

The End of Zenkyōtō: Mishima's Death and Osaka Expo as Symbols

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Abstract:

Mishima's suicide marks an endpoint for radical student movements and heralds a shift towards modernization and cultural reinvention within Japan; both events signal two turning points between tradition and modern progress that define contemporary Japanese identity.

Keywords: Yukio Mishima, socialism, Zenkyōtō, Cold war

1. Introduction

The late 1960s was a period marked by intense political, social, and cultural upheaval. The death of Mishima in 1970 and the Osaka World Expo in the same year were two important signs of the end of this turbulent era, and Zenkyōtō was the most representative movement during this period. And the radical part of this little by little disappeared after 1970. This article will analyze Japan's Zenkyōtō movement from the perspectives of philosophers and historians and highlight the relationship between the disintegration of this movement, Mishima's death, and the Osaka Expo.

2. About student movement

Before diving into the analysis, Zenkyōtō was a conservative movement. In 1968, a Zenkyōtō activist wrote, "If students are diligent in their studies, it should be a certainty that they won't be poisoned by industrial society. Nowadays, this certainty is much less certain. Our fight is a struggle to smash the academic-industrial complex." [1]. Another Zenkyōtō activist angrily say, "Rather than places for research, universities had become nothing but preparatory schools for entering the workplace, just as high

schools had become preparatory schools for university entrance exams....I lost faith in universities that bowed only to the demands of government and big business." [2]. At the same time, according to another author, "Concrete goals for improving the university system were scorned as 'reformism' (kairyōshugi) and 'settling for small gains' (monotorishugi)." [3]. From the quotes in the first and second paragraphs, we can see that what the students themselves wanted was a more independent academic environment and atmosphere, separate from the secular world. However, in the quote from the third paragraph, we see a point of contradiction: the atmosphere of academic viewpoints independent of the secular world is not directly expressed but rather expressed in a more modern and Marxist manner. In other words, this can be better understood as an academic environment with Enlightenment characteristics—a scholarly atmosphere free from political and governmental interference.

In this sense, what the students wanted and what Mishima desired were the same. Yukio Mishima's political view was that the divine nature of the Emperor should be restored, free from worldly interference, creating a self-contained logical world.

3. About Mishima

Mishima believed that at the moment Japan was defeated, the Emperor of Japan should have died. In his view, committing suicide was not about seeking recognition or justification for doing something but rather about thoroughly adhering to a recognition that had no basis. However, the Emperor did not die; instead, he issued the “Ningen-sengen” (Humanity Declaration), denying his divinity and surviving as a symbol of national unity. This is precisely what Mishima detested and what the Emperor’s supporters hated at that time. For them, this is nothing but a sham Emperor, surviving under the iron cavalry of the American military. To realize the true Japanese spirit, true beauty, and true divinity, the Emperor must die, just like the “Temple of the Golden Pavilion” was burned down. It is precisely because the divine Emperor has ceased to exist that the Japanese people’s identity has completely dissolved; they no longer believe in the Emperor and other things, leading to the current chaos. Only if the Emperor dies, allowing people to follow this symbol, can society become stable. In this sense, Yukio Mishima’s death is a drama of beauty. “His death didn’t really have any impact. At the Osaka Expo in 1970, Japan showcased a peaceful and prosperous image to its citizens and the world. The Japanese suddenly realized that they had entered the Western market using American technology. A sense of pride unique to Japan emerged spontaneously. This pride stemmed from a new religion of capitalism—the worship of commodities, even though this pride was based on an uncertain feeling of floating. As for Mishima’s death, no one cares about grand narratives that promote national subjectivity.; he just quietly disintegrated and died along with the right wing.”

4. The leftists’ relationship with Yukio Mishima

Returning to the leftists, what connection did they have with Mishima Yukio? For post-war Japanese intellectuals, it was an era of confusion, a time when Japan’s identity was lost. At this moment, the Kyoto School, represented by Takeuchi Yoshimi, tried to salvage the Japanese identity that had been nearly destroyed by the American occupation. As Takeuchi Yoshimi stated in his book “Overcoming Modernity”:

“...The aggressiveness of the Greater East Asia War is something that cannot be denied by any sophistry. However, to hate aggression to the extent of denying the sense of Asian unity expressed through the form of aggression,

isn’t that like throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Therefore, the Japanese people can never recover from the loss of a sense of purpose.” [4].

From the above arguments, it can be seen that Japanese leftist students essentially regarded Marxism as a tool—a tool for the revival of Japanese modernity. Although they absorbed the philosophical thoughts of the French radical left and attempted to create a depoliticized zone of liberation within universities, even so, most still viewed it as a tool. As long as socialism was in place, all problems would be resolved, including the post-war confusion. In this sense, they similarly endowed socialism with a certain divinity, a god of an omnipotent tool, the god of mechanical materialism. But they succeeded because they were more adept at using modern discourse to disguise themselves. Similarly, after the Osaka Expo in 1970, the students graduated from university, found jobs, and lived in a prosperous yet illusory Japan, gradually being absorbed and accepted, eventually becoming part of the system. In today’s society, where the bubble has burst, there has once again been a resurgence of admiration for these movements on mainstream social media platforms. But in terms of content, whether there is truly a suspicion of promoting a new god remains open to discussion.

The entire urbanization process in Japan was accelerated at the Osaka Expo. Osaka constructed new subway lines and highways, which later became essential support for urban development, making it easier for people from rural areas to migrate to big cities for work. At the same time, the economic boom led to an increase in per capita income, and Japanese people became deeply interested in modern lifestyles and high-tech products. Consumption behavior gradually shifted from thrift to enjoyment and quality improvement. People no longer believed in grand narratives of revolution or the Emperor; instead, they turned to more practical and realistic consumption and production in their lives. This was also one of the key reasons for the disintegration of the movement.

5. Conclusion

The Zenkyōtō movement was undoubtedly very important in shaping the ideology of postwar Japan, symbolizing the confusion of postwar Japanese youth. Both the Osaka Expo and Mishima’s death have given Japan a new identity - a new civic identity more embracing of capitalism and a consumer society.

References

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