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Two Japanese Philosophers in a Letter from Heinrich Blücher to Hannah Arendt

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Abstract

This research article identifies two Japanese philosophers — Ōe Seizō and Kitayama Jun'yū — referenced in correspondence letters between Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt. Using historical records and biographical data, the author clarifies their identities, intellectual backgrounds, and connections to Arendt, thereby resolving gaps left by earlier scholarship and contributing to the study of intellectual exchange. The identification and contextualization of these connections contribute meaningfully to broader studies of cross-cultural exchange during the early 20th century.

The book *Within Four Walls* is a collection of letters between Hannah Arendt (1906–75), the famous German theorist, and her husband Heinrich Blücher (1899–1970), the German philosopher.[1] Its scholarly importance stems from the insight it provides into Arendt's personal life and her relationship with Blücher who influenced her thinking. This article deals primarily with a 1956 letter from Blücher to Arendt. The pertinent part of it reads:

> A professor from Tokyo who was in New York for a few weeks called. Mr. Seizo Oe. He sends you his warmest regards as one of your old language students at Heidelberg. He had tracked you down from the telephone book. Was sad he wouldn't get to see you. By the way, he maintains that Kitayama isn't in Japan, but still in Prague. What does that mean? Has he become a Communist?[2]

The following letter from Arendt, agreeing with Blücher's reported information, readeth thus: "Oe from Japan—I vaguely remember Kitayama saying that the name is a common abbreviation for 'Yuck, how disgusting!' Kita in Prague, I don't understand. It's quite possible that he's become a Communist."[3]

While the editor of *Within Four Walls*, Lotte Köhler (1919–2011),[4] managed to identify some obscure figures mentioned in the various letters, she did not give a note for "Oe."

[1] KOHLER 2000.
[2] KOHLER 2000: 304.
[3] KOHLER 2000: 305.
[4] Köhler was a professor of German Studies at the City College of New York and an executor of Arendt's estate.

"Kitayama," on the other hand, is only given the note: "Could not be identified."[5] Both individuals have remained unidentified since the book's publication.

Undertaking a comprehensive literature search and analysis, testing for spelling variations, the author identified the two figures as (1) Ōe Seizō — commonly Seizo Ohe —, a Japanese philosopher of science, and (2) Kitayama Jun'yū, an eminent Japanese philosopher who worked in Europe. A search of the Arendt Archives (arendtindex.com) provided no more mentions of either philosopher. Their biographical data is detailed below.

1) Ōe Seizō (大江精三), "Japan's leading philosopher of science,"[6] was born in Kōbe in 1905 — as the son of a wealthy banker, businessman (sake, real estate, rice, etc.), and founder of Hōtoku Business School[7] — and graduated from Tōkyō Imperial University in 1928 before moving to Germany and studying philosophy at Heidelberg (1928–31) under Karl Jaspers and Heinrich Rickert — later becoming a professor at Nihon University in Tōkyō. Active internationally, Ōe was a Fulbright Exchange Scholar and Rockefeller Research Fellow at Chicago and Harvard Universities (1955–56), and Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences, Stanford (1958–59).[8] Fulbright records show that Ōe arrived September 28th, 1955, for a short research stay at the University of Chicago.[9] An annual Rockefeller Foundation report also lists his name.[10] Ōe received a Litt. D from Kyūshū University, Japan, in 1959. Moreover, he was involved with a number of different organizations, including the Philosophy of Science Society (Japan) and the Association for Symbolic Logic,[11] and was on the Board of Directors of the Council for the Study of Mankind, Chicago.[12] With a lifelong interest in philosophy and learning, Ōe had correspondence with numerous intellectual figures, such as Nolan Pliny Jacobson (1909–87) who was a professor of philosophy at Winthrop College. Reading Ōe's letters to Jacobson, one learns that Ōe was married (Sumie, a pianist) and maintained a deep friendship with Jacobson.[13] Ōe also had three children: Miwa, the daughter, Takeru, the elder son, and Tōru, the younger son.[14] After a long and productive career, Ōe passed away in 1992.[15] His European language publications include "Gedanken zu einer neuen Theorie der menschlichen Entwicklung," (1942) "Application of Mathematical Group Concept to Human Perceptual Systems, Visual and Auditory," (1957) "Science, Philosophy and Humanity," (1959) "Flexibility in Human

[5] KOHLER 2000: 438.
[6] JACOBSON 1988.
[7] HOTOKU GAKUEN n.d.
[8] AGUESSY *et al*. 1977: 9; NICHIGAI ASSOCIATES 2004.
[9] COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE OF PERSONS 1955.
[10] ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION n.d.: 172.
[11] ASSOCIATION FOR SYMBOLIC LOGIC 1943.
[12] AGUESSY *et al*. 1977: 9.
[13] OHE 1980–86.
[14] OHE 1958. Takeru and Tōru are retired academics now.
[15] NICHIGAI ASSOCIATES 2004.

Cognitive Behavior toward Nature," (1968) and "Scientific Creativity in Eastern Cultural Setting with Special Reference to Japan Today." (1979)

Ōe Seizō had an older brother called Seiichi 精一 (1898–1992) who likewise studied at Heidelberg and became a philosopher and professor at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan.[16] Despite his accomplishments and success, however, information about his life is harder to come by as he did not rise to his brother's level of importance. In an article by Hermann Glockner (1896–1979),[17] who was a professor at Heidelberg, Seiichi is listed as being on the board of the Internationaler Hegel-Bund in 1930.[18] He was also the publisher of the popular philosophical journal *Risō*, and translated figures such as Rickert and Heidegger into Japanese.[19] His German language publications include "Transzendenz der menschlichen Existenz" (1962) and "Wert und Menschliches Sein." (1974)

2) Kitayama Jun'yū (北山淳友), an influential philosopher and Japanese propagandist, was born in 1902 as the son of a Buddhist priest in Shizuoka Prefecture. After completing school, he entered a Buddhist university in 1920. Following his studies there, he was sent abroad to study at the University of Freiburg where he learned under Edmund Husserl and the Swiss Indologist Ernst Leumann, demonstrating great academic ability. Therefrom he went to Heidelberg University (1927) where he studied under Jaspers and Rickert,[20] and was eventually promoted to Dr. phil.[21] after Arendt's completion of her doctorate at Heidelberg in 1928.[22] Afterwards, Kitayama found work at a number of institutions, including the University of Marburg and later at the university in Prague. Ratajová, a historian, has already covered Kitayama's activities there, writing:

> In addition to lectures during the war, political pressure apparently increased for the establishment of a university East Asian Institute (*Ostasien-Institut*) connected with a full professorship of Japanese Studies. The discussions took place from 1943. The Japanese philosopher and Germanist Junyu Kitayama, who was working in Marburg at the time, was chosen as a suitable candidate. […] Kitayama began lecturing in Prague at the Klementinum in the summer semester of 1944, and a report sent by the curator Ehrlicher to K. H. Frank on 18 August 1944 speaks of a large audience — 100–125 people, which seems relatively hard to believe given the total number of students at the Faculty of Arts, despite the fact that the titles of Kitayama's lectures sound very interesting: *Das „Nichts" und der „sechste Sinn" als Kernprobleme ostasiatischer Geistlichkeit* or *Das japanische Ethos*. The institute began to function

[16] Kuno 2021.
[17] Glockner was a philosopher and an important Hegel scholar.
[18] Glockner 1930.
[19] Rüsch 2015.
[20] Ogawa 2011.
[21] Friese 1989; Kuno 2021.
[22] Heidelberg University 2015.

> fully from the autumn of 1944. Due to the ongoing war events, its operation was very short.[23]

The contents of Prague's university archive are nonetheless mostly limited to dull discussions about money and simple internal developments, including Kitayama not being reimbursed for his monthly travels from Berlin to Prague.[24] Indeed, his life up until this point seems to have been a mostly tame blend of learning, teaching, and writing. However, Kitayama had been characterized as a "warm and upright friend" of National Socialism and was interned as a pro-German collaborator following the end of World War II. He was unable to return to Japan and ultimately remained in Prague, becoming a language teacher and influential Jūdō instructor, eventually dying there in 1962.[25] His most popular works include *Metaphysik des Buddhismus* (1934), *Der Shintoismus. Die Nationalreligion Japans* (1943), *Heroisches Ethos* (1944), and *Sebeobrana* (1963).

Recent research by Jotaro Kuno,[26] a Japanese historian, shows that a total of 92 Japanese were registered as regular students at Heidelberg throughout the Weimar period (1918–1933). Kuno provides a table listing the students, and it shows that both Seizō and Seiichi (same biographical data as above) are the only Ōes enrolled during the Weimar period. Likewise, Kitayama (same biographical data as above) is the only Kitayama enrolled during the Weimar period. Documents from the Heidelberg University archives show that Arendt and Kitayama attended the same seminars by Karl Jaspers,[27] as did Ōe Seizō and Kitayama.[28] It remains unclear however whether Ōe had any direct correspondence with Kitayama after his return to Japan, despite the fact that he later knew Kitayama was living in Prague.

This evidence allows for the sound conclusion that Arendt was indeed at least somewhat acquainted with both Ōe Seizō and Kitayama Jun'yū. Regarding Arendt and Blücher's letters, it is likely that they were not aware of Kitayama's personal circumstances and desires, and this could explain the belief that Kitayama had possibly become a Communist. As for the mention of "one of your old language students," it is possible that Seizō, from a well-to-do family, bought some private language lessons from the highly literate Arendt.[29]

Whether Arendt's intellectual work was influenced by the two philosophers remains unclear. Nonetheless, Kitayama had published a translation of Arendt in *Risō* in 1930.[30] As Kuno notes, Heidelberg played a decisive role in shaping academic knowledge in modern Japan — and both Seizō and Seiichi were instrumental in this process as influential Japanese

[23] Ratajová 2022.
[24] Úřad kurátora německých vysokých škol v Praze 1939–45.
[25] Kubota 2008.
[26] Kuno 2021.
[27] University of Heidelberg 1928; University of Heidelberg 1927.
[28] University of Heidelberg 1928/29.
[29] Kuno 2021.
[30] Arendt 1930.

university professors. Other influential Japanese philosophers who were at Heidelberg include Miki Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897–1945), Takahashi Satomi 高橋里美 (1886–1964), and Mutai Risaku 務台理作 (1890–1974).[31]

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[31] KUNO 2021.

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