

The Kyoto School and International Relations

The Kyoto School and International Relations: Non-Western Attempts for a New World-Order, by Kosuke Shimizu. Routledge, 2023.

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Kosuke Shimizu's book was originally published in March 2022. Sadly, the political landscape has not improved much since then. While it is true that hegemony is waning, the liberal economy is increasingly overwhelming for many. As a result, the alienation of individuals continues apace and the chasm between the haves and the have-nots yawns wider. All of this brings "a nagging sense of uncertainty and unpredictability" (3). With the publication of the paperback edition, we have another chance to consider the promise of non-linear/non-cyclical, concrete temporality, and relationality for improved international relations.

But, as Shimizu points out, these conceptions of temporality and relationality are antithetical to the presuppositions of the Westphalian narrative that dominates international relations (IR). Attempts to change such fundamental terms of debate are fraught with difficulty. In fact, Shimizu offers a sustained case study of just this point. Although members of the Kyoto School of Philosophy attempted to "bring the bodily experience back into [political] philosophy with the temporality of the present" (7), they were ultimately unsuccessful. His cautionary tale of why this failure occurred and what it means for contemporary IR unfolds over the course of ten chapters.

After literature reviews of current East Asian IR in Chapter 2 and modernization and time in Chapter 3, Chapters 4 through 7 introduce many of the most prominent members of the Kyoto School of Philosophy. Chapter 4 focuses on the leading figures of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitaro and Tanabe Hajime, and their existentialist philosophies. Chapter 5 discusses four of Nishida's disciples. Here, Shimizu describes

“the transition of Nishida’s present into the linear progressive temporality in the discourses of the Big 4” (13). In Chapter 6, Shimizu discusses Miki Kiyoshi’s philosophy of imagination and the latter’s attempt to connect concrete bodily experience with abstract philosophy. Chapter 7 “compares the discourses of morality developed by Tosaka Jun with Nishida’s philosophy to depict the way in which Nishida and his followers lost their commitment to bodily experience and moved towards an abstract nation-state, thus using more of the vocabulary of Westphalian modernity in their political writings” (13).

Beginning with Chapter 8, Shimizu begins to draw the hopeful lessons of this failure. He introduces the reception of the Kyoto School philosophy in post-war era Japan showing how Japanese thinkers of this era were influenced by the philosophies of its members. In Chapter 9, Shimizu highlights the work of some Japanese scholars who engage with IR from the perspective of people’s bodily experience. These attempts to transcend the traditional boundary of IR have, for Shimizu, “the potential for contributing to contemporary post-Western IR literature” (13). The post-Western IR of Buddhism is the focus of Chapter 10. Pointing out the similarities between the Kyoto School of Philosophy and Buddhist IR, Shimizu argues that “by attending to the failure of the Kyoto School’s attempt, Buddhist IR has an immense potential to provide a critical perspective towards contemporary world affairs, particularly the ethics of IR” (13).

In Chapter 2, “East Asian IR Revisited,” Shimizu seeks to “bridge contemporary non-Western IR with the challenge of the Kyoto School by pointing out the similarities and differences between them” (14). Much of the chapter is devoted to retracing non-Western IR.

As Shimizu observes, criticisms of the Western understanding of the world in IR date to at least the 1980s (15). Neo-Gramscian and post-Structuralist critiques are perhaps the oldest kind of critique. Building on the post-structuralist critique of Western rationalism as non-universal and, in fact, parochial, post-colonial theory “seeks to

combine participation in a progressive agential politics of identity with a metacritique of modernism for its parochial ideas and exclusionary practices disguised as universalism” (17-18). The development of non-Western IR takes the next step: theorizing the ontology of “transformative and hybrid subjectivities rather than rational and autonomous self-interest maximisers” (18).

There are four typologies of this discourse, according to Shimizu. In the first approach, “scholars simply point out that there are different interpretations of world affairs from those offered by Western mainstream IRT [International Relations Theorists/Theory]” (20). “The second approach argues that including voices long disregarded by mainstream Western IRT literature will ‘enrich’ the discipline by promoting plurality and diversity” (20). Some ‘Asian value’ theorists exemplify the third approach, which seeks to “overturn power relations to create ‘our’ version of the world” (21). A fourth approach seeks to redefine IRT itself by “problematizing ‘the basic formulation and idiom of our query’” (21).

Shimizu concludes this chapter by pointing out that the Kyoto School philosophers conflate these four approaches in their respective discourses on philosophy and politics. The point seems to be not only that the different philosophers associated with the Kyoto School of Philosophy took different approaches, but also, and perhaps more so, that the same philosopher adopted different approaches at different times and under different circumstances. Nevertheless, for Shimizu, “it is worth trying to use these four types of non-Western categories” to clarify the thinking of the Kyoto School philosophers, “because these categories help us understand the key concepts of non-Western discourses as relationality and temporality that constitute one of the foci of contemporary IR” (21). After all, subjectivity as temporal and relational is a core tenet of the Kyoto School of Philosophy.

In Chapter 3, Shimizu explains why this is the case. Even before the Meiji Restoration, Japan was engaged in a process of modernization. But the threat of violence from the West that coincided with it not only hastened this process, but also

transformed it into one of Westernization. “Japanese officials strived to introduce Western concepts of international laws and political institutions” (41). They also reformed the very foundation of lived experience in Japan—space and time—as Shimizu demonstrates with reference to the substitution of the Gregorian calendar and the equinoctial hour for the traditional lunar calendar and the temporal hour (38). These processes were increasingly met with protests from Japanese intellectuals. “It is under these circumstances that the Kyoto School’s philosophy became popular” (41). The Kyoto School relied primarily on Buddhism to “overcome the modernist abstraction of time and space and to retain the perception of the bodily experience” (40). How and to what extent the major Kyoto School philosophers accomplished these goals is the focus of the next four chapters.

Chapter 4 treats the first-generation Kyoto School philosophers, Nishida Kitaro, and Tanabe Hajime. Shimizu’s account begins with Nishida’s transition from pure experience to *basho* (place). The purification of one’s experience blends both Buddhist philosophy as well as the transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant and German idealists, like Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The influence of the latter is well-known in the literature and is mentioned by Shimizu, but unfortunately not discussed in detail here (46). Transcendentalism can be understood as the search for the conditions necessary for any possible experience. Purifying one’s experience by emptying it of both form and content grants access to those conditions. A reiterative process, this purification ultimately reveals the fundamental conditions of possible experience. For Nishida, this is the place (*basho*) in which an impermanent self and world is constituted in time through a spontaneous and contingent process of interdependent arising.

As Shimizu points out, Tanabe famously criticized Nishida’s dichotomy between part (self and world) and whole (*basho*) for being too abstract. “To give concreteness to this structure, some kind of mediating existence between the entirety (*rui*: the genus) and the individual (*ko*) was desperately needed: the *shu* (species)” (70). Tanabe lays out his vision in what is perhaps his best-known work, *The Logic of Species*.

For Tanabe, species are closed societies. They serve to ethically cultivate individuals through customs and laws in light of humanity (the genus). The goal seems to be that, through coercive force, otherwise free individuals would become autonomous in the Kantian sense, internalizing the customs and laws of their respective societies. And, to the extent that closed societies come to recognize the value of individual freedom in the process, they transform into *open* societies, what Tanabe calls “nation-states” (54).

For Shimizu, Tanabe’s logic of species is spatiotemporal. The past and the future are mediated by the present. And the present is spatialized in closed or open societies. “Tanabe sees that this is the representation of nothingness” that lies at the foundation of Buddhist philosophy (54).

The philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe, therefore, represent one way to respond to Western modernity, particularly in the age of globalization. As Shimizu explains, this approach is broadly Buddhist and abandons “any possibility of essentialising the otherness or selfness, and to instead imagine the world as full of contingencies” (74). Another way to respond is to construct a counter-narrative around a non-Western essence. As Shimizu discusses in Chapter 5, this is the approach adopted by the so-called Big 4 of the Kyoto School: Nishitani Keiji, Kosaka Masaaki, Koyama Iwao, and Suzuki Shigetaka.

Shimizu accounts for the differences in approach in two ways. On the one hand, Nishida’s philosophy was both personal, emerging from his own attempts to overcome his own suffering and pain, and theoretical. Tanabe’s was also theoretical. By contrast, the second generation of the Kyoto School of Philosophy had a clear “socio-political orientation” (64).

The US declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, and during the summer of 1941, the Big 4 met with the imperial navy who seemed resigned to “lose the war in a manner that would not have a substantial impact on Japanese polity” (63). Discussions focused on ways to dissuade the army from further promoting the war. The declaration

of war seems to have rekindled a national pride in the Big 4 that Koyasu Nobukuni, a contemporary critic of the Kyoto School, describes as manic (66).

This nationalism was expressed in terms of the “historical mission” of Japan. According to Shimizu, this mission was informed by two beliefs. “First, European modernity was in an unprecedented crisis and, second, Japan was gradually increasing its presence in the world as a great power” (66). Japan’s ascendancy was attributed to its “moral energy” or virtue (67).

As Shimizu underscores, “behind the second generation’s logic of World History was Tanabe’s logic of the species” (69). For the Big 4, Japan was to serve as the intermediary between universal humanity and individuals. Shimizu writes: The mythical discourses of the Kyoto School philosophy, particularly Nishida’s place of nothingness and the eternal present, have become the source of moral superiority of Japan and have provided a sense of virtue that supposedly surpasses the West. Therefore, they [the Big 4] maintain that Japan should universalise this Japanese morality and virtue to make the world orderly and peaceful (68).

In the next two chapters, Shimizu turns to the left-wing of the Kyoto School, which appears to have taken the former approach mentioned above. Here, Shimizu contrasts the abstract philosophy of the conservative Big 4 with the leftists’ attempts “to socialise Nishida’s philosophy by bringing it back into concrete contexts” (80). Chapter 6 is devoted to Miki Kiyoshi, while Chapter 7 focuses on Tosaka Jun. In both, Shimizu highlights each thinker’s attempts to introduce “concrete others and relationalities with them in the picture of the nothingness” (81).

One way Miki attempts to do this is through his philosophy of history. History is the subjective narration of objective events. History, then, is the imposition of *logos*. While *logos* helps to stabilize experience, inform perceptions of the world, and to give meaning to life, Miki points out that the “basic experience” that makes history possible is itself dynamic (83). As a result, history is continuously being written, formed and reformed, by subjective *logos*.

But the writing of history occurs now, in the present. And this writing requires that a subjective *logos* is imposed on a collection of facts, which are curated by and as a function of the narrator's being and relation to the events of the world. Here, at this more primitive and fundamental level—not unlike Nishida's place (*basho*) of nothingness—lies what Miki calls history as a collection of facts. Shimizu points out that Miki's important concept of imagination, *kosoryoku*, develops from history as facts (85).

Following at least Kant and the German Idealists, Miki distinguishes between the reproductive and the productive imagination. The point seems to be that, in the present moment of writing history, the narrator can employ their imagination to highlight certain objective events to reproduce an existing ideology or to produce a new narrative by highlighting other objective events. Only through the latter is social change possible. And Miki believed that Japan must change for the better in accordance with this logic of imagination (86), if it were to successfully “promote individual morality” (83).

As Shimizu emphasizes in Chapter 7, for Tosaka, this account of relationality, temporality, and nothingness remains too abstract. As opposed to theorizing the conditions under which temporality is constructed in the present through a subject's relationality, as is the case with Miki and Nishida before him, Tosaka “was more concerned with...the way in which temporality affects people's everyday lives” (107). Important in this regard is Tosaka's distinction between scientific knowledge and common sense.

Scientific knowledge (as in the broad German sense of *Wissenschaft*) is like history in Miki's sense. Both are ideological and hegemonic. But, for Tosaka, scientific knowledge is in a dialectical relationship with what he terms common sense (99). Common sense has two meanings for Tosaka. In addition to “a sense of the world widely shared by ordinary citizens,” common sense also refers to a critical standpoint in the Kantian sense (99). This critical standpoint reflects the ordinary lives and concrete everydayness of citizens. For Tosaka, these critical engagements are expressed in

literature—as opposed to *dogma*—and so express *shinjitsu*, truth in a concrete context, but not *shinri*, abstract or logical truth (103).

In literature, we find meaning expressed through individuals in their everydayness. This order of meaning, or culture, Tosaka contends, can help to establish a moral world order. This is because Tosaka, although a materialist, rejects the Marxist idea that structure (economics) determines superstructure (culture). According to Japan's Gramsci, culture interacts with sciences like economics and politics in the public sphere to shape history (105).

Shimizu begins the third part of the book in Chapter 8 with a review of the reception of the Kyoto School of Philosophy in post-war Japan. Three post-war IR theorists are considered, in turn: Takeuchi Yoshimi, Hiromatsu Wataru, and Maruyama Masao. Their critical engagement with the Kyoto School philosophers offers valuable insights for contemporary IRT.

Takeuchi underscores the contradiction inherent in the Big 4's articulation of world history. While Japan was heralded as the leader of the East Asian region, it strived to establish a hegemonic alternative. These postures are contradictory. As Shimizu points out, "the rationale for leadership in East Asia was exclusively based on the European principle of modernization and civilization, but the Asian liberation from colonialism opposed this principle" (114). Takeuchi also noted the complete lack of attention paid to China by the Big 4 during their roundtables.

Hiramatsu was also critical of these roundtables. What is more, he criticized Miki's theory of imagination, claiming it was too abstract. "As a result, Hiromatsu's evaluation of the Kyoto School philosophy ends with disappointment, although he does write that [the Kyoto School's] concern with overcoming modernity is still legitimate in the present era" (117).

"Maruyama called the Kyoto School's philosophy an application of the 'secularised Buddhist philosophy' that allowed Japanese society to embrace all the contradictions within it without making sense of them logically or consistently" (119).

To revive Tosaka's public sphere, Maruyama called for the advent of a *sasara* style of public discourse. A *sasara* is a bundle of split bamboo with one end tied up, and is used in many applications, including washing dishes. The point is that, in this style of discourse, there is a rational or common foundation. In contrast, Maruyama describes the public and academic discourse of his time in the style of *takotsubo*, which literally means octopus trap, "where different perspectives coexist among intellectuals but never communicate or interact with each other" (118-119).

In Chapter 9, Shimizu surveys previous efforts of some Japanese scholars to "bring bodily and everyday experiences of ordinary people back into [IR] theorisation without being bounded by the curse of Westphalia" (125). The chapter focuses on Iriye Akira's work on diplomatic history, Hirano Henichiro's work on international cultural relations, and Takeshi Hamashita's work on regional history. From these analyses, Shimizu draws three lessons for post-Western IR discourse.

"First, Hirano's and Hamashita's analyses reveal how much our perception is biased by the Westphalian presumptions of state sovereignty and strict state borders" (139). As Hirano points out, so-called peripheral issues are just as important—if not more so—than core units of IR analyses. Hamashita shows that the stable political order in existence before the arrival of European modernity was made possible, in part, by blurred borders.

Second, there are "robust obstacles" to the kinds of arguments put forward by the likes of Hirano and Hamashita. As Shimizu observes, even today, any interpretation or understanding of state sovereignty and its boundaries that differs from "the mainstream Westphalian perception towards world affairs has difficulty being sufficiently recognized" (140). Conversely, Shimizu's third point is that "we need to keep in mind that perceptions based on such language as the Westphalian nation-state, geographical division and the dichotomy of West and East are more persistent than we can imagine" (140).

Shimizu concludes the book in Chapter 10 with a “theoretical journey for dialogue and reconciliation in contemporary world affairs with Buddhism” (141). Mahāyāna Buddhism profoundly influenced the Kyoto School philosophy. It is for this reason that Shimizu focuses on it, and its conception of *ku* (the ever-changing nature of things) and *engi* (relationality) in the context of language and being.

According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, things do not have fixed natures or purposes. This fact means that there are many more ways in which two things can relate. For example, on the (Confucian) view that a desk has a fixed nature or purpose, a person can only relate to it in so many ways: as a place to write this or that, or a place to reckon an accounting ledger, or to conduct other writing-based business. But, without this presupposition, the desk can easily be used as a base from which to change a bulb in the light fixture overhead, or a table for tea service, in addition to as a place to write upon. What is more, the use of language to specify a nature or purpose fixes it in what Imamura Hitoshi calls an act of “original violence” (145).

The same thing happens to the self. It, too, lacks a fixed nature or purpose. Its open horizon of relationality is ultimately bounded by the language of narration. This is one important way in which the self can distinguish itself from others. Buddhism reminds us that, in many ways, undoing this violence is the ultimate ethical act. To escape suffering, we need to become no-thing.

Shimizu believes that these tenets of Mahāyāna Buddhism are important in the context of contemporary IR. First, the Buddhist goal of the alleviation of all suffering invites contemporary IR theorists to reflect on “whether the discourses of IR have caused suffering for the sake of state sovereignty and world order” (148). Second, “the idea that all things have never been fixed means that all things established will necessarily be destroyed sooner or later” (148). It is neither necessary to assume that we must think in terms of the Westphalian, sovereign, nation-state, nor to be expected that such things will persist unchanged long into the future.

Other tenets are important as well. Mahāyāna Buddhism champions equality in the concept of *busscho*, the idea that everyone is on the way to Buddhahood. Because of this, contemporary IR must be committed to equality among all people.

In the remainder of the chapter, Shimizu applies these principles to three case studies. The first case study considers the US Okinawa base issue. The case underscores the importance of equality as well as *engi* in contemporary IR. The second case study comes from Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and is a story handed down as the miracle of the Danes or the "light in the darkness" during World War II (150). This case study illustrates the power of unexpected *engi*, the importance of equality, and "the change in the subjectivity of Nazis as a result of the relationship between the Nazis and the Danish" (152). Similar upshots are highlighted in the final case study, which contemplates the diplomatic issue between Japan and South Korea over wartime sexual violence against women during World War II.

Perhaps because his analyses of these cases are predominantly counterfactual, I am not sure that Shimizu's "cautionary tale" about the failures of the Kyoto School philosophers to "materialize their dream" of non-Western IRT is entirely successful (xiii-xvi). The issue turns on what the term means. If by "cautionary tale," one means an enumeration of precautions one should take at the outset of a journey, then Shimizu's book is a cautionary tale. There, Shimizu focuses primarily on what a *future* non-Western or Buddhist IRT should contain and with what it should contend.

But contemporary non-Western and Buddhist IRT are works already in progress. In fact, Shimizu highlights several concepts from Mahāyāna Buddhism that are applied in contemporary IRT. And so, it is not enough to identify the kinds of mistakes made by the Kyoto School philosophers and to exclaim that these same kinds of mistakes should not be repeated moving forward, as Shimizu does. For journeys already underway, a cautionary tale should account for the current state of the journey, offering course-corrections as needed. In the context of Shimizu's book, what is needed is a determination of whether contemporary non-Western or even Buddhist IRT has

sufficiently supplanted or overcome the presuppositions of Westphalia. Unfortunately, Shimizu does not address this issue.

Another important omission concerns Shimizu's several discussions of body. He correctly points out that the body and bodily experience were paramount concerns of Nishida and other Kyoto School philosophers, like Tanabe and Miki (78). Given this importance, it is surprising that Shimizu makes no reference to the philosophy of Kimura Motomori. Kimura published an essay in 1938, titled "Body and Spirit," that seems relevant to at least some of the issues taken up by Shimizu, especially given Tanabe's and Miki's influence on Kimura and the former thinkers' prominent place in Shimizu's book.

In his essay, Kimura defines the body as a principle of expression. And expression is "the manifestation of the inside on the outside—or, to employ contrasting concepts to which people are accustomed, it is the realization of spirit [mind] in nature" (Fujita *et al.*, 110).¹⁴³ No doubt drawing on the dialectic of German Idealism—a philosophical tradition which he studied closely—Kimura's point seems to be that the past calls out to the present with details about the future. The past, therefore, guides the present creation of the future, with such creation accomplished through bodily expression. So, we must properly understand the past. In addition, we should also defer to the proletariat or others who truly understand the intricacies of bodily expression (through labor).

Nevertheless, Shimizu's book is an important contribution to the history of IRT. The line Shimizu draws from the Buddhism of the Kyoto School philosophers to thinkers engaged in contemporary (Mahāyāna) IR is bright, interesting, and insightful. This narrative—blemished by some spelling and grammatical mistakes throughout the book, including the misspelling of "Tanabe" in the title and header of Chapter 4—is supported by helpful endnotes, a thirteen-page bibliography, and a comprehensive index. And,

¹⁴³ "Body and Spirit [Mind]" (R. Chapeskie, Trans.). In Fujita, M., Chapeskie, R., & Krummel, J. W. M. (2018). *The philosophy of the kyoto school*. Springer.

along the way, Shimizu introduces readers to several important Japanese scholars from this and the previous century. Those just beginning their study of IRT will benefit from the framing this history provides, just as surely as will scholars particularly interested in the history and development of non-Western or global IRT.