Deciphering Maruyama Masao: The Challenge of Originality

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Authors who contribute to the crowded field of books on Maruyama Masao (1914–1996) must be endowed with at least one of two qualities: courage and originality. Moreover, the more time that passes since Maruyama’s death in 1996, the more demanding and difficult the task of writing on Maruyama becomes. Authors do not only need to deal with the substantial body of their subject’s thoughts and deeds but also have to bring something new to the table. What can they say that has not already been said?

The books under review, both in the approachable shinsho (paperback pocket edition) format, possess the requisite courage for this endeavour; in the opinion of this reviewer, only one matches courage with originality.

Karube Tadashi has crafted a splendid book that should be appreciated by academics as well as by the wider reading public. The beauty of his book is its structure and its scope. Karube masterfully pulls together an impressive array of material, including the huge amount of secondary literature published on Maruyama since 1996, through employing the present (gendai) as a streaming device. Contextualising Maruyama in this fashion requires Karube to weave together text, context and biography in an original manner. Karube first paints the scene, then locates Maruyama as a person and as a scholar, adding Maruyama’s own voice to consolidate the contemporary analytical focus. It is an extremely effective technique.

Karube’s core premise is that Maruyama can be best understood as an intellectual of the present-day; thus, the primary task for him as an author is to amplify and illustrate how Maruyama reflected, molded and interpreted an array of successive ‘presents’.

The result is both convincing and illuminating. Karube has made splendid use of the various collected essays, series and volumes of letters and lectures that constitute the bulk of primary sources penned by Maruyama, and he has surveyed the field of secondary writings without being distracted from his main objective. What emerges is a clever book that informs the interested post-postwar generation of the ideas and impact of Maruyama in his own lifetime, and at the same time, stimulates postwar connoisseurs of Maruyama’s opus to take a fresh look at the thinker whom we all think we know.
Karube of necessity follows a chronological, biographical structure, and it is noteworthy that World War II features prominently in chapter allocation as a pivotal moment. He begins by addressing the stereotypes that have emerged in critical writing about Maruyama, noting that all who write on Maruyama do so with passion, whether it be to praise him or to damn him. Karube argues that too much emphasis has been placed on Maruyama as a builder of thought systems, and too little attention has been paid to Maruyama’s consistent ability to open up new perspectives in the midst of the chaotic present (pp. 11–12).

After skilfully drawing a line through time by linking Maruyama’s response to the Hanshin earthquake of 1995 to his youthful experience of the trauma of the 1923 Kansai earthquake, Karube helps us to view Maruyama as a ‘child of Taishō’ with Maruyama’s autobiographical voice as a *continuo*. The acute crisis consciousness of those times leads us to another line through time, when Karube shows us how Maruyama recalled the fate of anarchist Ōsuge Sakae after the 1923 quake, as Maruyama the high school student underwent the deep personal trauma of arrest and interrogation at the hands of the Thought Police.

Retrospectivity, as a catalyst for analysing the turbulence of the late 1920s through to the 1940s, appears again when Karube guides us through Maruyama’s encounters with the ideas of Fukuzawa Yukichi, which inspired Maruyama to transpose Fukuzawa’s critique of late Meiji as a period when ideas continued to legitimise a feudal system to his 1940s present. Karube performs a valuable service when he states that Maruyama’s Meiji inspirations (Fukuzawa, Kuga Katsunan) should not simplistically be viewed as an affirmation of the inherent superiority of Western thought. Instead, it was Maruyama’s assumption of the fundamental universality of freedom as the essential element of modernity that emerges most powerfully:

> even though [Maruyama’s inspiration] was the heritage of the early Meiji period which imbibed Western thought, through encountering the ideas of Japanese thinkers such as Fukuzawa and Kuga, Maruyama diligently amassed examples [of thinkers] for whom freedom was the central focus of modern thought (p. 90).

Maruyama continued to connect past inspiration with present-day criticism in choosing Ogyū Sorai as a research focus. Karube posits that this was a pivotal intellectual encounter for Maruyama, because it saw Maruyama shift from a focus on the purely political to a fascination with the pre-political realm of ethics. This is what Karube sees as the decisive element in Maruyama’s distancing from Marxism, which intensified as the war churned into the postwar. Not only was Marxism insufficiently concerned with the political in Maruyama’s view, it discounted ethics as an historical force. This eventually would represent the pulse of Maruyama’s devastating critique of wartime Japan as the cementation of a ‘spiritual structure’.

In this vein, Karube sees Maruyama’s postwar criticism of the emperor system (tennōsei) as essentially ethical, in that the tennōsei utilised feudal ethics to deny individual autonomy, and oppressed individuals from within as well as from without. The ‘liberal’ of the sub-title emerges in this emphasis on Maruyama’s sustained adherence to liberalism as a fundamental value that needed to be underpinned by universal ethics; this was the substance of ‘modern thought’ in Maruyama’s view.

The chaos and dismay that the 1960 Security Treaty Crisis and the university disturbances eight years thereafter represented for Maruyama are treated cursorily by Karube, who instead stresses the fact of Maruyama’s ‘emotional slump’ that began in 1958 and continued through the upheaval of both events. When Maruyama returned to the past in his intellectual endeavours in the 1970s, seeking the ‘deep layers’ (kosō) and ‘axis’ of Japanese thought, Karube maintains that Maruyama remained relentlessly focussed on the present as he did so.
Karube is critical of Maruyama’s thin sampling of Japanese ‘tradition’ (represented mainly by Fukuzawa and Sorai), and also queries how much value Maruyama added to interpretations of these thinkers (p. 199). But we can also lament the failure of Karube to use his potent formula to locate Maruyama in the traumatic ‘present’ of the late 1960s, when Maruyama collided so spectacularly with the postwar generation. What happened to his core ideals and intellectual commitment to liberalism when he was intimidated and abused by students who cursed the modernity he was seen to embody? This remains a great void in writing on Maruyama to this day, and Karube has not rescued us from it.

At first glance, it seems as if Takeuchi Yō will be the one to fill this void. Certainly, the space he allocates to treatment of the university disturbances of the late 1960s seems to compensate for the lack of this coverage in other recent books on Maruyama. And yet, Takeuchi conspires to confound the reader once again. While this tumultuous period in modern Japanese intellectual history is considered at length by Takeuchi, it is mainly for the purposes of painting the scene. In Takeuchi’s book, the context of transwar education and academic freedom is the primary scholarly focus, and Maruyama is merely a cipher through which to access that objective. As a result, we do not emerge from reading this book very much the wiser about Maruyama and his writing, though occasional interesting insights are on offer.

Takeuchi begins with an overview of the reactions to Maruyama’s death, including a survey of obituaries, column inches and the ensuing ‘Maruyama boom’ in publishing, supported by tabulated data. After a full chapter devoted to the machinations of the Genri Nihonsha, Takeuchi considers Maruyama’s ‘postwar strategy for the masses’ in Chapter 2, anticipating the clash with Zenkyōtō in his treatment of Maruyama’s changing views on Marxism. Chapter three locates Maruyama’s postwar writing in the analytical frame of ‘positioning’, where the argument concerning Maruyama’s alleged intent behind his postwar scholarship is put forward, before casting Maruyama as the victim of his own creation (mass intellectuals) in the late 1960s.

We should note that the two books under review represent two quite different disciplinary approaches to the material. While Karube is a political scientist/historian of political thought, Takeuchi is a sociologist. This means that Takeuchi rightfully relies more heavily on quantification as the basis for his conclusions. In some cases, this caused this particular humanities scholar to wince. For instance, Takeuchi queries the extent of the impact and influence achieved by Maruyama’s signature essay, ‘Logic and Psychology of Ultranationalism’,1 and of Maruyama as a public intellectual, on the basis of statistics showing how often individual scholars were commissioned to write for the popular journals such as Sekai, as well as circulation figures for the journals and other relevant information (pp. 172–177). While these tables are interesting, they may not constitute a wholly convincing proof of influence or otherwise to scholars from humanities disciplines. On the other hand, readers new to the study of transwar Japan will find the assembly of the many types of statistical information presented throughout this book useful and indicative of certain trends.

Takeuchi’s main objective, as his title implies, is to elucidate the nature of the era in which Maruyama lived. For Takeuchi, the tragic symmetry of wartime and postwar extremism and intimidation in the realm of higher education is the story that needs to be told. In particular, Takeuchi devotes copious space to elaborating the activities of the Genri Nihonsha in the war era (Chapter 1), and the advent of Zengakuren and Zenkyōtō in the postwar era (Chapter 4). In addition to the frustration of not knowing what Takeuchi’s approach or core argument is until the end of the first chapter (pp. 92–93), this reader found some of the subsidiary conclusions drawn by Takeuchi to be unconvincing. For example,

1. For an English version of this essay, see Morris (1963: 1–24).
Takeuchi asserts that Maruyama’s scholarship was primarily inspired by a desire to counter the notions propagated by the Genri Nihonsha in wartime; Maruyama’s post-1968 oeuvre represented for Takeuchi nothing less than ‘a full frontal assault on the ideas of the Genri Nihonsha’ (p. 272). Takeuchi also subjectively attributes very conscious motivations to Maruyama that seem to be based on mere assertion. For instance, Takeuchi states that Maruyama set out to be a ‘bridge between West and East’ by employing ‘scientific’ (meaning Western) concepts to examine Japanese thought (p. 94).

More seriously, Takeuchi argues that Maruyama self-consciously adopted a ‘strategy for the masses’ in postwar that raised the masses up to the level of intellectuals, and segregated them from the ‘pseudo-intellectuals’ (p. 112, 117). In Takeuchi’s view, Maruyama’s activism in the lively academic culture of the immediate postwar period was driven by this objective: ‘the latent catalyst for Maruyama’s postwar strategy for the masses was his painful memories of the Teida Shukusei Kisei Dômei (Association for Imperial Universities Regulation Enforcement) and the Genri Nihonsha’ (p. 117). The latter assertion in particular is not anchored in any text or primary source; it is purely an inference on Takeuchi’s part.

Other niggles that emerge in this book concern speculations such as how Maruyama’s work might have been received had he been a member of the Literature Faculty instead of the Law Faculty (we will never know), which connects with observations on the consequences for Maruyama of turning to ‘journalism’ as a member of the academic elite (a much more interesting line of enquiry relevant to postwar intellectual culture in general rather than to Maruyama in particular). Sweeping statements such as ‘Maruyama inherited liberal thinking from his father’ (p. 14), unsubstantiated by textual analysis or examples, represent a periodic annoyance throughout the text.

On the positive side, Takeuchi’s scene setting is a delight, for example: the atmosphere on campus in the 1930s and Maruyama’s contribution to President Nanbara’s first postwar meeting with repatriated students at Tokyo University are elaborated with finesse and insight. Glimpses of Maruyama as a man are also offered, for example, the chance meeting between Maruyama and a future Zenkyōtō student at a bus stop is very nicely portrayed.

Despite the veritable avalanche of writing on Maruyama in the past decade, we still have some way to go before a seminal text, holistic in scope and rising above trite stereotypes and opportunism, drags us out of the pedestrian mire in understanding Maruyama as thinker and man in modern Japanese intellectual history. Karube makes a vital contribution to this important endeavour, and Takeuchi shows why we still have some way to go.

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