



10-1-2006

### *In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers: More Voices From a Lost Generation of Japanese Students*

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#### Recommended Citation

Drew, Joseph (2006) "*In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers: More Voices From a Lost Generation of Japanese Students*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 55 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol55/iss55/11>

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***In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers: More Voices From A Lost Generation of Japanese Students.* Translated by Joseph L. Quinn, S.J., and Midori Yamanouchi, Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2005.**

It seems inevitable that when nations and countries, large and small, either lose or are about to lose major wars, they are forced into reevaluations of their true essence. Scholars examining Japan late in the war or post-war periods of national introspection have been given an excellent and extensive source to mine for observations in a new book just published in English translation by two American experts.

The book, which collects writings of University of Tokyo students killed in World War II, is called *In the Faraway Mountains and Rivers*, now ably translated by two University of Scranton professors, Joseph L. Quinn and Midori Yamanouchi. Previously the two scholars brought to the American public a somewhat similar volume, *Listen to the Voices from the Sea* (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2000). Although that book, ironically, was compiled a bit later, it was brought to publication earlier.

How did the Japanese students describe their history, art, culture, values, and ideals in the early and middle part of the last century? What, to quote the expression made so famous by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, was the pattern and meaning of the nation's history as these bright young Japanese saw it?

At the time these letters were written the University of Tokyo (also reported in these letters on occasion as Tokyo Imperial University) was probably the finest university in Japan and its students amongst the very best in the nation. For the most part, these doomed students were drafted, and the draft laws were becoming tighter and tighter as the war dragged on; their counterparts who majored in medicine or science escaped the draft. These letters home to family and loved ones, sometimes recorded in the form of journal entries, sometimes in the form of *haiku*, sometimes in other forms of reports, tell us a great deal about how the very brightest of Japanese young people viewed their lives and their country.

Especially is this the case as virtually all of these men knew, or suspected, that they would shortly die, as many of them had been placed in the most dangerous possible military positions. They were at the pinnacle of the Japanese educational ladder; they became Japan's lost generation.

Additionally, it is startling to see the war through the one-time

enemy's own eyes. What a different perspective than what we might have been prepared to imagine! This is not the type of enemy -- bright young college students forced by a ruthless, overbearing, anti-student and brutal military machine into fighting us -- that comes easily to any combatant force.

The letters and journals are filled with allusions to many of the learned world's greatest philosophers, authors, scientists, humanitarians -- especially German, French, and American ones. I've noted, among others, Max Stirner, Johann Fichte, Goethe, Morris R. Cohen, Rilke, Schiller, Ibsen, Dostoyevsky, Kant, Leibniz, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Leo Tolstoy, and Albert Schweitzer. Artists come in for quite frequent mention -- Botticelli, for example -- and poetry is quoted constantly. To a novice such as myself, it is incredible how widely read in the Western literature these young students are, how conversant with the important strands of Western political and social argumentation, going back to the Ancient Greeks.

So, the intellectual grounding is excellent. And what common themes emerge?

- In the first place, obviously there is much discussion of death, the meaning of death, the fact that the individual may not want to die but has to do so.

I wanted you to know how very much I enjoyed my life until its final moment and that, with a peaceful heart, I am simply going to disappear from this world as a light goes off.

Or, the following entry:

As Rilke wrote, a loved one who has passed away will live on in the memory of a living person. Taguchi is alive in my heart, in Masahisa's, and probably in Iwamiya's heart as well. When I think about my own death I wonder who, outside of my parents, would take a similar attitude, and I feel a bit lonesome. However, even if there were only someone who would just believe that in me there had existed an earnest dedication to life, I think that would be more precious than anything else. To live as earnestly as one can there is nothing else that really matters.

Or the following:

Why have I begun to write about faith all of a sudden? I should state it plainly: it is because in the near future I shall be facing certain death.

Or this one by Minoru Wada, a member of a Special Attack Unit, made

to squeeze into a tiny torpedo and be shot out toward an enemy boat, where he would steer the torpedo and be blown up himself, with no chance for escape:

It already seems to me that I no longer really exist.

After quoting Ibsen he adds, typically of his generation of young students, it seems:

I was far too emotional as well as stratagem-oriented, and I never took my own qualifications, or lack of them, into account. This is really the only regret I have with regard to my personal history, aside of course from the fact that the day is fast approaching when I shall have to sacrifice myself in the service of my country.

And:

When we first arrived here on assignment, we spent over a dozen easy days in total idleness. People might perhaps feel that we showed a lot of poise and grace in facing up to the death that was soon to come, but I would have to say that it was all valueless, for it was just a natural, everyday habit assumed by people without any particular courage, who are being forced to face death.

- Love of parents and other family members appears in almost each letter or diary mention; occasionally, others are mentioned. An important subset is the almost constant testimony that the student failed in his filial obligation and should have shown more gratitude for the sacrifices his parents have made.
- An appreciation for nature, and the Japanese flora and fauna, appears in almost every diary entry. It is also part and parcel of each *haiku* composed. We read of woods, tall grass, lovely sunrises and sunsets, falling leaves, the weather (good and bad), agricultural plots along the sides of the road. This may be mandatory, but it never appears as false or contrived. Rather, it shows the esthetic values of the writer.
- Most of the boys want to survive in order to continue to grow as scholars. They see the values of the university as virtually the *sine qua non* of their lives. Some write regretfully: I could have been a full-fledged scholar.
- Many write of their admiration for a particular professor, one who taught them cosmopolitan values.

(My teacher) taught me what a true human being, and the human race itself, has to do. I feel too that it was he who taught me what *gakumon* (the pursuit of knowledge) really is. I cannot forget the words he

said to me, "Devote yourself to science!" was what he said on a certain evening, as I sat in front of him, stirring red tea with a Tibetan silver spoon, in a room with a Tibetan fresco hanging.

- Many indicate that they miss the past. "I don't know how to cope with today's realities." Many hankered after the halcyon days of youth, during which they studied at the best higher schools and then at the best three-year university in the country. And they don't like to kill others.

I think, too, of the miserable condition of human lives these days, and of the tragedy involved in abusing nature's gifts to kill one another.

- There is occasionally a gentle discussion of the missed love of a girlfriend or female companionship. Sometimes the writing on this subject is so delicate that the reader could easily miss the allusion. And the translators are so sensitive themselves that, for example, one young man is made to write that "Since I had no one to talk to, I went to bed at 9 o'clock." The translator then explains that the actual phrase as written was somewhat more complex and arcane; it "is freely translated here" (38).
- In spite of the military's strong censorship, which the young writers protest against in very creative ways, there is acceptance by many that the war is being lost.

But what happens if those goals are not achieved? In the latter case, the dead will have to carry the burden of their regrets beyond the grave. Someone has said that a war is easy when you are winning but becomes very difficult once it turns into a defensive struggle. Speaking out straightforwardly, I should ask the government whether or not this war, in which Japan is now engaged, is being fought with any probability of winning?"

Another student reports that he sees "no light at the end of the tunnel"; he felt, rather "foreboding of death" and "sorrow for Japan's suffering."

Another: Italy's surrender has been reported. How about us?

Yet another: Why in the world am I taking up arms for the emperor?

- They write of the increasing difficulties of fighting the war. As an American I was startled to read of their one man's reaction as our American ships moved toward the Western Pacific.

And the war condition is increasingly tense as the enemy is approach-

ing Saipan.

I kept thinking of the musical “South Pacific” and the perspective I have had on our strategy of island-hopping war in the Pacific theater. However, there is no doubt that both sides, the Japanese and ours, would agree with another student’s observation that

The road from New Britain to New Guinea was perhaps a funeral-march (music) from heaven to hell.

- These young men frequently wrote of their dislike of the military’s ways -- “the military is jealous of the free time for art and culture that college students have” -- and yet each man was preparing for his death under military orders.

I came to realize that, even if I had to force myself to do it, I had been trying to make some kind of sense out of my impending death.”

And with their dislike of the military, and sense of pending doom, there was frequent allusion to the need to show courage, to fight for the country, to do what was expected.

- The students who were drafted were also not in favor of military solutions and the military methods. More typical of the students were these attitudes:

I thoroughly dislike the military. ... My entire mental and spiritual makeup is completely opposite of that of the military man.

Why do we have to say good-bye to those whom we love?

- There are in these letters frequent good bye comments to family and friends. There is a promise that the writer will reappear “as a spirit” before his family’s altar, guiding and protecting the family from beyond the grave.

Goodbye Father, Mother, Younger Brother and Younger Sister and all my teachers/mentors/professors, as well.

I pray for your good health.

- The students frequently write about the nature of the self and of the group. They discuss reaching higher levels of consciousness, asceticism, and vanity.
- One student amazed me with the following (as it is the opposite of what one can imagine most American students writing):

It was a European-style dinner, and since I had not eaten any such dinner before I fumbled a lot, but somehow I managed to get through the meal. It was a delicious dinner of meat and fish with which I was not familiar, and I only thought about how wonderful it would have been to eat it at my leisure with chopsticks and a spoon. It was quite a job to eat with a knife and fork, trying not to fall behind the three other people who were eating in so relaxed a manner, and my efforts resulted in my being able to swallow just about half of the dinner.

Some might think that there may be relevant lessons for contemporary readers, because a number of these writers were in the Special Attack Forces. In fact, these men were put into very tiny boats (torpedoes, really) and kamikaze planes and sent off with the specific knowledge that they would be committing suicide.

Durkheim called it “altruistic” suicide; today we call it “suicide bombers.” This is a type we see increasingly in the War in Iraq. Yet, as opposed, I believe, to the vast majority of the bombers of today, these were the country’s most intellectual and educated young people. And they had wanted to stay on as students. The military wouldn’t let them, and as a result, Japan lost a generation of brilliant men.

Finally, there is a postscript by the members of the editorial board that compiled these letters, and there is a dedication by the former president of the University of Tokyo. From these, especially from the postscript, as from many of the writers themselves, we see how Japan was able to perceive the outline of what a new Japan could look like.

Today, Japan has the world’s second largest economy and it plays a major role in both preserving the peace and advancing a real “co-prosperity sphere” around the world. Obviously, the impact of the American presence, and the new laws enacted after the defeat of the militarist government, when combined with the intellectual traditions these students had imbibed and advocated, worked to create a new, more successful Japan.

The writers of this book, and its companion volume, have given us the opportunity to see the world as others see it. Like a Yoga posture where we are upside down, we (the Americans) can, via this book, see the war as the best and the brightest of our enemy did. When we understand how our opponent sees a situation, we can empathize and we can readjust.

I recommend this book heartily.

Joseph Drew