CHAPTER FOUR

READING TAKEUCHI YOSHIMI AND READING HISTORY

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In 2005, an edition of the selected works of the Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi was published in China. This collection—the first book of translations of Takeuchi that has followed copyright procedures—was created by selecting pieces from the seventeen volumes of Takeuchi’s collected works.¹

Takeuchi is the founder of the study of Chinese literature and the Organization for the Study of Chinese Literature. Therefore, he has always been seen as a scholar of Chinese literature. However, throughout his intellectual life, the study of Chinese literature and thought was not actually his real goal. He used this study as a medium in order to establish Japanese thought. Therefore, the above-mentioned book of translations is not a collection of essays on the study of Chinese literature. Instead, it describes the intellectual trajectory of a strong thinker who constantly negates and re-creates himself. It also presents an outline of a Japanese thinker who shoulders social responsibility while searching amidst reality.

In mainland China, there exists a basic epistemological fallacy, which makes people see thought as an absolutely “correct” concept that does not change. Especially because the development of the media has led mass society to seek the common, the intellectual milieu cannot avoid the problems of simplifying history and relying on already existing conceptual frameworks. This has made it extremely difficult for intellectuals to understand that reality is complex and today it has the most diverse meanings. Therefore, the present is a period that silently entails many different possibilities. When intellectuals try to put complex reality into simple frameworks that are easy to understand, reality leaks outside of discourse.

¹ Takeuchi 2005. In the early 1980s, there was a translation (by Li Xinfeng) published in China of Takeuchi Yoshimi’s “Lu Xun”; this work was greatly influential. Overcoming Modernity has retranslated this long text and has added ten smaller works.
Takeuchi has been translated precisely at this critical juncture. The Chinese translation of Takeuchi contains his most politically incorrect piece, “The Greater East Asian War and Our Determination,” a manifesto published in January 1942 supporting the Pacific War. At the same time, it contains a text that is most difficult to understand, namely “Overcoming Modernity,” which was written in 1959 in order to find elements that could initiate transformation in the midst of Japanese intellectuals’ attempt to reflect on Japan’s own historical trajectory. Against the postwar trend to simply negate all intellectual activity during the war, this essay attempts to analyze why various projects during the war failed. At the same time, it attempts to find elements that could be transformed into positive intellectual resources in what was called fascist ideology during the postwar period. Because of the limitations of space, the volume of Chinese translations did not include two other aspects of his work, namely his analysis of Chinese history and the Chinese revolution and his analysis of Japanese pan-Asianism, which began to emerge in the Meiji period. These two aspects are also important parts of Takeuchi Yoshimi’s thought and if one looks at them directly, they seem to be contradictory: on the one hand, Takeuchi highly evaluates the subjectivity of modern China, but on the other hand, he does not consequently simply negate the pan-Asianism of the early Meiji period, although, after 1890, the latter was inextricably linked to invasion in a complex formation, and finally fell into fascist ideology.

Precisely because Takeuchi has such a complex face, the editors of the Chinese volume hesitated in choosing which essays to include. To put it simply, when the Chinese translated Takeuchi Yoshimi, they had extremely intellectualized considerations. With the start of the intellectual liberation movement in the 1980s, the scholarly community in China began to break away from the simplified thinking of the Cultural Revolution. Scholars attempted to establish a method of thinking the subject and history and use this method to avoid simplified ideological thinking. However, because it is extremely difficult to break free from a simplified dualistic method of thinking and because of the way in which Western theory was introduced, the scholarly community in China did not have the foundation to break free from simplified thinking. Moreover, in the midst of twenty years of transformations of contemporary history, a number of intellectuals became anxious and worried. They took thought as reality and concepts as the process of history. This type of epistemological mistake made it such that the instincts of the scholarly and intellectual communities to seek political correctness (and that too an extremely