

The “China Theme” in Japanese Literature: Inoue Yasushi's Novels and Japan's Post-war Journey from Guilt to Disorientation

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Abstract. "The China Theme" is an indispensable key. Through it, the postwar development of Japanese letters could be comprehended. Shifts within the "China Theme" are the most significant view. Here, the psychological course of Chinese identity crises of Japan is pursued. This covers over four decades, spanning the postwar years until the close of the 20th century. World War II was shared trauma. It brought gigantic holes culturally and existentially. These compel Japan to consider how it stood towards culture and history, particularly where China was involved. Prior to the war, China appeared haughtily in prewar Japanese letters. This was according to the lines of imperialism. However, subsequent to the war, much of this shifted. According to the writer, the most significant evidence of this shift are the historical epics by Yasushi Inoue on the China theme. These reveal the shift. Initially, attention centered on the "China Theme". Afterwards, concern was geared towards Japan's own future. Based on Inoue's works, the initial influx of works comprised the mission. Cultural longing and salvation were the desires. The defeat of Japan brought along the war crimes and agony. This brought forth increased contemplation on the nation's body and soul. Afterwards, the rapid growth of Japan saw the emergence of the void culturally. Society became centered on the current time. Turbulence and existence became matters of contemplation. Viewing this through the lens of the wider postwar letters tendencies, this reveals shifts within the "China Theme". Initially, it revealed the outlook that transcended the imperialism mentality. Afterwards, it became the reflective gaze upon Japan's internal conflicts. It included constructing the new cultural identity within the uncertain time.

Keywords: Inoue Yasushi, Post-war Japanese Literature, China Theme, Cultural Identity, Historical Trauma

1. Introduction

Japan surrendered unconditionally in 1945. Its military campaigns were all failures. With it, Japan's worldview also broke down. The grand edifice of militaristic nationalism previously once led the Japanese people to have mission and purpose. But it went bankrupt. That was a double blow to the people's psyche. Spirit appeared to fall into the material nature. After the Second World War, the United States military committed war crimes. These not only eliminated all the material reality.

They erased all the traces of an ancient nation's civilization [1]. People were thrown into Turbulence and instability. It was under these turbulences of living life where the writing of Japan acquired a mission. It was to heal, to alleviate the sense of sin, and to declare the sense of spiritual fall where material wealth would be inadequate [2]. It began to touch the soul of the time, the spiritual aspect. Another notable aspect is the emergence and evolution of the so - called "China theme." Prior to the war, this theme frequently appeared in literary works. For instance, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *A Visit to China* contained it. Pre - war Japan typically regarded China with contempt and respect. This was the view of an imperial and modernizing nation. After the war, however, Japan could no longer think of China this way. To them, modern China ought to be considered by the people as a multi - faceted "China theme." It depicts Japan's own findings. It's also the mirror of self - reflection [3]. And it's the method of handling Japan's historical responsibility in semi - quantitative manners. Many authors have produced wonderful works for this theme. However, the works of Yasushi Inoue are still the best illustration. His historical works are played on the stage of China and the Silk Road. They are popular and well - received by the critics. They mingle narrative charm and profound historical and philosophic self - exploration perfectly well [4]. According to this perspective, the present developmental course of Inoue's China - themed works significantly demonstrates the postwar Japanese consciousness shift as a whole. From his related works, people should have the idea of how Inoue's works narrate Japan's story. It goes from the initial stages of sorrow and guilt, to gradually trying to reposition itself culturally, and finally to a stage of existential loss. And one can explore modern Japan's identity crisis through the "China theme."

2. Brief overview of post-war Japanese literature

After 1945, Japanese literature started to change radically. This was a time when Japanese literature became completely different from the previous era. The previous era had an iron curtain that seemed backward, with rigid seams and boundaries. Japan was breaking sharply with its past governance and history. This period can be distinguished into different phases. Japanese literature from the period leading up to and including the early years of World War II was, in a certain sense, aligned with the nationalist ideology of the militaristic empire, also known as the 'literature of serving the country' period. Many works of this time praised the Emperor, justified military aggression, and encouraged Japanese soldiers to sacrifice their lives for the nation. Underlying the thought was simple: literature emerged to serve the war. When Japan lost the war, this whole ideology went haywire, and this trend of literature shortly stopped. Postwar literature appeared, giving expression to the trauma and the sense of guilt. War left physical and psychological scars. Writers were short of words to console their barrenness. This generation of writers, therefore, tried to bring forth a magnificent kind of literature. They referred to themselves as the 'postwar school.' They were keenly interested in themes. They illustrated and remembered the horrors of war and the sense of guilt. The literature they brought forth was dramatically intense, referred to as 'scar literature.' Ōoka Shōhei was the prominent figure of this movement. His novel *Fires on the Plain* illustrated the cruelty of mankind through the war. It placed severe psychological demands on the reader. He utilized acts of killings to illustrate the ferocity and the horror of the war. This brought forth the idea that shameless human inventions could appear so incomprehensible to the world. As Eiichi Oguma once put it, this introspective reflection arose and persisted. It was true not just in China, but also Japan. For example, in Nosaka Akiyuki's semi - autobiographical novella *Grave of the Fireflies*, two children were shown slowly starving under incendiary bombs. This was a lament for the huge costs of war. It showed how meaningless it was to treat human lives as mere sacrifices. To get this idea across, the

narrative completely gave up the sense of national honor. Instead, it focused on the suffering of individual characters and their personal responsibilities [5].

3. The development of the China theme in Japan

Japan's postwar 'China theme' shift largely synchronized with postwar consciousness. For example, in prewar Chinese travelogues, we can see the attitude toward China: it is a condescending attitude with modernist disdain and colonial arrogance. This is also expressed through depictions of a decadent and disorderly civilization. This was also a necessary condition for China to serve as the opposing 'China-themed' country that the Japanese Empire longed for. However, postwar writers had to reflect on Japan's various actions on the Asian continent and gain a clear understanding of the Japan-China relationship. At that time, it was no longer a relationship of superiority, but one marked by guilt and historical responsibility. Different writers reached different understandings of these two types of relationships. One approach involved portrayals of Chinese-style characters. For example, Yang Wenli, a noble and strategic figure in Yoshiki Tanaka's *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*, or the brave warriors in various fantasy novels who rescue and help others, all affirm Chinese-style values. Sometimes, by affirming these Chinese-style values, they also highlight what Japanese society at that time felt was lacking or imbue it with philosophical significance. Another approach was more direct, narrating stories set in mainland China, although the perspective was that of Japanese observers. For instance, Toyoko Yamazaki's *Child of the Earth* tells the story of a boy taken by defeated Japanese soldiers, long withdrawn from the battlefield, trying to survive in China. The setting is China, but the protagonist's dominant consciousness remains Japanese, enabling the reader to sense that when Japan lost everything in the world war, this child, abandoned by Japan after being displaced from the mainland, was ultimately left to fate, which took revenge on him. Meanwhile, China was nothing but the backdrop. This shift of narrative meant Japan moved closer to Chinese culture. When Japan entered the wealthy late postwar, the signification of those subjects acquired yet another dimension. Westernization driving its economic miracle and the strengthening trend of consumerism heightened Japan's awareness of the loss of cultural roots [6]. Historically rich China became a metaphorical, safe 'Chinese-style' reference, as its long history and ancient intellectual traditions were precisely what the inevitably declining modernized Japan was losing. Thus, the 'China theme' could appease two complex sentiments: one was a reflective mirror dispelling guilt, and the other was a spiritual solace against emptiness [7].

4. Inoue Yasushi: a literary bridge from guilt to disorientation

The historical novels of Inoue Yasushi, which constantly shift in genre, especially those focusing on Chinese themes, construct a bridge connecting all emotional spheres of postwar Japan. As in his own evolution, he became a voice representing a certain postwar group from being a Japanese writer deeply influenced by the early 1930s, thus having an excellent understanding of his own emotional transformation. Unlike those who confront and depict the horrors of war directly and vent their apocalyptic sense of despair, or writers who completely detach from direct feelings of terror and stand within a personalized world of retreat, he links the two and therefore chooses historical novels—particularly those set in Eastern China and Central Asia—to explore contemporary Japanese anxieties. On this basis, he created widely circulated, epic, and significant novels that are deeply rooted in the unique circumstances of his own era. As Li Chunde described, he successfully avoids the boring and dreary rationalism, the exaggerated, overly entertaining stance, endowing his works with captivating charm and engaging storytelling functions, making the story a truly appealing

medium for exploring themes at a popular level. Understanding and applying easily comprehensible meanings reveals this immense influence: setting the temporal background of events in the Tang dynasty or the Silk Road era effectively excludes direct engagement with the disasters of the contemporary world [8]; yet, on the other hand, it compels us to face the most stirring aspects of modern society—as existentialism arranges for us—namely, communication, the rise and fall of empires, and the search for meaning. Thus, the literature of Inoue Yasushi is not merely textual record; it can be seen as the author's journey from the initial, purely introspective postwar guilt to a transcendent cultural redemption that emerges with economic development, achieving a process of spiritual passage through the narrative of Chinese-themed works.

5. Mourning and cultural redemption in early works

At the start of the post-war period, Japan was focused spiritually. It was mourning and looking for new bases to rebuild its broken identity. Inoue Yasushi's early China - themed novels directly answered this need. They were strong allegories in the rebuilding of the culture and spirit of Japan. His 1957 novel, *Tenpyō no Iraka*, takes place after the war. The narrator of the novel accompanies some Japanese monks on a journey to the China of the Tang dynasty. They are seeking Buddhist scriptures and hope to return to Japan. It appears to be, on the surface, just a historical adventure novel. However, once you examine it, it has much to do with the post - war circumstances. Travel to China isn't framed as encountering a backwards nation. However, it's illustrated as proceeding upon a pilgrimage to a vibrant and wonderful center of culture. It reflects the humility and the appreciation of Japan's classical civilization tradition roots. These heroic actions upon so hazardous and apparently unjust mission reveal the efforts required upon the spiritual and the culture life recovering by way of devastating nationalism. These monks are strongly committed to their mission. This represents the hard labor the winning nation must undertake to renew power through humble foundation. They try to copy the physical roof tiles. This is a strong metaphor for the cultural parts needed to rebuild Japan's spiritual structure. This story shows a strong wish to go back to a renewed, more basic, and pre - nationalist time. Re - engaging with the Asian continent then is a way to get enrichment and enlightenment, not conflict [9]. In this allegorical way of expressing, Inoue Yasushi offers a literary option for the loss of militaristic self - identity. He provides a redemptive view. It's centered on finding and returning to a shared Asian cultural heritage. So, it gives a way to reduce collective guilt by turning to a more positive and humble cultural line.

6. Existential disorientation and the silk road narratives

After the Second World War ended, Japan had firmly achieved economic success in the 1960s. Then, the country's focus changed. The immediate sufferings of war became less important. They were replaced by more subtle but widespread views about living in a wealthy, modern, and perhaps alienating society. Inoue Yasushi China- oriented works are intimately connected and the result of this shift and its catalyst. His works definitely moved on from tales of cultural redemption to somber reflections on existential issues. This comes through most strongly in his notable Silk Road series, such as *Loulan* and *Dunhuang*. These works are framed by the backdrop of lost kingdoms. They are not about the pursuit of cultural relics as in *The Roof Tile of Tenpyō*. They are the contemplation of the impermanence of empires, the silence of the past, and the way an individual pursues meaning through these vast, impersonal cycles of time. The desert becomes an essential, multi- dimensional symbol. It symbolizes the loss of the big ideas of nation, modernization, and shared purpose. These once comprised the life of the Japanese. They now leave an intellectual hollowness which material

security and financial success cannot fill. His protagonists are frequently scholars, exiles, or low-level officials. They undertake highly personal voyages through this void. This mirrors the challenging position of the modern Japanese citizen. His or hers isn't the labor of the state or of the administration. It is the pursuit of personal, often implicit intellectual or spiritual aims. In Dunhuang, an anonymous scholar incidentally stores a container of manuscripts in a cave at the wartorn siege city. This narrative becomes the powerful metaphor. It demonstrates the pursuit of personal meaning through those aspects of life, where the avenues for collective greatness and national greatness have come apart. His actions are irrelevant to national matters. However, they are the evidence of life's most individualist experiences of life, death, and posterities. This too strongly co- incidentals with the nation, which provides the salaryman populace material security but few transcendent aims. Inoue Yasushi serves the area of psychological escape. There, he escapes the corporate homogeneity of Japan and confronts the most primal questions of life, death, and posterities. Thus, his later works are not the construction of the collective identity. They are the reflection of the pursuit of personal meaning through the depths of Japan's economic miracle, which are full of surface level confusion.

7. Conclusion

Inoue Yasushi's novels' development can be accurately traced. This is through his continuous involvement with Japanese and Chinese themes. This helps explain Japan's postwar psychological situation. His novels are not just historical escapism. Instead, they actively talk to the past and regions outside themselves. By doing this, they heal and shed light on the problems in their contemporary homeland. In the early postwar years, works like *The Roof Tile of Tenpyō* had an important therapeutic and cultural role. They helped the defeated nation deal with its militarized past. They found a way of atonement by returning to a shared classical Asian heritage. At this time, China was seen as both a source and a way for this more immediate historical atonement. It created a closer and more constructive historical relationship in memory [10]. However, peace and prosperity brought spiritual emptiness. His descriptions of the desolate beauty of the desert and the ruins of forgotten kingdoms strongly show his sense of dislocation, loss of grand narrative, and the lonely search for meaningful existence in a society more and more shaped by bureaucracy and consumerism. As a writer, Inoue Yasushi consistently employed the 'China theme' with skill and responsiveness to the times.

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