Book Reviews


Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) — whatever his contributions to “national aesthetics” may have been — is one of the foremost Japanese philosophers of the century, and it is lamentable that none of his major works has been translated into English. Leslie Pincus’s book is the first substantial study of his thought, as far as I know, to be published in a Western language. (An interesting — but short — work by Stephen Light, entitled Shūzō Kuki and Jean-Paul Sartre, appeared ten years ago.) The argument of Authenticating Culture ranges beyond Kuki to the larger historical context in which he wrote; but since his thought is the primary focus, Pincus’s book constitutes a welcome beginning from which there is much to be learned.

Any study of a life or life’s work is bound to be partial, if only because the disproportion between the scope of a book and the enormous complexity of a corpus demands that the author be highly selective. With a thinker as profound and complex as Kuki, who cultivated an unusually wide range of intellectual interests and was as cosmopolitan in his life as in his thought, the task of presenting a fair picture of his thought becomes formidable indeed. Pincus provides an informative account of Kuki’s eight years in Europe, together with an overview of the intellectual and philosophical currents that were prevalent in France and Germany at the time. The third chapter supplies an interesting overview of the late Edo culture during the period known as “Kaiseki” — to which many of the historical portions of Kuki’s best known work, “iki” no kōdō (The structure of iki; 1930), refer. Pincus has undertaken an impressive amount of research, especially in original Japanese sources from the 1920s and 1930s, so that her study is particularly informative about Japanese intellectual life during that period. She has read widely in Kuki’s own corpus, and for this reason the book is to be recommended to anyone interested in his ideas. But it is also informed by an extreme partiality, so that the picture it presents of Kuki’s philosophy is unnecessarily distorted.

I say “unnecessarily” because while all studies of this kind are bound to be partial, some are more partial — and less impartial — than others, depending on how much the methodology is determined by ideological considerations. A sentence from the blurb on the inside of the book jacket is informative in this respect: “Inspired by the work of Foucault, the Marxist culturalists, and the Frankfurt School theorists, Pincus reads against the grain of traditional interpretations to reveal the disturbing proximity between aesthetic modernism and political fascism in Japan.” The body of the text lives up to this preview: the angle of approach...
is decidedly narrow, as evidenced by the fact that almost all the secondary literature cited, whether in Japanese or English, is Marxist in orientation. Kuki's philosophy is by contrast aristocratic (and occasionally elitist) in its refined treatment of topics in the history of philosophy and the aesthetics of culture, with almost no reference to social or political issues. The young Marx expressed enthusiasm in the 1844 manuscripts for "the wealth of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye which is sensitive to the beauty of form)" as well as for "the cultivation of the five senses [as] the work of all previous history," and so one can imagine much in Kuki's writings that would have appealed to him. But since neo-Marxism has little interest in cultural refinement — and often appears to cultivate resentment against it — one might well doubt whether a neo-Marxist perspective would be adequate for seeing what is of importance in Kuki's philosophy.

The first chapter of Authenticating Culture provides a brief sketch of Kuki's early years, in the course of which Pincus refers to a discussion of his life by a recent commentator, Sakabe Megumi of Tokyo University. Sakabe argues on depth-psychological grounds that the structure collapse of Kuki's family when he was young had a lasting effect on his subsequent life and thought. Pincus comments: "Here Sakabe's argument drifts into an explicitly political register" (p. 30).

Deprived of a family model of integration and harmony, Kuki had no choice but to do without the security offered by fixed collectivities and assume the difficult burden of a thoroughgoing individualism rare in prewar Japan. Banished from the family circle into the lonely exile of a harsh individualism, how could Kuki have acceded to a "family-state," in other words, to an emperor-system ideology representing Japan as a family under the paternal authority of the emperor?

Immediately after the passage paraphrased here, Sakabe writes that Kuki was nevertheless able to develop "a thinking and ethics [concerning] the public world [which] went beyond reference to any specific group" and that later, during the period leading up to the Pacific War, his early experiences allowed him to resist being drawn in, such that he was able to become "a witness to the era's misfortune through seeing it, as it were, from the back." [p. 31-32] These are the grounds for Sakabe's saying, as Pincus goes on to mention, that Kuki had no interest in "the notion of traditional community that thinkers like Watsuji and Nishida incorporated into their thinking" (p. 31). But she will have none of it.

Sakabe has enmeshed the child in a family scandal only to rescue the intellectual from embroilment in what is considered by a number of postwar Japanese thinkers to be a historical scandal — the complicity of prewar intellectuals with a family-state ideology that underwrote the repression and militarism of the 1930s and 1940s. ... What enables Sakabe to vindicate Kuki's thought politically is a tacit disregard for the historical settings and textual networks in which "Ikki" no kōzō is interpolated.

64 Chanoyu Quarterly no. 86
These are strange remarks, for a number of reasons. Sakabe’s study of Kuki evidences a most insightful regard for the “historical settings and textual networks” of his subject’s thought; and since that thought deals primarily with culture and the arts, there is no need for him to “rescue [Kuki] from embroilment” in any historical scandals. Sakabe mentions the “family-state” (kokka) ideology because he is aware that colleagues of Kuki’s such as Nishida and Watsuji have been harshly criticized for subscribing to such an ideology, and his exposition of Kuki’s philosophy makes it clear why Kuki has not been the target of such criticisms. (Not until Karatani Kôjin, at least; and now Leslie Pincus.)

Pincus’s attitude toward Sakabe’s work is a mystery. He is one of Japan’s pre-eminent contemporary philosophers, and his masterly study of Kuki’s thought in the context of his life, Fuzai no uta (Songs of absence; 1990), is an indispensable item in the secondary literature which no subsequent scholarship can afford to ignore. But though Sakabe’s is the only book-length study of Kuki to appear in her bibliography, Pincus declines to discuss it after criticizing the above-mentioned passages from its first chapter.2 Could the reason be that Sakabe’s presentation of Kuki as an unusually apolitical thinker is so at odds with her presentation of him as an accomplice of Japanese fascism? (References in her index under “Kuki’s fascist affinities” refer to 25 of the text’s 250 pages.) Sakabe’s picture of Kuki’s philosophy as replete with insights into human existence, art, and culture seems to me a faithful one; it in any case inspires the reader to study Kuki’s writings. If Pincus thinks that picture is false, then the intellectually responsible thing to do would be to tell us what’s wrong with it — rather than proceed to present a flabby contradictory thesis without further comment.

The index entries under “‘Ikki’ no kōzō and fascism” make reference to five pages of the text, but neither there nor anywhere else in the book do we find any evidence for this insalubrious association. Pincus herself is forced to acknowledge how poor in grist for the political mill that text really is: “Despite the very rare references to nation or state in “Ikki” no kōzō, the cultural community that the text presupposes may in fact represent the preferred idiom for the expression of nationalism” (p. 282). She admits too, perhaps with Sakabe’s suggestion in mind, that there is no sign there of “the kazoku kokka, the ‘family state’ ideology” or even of the state simpliciter: nevertheless, “despite the marked absence of the state on the surface of the text, ‘Ikki’ no kōzō in fact represented the state in another form” (pp. 235–6). The more obvious conclusion to be drawn from this “marked absence” is that the text is more or less lacking in significant political implications.

In view of the background Pincus herself provides to Kuki’s writing of the book “Ikki” no kōzō, one can give a quite unconsipiratorial account of what the book is about and of what she rightly calls Kuki’s “philosophy of culture.” During his years in Europe Kuki learned a great deal of European philosophy and aesthetics, and found that his distance from Japan gave him a new perspective on his own culture, which he realized was poorly understood in Europe. After drafting numerous reflections on the peculiarly Japanese notion of ikki, he returned home to an academic atmosphere in which philosophy looked almost exclusively to Europe for its topics as well as its methods. He then published a book that employed a methodology from Western hermeneutics and aimed to contribute to the philoso-
phy of culture by explicating the aesthetic notion of *iki*. There is indeed a mention at the beginning of Kuki’s text of the *minzoku*, the people, or nation, members of a community formed by a shared language; but his point is simply that different cultures develop their own particular ideas about aesthetics, which resist being subsumed under the universal categories proclaimed by the prevalent European theories. He could have found such incommensurable aesthetic notions in any number of other cultures, but he began with *iki* because he was writing for a Japanese audience. Perhaps there was some kind of national “inferiority complex” in intellectual matters at work here (since Europe so completely dominated the philosophical scene in Japan); but Kuki’s choice of a topic from the history of his own culture doesn’t justify calling him an ultranationalist.

Since Kuki’s writings provide so little in the way of evidence for his alleged fascist proclivities, Pincus tries to establish some guilt by association through invoking his relations with Heidegger, whose credentials in the area of political incorrectness apparently need no establishing. Several factors contribute to the failure of this tactic. First, her reading of Heidegger’s *A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer* takes that complex text too much at face value. Elsewhere she cites (p. 58) a footnote in Stephen Light’s study which contains a reference to Tezuka Tomin’s account of the actual conversation with Heidegger upon which the “Dialogue” purported to be based. If Pincus had bothered to read that account she would have gained a very different perspective on Heidegger’s text and could not have endorsed Peter Dale’s egregiously literal misreading of it (p. 93). One wishes that she had in general striven for a better first-hand understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy and its relation to the history of Western metaphysics, rather than relying so heavily on commentaries by people such as Tosaka Jun, Theodor Adorno, and Karatani Kōjin (interesting thinkers, but hardly the most reliable sources on Heidegger). Heidegger scholars will find it hard to take seriously an account containing claims such as this: “But interestingly, the ‘Dialogue’ suggests one further temptation never explicitly acknowledged in the text — the temptation compelling Kuki to invest his description of *iki* with Heidegger’s desire for the unutterable beyond of Western metaphysics.”

The most telling feature of the discussion of Heidegger, however, is Pincus’s attempt to argue that *Being and Time* presents “collective and conservative dimensions of Dasein” that are continuous with its author’s “association with National Socialism” (p. 176). “In what I would call a calculated oversight, Kuki, Watsuji, and Miki — all conscientious students of Heidegger — neglected the implications of this last section of *Being and Time*.” The implications of that section are simply that authentic being-in-the-world is not an existence lived in splendid isolation but involves a return to being a member of a community after the alienation occasioned by angst-conditioned confrontation with death. But Pincus complains that in this section “the hard-won authenticity of Dasein . . . is abruptly and somewhat mysteriously collectivized in the form of an ‘authentic folk.’” The move is abrupt only if the reader has forgotten that Heidegger earlier established *Mitsein*, or being-with-others, as one of the basic existential structures of Dasein. But the main problem is that Heidegger never talks about “authentic folk.” (What would that be anyway — *eigentliches Volk*?) In fact there is only a single occurrence of the word

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66 Chanoyu Quarterly no. 86
Volkin the entire text of \textit{Being and Time}, where it appears in apposition to the term for "community" (p. 384 of the German edition). But Pincus has to make a great deal of this lone \textit{Volkin}, since she argues that Kuki drew on "the semantic resources" of the word, "as a translation [for which] 'folk' would have the advantage of invoking the German fascist politics associated with the term" (p. 55).

Although much of Pincus's writing is fairly clear, two factors make Authentication Culture a difficult book (for the reader, at least) to read. For one thing the sound of various ideological axes being ground often drowns out the main theme. Some sections contain so much political commentary from the sidelines by neo-Marxists that one forgets that the ostensible subject of the study is Kuki's aesthetics. And the author's own discourse is often blurred by lapses into postmodernist academic jargon: "Kuki's venture into critical alterity was compromised from the outset by a compulsion to reproduce the expansive identity that it opposed — a compulsion enacted in the interests of a domestic hegemony . . . " (p. 246). It is a bit like hiking mountain trails around the cloud level: every now and then one is enveloped by thick mists which completely obscure the path, so that even after the mystification lifts it takes a while to regain one's bearings.

The coup de grâce is administered in a lengthy epilogue based on the premise that "the theoretical framework elaborated in 'Iki' no kōzo served as a firm foundation for the more militant pronouncements of the later texts" and "the more explicitly ideological writings" (p. 213). Pincus discusses two essays from the late thirties in which, she claims,

\begin{quote}
Kuki enlisted the discursive tactics and objects first deployed in "Iki" no kōzo in a widening movement to suppress pluralism at home and mobilize the Japanese populace for an expansionist war in Asia. By the end of the decade, the discourse on culture — in a blunt rapprochement with a repressive and militarist state apparatus — had placed itself at the disposal of what has been called, with much exception, Japanese fascism. (p. 214)
\end{quote}

Expectations raised by her claim that in these later essays "affinities with fascist cultural discourse stand out in clear relief" (p. 220) are hardly fulfilled by the treatment that follows. Yes, fascism traditionally makes much of aesthetic and cultural concerns; but this does not mean that anyone who, like Kuki, writes about aesthetic and cultural issues during a politically repressive era is a fascist. Pincus criticized Kuki's later essays in an earlier journal article, and since I have responded to those criticisms elsewhere I confine myself here to a brief discussion of what is new in the book version of her critique.

In his essay on the Japanese character, Kuki argues for an open-minded internationalism, exhorting his fellow countrymen to "recognize the unique strengths of other cultures and respect their legitimate rights and aim for the coexistence of all human beings. . . . Thus world culture as a whole will advance through the exercise of each country's uniqueness." But now Pincus dismisses this, and Kuki's major concern with trying to integrate "Japanism" (Nihonshugi) into a "cosmopolitanism" (sekaiishugi), by calling them mere "rhetorical gestures toward in-

\textit{Book Reviews 67}
ternationalism” (p. 223). Such a cavalier dismissal of an author’s main theme is breathtaking in its perversity. What Kuki proposes in the concluding section of the later version of the essay, from which Pincus cites only selectively, is a balancing of nationalism with internationalism.

In the present situation [1937] some people engage in an uncritical adulation of Western culture, abandoning themselves to its influence completely. Japanese character will be lost in this way. Other people regard Japanese character as something absolute and can do nothing but try to preserve it as absolute. Neither of these extremes will work. On one hand we must become fully aware of the uniqueness of Japanese culture, but at the same time we must open ourselves to a broad view of world cultures and display a capacity to incorporate their good features.

When Kuki discusses “nature” (shizen) as a key element in Japanese character earlier in the essay, he adduces numerous examples from the arts of Japan to show the importance in this area of the Daoist ideal of ziran (which comprises the same characters as shizen). At the end of the discussion, he mentions that Japanese ethics is similarly naturalistic insofar as it is natural for the same person, the emperor, to be in charge of worshiping the gods and governing the people. Pincus reads this as an endorsement of “the subjugation of individuals to absolute power” (p. 224), though there is no mention in the essay of “subjugation” or “absolute power.” Just as forced is the way she interprets Kuki’s discussion of another kind of iki as a second element in Japanese character: by bringing a mention of “the spirit of self-sacrifice born of a pure heart” (KSZ 3:384) into association with the language of Kokutai no hongi, she conjures up visions of “a democracy of death... in which all Japanese are equal as willing subjects of sacrifice” (p. 225). But again there is nothing in the text to suggest that the people should lay down their lives for emperor or country.

Pincus’s reading of Kuki’s four-page pamphlet “jikyoku no kansen” (Thoughts on the current situation) is an egregious exercise in taking quotes out of context, insofar as the major mood of the piece is Kuki’s distress at what he perceives as the degeneration of Chinese culture, for which, thanks to his classical education, he has sincere and profound respect. She portrays the author as a bloodthirsty warmonger who “praises the Japanese spirit, whether it found expression in kimono patterns or suicidal bomber missions” (p. 232). She declines to note that Kuki supports the war against China only grudgingly, and on the grounds that, since the war is already underway, it might as well be brought to “a meaningful conclusion”: “When I think of the fact that war is something that sacrifices individual happiness in favor of the whole, then I’m actually always a pacifist” (KSZ 5:37). Kuki does indeed say that the Yamato damashi is manifested by the pilot who uses his plane as a weapon when the armaments have run out, but he immediately adds that a “feminine version” of the same Japanese spirit is manifested in the way a women’s group arranged shipments of food and medical supplies as an expression of solidarity with the Chinese (5:39). Again what is in Kuki a balanced treatment is portrayed as militantly one-sided.

68 Chanoyu Quarterly no. 86
Pincus ends her book by invoking Adorno on the way “insistence on the autonomy of the spirit” ultimately conducted in Germany to “absolute horror.” There is no better way to convey how she overstates the case in Japan than to quote her last sentence: “It is this discursive itinerary, from culture as ideal to culture as terror, that I have endeavored to trace in this study of “Iki” no kōzō” (p. 247). But after following this itinerary all the way to “culture as terror,” any reader possessing prior acquaintance with Kuki is going to be left with the question of why Pincus should have gone to such lengths to portray him as a protofascist when there is so little in his philosophy to justify such a representation.

Karatani Kōjin obviously plays a role here; Pincus writes that he “has drawn an even more direct ideological line between the related projects of Kuki and Heidegger and the fascist development of their respective states” (p. 94) — though the justification he presents for drawing such lines is no less flimsy than her own. She also acknowledges Harry Harootunian as one who helped her “discover the meaning of critical thinking” (p. xi) — another scholar who is remarkably liberal when it comes to applying the fascist label to members of the Kyoto School. In fact a flourishing division of the deconstruction industry in Japanese studies these days seems to be devoted to demonstrating the extreme political incorrectness of the major figures in twentieth-century Japanese philosophy. It is hard to resist the suspicion that, since Nishida and Watsuji and Nishitani have already been severely reprimanded in this regard, the desire to add Kuki to the list by demonstrating his complicity with Japanese fascism prompted Pincus to try situating his texts in suitably damning contexts. Not that the relation of philosophy and culture to politics is not an important topic of intellectual inquiry; it is just that accusations of ultranationalism and fascism are serious matters that require careful substantiation. All the more so since unsuspecting students coming across such accusations in books published by respectable university presses will be inclined to believe them — and so disinclined to further their own reading of the philosophers themselves.

It is true that as social and political tensions within Japan intensified toward the outbreak of the Pacific War, Kuki made a few remarks in his essays with a rationalistic and cultural-imperialistic tone to them; and it would have been perfectly appropriate for Leslie Pincus to devote a section of her book to a critical discussion of those remarks in their contexts. But when a neo-Marxist ideology conditions the study from beginning to end, the resulting picture of Kuki is grotesquely distorted. There is much in Kuki’s work, especially in his internationalist reflections on culture, that could illuminate contemporary problems concerning multiculturalism and pluralism, but Pincus’s study hardly begins to examine these ideas. She does deserve our gratitude for getting the conversation started — and I have kept the tone of this review polemical in the hope of sparking further discussion of one of modern Japan’s most fascinating thinkers.

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Book Reviews 69
NOTES

1 Sakabe Megumi, Fuzai no uta: Kuki Shūzō no sekai (Tokyo 1990), p. 22. Pincus refers to the initial appearance of Sakabe's text as a series of journal articles that appeared under the title "Kuki Shūzō no sekai" (The world of Kuki Shūzō) before they were collected and published in book form.

2 There are only two subsequent references to Sakabe's book but no further discussion of his view of Kuki's thought.

3 For a judicious discussion of Heidegger's "Dialogue" in the light of Tezuka's account of their conversation, and an English translation of that account, see Reinhard May, Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work (Routledge 1996).


7 See my brief discussion of the main thrust of this essay in "The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School."

8 For a brief criticism of Karatani's ideological critiques of Kuki and Heidegger in English, see "The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School."