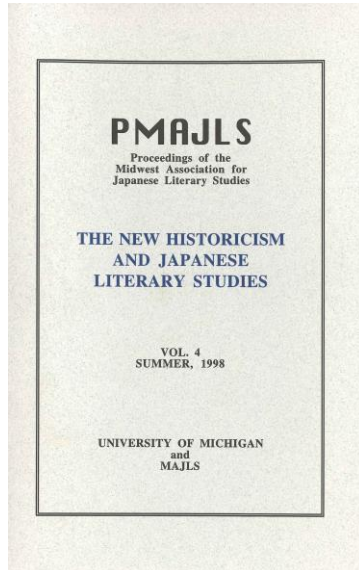


“Escaping the Impasse in the Discourse on National Identity: Hagiwara Sakutarō, Sakaguchi Ango, and Nishitani Keiji”

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**Escaping the Impasse in the Discourse on National  
Identity: Hagiwara Sakutarō, Sakaguchi Ango,  
and Nishitani Keiji**

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**A Self-Contradictory, Circular Trope**

At the core of this paper rests a certain trope, or pattern of thought, that appears time and again in essays written in the 1930s and 1940s on the question of national identity. The trope is a peculiar one; it is circular and seemingly self-contradictory, yet it leaves the reader with the impression that, in the end, something has been convincingly asserted all the same. This trope can be found, for example, in an essay by the poet Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942). In calling for a “return to Japan” (*nihon e no kaiki*), Hagiwara finds himself at a loss when attempting to define the Japan to which he would have his contemporaries return. Examining the state of Japanese culture around him, Hagiwara writes: We have not lost a thing / And yet we have lost everything.<sup>1</sup>

The statement is circular and self-contradictory, and it would seem to represent a checkmate in the quest to construct a national identity. Still, Hagiwara and others reaching a similar conclusion manage to find a way to proceed. The goal of this paper is to explore the genesis of this trope, trace a number of its manifestations, and examine its function in the discourse of national identity in Japan.

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<sup>1</sup>Hagiwara Sakutarō, “Nihon e no kaiki,” in *Kindai Nihon shisō taikai* [Collection of modern Japanese thought] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1978), vol 36, 308.

### The Historical Moment and a "Despicable Contradiction"

The antinomous nature of this discursive construction of "Japan" reflects the contradictions inherent in the historical moment. Japan's escalating war in China and the growing tensions between it and the West during this time intensified the ideological implications of any and all positions in the ongoing "things Japanese" (*nihonteki naru mono*) discourse. The poles of dualities such as Japan-West, Japan-Asia, and nation-individual had become politically charged in such a manner that the middle ground, any compromise position, was no longer available: one was either "with Japan, or against her," so to speak. At the same time, siding exclusively for either of these radically alienated poles proved a rationally untenable stance. In short, the discourse was at an impasse, and the twisted logic of the trope examined here arose as a means to break it.

Literary critic Nakamura Mitsuo (1911 - ) identified the roots of this impasse and criticized the trope which was appearing in the work of thinkers attempting to break it. In his contribution to the "Overcoming the Modern" (*kindai no chōkoku*) symposium of 1942, Nakamura rightly points out that the attempt to overcome the modern is tightly linked to modern Japan's cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> With Japan's modernization being inextricably entwined with Westernization, any attempt to overcome modernity would, Nakamura argues, entail the extraction of things Western from the Japanese landscape. The problem, though, is that Western culture has made significant inroads everywhere: electric lights and

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<sup>2</sup>Nakamura Mitsuo, "Kindai e no giwaku" [Doubts Concerning Modernity], in Kawakami Tetsutarō, et. al. *Kindai no chōkoku* [Overcoming the Modern], ed. Takeuchi Yoshimi (Tokyo: Fuzanbō, 1990), 150. It should be noted that while the other contributions were composed prior to the symposium, Nakamura's was written afterwards. This privileged perspective at least partially explains the more balanced tone of his essay.

fountain pens, Western style clothing and shoes, building materials and methods--it is all of Western origin and yet it is impossible to conceive of life without them. Nakamura drives the point home with the following: "How about the young girls strutting down the beach wearing nothing but a bathing suit? Now there's a sight one didn't see in ancient Japan!"<sup>3</sup> With this Nakamura calls into question the desirability as well as the possibility of overcoming modernity/Westernization.

The extent of Japan's debt to the West, Nakamura adds, is also evident in the fact that the very idea of overcoming modernity had been hatched by Western thinkers. This prompts him to dismiss the goal of the symposium as self-contradictory: "To borrow a Western concept for the purpose of rejecting the West is, in and of itself, a despicable contradiction in terms [fukenshiki na mujun]."<sup>4</sup> Nakamura is correct in characterizing the project as self-contradictory. His outright dismissal of it as "despicable," however, is off the mark. The context and manner in which thinkers deployed this trope suggest that, regardless of its strained logic, it was both consistent with the trajectory of Japan's modern history and a rhetorically effective means of establishing a national identity.

### **Complex Beginnings and the Construction of the Nation**

How these thinkers had come to make such paradoxical assertions as Hagiwara's "we have not lost a thing, and yet we have lost everything," or to undertake a project wherein a Western idea served as inspiration to eradicate Western influence, is tied to the manner in which Japan emerged as a modern nation-state.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 150.

Succinctly put, Japan emerged spontaneously but developed deliberately, and this made the fact of its constructed nature painfully clear. The trope in question was fashioned in response to this realization.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson writes that the emergence of the cultural artifacts known as “nations” was “the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains.”<sup>5</sup> This distinction between first-wave nations, emerging spontaneously, and second-wave nations, which were self-consciously constructed based on pre-existing models, is an important one. The fact that Japan was caught between the two paradigms is what shaped both the crisis of national identity in the 1930s and 1940s and prompted the unique trope which resolved it.

Although emerging as a modern nation approximately one hundred years later, Japan followed a course similar to that of France, a nation Anderson characterizes as a first-wave, spontaneous emerger. Anderson notes that the French Revolution unfolded without the sort of leader, party, movement, or systematic agenda that we associate with the birth of those nations which emerged later. In spite of this, Anderson points out, “once it [the French Revolution] had occurred, it entered the accumulating memory of print. . . . Why ‘it’ broke out, what ‘it’ aimed for, why ‘it’ succeeded or failed, became subjects for endless polemics on the part of friends and foes: but of its ‘it-

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<sup>5</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed., (New York: Verso, 1991), 4.

ness,' as it were, no one ever after had much doubt."<sup>6</sup> This is to say that it was only in retrospect that the random constellation of historical contingencies appeared as a single, coherent, meaningful event in a teleological trajectory toward nationhood. What had originated as a spontaneous, coincidental emergence of a political entity came over time to be discursively reconfigured in a manner that obscured its multi-directional origins and invested it with an aura of historical inevitability, transcendent meaning and positive essence.

To a certain extent, the same is true for Japan. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was not so much the fruition of a sustained, unified drive toward nationhood as it was a "spontaneous distillation of . . . discrete historical forces." The widely varied motivations and strategies of the economically strained bakufu, the restive daimyō, the repressed merchant class, and the popular revivalists were as significant as those of the imperial loyalists in shaping what is now referred to as the Meiji Restoration.<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing efforts to understand the import of the upheaval of that time, these disparate forces became reified as a single event, the Meiji Restoration, and a single product, Japan as modern nation. In the debates over what sparked it, who executed it, and where or how it succeeded or failed, the question of whether or not there truly was a single, meaningful "it" was effaced. In the process the nation of Japan acquired a communally posited transcendent essence, though one which had yet to be defined.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 80. In his description of the French Revolution, Anderson quotes Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

<sup>7</sup>Concerning the heterogenous forces behind the Meiji Restoration, see George M. Wilson, *Patriots and Redeemers in Japan: Motives in the Meiji Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

At this point, however, Japan's road to nationhood sharply diverged from that taken by the first-wave nations. Unlike France and other early emergers, Japan appeared on a world stage already inhabited by established nations, some of which threatened its autonomy. It was not long after the Meiji Restoration, then, that the evolution of Japan's nationhood began to more closely resemble that of second-wave nations, those which proceed self-consciously and according to models transplanted from nations which had emerged earlier.

It is clear that in building the economic infrastructure, Japan did avail itself of available models: the intimate relationship between government agencies and private industry, the company's long-term commitment to workers, and the formation of enterprise unions are all innovations instituted by Japanese industry leaders explicitly for the purpose of avoiding the deficiencies they saw in the British economic model.<sup>8</sup> Japanese government agencies also turned to the models offered by other nations when building social policy, with, for example, "thought guidance" (*shisō zendō*) and the Local Improvement Movement (*chihō kairyō undō*, 1900-1918) being instituted by Tokyo University trained bureaucrats based on their understanding of the social engineering experiments of the Younger Historical School in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See Ronald P. Dore, *British Factory, Japanese Factory: The Origins of National Diversity in Industrial Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), particularly Chapter Fifteen, "Late Development," 404-420. See also Dore's "The Late Development Effect," chap. in *Modernization in South-East Asia*, ed. Hags-Dieter Evers (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 65-80.

<sup>9</sup>See Kenneth Pyle, "Advantages of Followership: German Economics and Japanese Bureaucrats, 1890-1925," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 127-164.

The task of forging a national or cultural identity, however, remained problematic. Having emerged spontaneously, Japan could not engage in myth-making around some leader, party, movement, or systematic agenda which had led to nationhood. Moreover, while self-conscious transplanting of models for the economic and administrative aspects of nation building may proceed smoothly, the construction of a national identity, being a far more delicate matter, does not easily lend itself to the same process: the adoption of a foreign model in this realm surrenders the "home field advantage," leaving the adopter the nearly impossible task of establishing its equality (if not superiority) according to alien standards while simultaneously erasing any hint of imitation.

Interestingly, some early attempts to establish a cultural identity for Japan do resemble just such self-conscious transplanting of prefabricated models. Tokutomi Sohō (1863-1957) and the Min'yūsha (Friends of the Nation) originally sought to adopt, virtually as is, the model of nineteenth-century Western liberal doctrine as a universal measure of a nation's evolutionary phase.<sup>10</sup> Nitobe Inazō worked more subtly in his *Bushido, The Soul of Japan* (1899) and yet he, too, was beholden to a pre-existing Western model: in the preface to this work he writes that the book was conceived in response to a Belgian's inquiry into Japan's equivalent to a Christian moral education.<sup>11</sup> Unable to imagine that the Western model informing the question

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<sup>10</sup>See Kenneth Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

<sup>11</sup>Nitobe Inazō, *Bushido, The Soul of Japan: An Exposition of Japanese Thought* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1984), xi-xii. The Western orientation of this exposition of the Japanese "soul" is also evident in the fact that the work was originally written in English, and for a Western audience.



was not universal, Nitobe accepted it, and simply posited *bushidō* the "code of the warrior," as Japan's equivalent to Christianity.

Such modeling, however, is ultimately unsatisfactory as the attempt to articulate cultural uniqueness, the cornerstone of a cultural identity, is undermined by the lingering scent of imitation and derivation in relation to the provider of the model. To the extent that a cultural identity borrows, however obliquely, from another, it loses its power to perform its most important tasks: to distinguish "us" from "them" and to assert parity, if not supremacy.

Japan's predicament, then, was this: though it had emerged as a modern nation without being driven by a single, coherent indigenous movement, once emerged it required a unified national identity in order to maintain its political and cultural autonomy in the face of hungry, already matured nations. Thinkers needed to articulate a modern identity for a nation which had emerged without one. As the efforts in this direction intensified during the 1930s and 1940s, the paradoxes inherent in this mission became increasingly clear, and the nature of the nation as a cultural construct or "imaginary community" (to use Anderson's term) was keenly felt. The circular trope employed by Hagiwara and others was uniquely suited to this realization of the artificial, or constructed, nature of national identity for in its self-negating pattern it eliminated the need for transcendent, stable essences in a definition of culture, and rhetorically opened the door for a flexible, infinitely renewable definition of the nation of "Japan."

### "De-Japanizing" Japan

This trope manifested itself in a number of forms. The Japan Romantic School (*Nihon romanha*) poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, mentioned above, is the writer who expressed it most explicitly. In his "A Return to Japan" (*Nihon e no kaiki*, 1937), Hagiwara

succinctly characterizes the conditions which caused the impasse in the discourse on national identity and offers the trope as the only way out. He writes of how post-Meiji Japanese worked tirelessly to build a Western-style utopia, only to find it had been a disappointing illusion. Furthermore, in the pursuit of this illusory utopia the Japanese lost all that had been distinctly theirs. The only road left open, claims Hagiwara, is one which takes this state into account. He writes:

I once wrote this in a lyric poem:

We have not lost a thing

And yet we have lost everything.

Truly today, from the midst of the emptiness in which culture has collapsed, the single song which we poets can sing is none other than that of the nihilistic drifter, a song given rhythm with contradictions such as these. A is not A; A is not not-A [*A wa A ni arazu. A wa hi A ni arazu*]. In Japan today this dialectical formula lives on as a rhythmical lyricism in the everyday emotions of the poet.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of the essay it becomes clear that the first half of Hagiwara's formula, "A is not A," is essentially a rejection of stable essences: (the true) Japan is not Japan (as defined by its traditional culture) or, conversely, (the true) Japan is not (what you see before you as a Westernized) Japan. The second half of the formula opens the gate for a rehabilitation of "contingent essences," if such a thing is conceivable. In his "A is not not-A," Hagiwara is suggesting both that (the true) Japan is not (necessarily) not (traditional) Japan and that there is no reason that what appears as a Westernized Japan must be rejected for being not-Japan.

It is a twisted argument to be sure, but one which allows for a

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<sup>12</sup>Hagiwara, "Nihon e no kaiki," 308.

clearing of the slate in preparation for the continual construction and reconstruction of a new Japanese identity; it is a trope which recognizes, and in fact reveals in, the make-shift, artificial nature of a cultural identity. The trope allows Hagiwara and his contemporaries to freely create a culture for modern Japan. This sense of starting anew is evident in the following lines, in which Hagiwara answers the charge that the call for a "return to Japan" is inconsistent with the project of modernization and Westernization that had been pursued to date.

Certain people of superficial opinions look at this phenomenon and call it the defeat of the intellectuals, proclaiming it a "cowardly retreat" in our war. However, we have never in the past retreated. On the contrary, we have struck out at the enemy siege, attacking recklessly. Then, when at last we succeeded in breaking through, we stepped out onto a vast, open plain of nothingness [*kyomu*]. Now, in this place there are no images of any kind. All that one finds here are the clouds and sky, our shadows on the earth, and a starved, abandoned feeling.<sup>13</sup>

Here we see how the trope made it possible to break the impasse in the discourse on national identity: the implosion of the self-contradictory definition cleared the slate. Through the denial of absolute essences and the rehabilitation of them as "contingent essences," Hagiwara is able to call for a return to a Japan which is nothing more than a "vast open plain of nothingness . . . [where] there are no images of any kind." Hagiwara is acknowledging the fact that whatever is to distinguish Japan from other nations, i.e. its national identity, is without transcendent essence, is infinitely malleable, and is to be the product of the imagination.

Having concluded that modern Japan's cultural identity is to be

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 308.

constructed from scratch, Hagiwara needs to anchor the forthcoming effort in order to insure that its product is still somehow "Japanese." He does this through an appeal to history.

We have lost everything. And yet there is nothing so certain as the fact that, at the same time, we are traditional Japanese, and in our veins pulses the two thousand year history of our ancestors. Thus, to that extent, we have not lost a single thing.<sup>14</sup>

With this, Hagiwara rehabilitates history, but in a new role. Having left no traces on the modernized/Westernized Japanese landscape ("we have lost everything"), history is essentially empty, waiting like culture to be constructed. And yet, even under erasure, history grounds the forthcoming construction of a cultural identity.

In this manner Hagiwara works the trope in question to radically shift the terms of the discourse. By recognizing--in fact emphasizing--the contradictory elements of modern Japan's culture, Hagiwara has them cancel each other out, neutralizing the ideological charge of all possible components of a cultural identity. By thus clearing the slate and justifying the fabrication of national identity, Hagiwara's use of the trope effectively breaks the impasse in the discourse.

Sakaguchi Ango (1906-1955) works much the same trope in his often humorous 1942 essay "A Personal View of Japanese Culture" (*Nihon bunka shikan*). Like Hagiwara, Ango rejects the idea of cultural essences:

It does not stand to reason that what happened in Japan long ago is, just because it happened long ago, somehow quintessentially Japanese. It is possible that customs followed

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 308.

in foreign countries, and not in Japan, are in fact intimately suited to the Japanese, and that customs followed in Japan and not abroad are, in fact, suitable to foreigners.<sup>15</sup>

For this reason Ango states that though foreigners may laugh, it is perfectly natural for the Japanese to “yank trousers over our short bowlegs, waddle along wearing Western clothes, dance the jitterbug, toss out the tatami, and strut our stuff amidst cheesy chairs and tables.”<sup>16</sup>

Though he has not explicitly stated his reasoning in a formula such as Hagiwara’s “A is not A; A is not not-A,” Ango is working what is essentially the same trope. By rejecting enduring, cultural essences, Ango “de-Japanizes” Japan and allows for a Japanese culture that is a pastiche of elements conventionally associated with other countries. This infinitely flexible definition of Japanese culture is a recognition of the constructed nature of culture, “Japan is whatever we might decide it is.”

Hagiwara grounded the continual reconstruction of a national culture in “the two thousand year history of [his] ancestors,” and Ango locates a similarly malleable center. “It wouldn’t bother me if the temples of Kyoto and the Buddhist statues of Nara were completely destroyed,” writes Ango,

but we’d really be in trouble if the trains stopped running. What is important for us are the “necessities of life,” and these alone. Even should the ancient culture be destroyed, daily life [seikatsu] would not perish, and as long as our daily lives themselves do not perish, our uniqueness is assured.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Sakaguchi Ango, “Nihon bunka shikan” [A Personal View of Japanese Culture], in *Darakuron* [A Theory of Decadence] (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1990), 8.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

In this way Ango, having first erased cultural essences, rehabilitates potential components of culture based purely on the needs of daily life. Based on this reasoning, Ango champions a prison, a battleship, and a dry ice factory for their pure, straightforward practicality while denigrating the cultural importance of more conventional icons, the famous rock garden at Ryōanji among them. In short, Ango's "personal view of Japanese culture" is that it is without a transcendent essence, and subject to infinite renewal. Like Hagiwara's definition, Ango's formulation of the questions of cultural identity represents a radical break with the discourse up to that point. By first rejecting any permanent cultural tradition ("de-Japanizing" Japan) and then rehabilitating various elements along infinitely malleable lines, Ango is employing the same circular trope in breaking through the discursive impasse.

### **Constructed Cultures and Imperialism**

One might expect this rhetorical trope to dampen the allure of Japan's imperialist project on the continent. Rejecting the idea of transcendent, transhistorical cultural essences, and replacing them with a pastiche of makeshift, contingent, and ever-changing components would, it seems, weaken the base of the national identity around which a nation rallies. It is hard to imagine soldiers dying for a Japan defined as a "plain of nothingness" or in defense of practical dry ice factories and functional prisons.

This, however, was not the case. In fact, precisely the opposite principle seems operative. Benedict Anderson points out that the emotions which inspire people to die for their country are rooted in a belief that one is somehow naturally tied to it:

In everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen . . .  
 . [and] precisely because such ties are unchosen, they have

about them a halo of disinterestedness. . . . For most ordinary people of whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices."<sup>18</sup>

From this perspective, then, it becomes conceivable that the contingent national identities of Hagiwara and Ango might prove successful in eliciting sacrifice. By foregoing the positing of a static cultural identity in favor of one that is continually reshaped, any trace of a national agenda is erased. By "de-Japanizing" Japan, everything is coopted into the national identity, all is rendered automatic, and consequently the affiliation seems interestless. As Anderson points out, this is an affiliation for which one would be willing to make sacrifices.

The link between the intellectual trope I have been discussing and this willingness to die for one's country is readily apparent in philosopher Nishitani Keiji's (1900-1990) contribution to the aforementioned "Overcoming the Modern" symposium. In his essay Nishitani laments the fragmented nature of the modern world, split as it is into the mutually exclusive realms of culture, religion and the natural sciences. He posits as cure a "position of subjective nothingness" (*shutaiteki mu no tachiba*).<sup>19</sup> The erasure of the subject position in the attainment of nothingness resolves the contradictions inherent in modernity because it "includes both an absolute denial and an absolute transcendence of the body and its natural world, as well as of the spirit [*kokoro*] and its world of culture."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 143-4.

<sup>19</sup>Nishitani Keiji, "'Kindai no chōkoku' shiron" [A Personal Theory on 'Overcoming the Modern'], in Kawakami Tetsutarō, et. al. *Kindai no chōkoku* [Overcoming the Modern], ed. Takeuchi Yoshimi (Tokyo: Fuzanbō, 1990), 25.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

Unlike his teacher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Nishitani posits the position of subjective nothingness as a static state. Once achieved, he seems to be suggesting, it can be maintained. It is this belief that allows him to take the experience one step further than would otherwise be possible, and thereby reinstate what he had originally rejected:

The absolute denial of everything, including both culture and science, can lead directly to an absolute affirmation. A subjectivity which creates culture or practices science does not represent a position awakened to subjective nothingness. It is, however, possible for a stance awakened to subjective nothingness to exist within a subjectivity that creates culture and practices science. It could maintain its transcendental status, and be immanent there as a true subjectivity.<sup>21</sup>

Having proposed his “subjective nothingness” as the cure for our fragmented modern world, Nishitani then goes on to reassert it as a qualitatively different sort of presence. First denying subjectivity, Nishitani rehabilitates its absence as representative of a “true” subjectivity. This circular reasoning is the same trope as that employed by Hagiwara and Ango: it is a denial at one level and a reaffirmation at another.

Unlike the other thinkers discussed here, Nishitani works the circular logic in order to rationalize Japan's military aggression. Later in the same essay he turns to the war with China, claiming that

the situation must be one in which the nation is manifesting that aspect of itself which is a fundamental denial of self. This being the case, in that Japan would be a nation carrying a universal spirit, it could [rightly] assert its authority as the leading nation of the present time. In short, its self denial

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 25.



makes possible a proper self assertion.<sup>22</sup>

This self assertion, of course, takes the form of Japanese aggression on the continent and the waging of the Pacific War.

Nishitani, then, joins Hagiwara and Ango in employing this circular trope in order to resolve the irresolvable contradictions that arose in Japan's quest for a national identity. Emerging as a nation according to the pattern of earlier, first-wave nations and being subsequently forced to quickly construct a cultural identity where one had been conspicuously absent made thinkers keenly aware of the nature of nations as "imaginary communities," and of culture as a construct. While this realization initially caused an impasse in the discourse on national identity, the trope examined here allowed thinkers to coopt this contradiction in the articulation of a radically different type of identity. This trope made possible the definition of a Japan without transcendent essence, and composed instead of constantly changing "contingent essences." Although this construction of cultural identity admitted, or even emphasized, its artificial nature, this did not mute the power of the idea of "nation." As Nishitani's use of the trope demonstrates, even as unlikely a candidate as the erasure of subjectivity could be coopted into the ideology of nation and imperialism.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 34

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