

Tokutomi Soho and Imperial Japan's Destiny

By Vinh Sinh

Tokutomi Soho (1863-1957) was one of modern Japan's most influential and prolific writers. Starting his career in 1884 at the age of 21, Soho continued to write until the last years of his life. During his long career – which spanned the Meiji (1868-1912), Taisho (1912-26) and the first half of the Showa (1926-90) eras – he wrote approximately 300 books, many of which enjoyed great popularity. These works may be classified in three main categories: journalism, social critiques and historical writings. Whether as a liberal in the 1880s or as an imperialist proponent in his middle and later years, Soho was in the forefront of public opinion during most of his career.

Despite Soho's prominence in the intellectual and political movements that shaped Japan's history during this period, scholars have traditionally restricted their analyses of his work to his early years when he was a powerful advocate of liberalism. Consequently, little attention has been focused on the more contentious period of his career during which he came to promote a policy of expansion for Japan and, ultimately, became a proponent of militant imperialism.

This essay will focus on Soho's writings and activities within the context of post-Meiji Japan. In treating his later career as a major ideologue of imperial Japan, I hope to provide further understanding of the inner rationale of those who shaped Japan's world outlook in embarking upon a desperate policy of aggression. While holding no brief for prewar imperial Japan's policies, I consider that a bitter condemnation or a venting of moral outrage from the point of view of "victor's justice" would prove futile, as our purpose is to try not to repeat similar mistakes in the future.



Photo : Vinh Sinh

Tokutomi Soho's career dramatically symbolized the path that prewar Japan had followed (photo was taken at the age of 88, spring)

In my judgment, that could be best done by presenting a fair and objective picture of Soho's ideas in relation to current events.

I

In studying Soho, one is struck by his vigorous spirit and inexhaustible vitality. For instance, in tracing his early work from his debut as a champion of *heiminshugi* (his own version of democracy which carries a connotation close to "egalitarianism") in the literary world in the mid-1880s to the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), one is almost bewildered by its scale and tempted to view this decade as marking the peak of his activities. Certainly this period is a memorable one, during which Soho first encountered the world of Japanese and international politics from an idealistic perspective. Over the course of

this period, there was a shift of emphasis in his thought from liberalism to imperialism. In terms of activities, however, the following decade (1895-1905) is equally significant. Indeed, the maturing of his ideas and his increasing involvement in the inner circle of actual politics added even more intensity to his role within the context of Japan's history. Soho often recalled that the decade between the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) was the happiest period of his life.

Japan's victory in the war against Russia was a vindication of Soho's foresight a decade earlier and can be regarded as the climax of his incessant activities during this decade. During the war, Soho unofficially assumed the position of "Director of Press Relations and Information" for the cabinet of Katsura Taro (1848-1913) – with whom he had developed an intimate and involved political relationship. The drive behind Soho's enthusiastic activities in cooperation with the government's conduct of these two wars was shared by most other Japanese, for the feeling of self-protection was the keynote in the psychology of the people in both events. Thus we arrive at yet another peak in his life and are bound to wonder whether this too will be the highest and the last one. Yet, as a new era opened to Japan through her victory over a European power, Soho continued in the forefront of public opinion, carrying on his self-appointed task of leading it. Once again there was a continuing relationship between Soho's ideas and historical developments, right down to the end of the Pacific War in 1945. In fact, Soho's personal ideology and Japan's actual policies were perhaps never more closely identified than in the later period of his life, despite the

fact that he held no official post.

What was Soho's view of Japan's mission in the post-Meiji era? In answering this question, we have indeed begun to touch the beginning of the thrust, which in Soho's perception, was growing greater and greater, and eventually culminated in the Pacific War. The impact of the Russo-Japanese War opened a new page in the balance of power in the Far East, and it also marked a turning point in Soho's outlook towards the West. Throughout the critical period of hostilities, Britain and the United States had been sympathetic toward Japan. Soon after Japan emerged victorious and replaced Russia as the principal power in northeast Asia, however, they began to see Japan as a potential threat to the Open-door policy and to the principles of equal trading opportunities in China laid down by the United States in 1899. Rather than viewing the Western powers' changing attitude as a conflict between economic and political interests within a group of imperialist powers, of which Japan had become a full member, Soho quickly took it as an indication of increasing racial strife between Japan and the Western world.

It should be mentioned that this racial notion of international relations did not originate with Soho. Jacques Barzun argues eloquently that although the most blatant expression of racism in the modern world was to be found in the Third Reich, racial ideas and beliefs had existed long before that and had been "scientifically" justified by science, art and historical writing in 19th-century Europe "without distinction of nationality – or race." Feelings of racial superiority thus provided a convenient shield for imperialist activities, and were used as such by many countries with imperialistic aspirations. Barzun notes: "Read attentively the press and political literature of the modern world in England, France, Italy and the United States; in Mexico, Turkey, Rumania and Scandinavia, you will not read very far before you are told or left to infer that the whites are unquestionably superior to the colored races: that the Asiatic Peril is a race-peril; that the Japanese are deemed so exceedingly yellow-perilous that the

Chinese become white brothers in comparison (and vice versa); that the great American problem is to keep the Anglo-Saxon race pure from the contamination of Negro (or Southern European, or Jewish) 'blood'." In such a climate, Soho found ideas about race an effective instrument with which to weld the public to his imperial cause.

It was in this context that Soho wrote *Ojin no Omoni*, or *Yellow Man's Burden* (1906). As may be inferred from the title, this piece was Soho's answer to Rudyard Kipling's *White Man's Burden* (1899). Kipling's poem, as Soho explained, was a "confession of the awareness of the White race that it has the responsibility and the authority to bring other races under its control." If such was the case, "The Yellow Man should also have his burden," and "we should call upon the *Yamato* (Japanese) race to be aware of this burden." While it is true that Japan's victory over Russia had lent a great stimulus to independence movements against Western colonial powers in many countries in Asia, it was a crucial mistake on Soho's part to advocate a superior posture for Japan toward other Asian countries. In the final analysis, Soho's racial interpretation was but an oversimplification of the world situation. In many cases, racial slogans were used by Western powers merely to mask the underlying motives of political and economic interests. By taking racial issues literally, Soho became unable to appreciate the possibility that Japan could still find ways of participating in the struggle of world powers within their larger non-racial context. The *Yellow Man's Burden* in fact became a formula for creating a massive confrontation between Japan and the West.

II

After the Russo-Japanese War, Soho directed his attention to consolidating Japan's position on the Korean peninsula. Diverging from Ito Hirobumi's (1841-1909) opinion that Korea be considered a protectorate of Japan, Soho strongly advised the Katsura Cabinet that the annexation of Korea was necessary. When the Treaty of Annexation

was actually concluded in August 1911, Soho welcomed the news jubilantly in his newspaper *Kokumin Shimbun*, and shortly afterward he was asked to become Director of the *Keijo Nippo* (*Seoul Daily News*) and was put in charge of the press in Korea. It was around this time that Soho was elected to the House of Peers.

With her victory over Russia and subsequent annexation of Korea, Japan had become a full-fledged imperialist power. In spite of the changing situation and in defiance of public opinion, Soho continued to argue that Japan was under constant threat from world racial conflict and that national right should be strengthened even at the expense of civil rights. In December 1912, as Soho was helping Katsura – who by this time had become immensely unpopular – to boost the latter's political profile, angry mass demonstrations inflamed by the desire for civil rights broke out against the Katsura Cabinet. Condemned by the masses as an "enemy of the constitutional government" and a "subsidized organ of the Katsura Cabinet," Soho's newspaper *Kokumin Shimbun* was mobbed and burned by violent protesters in February 1913. Soho later recounted that even more severe than his newspaper's material loss was the mental anguish he suffered after the burning.

Soho's faith in the Gospel of Power and in militarism increased following the outbreak of World War I. Writing in 1916 about the changing situation in the world, Soho commented prematurely that the Great War marked the victory of German militarism over English liberalism. When it turned out later that the war ended with the collapse of Germany, Soho then insisted that the cause of England's victory was not her "liberalism" but the all-out mobilization which he saw as a kind of "militarism" even more thorough-going than that of Germany.

During the Great War Japan had been England's ally in the Far East. Nevertheless, according to Soho, England merely used Japan "to protect her rights and interests she had acquired, and this is her reason for making Japan her watch-dog." He was also wary of American motives:

“America, in the Far East, intended to acquire rights and interests, and for this reason, she looked upon Japan as her rival.” In particular, Soho was highly critical of the “anti-Japanese sentiment” and the “Japanese exclusion movement” in the United States.

Iriye Akira explains the growing conflict between Japan and the United States after the Russo-Japanese War in terms of both countries’ professed commitment to expansion, thus “overseas Japanese did not impress Americans as exponents of peaceful immigration, while American behavior at home and abroad appeared to Japanese more and more a hindrance to their expansive activities.” Unfortunately, it should be noted, the events in the seven year period from World War I to the end of the Taisho era (1926) seemed to furnish Soho with still further reasons for his argument. At the Peace Conference in Versailles (1919), although Japan succeeded in winning recognition by the world powers for control of the former German leased territory in Shantung Province and the Pacific islands north of the equator, her proposal for the inclusion of a clause on racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations was barred and this was felt as a direct insult. Furthermore, as a result of the Washington Conference, held in 1921, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was terminated and, for the purpose of maintaining the status quo in the Pacific area, there emerged instead the Four Power Pacific Treaty (signed by Japan, Great Britain, the United States and France). The Naval Limitation Treaty resulting from this conference stipulated a maximum naval tonnage ratio of 5-5-3 for the United States, Great Britain and Japan respectively.

An intense nationalist, Soho was indignant at the outcome of the Washington Conference and saw it as most humiliating. Through an analysis of editorial comments, news articles and the layout of the *Kokumin Shimbun* in the four month period from April 12, 1924 (the day the Japanese exclusion legislation was passed in the Lower House of the American Congress) until July 1, 1924 (the day the law went into effect), Miwa Kimitada has suggested that “from the point of view of spiritual

history, the war between Japan and the United States began when Soho, in the *Kokumin Shimbun*, called July 1, 1924 the ‘Day of National Humiliation,’ and inserted a short comment ‘July 1: The day Japan’s diplomacy draws a great arc from the East to the West to break off with the United States and clasp hands with her Asian brothers.’”

III

During the 15 years from the beginning of the Showa era until Imperial Japan declared war upon the United States and Britain in December 1941, Soho’s primary concern was with the mobilization of public opinion and morale in preparation for this final “unavoidable” confrontation. Apart from continuing to work on the massive *National History of Modern Japan* (*Kinsei Nihon Kokuminsi*), Soho wrote and edited nearly 120 volumes, many of which to appeal to the audience’s faith in Soho’s favorite theme of Emperor-centralism.

Soho’s coalescence with the militarists became clearer and clearer as Japan’s political history moved toward the end of the party movement. The triumph of the militarists and the right-wing radicals was marked by the Manchurian Incident and the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855-1932) in May 1932. In *Nihon Teikoku no Ichitenki* (*A Turning-point of the Japanese Empire*, 1929), Soho declared that “the world of the present-day requires ‘personality politics’ (*jimbutsu seiji*) which transcends conventional party politics, and the best example of ‘personality politics’ was Mussolini of Italy.” In a talk on “World Developments and the Lessons of the Meiji Restoration” in February 1931, it became obvious that “personality politics” was Soho’s euphemism for “dictatorial politics” (*dokusai seiji*). As he appealed to the public: “The nations which adhere to parliamentary politics are backward and are switching to dictatorial politics.” Apart from his heavy writing schedule during this period, Soho also busied himself with such activities as speeches, lectures and radio addresses. The highpoint of these activities was the three lectures

he gave in the presence of Emperor Hirohito.

In 1930, on the Day of National Foundation, the *Soho-kai* (The Soho Society) was created to promote Emperor-centralism. Its first President was the well-known University of Tokyo Professor Ueda Kazutoshi (1867-1937). The Soho Society had about 40 branches throughout the country with some 12 thousand members. Toward the end of the Greater East Asian War, it even managed to establish a branch in the South Pacific Islands. The presidents of local branches were often prefectural governors or mayors. The organ of the society was the *Sohokai-shi*, or *The Journal of the Soho Society*, which published Soho’s lectures and activities for the society. Most of these speeches were delivered at the inaugurational meetings of local branches or at the Aoyama Hall, the main office of the society in Tokyo. The Soho Society continued its activities until the collapse of Imperial Japan 15 years later.

After the Manchurian Incident, event after event drew Japan deeper into the “valley of darkness.” In Manchuria, the Kwantung Army created the state of Manchukuo in 1932. At home, it was a grim era of plots and assassinations. Through the mass media, textbooks and almost every possible means, the Japanese public was conditioned to believe in the justice of a Greater Japan. The situation was even further aggravated after the China Incident (1937); the tide of ultra-nationalism and militarism rose unchecked. Japan’s desperation and confusion before her decision to embark upon a total war against the United States and Britain were perhaps best illustrated in the words of the then Minister of War Tojo Hideki (1884-1948) to Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro (1891-1945) that “a time comes in the life of every man when it becomes necessary to close his eyes and jump from the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple [in Kyoto] to the ravine below.”

To Soho, it was a different story. Although he felt that Japan would be in a better position to go to war after she had had more time to accumulate her strength, he nevertheless perceived the

Greater East Asian War, like the two previous wars against China and Russia, as a “legitimate defense” (*seito boei*). In fact, for Soho, the Greater East Asian War was nothing but a continuation of the Meiji Restoration, fulfilling its ideals.

Although holding no official post, Soho seemed to be among the few upon whom the militarist leaders could count on as a source providing historical explication and justification whenever major events took place. He assumed a high profile throughout the course of the war. Members of the Soho Society called him a “leader of the Greater East Asian War,” undoubtedly in a conceptual sense.

It should be remembered that Soho was already 78 by the time Japan declared war upon the United States and Britain (December 1941), and despite the effects of his trigeminal neuralgia, there was no relaxation in his fervent self-appointed mission of “writing in the service of the nation” and in his self-imposed role as the preceptor of Japan’s expansionist destiny. Even in the drafting of the “Imperial Rescript Declaring War,” Soho admitted that he had helped Tojo, now Prime Minister, to revise it a couple of times.

As his main concern was with the “ideological warfare” (*shiso-sen*) at home, Soho advised Tojo on the necessity for control of the press. When the *Nihon Bungaku Hokokukai* (Japanese Literature Patriotic Association) and the *Dai-Nihon Genron Hokokukai* (Great Japan Press Patriotic Association) were created, he served as president for both. Although documentary materials on Soho’s work in these associations are almost non-existent, the fact that he was proposed as their president is symbolic of his prominent role in wartime public spiritual mobilization.

V

An order for the arrest of Soho and 58 other Class A war-criminal suspects was announced on the radio on Dec. 3, 1945. Because of Soho’s illness and advanced age, however, he was exempted from being sent to Sugamo Prison, but was kept instead under

house arrest until September 1947. Soho’s defense of imperial Japan’s lost cause was explicitly stated in the testimony which he submitted to the Tokyo Tribunal in March 1946 on behalf of all defendants. In this testimony Soho argued that the quest for a greater Japan was thus like “a crow imitating a cormorant” in catching fish, but “while other world powers all dived into the water and secured either small or big fish, Japan was not only unable to catch any fish, but even got herself drowned.” In other words, in Soho’s view, the problem with the Japanese was that “they were not as skillful in performing their role as the other world powers.” For this reason, he concluded that “the advanced nations may ridicule or laugh at Japanese unskillfulness; but from God’s viewpoint it is on no account fair to condemn or punish them.”

After years of struggling against neuralgia, Soho died on Nov. 2, 1957. About one year before his death he had composed the following *waka* and asked that it be recited at the funeral:

*Hoekuruu • Nami no yaeji o • Norikoete
• Kokoro shizukeku • Minato ni zo iru*

(Riding across • The roaring waves of distant seas • At last • With calm spirit • I am entering the harbor)

This is indeed a fitting summary of Soho’s eventful life.

By way of conclusion, I would like to advance the following three points. First, to Soho and most of his Meiji contemporaries the modernization of Japan was largely motivated by a desire to escape from the fate of other Asian nations. As a consequence, Soho and other Japanese expansionists retained their defensive attitude vis-à-vis the West, even when Japan was fully engaged in her expansive activities on the Asian continent, and thus the motivation for such an attitude was less than obvious. Soho’s testimony to the Tokyo Tribunal shows that this self-defense mentality was a key element in his justification of Japan’s Greater East Asian War. One may say that Soho was thus a believer in the doctrine that the end justifies the means and he was

unable to realize that the means might corrupt the end and become an end in itself. As an influential leader of public opinion, by seeing the world through racial spectacles, he in fact had led his audience to oversimplify the diversities in international relations and to overlook the fact that while “there are established ways of coping with the conflicts of political and economic groups ... there are none for racial strife” (Barzun).

Second, for a proper understanding of the significance of Soho’s career, it is crucial to see that regardless of the changes in his thought over time, there was a consistent theme: his intense nationalism. Depending upon the period he favored different solutions for Japan, from his early call for *heiminshugi* to his demand for military dictatorship in the early 1930s. Nonetheless, these conflicting solutions were, in Soho’s mind, necessary steps for a country seeking to expand the glory of its power.

Finally, Soho’s career dramatically symbolized the path that prewar Japan had followed. During most of his long career, he was in the forefront of public opinion and displayed a strong commitment to his self-imposed mission by “writing in the service of the nation,” both journalism and history. Viewed in this light, Soho’s career was not simply a reflection of his times but rather was that of a preceptor. For this reason, although the cry for imperialism and militarism assumed a solid background in the 1930s, it is incorrect to say that Soho was just a mere “pawn taken in by the bureaucrats and the militarists.” He was, perhaps, a victim of his own self-appointed mission. JTI

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