

The Occult “Overcoming Modernity”:**Fukurai Tomokichi and the Japanese Mind Cure Movement in the Early Twentieth Century**

PANEL: Modern Occult Practice in Global Contexts (1880–1930)

KURITA Hidehiko (Bukkyo University)

castanea1127@gmail.com

Introduction

Julian Strube has shown that the nineteenth century was the period of enunciating the meaning of “esotericism”, connecting various “esoteric” factorsⁱ. At the end of the century, the global esoteric/occult currents including hypnotism, mesmerism, mind cures, Theosophical Society, and psychical research and so on, had reached the Far East. Of course, that was not merely the diffusion of “Western esotericism”, but the process which Japanese (Asian) indigenous religious traditions including Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism and Confucianism are, through the framework, reinterpreted and reevaluated, and they resurged as modern discourses. It should be noted here that esoteric currents in Japan are not necessarily opposed to Japanese established religions or central cultural discourses, but also support, incorporate, differentiate, and integrate each other. A complicated process took place here. What were the consequences of these esoteric milieu in Japan? The aim of my paper is to explore this question by tracing the most famous psychical researcher in Japan, Fukurai Tomokichi (1869-1952) and his surrounding milieu.

1. Esoteric Milieu and Religious Modernism in Japan

Although Fukurai was the most important and prominent figure in psychical research in Japan, the pioneering people of this field were actually neither philosophers nor psychologists like Fukurai but religious reformers (Buddhism, Christianity, and Shinto) including Inoue Enryō, Kondō Kazō, Takahashi Gorō, Matsumura Kaiseki, and Hirai Kinzaⁱⁱ. Here, I would like to introduce Hirai Kinza as a figure who had a direct influence on Fukurai.

Hirai Kinza is now a forgotten figure, but Shinichi Yoshinaga's research has clarified its important significance in the Japanese history of modern Buddhism and esotericismⁱⁱⁱ. Hirai's prominence as international Buddhist from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century run ahead of D. T. Suzuki far more. After the Meiji Restoration, the social status of Buddhism had declined, and Buddhism had to reform itself in response to the modernizing Japan. The invitation of Henry Steele Olcott, president of the Theosophical Society, in the 1890s, which Hirai planned, sparked Buddhist modernism in Japan. In 1892, he traveled to the United States to promote Buddhism and criticize unequal treaties which was concluded with Western countries and gave a lecture at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in the next year. He also participated in Unitarian, cooperated with Japanese Christian reformer, Matsumura Kaiseki (1859-1939), and established a society for psychical research named *shinshōkai* (心象会) together with Matsumura. Moreover, he started a group of Japanese mind-cure movement, *Sanmajikai* (三摩地会, lit., the society for Samādhi) and insisted the

way of healing and spiritual education, connecting Buddhism and psychical research.

Hirai did not debunk psychical phenomena as ‘superstition’ but considered them to be a remnant of “ancient human wisdom” that was far more advanced than today^{iv}. This kind of attitude toward esoteric/occult wisdom and technique was probably shared with Anesaki Masaharu and Kato Totsudō, students of Hirai’s Oriental Hall. The former gave lectures on "mysticism" at Tokyo Imperial University and introduced Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, and some examples of psychical research. The latter illustrated Buddhism and Taoism as well as Neoplatonism, Jakob Böhme, Quakers, Mesmerism, and Spiritualism and found out of them meditation as a way of both ethical development and healing^v. In this way, esoteric milieu including psychical research was formed in conjunction with social education, ethical education, and the mind cure movement, including both academic scholars and popular educators.

2. The Clairvoyance Incident and the Rise of Japanese Mind Cure Movement

Fukurai, an associate professor at Tokyo Imperial University, also started out under Hirai’s influence in terms of the fact that he repeatedly attended shinshōkai. Fukurai was originally a psychological scholar who followed William James and majored in hypnotic psychology. However, after his participation in shinshōkai, he began to repeat parapsychological experiments to demonstrate the human ability of clairvoyance and psychic photography. The experiments were attended by prominent scientists and philosophers in universities of Japan and widely reported in journalism, so it caused a great sensation and popular interest in human esoteric power like clairvoyance. However, subjects of the experiments died one after another from suicide and illness and some scientists indicated mistakes in his methodology, and Fukurai was bashed in the newspapers. As a result, Fukurai was forced to end his employment with Tokyo Imperial University. The turmoil of Fukurai’s experiment is called the clairvoyance incident (jp. senrigan jiken).

The history of Japanese psychology tells us that after the clairvoyance incident, mainstream academic psychology in Japan rejected and dismissed parapsychology. However, parapsychological activities should not be simply seen as "rejected knowledge." The interest in esoteric practices, which gained popularity during the clairvoyance boom, continued to grow. This led to the emergence of movements that went beyond the realms of science, religion, morality, healing, and social change.^{vi} In particular, after being forced to depart his university job, Fukurai found a platform to express his thoughts at the Nihon Shinrei Gakkai (Japanese Society for Mind-Spirit Science), which I will call NSG. The NSG was one of the most advanced organizations in the Japanese mind cure (psychotherapy) movement. As NSG developed further with the help of Fukurai's knowledge, his influence on the Japanese esoteric world continued to grow.

3. Nihon Shinrei Gakkai and Democratic Esotericism

Here, I would like to introduce NSG’s details, transition, and their background^{vii}. Watanabe Tōkō (1885-1975), the founder and president of NSG, was originally apprenticed at a temple in Kyoto,

and later studied at Buddhist vocational school. Although he gave up the career as a Buddhist monk for health reasons, he was deeply involved with the Buddhist world. Therefore, when NSG was founded in 1906, the first thing to do was to publish and distribute its periodicals *Nihon Shinrei* (lit., Japanese Mind-Spirit) to Buddhist temples all across Japan. For Watanabe, the founding of the organization to teach the way of psychical healing (mind cure) was nothing more than providing a side job for supporting temple's management and a means for getting new followers to the destabilized Buddhist temples. Its psychical healing, though partially resisted, permeated many Buddhist monks and even treated the diseases of the highest priest of one of the biggest established Buddhist denominations. Psychical research and esoteric knowledge as well as Henri Bergson's philosophy and William James's psychology, which often appeared in *Nihon Shinrei*, were considered the latest, avant-garde Western scientific knowledge to reform Buddhist philosophy and defend it from charges of anachronism.

Around 1918, NSG began to expand its activities outside of Buddhism. Psychical healing techniques were opened to popular people and books for the general population were published, starting with one by Fukurai. Why these changes occurred was probably that the increase of new members in the Buddhist world had reached a plateau. In addition, there was internationally the rapid increase of democratic movements after World War I. While supporting democracy in Japan, NSG exposed an article titled "psychical research as social reform" in *Nihon Shinrei* and, in another article, insisted that "the concept of democratization must not be the direct translation from Western one and Japanese style of it, that is, democracy with the imperial family at the top [...] and a religious background behind it must be needed"^{viii}. In other words, it was a democracy rooted in "national unification". As its basis, however, NSG did not expect "religious unification" but each person's "enlightening and developing spirituality" and "belief in the Universal Spirit" by psychical research and healing^{ix}.

However, when trying to promote democracy and unification in "Japanese style", it is not enough to simply represent the spiritual and psychical source as "Universal". NSG, which had been interested in "shamanism" in terms of psychical healing, shifted its interest to ancient history and folklore, and to "Shinto" at last. Shinto referred to here is not "Shrine Shinto" (or State Shinto), which was supposedly not "religion" but "national rites", but "Primitive Shinto" rooted in popular people from the ancient Japan. While criticizing bureaucratic nationalism, this discussion promoted people's spiritual awakening through psychical research and healing towards spiritual democracy, or grassroots nationalism. The aspire for spiritual democracy was also sought by other mind cure organizations including Taireido (太靈道, lit., the Way of Universal Spirit) in Japan. But, after WWI and the Russian Revolution, when the atmosphere of Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West" permeated intellectual circles, the spiritual democracy of the Japanese mind cure joined the common Third Way orientation, a political position differing from "Soviet style" and "Anglo-American style" modernity.

4. "Overcoming Modernity" and the Esoteric Milieu in Japan

In the late 1920s, the Marxist revolutionary movement was gaining momentum in Japan due to the influence of the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression. Under the direction of the

Comintern, the slogan of overthrowing the Japanese Emperor system (or monarchy) was employed but that caused the suppression of the communist movement by the Japanese government and thereby Marxism was forced to decline in the 1930s. However, the severe deflation caused by the aftermath of the late 1920's Japanese financial crisis and the Great Depression impoverished farmers and increased the number of unemployed. As Britain, the United States, and France built each trade bloc, Japan took the path of military invasion starting with the Mukden Incident in 1931 in order to secure Japanese lebensraum. At the same time, under the name of the Restoration, alternative reform movements that affirmed the emperor system progressed and coups d'états and terrorism aimed for more power for the emperor occurred frequently. Against this backdrop, social scientists of Buddhism and Shinto called for religious revival^x.

Under this situation, the currents of spiritual democracy transformed grassroots nationalism into mass mobilization. Tenohira ryōji (that is, palm therapy) which was derived from the later globally expanding Reiki was very popular in the right-wing group Genrinhonsha (lit., the Fundamental Japan Society) which strongly led the kokutai meichō movement. From April 1932, NSG's magazine *Nihon Shinrei* began to advertise "national total mobilization of health care and teaching of our psychic healing methods". This predates the government's National Spiritual Mobilization Movement in 1937 and the National Mobilization Law in 1938.

At the same time, NSG strengthened its publishing department named Jimbunshoin (which later became a famous academic publisher) and, under the advice of Kawabata Yasunari, later a Nobel Prize winner for Literature, began to publish many books on Japanese literature and Japanese poetry collections. Among authors of books published by Jimbunshoin, there was Yasuda Yōjūrō who founded the literary magazine *Nihon Roumanha* (lit., Japanese Romantic School) which aimed to combine Marxism and Romanticism^{xi}. He affirmed war as a passion for "downfall" and "ruins" in order to lead to overcome or end modernity and expected the "ruins" would nurture ancient mythology and Shintō again. Yasuda's criticism of modernity and his discussion of Japanese mythology and Shintō as overcoming modernity were known to have had an impact on the famous symposium "Overcoming Modernity" held by a major literary magazine, *Bungakukai*, in 1942 (although Yasuda himself declined to participate in it).

However, we could say that the Japanese esoteric milieu had the idea of "Overcoming Modernity" prior to Yasuda and the symposium. In Fukurai's book in 1938, *The Core of the Japanese Spirit*, he, on the basis of his psychical research, insisted that the ancient people had had the stronger "psychical sense" including clairvoyance, which had enabled them to recognize "gods" and therefore had led them to "control themselves" and "live serving the divine providence of the Universal Spirit"^{xii}. According to Fukurai, in ancient Japan, people "believed that an edict in which Amateras, a major sun god in Japanese mythology, ordered her descendant's emperor family to govern Japanese lands was the divine providence of the Universal Spirit", and "their lives serving the providence had the activities of non-selfish self or Japan style self, serving the Japanese emperors and the imperial lands"^{xiii}. He said, "it is the viewpoints of individualism, liberalism, and rationalism that was something which got people to lose their psychical sense and betray the providence and devastated human lives" and "the peaceful world and the import of western thought and materialism caused this situation".^{xiv} For him,

the imminent World War is not just a “national crisis” but a “god's trial” which “beats Japanese people” by “a whip named crisis” and determines whether Japanese will be the “chosen people” meeting “the Universal Spirit”^{xv}. Here we can see the ironic logic of affirming the war like Yasuda's “Overcoming Modernity” in terms of restoration of the divine ancient through a crisis.

Conclusion

After that, Japan entered World War II. There were various logics for the affirmation of war. Some ideologues appeared from the esoteric milieu and mind cure movement and occupied a central position in war-time discourse^{xvi}. As can be seen, the Japanese esoteric milieu cannot be considered to be simply “anti-establishment” or “rejected knowledge”. Not only was it deeply connected with established religious organization, but it became an important part of the mainstream discourse and functioned as a radical war-time discourse. Although I could not discuss it in detail this time, anti-Semitism also emerged from this milieu in Japan and Fukurai's discourse.

These subjects are important to compare with the cases of other countries, especially the Axis's members like Germany and Italy. Also, when esotericism is separated from the term “Western”, it is necessary to consider the cultural hegemony of the occult and esoteric milieu in conjunction with international power relations, including those in Asia and the colonized world, and the domestic power struggle. The case of Fukurai, who, in spite of his dismissal in academic circle, continued to participate in mainstream discourses of Japanese mass society, suggests that to us.

ⁱ Julisn Strube, “Toward the Study of Esotericism without the “Western”: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History” in Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Brill, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Avery Morrow, “The Rise and Fall of Kondō Kazō, a Shinto Hypnotist,” Orion Klautau & Ioannis Gaitanidis (eds.), *The Occult in Japan: Studies in Honor of Yoshinaga Shin'ichi*, Oxford University Press, upcoming publication. Kurita Hidehiko, “Shinto Reformation and hypnotism/psyochical research in 1890s”, Ito Satoshi and Saitō Hideki (eds.), *The Modernity of Shinto*, Benseishuppan, 2023 (栗田英彦「明治二十年代の神道改革と催眠術・心霊研究—近藤嘉三の魔術論を中心に」伊藤聡・斎藤英喜編『神道の近代』勉誠出版、2023年).

ⁱⁱⁱ Yoshinaga Shini'chi, *Theosophical Society and Buddhism*, Hōzōkan, 2022 (吉永進一『神智学と仏教』法藏館、2022年).

^{iv} Hirai Kinza, *Psychical Phenomena*, Keiseisha, 1909 (平井金三『心霊の現象』警醒社、1909年), pp. 117, 121.

^v Isomae Jun'ichi and Fukazawa Hidetaka (eds.), *The Intellectuals and Religion in Modern Japan: The Trajectory of Anesaki Masaharu* (磯前順一・深澤英隆編『近代日本における知識人と宗教——姉崎正治の軌跡』東京堂出版、2002年). Katō Totsudō, *On Meditation*, Tōadō, 1905 (加藤咄堂『冥想論』東亜堂、1905年).

^{vi} Kurita Hidehiko, “Mind-Spirit and Bodily Techniques: Spiritually Automating Democracy”, Shimazono Susumu and Ōtani Eiichi (eds.), *The Modern History of Japanese Religions* (vol. 3), Shunjūsha, 2020 (栗田英彦「心霊と身体技法——霊動するデモクラシー」島藺進・大谷栄一他編『近代日本宗教史』第三巻、春秋社、2020年).

^{vii} Kurita Hidehiko (ed.), *The Study of 'Nihon Shinrei Gakkai'*, Jimbunshoin, 2022 (栗田英彦編

『「日本心霊学会」研究』人文書院、2022年).

viii *Nihon Shinrei*, March 15, 1919 (『日本心霊』大正八年三月十五日).

ix *Nihon Shinrei*, February 1, 1919 (『日本心霊』大正八年二月一日).

x Hayashi Makoto, “‘The Symposium Buddhism and Marxism’: *Chūgai Nippō* in 1930”, *Tokyo Daigaku Shūkyōgakuenpō*, no. 25, 2008 (林淳「座談会・仏教とマルクス主義」—一九三〇年の『中外日報』『東京大学宗教学年報』25号、2008年).

xi Sugawara Jun, *Rethinking of ‘the Attempt to Overcome the Modern’*, Kōyōshobō, 2011 (菅原潤『「近代の超克」再考』晃洋書房、2011年). Yasuda Yojurō, *The End of Modernity*, (保田與重郎『近代の終焉』). For further information on the symposium of “Overcoming Modernity”, see below. Takeuchi Yoshimi (ed.), *Overcoming Modernity*, Fuzanbō, 1979 (竹内好編『近代の超克』富山房、1979年). Hiromatsu Wataru, ‘*Overcoming Modernity*’, Kōdansha, 1989 (廣松渉『近代の超克』講談社、1989年).

xii Fukurai Tomokichi, *The Core of the Japanese Spirit*, Kōdōnihonkyōkai, 1938, (福来友吉『日本精神の核心』皇道日本協会、1938年), pp. 28-36, 42

xiii *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

xiv *ibid.*, pp. 41-42, 47.

xv *ibid.*, p. 48.

xvi Kurita Hidehiko, “The Agencies and their Struggles among the Japanese Ultrationalism: Genrinhonsha, Kyoto School, and Nihonshinwaha”, Kondō Shuntarō and Nawa Tatsunori (eds.), *Buddhist Ideologies and the Japanese Ultrationalism in modern*, Hōzōkan, 2020 (栗田英彦「日本主義の主体性と抗争」近藤俊太郎・名和達宣編『近代の仏教思想と日本主義』法藏館、2020年).