



The problem of defining Japanese Philosophy

O problema de definir a filosofia japonesa

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Abstract: This article aims to introduce Japanese philosophy to new readers while investigates the problem of defining Japanese Philosophy. Previous studies argue that the most important characteristic of Japanese philosophy is its capacity to reinterpret and absorbing the thought of other traditions. However, this interpretation has limitations because it results in a false dichotomy between different forms of interpreting and questioning reality. In approaching this problem, I consider the history of Japanese philosophy and the first contact with Euro-American philosophy, the foundation of Kyoto School, and the possibility of defining Japanese philosophy based on an intercultural interpretation that focuses on culture as the root of philosophy.

Keywords: Japanese Philosophy; history of philosophy; metaphilosophy; intercultural philosophy.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo introduzir a filosofia japonesa a novos leitores enquanto investiga o problema de definir a filosofia japonesa. Estudos anteriores argumentam que a característica mais importante da filosofia japonesa é sua capacidade de reinterpretar e absorver o pensamento de outras tradições. no entanto, esta interpretação tem limitações uma vez que resulta em uma falsa dicotomia entre diferentes formas de interpretar e questionar a realidade. Ao examinar este problema, eu considero a história da filosofia japonesa e o primeiro contato com a filosofia Euro-Americana, a fundação da Escola de Quioto e a possibilidade de definir a filosofia japonesa com base em uma interpretação que foca na cultura como raiz da filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia japonesa; história da filosofia; metafilosofia; filosofia intercultural.

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to introduce Japanese philosophy to new readers by problematizing the question “What is Japanese philosophy?”. However, to discuss the issue of finding the unique characteristics of the critical thought developed in Japan, it is also indispensable to question the definition of philosophy.

Despite the efforts of philosophers and scholars who have been developing their research on non-canonical traditions, and scholars who defend an intercultural approach of philosophy, until nowadays the narrative that philosophy has been founded exclusively in ancient times by the Greek minds is standard in Academia. A more inclusive viewpoint defends that philosophy has been established by the Greeks but has expanded its domain and influenced other societies to develop their critical thought. Because of this colonialist belief, the philosophical proposals that dialogues with Euro-American thought have found more acceptance in European and American universities. Given that, it is possible to find official chairs in departments of philosophy dedicated to the study of non-canonical traditions, e.g., Asian studies, although on rare occurrences not representing the norm world-wide.

A group of students from UCL, UK, has been questioning the lack of cultural diversity of their curriculums asking the provoking question “Why is My Curriculum White?”. Soon the movement has become national, thousands of students from different institutions took action to bring awareness to the problem of the dominance of white philosophers in the philosophy courses. According to students, it is not a coincidence that the course content at universities reflects white dominance and under-represents other cultures. The “Why is my curriculum white?” movement brings to light the intrinsic relationship between eurocentrism and the colonialist history of Britain and how this reflect on Academia.

This is not an exclusive British issue. It is safe to affirm that many professors, scholars, and academic institutions of philosophy have never heard of the critical thought developed in Asia, Africa, or Latin-America. Despite a significant rising enterprise disputing this narrow definition of philosophy and engaging to find a place for diversity in the philosophical perspective. Moreover, decolonial philosophy and intercultural philosophy are relevant approaches on philosophy that intent to question how epistemology has been historically centralized in Europe and later in USA.

In this context, the problem of the definition of Japanese philosophy is also a problem concerning the history of philosophy and the systematic exclusion of certain cultures from the status of a relevant critical thought. In this article I introduce Japanese philosophy by its historical context, which highlights the imperialist enterprise of some countries when Japan opened the borders after more than 200 years of relative isolation. Then, I present the Kyoto School as a modern representation of an original Japanese way of thinking which happened under

the influence of Euro-American thought. Later, I investigate the possibility of a Japanese philosophy before the contact with the word “philosophy” (jap. Tetsugaku 哲学). And finally I analyze the problem of defining Japanese philosophy without falling into essentialism and generalizations.

History of Japanese Philosophy

To understand Japanese philosophy characteristics and its contribution to the world’s philosophy, it is necessary at first to discuss the historical context that led not only to a formal academic study of philosophy at the universities but also to a consistent and systematic form of philosophy in Japan. By doing that, my goal is to demonstrate that what has been called “Japanese philosophy” was developed through a set of events that had consequences in how Japanese thinkers wanted to be recognized in contrast with Euro-American philosophy. For that, we need to go further back to the historical facts that occurred at the beginning of the 16th century.

Also known as the Tokugawa period, the Edo Era is considered the premodern Era of the country. This period is historically known for the foreign isolation policy where their international relations were limited to commercial trades restricted to China, Korea, and the Netherlands. Claiming that the trades with foreign countries and external cultural and religious influences were responsible for social destabilization, the *shogun* began a period of repression in which the relationship with foreigners was limited to trading activities in specific ports and controlled by local police. In 1606 the Tokugawa government considered Christianity illegal and in 1614 began the process of systematic persecution of Christians (Junqueras i Vies et al., 2012, p. 180). These actions of the Japanese state can be interpreted as an attempt to block the development of foreign values in the country. In 1639 the ports were closed, and all interaction with foreigners was impossible or rigidly controlled in rare exceptions.

In addition to the policy of closing borders, the Tokugawa family shogunate also marks a stable peaceful period (*pax Tokugawa*) in Japan’s history after going through a long period of internal conflicts in the search for territories and political power by the different military and samurai groups, still in the feudal system (shogunate or *bakufu* 幕府). As a result of the absence of internal conflicts, it was possible to develop its own political institutions and maximize economic resources in a feudal social organization with neo-Confucian influence (*Idem*, p. 197).

The national opening motivated by the arrival of the black American ships resulted in internal instability. Individuals involved in administrative institutions had contrary views on signing trades and diplomatic pacts with the USA government. This administrative conflict resulted years later in the collapse of the Tokugawa regime. In 1867 the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu resigned after approximately

260 years of his clan's tenure in power. From the changes in the country's method of government with the restoration of the imperial system in 1868 and the signing of commercial trades with major foreign powers (USA, Russia, France, the Netherlands, and England), Japan begins the process called historically *modernization*. This series of transformations— that includes also the beginning of the industrialization stage— is identified as the Meiji period (1868–1912).

According to Arisaka Yoko, due to its 250 years of isolation, the contrast between what is considered Japanese and therefore traditional and what is considered *Western*, that is, modern, foreign, exotic, and new, was clearly noticeable. In this sense, simple and everyday choices of clothing (kimono or dress/suit), eating utensils (chopsticks or cutlery), whether to eat meat (a new habit), where to sit (a mat on the floor or a chair), entertainment style (traditional or Western) among other daily practices became markers of this profound cultural transformation. (Arisaka, 1999, p. 4)

In this context, the Japanese people, unable to manage the speed of transformation that the country was going through, were saturated with new clothing, food, information, and technology items, a fact that will also influence demands for political, social, economic, educational, cultural, and intellectual changes. As a result, Japan's products and services could not compete with the highest quality supply from foreign countries, which created an economic crisis.

On the circumstance of an intense foreign influence, what the European and American traders interpreted as the free-market practice, the supporters of Japanese traditions characterized as an expansionist invasion. Consequently, for the protection of the economy, the cultural roots and to safeguard the sovereignty of the country from “colonial domination”, Japan not only became the first Asian country to industrialize itself but also became an important military power, through a process of strengthening its army.

In addition to consolidating its technologies in industrial production and improving its military power, the government begins to send young intellectuals to study in Europe and the U.S. The official objective was to bring back to Japan the knowledge needed for the country's development process. (Heisig et al., 2011, p. 15). The Japanese scholars engaged in the translation of tens of thousands of books from various areas of knowledge, including classical literature to know and deepen the knowledge that has been developed intellectually in Europe and the USA.

In a context where Japan was trying to balance aspects of its cultural tradition with modern elements from foreign countries, Japanese scholars encountered some European currents of thought, such as British utilitarianism, American pragmatism, and German philosophy. As a result, the philosophy, which in the Japanese tradition had its place in Buddhist temples and academic centers, now had its teaching and study formalized and universalized by becoming a subject in the new universities.

According to Arisaka, in this historical context doing philosophy in Japan meant dealing with the dilemma of being rooted in Japanese cultural tradition and still propose to express the universal and systematic character of foreign philosophy. (Arisaka, 1999, p. 5).

Kitetsugaku 希哲学 (the study that aspires to wisdom) was the term Nishi Amane (1829-1897) proposed to translate the Greek expression $\phi\iota\lambda\omicron\sigma\omicron\phi\iota\alpha$, love of wisdom. Later the term was simplified as *tetsugaku* 哲学 (study of wisdom), which was initially understood as the systematic and universalized study of European philosophy developed by Japanese academics.

Although defined initially as the study of western philosophy, *tetsugaku* slowly took on its own connotations as Japanese philosophers began to diverge from western systems to forge their own philosophical positions, often as direct critiques of western thought. (Heisig et al., 2011, p. 15).

Nishi was one of the Japanese students sent abroad. On this occasion, he intended to study law and economics. However, he decided to dedicate himself to the study of philosophy. Fluent in German, French, and English, he gained recognition as the one responsible for importing and disseminating the main movements of European philosophy in Japan, thus becoming a scholar of special historical importance for the development of what is now known worldwide as Japanese philosophy.

Moreover, in 1877 Japanese universities started to invite European professors to lecture on classical philosophical ideas, drawing the attention of young scholars and Buddhist thinkers interested in researching their intellectual legacy considering the ideas introduced by the philosophical tradition born in Greece. As a result, Japanese intellectuals begin developing their philosophical positions by critically analyzing and diverging from foreign perspectives. They were seeking to build a counterpoint in dialogue with their cultural roots.

As Arisaka Yoko problematizes, some of the Meiji-Era intellectuals were dissatisfied with what they interpreted as an “imperialist arrogance” of foreign thinkers. They questioned if philosophy is theoretically supposed to be universal in practice Euro-American thinkers assumed that the civilization descended from the Greek tradition represented the only legitimately true philosophy. In fact, it is not difficult to find examples of well-known European philosophers who defended that philosophy is an exclusively ancient Greek invention. Therefore, philosophy is a systematic critical way of thinking exclusively found in the European civilization as direct descendants of the Greeks.

Martin Heidegger in “What is Philosophy?” defended that the question about the nature of philosophy is also the question about its origin. According to him:

The often-heard expression ‘Western-European philosophy’ is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature; (...) the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold. (Heidegger, 1956, p. 28-29).

Also, Kant argued in disfavor of the possibility of philosophy being an activity developed by other civilizations outside Europe. He states in his lectures on *Physical Geography*:

Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient. (...) Their teacher Confucius teaches in his writings nothing outside a moral doctrine designed for the princess (...) and offers examples of former Chinese princes. (...) But a concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese. (Kant *apud* Norden, 2017, p. 1).

Hegel and Jacques Derrida are also examples of European philosophers who defended on different occasions their questionable point of view about the impossibility of philosophy be a critical way of thinking found in traditions outside Europe.

Derrida was invited to China in 2001 where he was invited to give lectures and receive honorary professorships at the French consulate in Shanghai. However, the transcription of his presentation confirms the astonishment of the attending when Derrida opened his speech saying: ‘China doesn’t have philosophy, but/only thought (*Zhongguo meiyou zhexue dan/zhi you lixiang*, 中国没有哲学, 但/只有思想,)’. (Zhang, 2009, p. 23).

Despite their philosophical differences Derrida and Hegel have in common their unjustified dismissing of Chinese philosophy. Hegel evaluates the work of Confucius in Lectures on the Philosophy of World History:

He [Confucius] is for the most part a moral educator. He was a moralist as such, not actually a philosopher; for in his case we do not find theory that occupies itself in thought as such. ... We have one of his books [the *Lün yü*] in a modern translation; according to the reviews, however, it does little to enhance his reputation. He is not to be compared to Plato, Aristotle, or Socrates. (Hegel, 2011, p. 240-241),

Based on those examples, it is safe to affirm that the Japanese intellectuals were aware of the epistemological injustice defended by some European philosophers who repeatedly denied the status of philosophy to the critical thought developed in Africa, Asia, and South America.

That said, it was in that period of intellectual confidence that the Japanese aspired, in Arisaka’s words, to contribute to world civilization the way Europe had done. To do this, they intended to develop a philosophy that was “Japanese but universal”:

if Japan could develop a culturally non-Western yet universal form of philosophy, then that would be a proof that European civilization is not the only center of truth. If such a philosophy could indeed be universal, then it would necessarily mean that European and American minds would be able to understand it as also applicable to the nature of the human mind or reality. If that could be achieved, then Japan could contribute to the creation of a more globally balanced world culture, offering a possibility of a counterbalance and a conception of an ‘alternative, non-Western modernity’ to the Western-dominated world. (Arisaka, 1999, p. 6)

It is precisely in this historical context of political, social, and intellectual impasses that the Japanese intellectuals challenge the narrow definition of philosophy, imposed by some relevant European philosophers. Furthermore, Japanese philosophers analyze their own identity to find a way to contribute to philosophy while respecting their cultural roots. These events that are part of the Japanese Modern Age are the ingredients that, I believe, made possible the formation of the Kyoto School and its development as a relevant movement in the setting of 20th-century world philosophy.

The Kyoto School

The first known printed record that characterizes as a school the critical thought developed by the group formed in the Kyoto University around Professor Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) is Tosaka Jun’s (1900–1945) article “The Philosophy of the Kyoto School” (1932). With this designation, Tosaka argues that the singular philosophical proposal initiated by Nishida Kitarō—the unintentional founder of this group—is critically continued by Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962)—his successor in the chair of philosophy at Kyoto University—and some of their outstanding students.

Tosaka recognizes, in his article, the importance of the thought developed by his teacher Nishida, whose philosophical efforts Tosaka characterized as the “most significant, great and memorable” for Japan. However, Tosaka was critical of the Kyoto School, which he describes as a bourgeois idealistic philosophy, completely forgetting the society’s changes in that time, thus having no historical awareness. Despite the criticism, some scholars consider Tosaka a member of the school—together with Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945), they form part of the left-wing segment for developing a materialistic-Marxist philosophy.

Because of its no intentional foundation, the list of members that form part of the Kyoto School is not a consensus. In the article “The Philosophy of the Kyoto School”, Tosaka indicates as belonging to Kyoto School Nishida, Tanabe, and Miki Kiyoshi. According to Kenn Nakata Steffensen, in another article, “Yamato spiritual school” (「やまと魂」学派の哲学) Tosaka includes as members Yamauchi Tokuryū, Ueda Shūzō, and Mutai Risaku, however, he does not mention

Nishitani Keiji. (Steffensen, 2016, p. 55). Nevertheless, the importance of Nishitani as the third member of the Kyoto School is not an issue of discussion for scholars. Nishitani has a significant role alongside Nishida and Tanabe in consolidating the group and promoting its ideas abroad.

A striking feature of the Kyoto School is its systematic dialogue with the western tradition. Relevant scholars often characterize this Japanese school of philosophy as the first original contribution to the European philosophical tradition from a remarkably Eastern perspective.² Similarly, D.S. Clarke Jr. defines the movement initiated by Nishida for assimilating European philosophic and religious ideas aiming to use them to reformulate the “religious and moral insights unique to the East Asian cultural tradition.” (Clarke, 1999, vii). For this reason, the Kyoto School became famous as the group of Japanese thinkers who are committed to building a dialogue, or in Ueda’s words a “dialogical confrontation” (Ueda, 2011, p. 20) between traditions, seeking a critical analysis capable of developing perspectives that contribute to the two lines of thought beyond the differences between them.

Besides this intention of dialogue with European thought, another relevant characteristic of the Kyoto school is the variety of topics and problems that its members have been analyzing. The Kyoto School philosophers have investigated a wide range of subjects, and diverse perspectives about certain issues concerning ethics, politics, epistemology, and ontology. However, Nishida introduced a concept, or philosophical perspective, that has been a common element in the work of many members of the Kyoto School. The ontological idea of *nothingness* is the philosophical line that connected the philosophy of Tanabe, Nishitani, and Ueda in a critical manner. In other words, The Kyoto School stands out because of a philosophical proposition in which the absolute, i.e., the ultimate element that constitutes reality is *nothingness*. Inspired by the Buddhist concept of *mu* 無 (sans. *Śūnyatā*), Nishida and Tanabe developed their concept of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無). Although using the same term, there is an important interpretational distinction between them.

To sum up in a few words— since it is not part of the scope of this work to develop in-depth the interpretation of these philosophers— Nishida considerer a non-dualistic perspective of understanding absolute nothingness based on the category of the logic of *basho* 場所, translated as *topos* or place. Nishida seeks in his Buddhist roots an idea of absolute innovative enough to support his philosophy. The notion of *basho* elevated Nishida to the title of the most significant and influential representatives of 20th-century Japanese philosophy and the first modern Japanese philosopher.

2 Cf. Heisig, James. “Introducción”. In Nishitani Keiji. *La religión y la Nada*. Trans. Raquel Bouso García. (Chisokudō Publications. Edición revisada, 2017). : 7-26. Davis, Bret W. “The Kyoto School”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [Online] URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/kyoto-school/>>.

Tanabe, for his part, develops a critique of the contemplative view of the concept and employs a point of view that perceives absolute nothingness in terms of *praxis* (jap. *jissen* 実践). Tanabe critically claims that Nishida's proposal of absolute nothingness as *basho* 場所 is problematical because insists in the category of principle, failing to overcome the problems introduced by the metaphysics of being.

Nishitani philosophically analyses the conception of absolute nothingness developed by his predecessors and chooses, instead, to use the term emptiness (jap. *kū* 空), or directly the Mahāyāna Buddhist expression *sūnyatā* (sans.). His choice of vocabulary, in my opinion, has a direct relation with the distinction established by him between *emptiness* and the nothingness of nihility. Since, according to Nishitani's perspective, nihility is negative and relative and must be overcome while emptiness represents the point of view where the reality can be realized in its suchness.

In my opinion, the Kyoto School is a good representation of the complexity and culturally rooted Japanese way of thinking that happened after the Meiji restoration. The inclination of developing its own original thought through the critique of Euro-American philosophy without dismissing its religious roots, the historical background, and the multiple interests in a wide range of subjects, are aspects that help us to understand what Japanese philosophy means. However, the Kyoto School is not the only representation of Japanese philosophy.

Japanese Philosophy Before Tetsugaku

It is critical to clarify that although an important and well-known Japanese school of philosophy, one cannot reduce the philosophy developed in Japan to the Kyoto School. In other words: the Kyoto School is not the first or the last expression of Japanese Philosophy.

Maraldo and Heisig (2011) defended that the roots of Japanese philosophy can be traced back to Kūkai (774–835), the founder of the Japanese Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai's main contribution is his metaphysical and epistemological justification for the practice of ritual. His original thought would largely influence the philosophy developed in Japan. Kūkai adopt philosophy to defend a personal engagement on the buddha's enlightened experience, which had a physical and intellectual engagement, in opposition to the mainstream understanding of an abstract and inaccessible principle. In "Kūkai's words, enlightenment is achieved 'with and through this very body,' a process inseparable from true intellectual understanding." (Heisig et al., 2011, p. 8)

The affirmation that Kūkai is one of the first Japanese philosophers, on one hand, challenges the predominant and narrow definition of philosophy. On the other hand, it implies that the exercise of philosophy in Japan is an activity that happened before the adoption of the term *tetsugaku* 辰学— that is, before the contact with the European philosophy and the modernization of the country.

As I have discussed in the first session of this article, the Japanese intellectuals and philosophers have condemned what they labeled as “imperialist arrogance” and reclaimed for themselves the entitlement of naming philosophy the original, confronting, and critical thought of Japan. Other scholars and philosophers have pointed out the need to question the definition of philosophy as an exclusive Greek invention.

Franz Wimmer calls attention to the narrow and strict definition of philosophy as something that has its origin in Europe.

En „sentido estricto“ se dice que la filosofía es algo europeo. Así, el filosofar ha sido distinguido con frecuencia del no-filosofar con un criterio cultural, a veces racista. Se dice que es el logro de una sola cultura, la occidental, el haber pensado de manera radical y metódica sobre las preguntas fundamentales. (Wimmer, 1995, p. 8).

Similarly, Bryan Norden, in his provoking article, denounces the Euro-American Philosophy practice of excluding Asian, African, and indigenous philosophies.

Mainstream philosophy in the so-called West is narrow-minded, unimaginative, and even xenophobic. I know I am levelling a serious charge. But how else can we explain the fact that the rich philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are completely ignored by almost all philosophy departments in both Europe and the English-speaking world? (Norden, 2017).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos in *Epistemologias do Sul* (2011) argues that the process of colonization resulted in the dominance of Euro-American culture and way of thinking. According to him, some epistemologies were intentionally ignored because of colonialism and an ethnocentric view of knowledge.

For this reason, before analyzing the hypothesis that Japan has been developing a critical thought characterized as philosophical— even before getting in contact with the term philosophy— it is necessary to overcome this problematic perspective which is ultimately responsible for maintaining a Eurocentric view of knowledge. It is only possible to provide the status of philosophy to critical methodologies, definitions, and argumentative formulas developed despite Euro-American traditional philosophy when one sees the cultural context as a relevant element of critical thinking.

Furthermore, as argued Wimmer, if one accepts the open definition of philosophy— that focus not on the form which the philosophy was founded, but in the content investigated— it should appear evident “that philosophy has had several origins, which differ essentially, are independent of each other, and that are acting to date” (1995, p. 8). Following Wimmer’s premise, Japanese philosophy must have its own process of origin and its own peculiar characteristics.

Although it did not receive the title of philosophy at the time, Japan has been able to think critically and methodologically about central concepts and ultimate problems they consider relevant through the lens of their tradition since Kūkai. Furthermore, Japanese philosophy is a heterogeneous and complex way of thinking that has received influence from different religious doctrines and philosophical movements from different cultural backgrounds.

However, it is essential to emphasize that the introduction and assimilation of foreign philosophies have not been a passive activity, i.e., a reproduction or transference of these ways of thinking. Japanese intellectuals and philosophers critically select and adapt what is relevant according to Japan's cultural values and internal struggles.

Nevertheless, how can one define the Japanese philosophy based on its own features without failing into the problematic essentialism that ultimately separates traditions of thoughts and reinforces stereotypes? Would that be essential to understand the contribution of the thought developed in Japan?

Defining Japanese Philosophy

Bret Davis has carefully problematized the question: “What does it mean to ask after the definition of something, or to define something, such as Japanese philosophy?” He asks if there is a particular and unique thing called Japanese philosophy with a definite and definable essence. He continues his inquiry: Is there one universally and eternally correct answer to this question? (Davis, 2019, 1).

When the qualification “Japanese” is added to the critical stance that characterizes philosophy, it is assumed that Japanese thought has specific characteristics that need to be evidenced. The analysis of the cultural-historical context shows that historical events have a principal influence on the formation of these distinctive features. However, when one searches for the essence of Japanese philosophy— a universal and everlasting definition— one might find an oversimplistic and stereotypical answer.

What I am mainly concerned with here is to introduce Japanese philosophy to new researchers and problematize the often simplistic and essentialist answer to this question. In this sense, I would like to avoid the common but misleading dichotomy between Eastern and Western philosophy or Japanese philosophy and Western philosophy. Even when used for educational purposes, this artificial opposition instead of stressing the prominence of each expression of critical thought might lead to a reductionist perspective.

Many scholars and Japanese philosophers have given their contribution to clarify the definition of Japanese philosophy. Scholars have defended that the distinctive characteristic that defines Japanese philosophy since its genesis is the act of assimilating or absorbing foreign ideas and values to integrate them into a new

system more appropriate to the Japanese cultural context (Heisig et al., 2011, 6). According to Heisig, Maraldo, and Kasulis, most Japanese philosophers followed this method of appropriation and reconstruction that has since defined the character of critical thinking in this country.

In the same sense, Davis highlights how this method has been applied by Japanese monastics and scholars consistently before the modernization of the country. Critical thinkers have adopted but also adapted Chinese philosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism to create the Japanese critical interpretation of them. Likewise, the modern Japanese philosophers set about critically and creatively appropriating currents of Euro-American philosophy. This systematic process of selection of what concept or method is relevant to be adopted and transformed is applied to think Japan's issues and form its own way to question reality.

Kūkai, Dōgen, Shinran, and Nichiren were especially innovative Buddhist thinkers, just as Hayashi Razan, Yamaga Sokō, Itō Jinsai, and Ogyū Sorai developed significantly new interpretations of Confucianism. And all the modern Japanese philosophers treated in this volume were highly original thinkers, most of whom critically confronted as well as creatively drew on aspects of both Western and Eastern traditions of philosophical thinking. (Davis, 2019, p. 6).

However, as Davis reminds us, dialogue and adaptation of foreign ideas is not an exclusive aspect of Japanese philosophy. According to him, the same could be said about “German philosophy” or “French philosophy,” for example, “which do not have autochthonous origins but rather developed through their reception of ancient Greek and medieval Latin philosophy.” (Davis, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, neither Greek philosophy genesis happened in isolation from the critical thought of other civilizations that they contacted. Therefore, the “Japanese” method of doing philosophy seems to be, rather, the universal way of doing philosophy.³

Conversely, as Falero argues in the article “The Meaning of Japanese Philosophy. A Spanish Perspective” (2017), the thought developed in Japan should not be interpreted in isolation of other cultures. According to him, its relevance relies on its attempt to search for universal truth— which we have chosen to call philosophy since ancient Greece. Philosophy would be an attempt to give sense to reality answering fundamental questions about human existence, nature, social structures, moral boundaries, and the possibility of knowledge through logical reasoning, analysis, and argumentation.

3 Despite the argument that any tradition that is in contact with other culture will inevitably influence each other, it is important to highlight the uniqueness of Japan's history of modernization and the power dynamic involved in these interactions. Japan opened the borders for European countries and USA after almost 250 years of isolation. In this sense, the process of modernization of the country was also a process of Euro-Americanization. In the case of Japan and colonized countries there is a lack of balance in proportion of influence that these nations were able to provide. (*cf.* Betancourt, Raúl. 1998. “Supuestos filosóficos del diálogo intercultural”. *Utopía y praxis latinoamericana*, 3(5), 51-64.)

According to Falero, if we accept the definition of philosophy as the search for universal truth, cultural particularities are included in this initiative. He claims that philosophical truth is comparable to the scientific one. Therefore, philosophy must be universally applicable. That means that philosophic discovery must have the same status as a scientific discovery, regardless of where one made it.

Related to this matter, Falero uses Nishida Kitarō's philosophical approach to illustrate his argument. He states that Nishida's concept of *basho* 場所 was not developed as a truth intended to be concerning exclusively to Japanese culture, instead his proposition aims to be a contribution to a universal philosophy. For this particular reason, Falero claims: "it [Nishida's *basho*] must be discussed not in the history books of Japanese philosophy, but in philosophical circles along with the world where radical ontology is the issue." (Falero 2017, 61).

Falero's argument related to the definition of Japanese philosophy indicates the recognition of the universal appeal of the subjects investigated by the philosophers of Japan, which is justifiable. However, later he also defends the necessity of "recover rationality, understood as a basic philosophical and linguistic tool, common to all cultures and languages." (Falero, 2017, p. 62). He argues that by recovering rationality Japanese philosophy is liberated from the tinge of "irrationality" to which it has been condemned both inside and outside Japan.

I must indicate that Japanese philosophers have been criticizing reason as an epistemological perspective. Therefore, it would not be elected, at least by Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji, as their philosophical principle. Nevertheless, reason is not an impartial intermediary of knowledge. Reason as the primary source of knowledge is not a consensus, not even among Greek philosophers, but it has been adopted to define the value of thinking.

I argue that it is indispensable to criticize philosophical reason— in the terms that Raúl Fornet-Betancourt considered. According to him, it is imperative to criticize the historical management of the idea of reason and the historical use of such notion to determine, for example, what it means to think, know, understand, justify, and value. (Fornet-Betancourt, 2010, p. 24). Classical European philosophy has systematically elected reason as an epistemological value to be pursued and has under valued the critical thought developed by outsiders as irrational, therefore minor or irrelevant.

All those attempts of defining Japanese philosophy or clarify its general characteristics have limitations. In analyzing them closely, we find that although the influence of other traditions has shaped Japanese philosophy, it is not the only tradition of thought that received multicultural influences. Additionally, if we investigate the central problems analyzed by Japanese philosophers, we conclude that although the answer to those problems is unique, the issues are not fundamentally different from the problems discussed by classical Greek philosophy.

Finally, the argument that Japanese philosophy has also applied reason like a “basic philosophical and linguistic tool”, is challenged by the fact that some Japanese philosophers criticize the notion of reason. Furthermore, the notion of reason, as the source of truth and knowledge, is a matter in dispute even among European philosophers.

Moreover, philosophy understood as the historical manifestation of critical thought is formed by a multiplicity of perspectives, counterpoints, and criticisms, which are intrinsically connected with the historical, political, religious, and economic circumstances that shape the culture of the philosopher. If we accept that Japan and other societies are also capable of developing a critical systemic reflection on reality— an activity that we call philosophy— its uniqueness of perspective is a result of their cultural values and traditions. Culture is the lens through which everyone sees reality and constructs a philosophical proposition capable of overcoming unique and universal problems. Thus, in my perspective, culture is the principle of philosophizing.

Culture has no stable consensual definition and was conceptualized in several different forms. I define culture as the customs, traditions, art, religious rituals, values, social manifestations, and collective achievements of a social group. However, culture is not a static and hermetically sealed phenomenon, but it is constantly changing according to historical deeds, and it is open to stimulate and challenging cultural encounters with others. Thus, I see culture as an open space of manifestation of the singularity of thought through openness to the other. This perspective of culture contests the idea that cultures are essentially different, thus cannot blend. In the reality of a multicultural world, there is a constant and mutual influence, despite the political power dynamic and intentions of controlling and subjugating certain regions of the planet.

In my opinion, philosophy has a double feature: it has a universal character— there are no geographical frontiers that would restrict philosophical problems to be elaborated and thought in different parts of the world. As a result, the issue of the reality-forming principle, the question of the possibility of acquiring knowledge, or the concern about human practice are problems replicated universally in diverse parts of the world. However, there is a second important feature that can transform the universality of philosophy: cultural and social distinctions influence language so that they can affect the way one responds to these questions and ultimately influence the way one philosophizes.

Thus, an approach that highlights culture as the attribute which defines Japanese philosophy avoids essentialisms and reductionisms. These aspects ultimately separate what some consider “the real original philosophy originated in Europe” and other forms of “thoughts”. But also creates the artificial dichotomy which blends all the heterogeneous philosophical perspectives of the world into

only two groups Eastern and Western philosophy. Additionally, a culturally diverse approach to philosophy would enable a pluralistic viewpoint that provides distinct solutions to universal philosophical questions created according to the cultural background.

The analysis of Kyoto School's philosophical proposal of absolute nothingness (zettai mu 絶対無), per example, might evidence, on one hand, the cultural differences between Japanese interpretation and the conceptualization of nothingness developed by Sartre and Heidegger, for instance. On the other hand, it confirms the argument of the universality of philosophy by stating that Japan and Europe share the same fundamental issues, in this case, the search for the principle of reality. However, both traditions can propose different solutions according to their cultural, linguistic, religious, and social bases. In other words, to define Japanese philosophy it is necessary to realize that the center of philosophizing is not logical or rational thinking, not even the subjects are in the center, the cultural aspects of each society are.

Conclusion

The question “What is Japanese philosophy?” It is an inquiry that demands careful consideration of another important question: What is philosophy? In order to define *Japanese* philosophy, it is indispensable to define the idea of philosophy.

In analyzing the state of the debate today one encounters a tendency of questioning the geographical and cultural borders of Philosophy. The syllabus of universities has been accused of being deliberated white, philosophers and scholars from different backgrounds have been questioning why the critical thought of some traditions had the status of philosophy denied. The borders of philosophy need to be removed to accommodate the diversity of perspectives engendered by different cultures.

I argue that there is still a debate about accepting that philosophy can be universal and exist in numerous forms, i.e., beyond the Greek standard. However, if we aim to overcome this narrow definition of philosophy to enrich it culturally, it is necessary to question the Eurocentric and colonialist understanding of knowledge. Or in Raúl Fornet-Betancourt's terms, it is indispensable to question the history of management of the idea of reason that has neglected the critical intellectual proposition developed by other traditions. The Eurocentric and colonialist perspective has excluded other traditions from the status of philosophy— a classification established by themselves and for themselves. Considering the critical thought developed in Japan, for example, the same structure of power has created a narrative that exoticizes Asia, establishing a generic image of that group of countries by defining them as Eastern or Oriental.

The analysis of the history of Japanese philosophy shows how culture is crucial to understand Japanese philosophy and its contribution to the world's philosophy.

The Japanese philosophy has the characteristic of assimilating the critical thought developed by other traditions and critically reconfigure it as part of their innovative way of thinking. It constitutes the foundation of the Japanese philosophical history and their method of studying and integrating the philosophy of Europe and China, per example. Although, even Greek philosophy was not founded in isolation from the influence of other cultures. The uniqueness of Japanese philosophy— its original way of thinking— has its roots in its cultural context. The same can be said about any other philosophy.

Affirming that Japanese philosophy, or any philosophical tradition, should be defined by its culture implicates that every philosophical activity, method, and concept, has to do with the history, language, social values, and religion of that group. This view should avoid essentialism that ends up in stereotypes, generalizations, or even ethnocentric views and asymmetry between traditions since culture is a phenomenon open to alterity that is constantly changing. I argue that approaching philosophy in an intercultural way reveals the multiplicity of philosophy that must be considered in establishing a pluralist, diverse and open philosophy.

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