

Dai Jitao *Theory of Japan* (1928)



Hideaki Sasaki



Dai Jitao

Dai Jitao (戴季陶) is often referred to as Dai Chuanxian (傳賢) or by his pseudonyms, Dai Xuantang (選堂) or Dai Jitao (季陶). As a journalist, his pen name was Dai Tianchou (天仇). He was born in 1890 in Hanzhou, Sichuan (north of Chengdu, now Guangmo). He learned Japanese in Chengdu, and from 1905 to 1909 (from the age of 15 to 19), he studied at the law department of Nihon University. After returning to China, he became a reporter for Shanghai Daily and then Tianduo Newspaper, where he wrote editorials and became a well-known writer. In 1911, he was exiled to Nagasaki, Japan, after his writing at Tianduo Newspaper caused trouble. He then moved to Penang, Malay Peninsula, where he edited Guanghua Newspaper and joined the Tongmenghui of China (Chinese United League). After the Wuchang Uprising, he returned to Shanghai, where he met Sun Yat-sen, and

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founded Civil Rights Newspaper. From 1913 onward, he served as Sun's interpreter and secretary and worked with him as a Kuomintang proponent until Sun's death in 1925. From 1913 to 1916 he stayed in Japan. During this period he became acquainted with Inukai Tsuyoshi and other Japanese figures, and in 1917 he was to return to Japan to investigate the Manchu Restoration Movement and met with Tanaka Giichi, Akiyama Saneyuki and others. In 1920, he became a major associate of Chen Duxiu's Marxist Institute. Two years after a failed suicide attempt (by throwing himself into a river), he joined the National Revolution and became a member of the central executive committee, a political commissar, and the head of the propaganda department of the Chinese National Party, or Kuomintang (KMT). He completed *The Philosophical Foundation of Sun Yat-senism* soon after. In 1926, he retired from politics and became the principal of Guangdong University (later to become Zhongshan University). A second suicide attempt was followed by his return to Japan in 1927, when he was dispatched by the right wing of the Kuomintang (KMT) to give public speeches in various places. It was after returning to China again that he wrote *Thesis on Japan*. With the establishment of the Chinese Kuomintang government in 1928, he became President of the Examinations Authority, and for the next 20 years he led the government's education policy. In 1948, at the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War, he moved to Guangzhou, where he died the following year at 59 years of age. The cause of his death is said to have been an overdose of sleeping pills, which he took regularly.

Sun Yat-sen's death caused a rift in the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) between the pro-communist left wing (Wuhan government) led by Wang Zhaoming, the party president, and the anti-communist right wing led by Chiang Kai-shek, who had promoted the Northern Expedition. Dai Jitao, who had worked with Sun Yat-sen for many years as an interpreter and secretary, was a shrewd realist who saw himself as the legitimate heir to the "Three Principles of the People," rather than a radical nationalist, even though he belonged to the right wing.

Since coming to Japan to study at 15 years of age, he had spent a total of more than 8 years in the country, and it is said that he was even better than the Japanese when it came to giving speeches in Japanese (i.e., according to Hu Hanmin, Introduction to *Thesis on Japan*). The right wing of the KMT decided to dispatch this intelligent Japanist orator to Japan to make their case to the Japanese people. This was in February 1927 (Shōwa 2), just two months before the so-called First United Front, also known as the KMT-CCP (Chinese Communist Party) Alliance, which resulted in the reunification of the KMT.

In his speeches Dai Jitao stated: "Stop armed aggression and work for peace, for the revival of Asia depends solely on a China-Japan cooperation." However, as posterity knows, the Japanese government of Tanaka Giichi, the last great leader of the Chōshū warlords, was about to form his cabinet, and Japan subsequently dashed in the opposite direction of Dai Jitao's expectations. After returning to China, he monitored and criticized the Tanaka Cabinet, and wrote *Thesis on Japan* as a final recommendation to Japan and as a prayer to his homeland, "Learn from Japan and know the secret of her strength."

As a natural consequence of these circumstances, the book has a strong political and topical aspect, with its emphasis on the need of his homeland for knowledge of contemporary Japan. Accordingly, it includes one or two chapters dedicated to the introduction and analysis of Tanaka Giichi, Itagaki Taisuke, Katsura Tarō, and Akiyama Saneyuki, among others. However, this does not diminish the abiding relevance of *Thesis on Japan*, as evidenced by the fact that this book, first published in Shanghai in 1928, is still being reprinted in Taiwan.

This book, with its emphasis on “the two positions of theory and history,” succeeds as a systematic theory of the Japanese people and Japanese culture. It can be compared to, and in some respects even surpasses, the later published *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by Ruth Benedict, partly because Benedict never set foot on Japanese soil, whereas Dai Jitao had a rich and intense experience in Japan, including meeting many influential figures as Sun Yat-sen’s interpreter and secretary, and getting to know Itagaki, Tanaka, and many others very well. For example, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is said to be one-sided due to the fact that the author’s perspective was limited to that of the “pseudo-samurai class” and the “samurai-like world” (Nishi Yoshiyuki, “‘Kiku to Katana’ Kō,” *Studies of Comparative Literature*, No. 44). Dai Jitao, on the other hand, had firsthand contact with the Japanese people and did not have this one-sidedness.

Rather, he actively discovers that behind bushido (the “way of the warrior”), for example, there is always something anti-samurai, or a “mercantile spirit,” which is nothing more than one of the two wheels that have supported the amazing energy of modern Japan. “While samurai disregarded life or death and valued trust and duty, merchants disregarded trust and duty and valued money. The former is the Muslim mystical morality, and the latter is the Jewish mercantilism,” he boldly points out, and also offers the following astute insight:

Europeans crossed into the Americas and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of native people. I have always thought that such cruelty was not possible for pure warriors. They could only have done it because they were merchants and convicts with weapons. Even the so-called “mercantile spirit” of feudal Japan has an aspect of cruelty behind its obedience. [. . .] Let us compare Shibusawa (Eiichi), a samurai, and Ōkura (Kihachirō), a merchant, among a group of 80-year-old Japanese businessmen who grew up before the new Meiji era education system. The former is a sincere gentleman and the latter a cunning broker. The former is noble, the latter vulgar. One speaks of cultivation, while the other is all about profit. These two extremes clearly reveal the difference between the samurai and the merchant.

According to Dai Jitao, however, such a “fussy and lowly” “mercantile spirit” was due to the fact that merchants “had to live near and depend on the ruling class for their livelihood while they belonged to the ‘ruled’ class and were politically weak,” and they “had no choice but to be this way if they wanted to be winners in life.” He also says, “It is natural that a merchant whose character was not recognized as having even a modicum of status had nothing to do with the higher virtues,” and that “the higher virtues not only did not help him in his life, but on the contrary, they even hindered him.”

The complexity of his view of the “mercantile spirit” as a complementary shadow behind bushido, the Japanese “flower” (Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushido*), is the true essence

of Dai Jitao's analysis, and it runs through the entire *Thesis on Japan*. It lies in the fact that he recognized that, in the modern era, bushido and "mercantile spirit" could no longer be separated, and that both now, as an inseparable whole, support the nation.

"The temperament of the upper and middle classes in modern Japan," he asserts, "is nothing more than the skeleton of 'mercantile spirit' clothed in the garb of bushido." From this viewpoint, the following contradiction of the Japanese people can be understood: On the one hand, there is the samurai-like "self-confidence" (including pride and ambition) that the Japanese people should emulate, as shown in the Meiji Restoration and the Russo-Japanese War, and on the other hand, there is the "fussy" and "deep-rooted insularity," as the author laments, "When I come in contact with their many words and actions, in which they tirelessly worship the West and scorn China, I fundamentally doubt their spirit of public morality." His insights seem to foreshadow postwar Japan's successful transformation from a "military power" to an "economic superpower."

However, the book, which focuses on encouraging the Chinese, does not dwell too deeply on the shortcomings of the Japanese, but rather focuses on introducing and analyzing the strengths of the Japanese from which the Chinese should learn in the future. As a result, *Thesis on Japan* can be considered an appropriate cultural and social comparison of Japan and China, even though it is a bit soft on Japan and hard on China. Dai Jitao outlines Japan's advantages over China as follows:

1. "The truth of faith." An "idea" becomes "faith" only when it is "merged with life." "The idea of suicide," which is unique to Japan, as shown in "seppuku" and "shinjū," is one expression of the purity of this "faith." Chinese "calculated people," should know that without "faith" there will be no revival of the nation.
2. Japanese people are "beauty-loving people." "In general, they are more graceful and rich in aesthetic sentiments than the Chinese." "People who do not appreciate beauty" have no ambition, and "they never hope for moral progress."
3. "A martial spirit and peace." The martial spirit of the Japanese people is well known throughout the world, but it is realized only when it is complemented by the "peace and mutual aid" that pervades Japanese society. This integration of the two elements corresponds to the Japanese people's outstanding talent for blending, as in the fusion of Shinto and Buddhism (or Chinese culture), or the harmony of "faith" and "love of beauty."
4. "Gender relations." The "samurai morality of protecting the weak is especially evident between the sexes." As a result, even though Japan and China share the same "male-dominated" society, there are no "two sides of the same coin" in Japan as in China, and therefore "domestic violence," which is common among Chinese men, and cohabitation between a wife and concubine, where Chinese women suffer, are "absolutely absent" in Japan. In addition, Japanese women's "sense of chastity," which is misunderstood as being scarce in China, is in fact "extremely strong"; it is just that in Japan, the way of thinking about it is "not as cruel as in Chinese society."

Having laid out the virtues of Japan in this way, Dai Jitao, however, emphasizes that those virtues are already disappearing from early Shōwa-era Japan, saying, “I have now visited Japan for the first time in six years, and what I saw and heard gave me a sense of a different world.” Nostalgic for the “good old” Japan of 20 years prior, when “capitalism was immature,” “class division by money” was still weak, and “life was not as hard as it is today,” the author laments the change in the minds of the Japanese people from “peace” to “non-peace,” from “religious faith” to “superstition” (of the divine nation and divine authority). The man with a view towards synthesis notes that since Japan’s “martial spirit and peace” were originally one and the same, this change is in fact a sign of the decline of the Japanese people’s martial spirit, and that their excellent “self-confidence” and “religious faith” are now being undermined by a calculating and ruthless “mercantile spirit”.

The Manchurian Incident would occur 4 years later.

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