selflessly places his verse at the disposal of the third poet, allowing him any interpretation he would give it, not insisting upon any original intent as a criterion.... He is prepared to accept any interpretation, even the most surprising, in the hope

8. I have adapted the translation of Jeff Robbins, *Basho4Humanity*, <<https://www.basho4humanity.com/topic-description.php?ID=1531620150>>.

that in an unfamiliar reading he will discover himself anew... and experience joy at the new world opened in his line.<sup>9</sup>

In Ueda's view, *renku* arises from an interplay between autonomy and selflessness and creates an open space for the other to emerge and express herself. Arising as it does from interplay and interlude, this poetic form serves as an apt aesthetic model for genuine conversations between people and for the nature of language itself. Importantly, Ueda's presentation of *renku* points to an aspect of conversation that we often lose sight of—that often escapes our ears. This aspect comes to the fore when we place Ueda's presentation in dialogue with Gadamer's.

Both Ueda and Gadamer stress that the power of conversation, and of language itself, does not lie in the hands of the individual. Gadamer argues that language is not someone's invention, much less is it a tool; learning a language is not like learning a handicraft. It is the power that makes it possible for humans to share a world. To acquire a language means to disclose a world; to speak means to voice learned words anew, to express one's own voice but listen to the voices of others as well. It seems to me that this demand to be receptive to the voice of others opens a normative dimension in conversation. Ueda, without mentioning Gadamer or Rilke's poem, introduces a turn in direction: we must not only be receptive to what others say, but after expressing ourselves be willing to let go of a grip on what we say and allow others the freedom to redirect it. This receptivity and ensuing release are what allows the ability to speak to become the world's power to create.

Yet another turn in the "conversation" occurs when we add remarks that the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō wrote in the 1930s. In his reflection on the link between Japanese literature and Buddhism, Watsuji also uses the *renku* or *renga* form to illustrate the autonomy of expression and then its release into a space in-between. In particu-

9. UEDA 1984, 231–2.

lar, Watsuji draws our attention to the normative balance between the voice of the individual and that of the group:

While each verse of a *renga* creates an entirely autonomous poetic space, at the same time it collaboratively configures the poetic space of the whole. Only when the poets practically bring about, between them, a dialectical unity of individual and whole, can a unified *renga* be created.... If one person within the group is egoistic, a certain friction is felt and the group does not harmonize. If, on the other hand, a poet lacks individuality and is moved only by what other poets suggest, a certain void in energy is felt and the inspiration for the poem languishes. But when each poet is thoroughly individual and then negates the self and attains nothingness, in other words, when each poet moves within a vast emptiness, the group takes shape and the impetus to create together arises.<sup>10</sup>

Here the transcendent and personal element that Rilke's poem calls an eternal co-player is reduced to an immanent, impersonal emptiness, a Buddhist nothingness that acts as the source of creativity. Ueda's reflections intimate the same source when they suggest that creativity in language springs from the empty space of silence, the interludes in speech that characterize genuine conversation.

#### BORDERLINE INTERROGATIONS

What relevance does this model have for the challenge of responding responsibly to Japanese philosophy? As a model of conversation, Ueda's and Watsuji's interpretations of *renku* may seem too ideal, almost utopian, ahistorical and unaware of distortion and ideological manipulation. At best, the back and forth, the receptivity and release of *renku*, offer a limited if instructive model for translation and intercultural philosophizing. The very question of the normative conditions for true and trustworthy dialogue serves to introduce the

10. WTZ 4: 402.

ethical philosophy of Watsuji, which will engage our attention in the first part of this volume. If I interrogate Watsuji's ethics as it places individuals in the intermediate domain of a totality and seems to favor the collective voice of the group, it is nevertheless in an attempt to tap into its potential to take us further—beyond “individual versus group” and other timeworn divisions. Convinced that Watsuji is already an intercultural philosopher, I want to enter the spaces of his thought, leave some of it behind to be sure, but also advance in directions he may not have foreseen—ways to conceptualize dignity and human rights, for example, that become visible from the relation between us. My ventures into the intercultural thinking of Tanabe Hajime and Kuki Shūzō arise from the same motive—to take up aspects of their thought and test its potential to rethink, for instance, the responsibility of philosophers and the possibility of ethics beyond responsibility. Essays that question the boundaries between the political and the purely philosophical import of certain Kyoto School philosophers are similarly motivated; they attempt to dislodge entrenched positions and allow us to see their relevance for today's world. I conclude with some ecological reflections, likewise inspired by Japanese philosophers, that bear on the ways we differentiate peoples and divide humans from non-human nature.

The essays in this volume, then, endeavor to inter-rogate a select group of Japanese philosophers in a twofold sense: they would question their thought for what lies undisclosed, and they would expose decisive questions that arise *between* us. They find their unsettled home in borderline areas between Japanese and European philosophical traditions, between tangentially related themes, and between my own initial interests and those of my sources. Some were written over the past thirty years and appear here in slightly revised form; others were composed the year of this publication. I will be happy if they prompt further interrogation where no one has the last word.