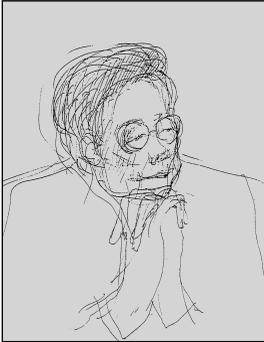


Kenzaburo Oe

## Two Letters to a Chinese Writer in Exile from Berlin to Washington, D.C.



1935 born in Ehime Prefecture, Japan. 1959 graduated from the Department of French Literature at the University of Tokyo. 1994 awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. – Address: Seijo 4-10-2, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo 157-0066, Japan.

### Acknowledgements

From mid-November of 1999 to the end of February of the following year, I had the pleasure of staying at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Berlin as one of the Guests of the Rector. Residing there, I gave a series of lectures at the Free University of Berlin as Samuel Fischer Professor for Literature.

The following are two open letters I wrote to Zheng Yi, a Chinese writer in exile in the United States. The letters, together with Zheng Yi's replies, appeared in *The Asahi Shimbun*, a Japanese newspaper. The two letters are my independent work. However, it is the meaningful conversation with my colleagues at the Institute that provided the incentive for the correspondence.

January 7, 2000

Dear Zheng Yi,

We met for the first time three years ago in a modest Chinese restaurant in a college town in the eastern United States. I had discovered, before then, that my colleague at the East Asian Studies Department at Princeton Uni-

versity was an excellent and critical researcher on modern China. We had made our acquaintance through our writing to the London Times for their Asia special, and it was this new friend of mine who introduced me to you.

You spoke vivaciously of your life in exile, and composedly, too, objectifying the deep sufferings you must have suffered. When our conversation turned to your newly finished work *Shen-shu* (*The Divine Tree*<sup>\*</sup>), I theorized to you whether *Lao-ching* (*The Old Well*<sup>\*</sup>) one of your earlier masterpieces, was not only about a hole dug in the ground but also a metaphor of a tree of the universe that connects to a passage extending into space – in Japan, too, in referring to the constellations, we still use the word *tensei*, whose Chinese characters denote heaven and hell. I theorized thus because I was impressed with the reality you established through the structure of your work, which penetrates vertically – from history to mythology – the many layers of people's lives in the provinces.

*Shen-shu*, a translation of which has at long last come out in Japanese, also portrays, by shedding light on another tree of the universe, the history of the idiosyncratic lives of the Chinese people of the times of the Sino-Japanese War, liberation, the founding of the socialist state, the Great Cultural Revolution, and afterwards. Your excellent narrative adds humorous reality to the souls, living and dead, that appear frequently and freely in the novel. I admire your completing – amid the difficulties of a life in exile – this rich and monumental work, which depicts, comprehensively, the mass of poignant problems confronting contemporary China. Works set in print today are channelled through the diverse and global communication network, and I believe this work of yours will reach the youth of China who need it the most.

Japan is unique in that, from the time it embarked on modernization, it has almost never granted asylum to exiles, nor has there been a Japanese refugee who has produced literary work abroad. Clearly the nation has a history of isolationism, but less apparent, and more complex, is its predisposition to stealthily close its doors to the outside world. The tendency resurfaces occasionally, and I sense it happening today.

Toward the end of last year, I gave a lecture at a Berlin theatre of nostalgic beauty. I started my lecture by quoting a passage from Shigeharu Nakano, a poet who, suppressed as he was in expressing himself, had no means of escape from Japan. The passage, written in resplendent style, cites a poem by Heinrich Heine, whose works were burned in Berlin just before the Second World War, by which time Japan's invasion of China had already begun. I had some difficulty understanding some parts of the

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<sup>\*</sup>) The English titles *The Divine Tree* and *The Old Well* are an arbitrary translation.

poem, so I asked my colleague to help me with it and rewrote it with a few minor changes.

Spring's true Nature is learnt for the first time  
with the coming of winter.  
It is by the fireside that the best songs  
of May are writ.  
Love of freedom is the flower of prison,  
wherein is felt freedom's true worth.  
Likewise, devotion to Germany burgeons for the first time,  
when on Her borders our backs are turned;  
When we gaze upon Her misfortune  
from a foreign land.

My thoughts turned to you as I read out this poem; also to the future youth of my country. Needless to say, I am living a comfortable life here, thanks to this nation which, despite the diverse difficulties it faces after the reunification of ten years ago, provides a wonderful environment to its foreign guests – although some people tell me that the Institute for Advanced Study where I work is an exception. Indeed, the only hardship, if I could call it that at all, is the need for me to prepare manuscripts to duplicate for the more than forty enthusiastic students who attend my lectures, which I give in English here at the Free University of Berlin. The manuscripts require days of preparation, and I make copies for my students lest my poor pronunciation come in their way of understanding me.

Nevertheless, there are times I spend restless nights in my apartment in Berlin where I live alone, feeling apprehensive of the “moderate nationalism” that is starting to surface in my country. Like many others, I do not believe that ultra-nationalism as we experienced in the past will come to the fore overnight. Such a resurgence requires some time. I fear, however, that in this aperture of time, we shall witness “moderate nationalism” taking root, soon to extend its branches and leaves.

Perhaps what has already started in Japan is inner isolationism. I fear that the next generation of Japanese will fall into isolationistic negativism, and, within spiritually closed borders, become a people who, to use an expression we learned from one of your classics, “throw their weight around without knowing their true worth”. In which case, in the new century, in which China is sure to become a superpower – I think you will agree with me if I add the phrase “notwithstanding its diverse dilemmas” – I doubt the prospect of Japan treading an independent path of survival. My nights wax sleepless as I ponder the changes on the Korean peninsula and the developments in Taiwan in conjunction with

Japan's relationship with Germany and the rest of Western Europe, which differs from its relationship with the mighty United States. Obviously, my words will not be taken seriously in the cultural phenomenon of Tokyo, which I call "neo-dilettantism". Dilettantism turns a slightly askew ear to all it hears and parries with a complacent look.

Let me return to the evening we met in Princeton. At first we had my friend interpreting for us, but a few beers helped us start communicating with each other in English. You referred to the classic *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and said that modern Chinese politics, society, and culture, after the Tiananmen Incident, is devoid of the feeling of repentance, which informs the eighteenth-century work. Correct me, please, if I am wrong; it's my poor English, but I believe you said *repentance*, and this one word remains indelibly imprinted in my memory.

After the defeat in the last war, the Japanese people embraced a genuine feeling of repentance for causing the war's Herculean miseries: for dragging Asia into the war flames, spreading the fire to the world, having Tokyo and many other cities razed to the ground, and seeing Hiroshima and Nagasaki become targets of a nuclear weapon. Reflecting upon the inability of the Japanese intellectuals to confront ultra-nationalism before and during the war and their inability to channel the feeling of repentance to go beyond the mere level of emotion, Masao Maruyama, a scholar of political thought, took action, calling his own generation a "repentance community".

Dilettante disputants today, especially the young ones, deride not only Maruyama and the intellectuals who have shared his resolve in the "repentance community", but their belief in "postwar democracy" as well. The more wily and vicious ones, the neo-nationalists, demonstrate direct hostility. It is my belief, however, that in the one hundred years and several decades of Japan's modernization, there has been no brand of Japanese intellectuals of finer mettle – as fine as the famous and the nameless who experienced the bitter war – than those who comprised the "repentance community".

If I were asked, in refutation, whether or not I consider repentance to be a productive emotion, I would say that it, in itself, is a passive one. Repentance, however, becomes a positive attitude when we make a conscious effort to reconsider our understanding of it and when we continue to remember it. You referred to modern Chinese politics, culture, and bureaucrats as being devoid of any feeling of repentance: I took these words – if I am not mistaken – to be harsh words of criticism by an individual who stands tooth and nail in opposition to a nation.

Those plotting to rewrite the Japanese history textbooks discredit the reflections shared by Maruyama and his "repentance community" as a

self-persecuting view of history, for example in their perspective on the Nanjing Massacre. What strength, I wonder, will these people and their ilk nurture in our children by pampering them to cast truth to oblivion?

Repenting penetratingly and making it the mainstay with which to live ethically: this connects to the thought of virtue held by the pre-modernization Osaka merchant-scholars, which Tetsuo Najita of Chicago University and I recently discussed in our correspondence. Their thought of virtue, which they learned from Confucianism, was, in the language of Western thought, virtue as nurtured by the Greeks, a practical power that can be termed a life-living technique. I would like the youth who are going to carry responsibility for Japan in the twenty-first century to make this very power their own.

Should the plot, which is now an open scheme (a manoeuvring possible only within Japan's borders and which no foreign country would condone) come to have sway over the classrooms of our elementary and middle schools, the next generation of Japanese youths will be that of cowards devoid of the courage to imagine not only their forefather's errors but the errors they themselves might commit, incapacitating them to make a change in direction. The implication of which is that resuscitation through the power of repentance will be denied them in the event they err.

My colleague, however, points to the pliant and universal demeanor of the new generation of Japanese that come to Germany, a demeanor totally unthinkable for us in our generation. He tells me it is spreading in my country whose port I left, and goes on to say that it is because of its eeriness that the government has pushed through a bill requiring all public schools to hoist the *Hinomaru* flag and to sing the national anthem *Kimigayo*. If so, my dear Zheng Yi, I pray that an indomitably cheerful reply to this letter, one typical of your person, will reach these youth.

Sincerely yours,  
Kenzaburo Oe

February 15, 2000

Dear Zheng Yi,

As the fallen leaves of your *Shen-shu* (*The Divine Tree*) burn, the battle between the Japanese Imperial Army and the Eighth Route Army, the execution of girls branded during the Great Cultural Revolution as belonging to a religious group, and the sex ordeals of women who had but stolen a

few meager provisions during a famine appear in the form of holographic images against the backdrop of a giant tree.

The leaves of *The Divine Tree* have worked wonders in our relationship, too, in that the letter you wrote in July of 1995 – but did not post – continued to guide me to action. Indeed, together with Günter Grass, I was one of the signatories of a statement the Chinese mainland intellectuals issued in their call for tolerance and human rights.

I mention Grass not necessarily because he won the Nobel Prize last year, but because of the support I give to the atmosphere, which you yourself felt in the environs of Princeton University, of relativizing the prize; also because working at the Free University of Berlin now, I had the privilege of dining with him on the occasion of the university's conferring an honorary degree upon Salman Rushdie, against whom Khomeini had issued a death sentence.

Due in part to the large number of security personnel – some twenty times as many as guests at the table – and to the fact that the guest of honor, the British ambassador, was late in coming, we writers and other men of letters chatted in the dean's office. It was then, and then only, that Grass mentioned the Nobel Prize, and his words were limited to the following: "My government repainted my mother's house in Gdansk when they learned that I was receiving the prize. Kenzaburo, did your government repaint the Shikoku house you were born in?"

At the university, I invited to the study room a student of Chinese ancestry and a German student who read Japanese for a series of discussions in which we used as our text Grass' *Ein weites Feld* and your *Shen-shu*, translations of which came out in excellent Japanese last year and were cited as representative translation works of the year. I chose *Ein weites Feld* because I was impressed with the manner in which Grass meticulously depicted in the novel the diverse lives of the citizens of East and West Germany before and after the reunification, delving deeply into the lively inner world of individuals while shedding light upon the vast panorama of history and thought. The speech the female teacher delivers, for example, one who had been a communist party member in East Germany but converted to Christianity and is soon to marry a West German businessman, touched my heart, as did the comment on her speech by my student, who was so moved that she spoke in tears. The student had transferred from a university in East Germany to attend my lectures.

By breaking new ground in a truly attractive technique, *Shen-shu* – an amazingly varicolored reproduction of modern history with masses of humans etched therein – has brought your idiosyncratic, magical realism to completion. The local variant of Buddhist philosophy forms the framework of the magic, and the denouement in which peasants and ghost sol-

diers of the Eighth Route Army protect the giant tree – a symbol of the provinces – and force a war of rebellion on the Liberation Army, only to be defeated, is overwhelming.

Portrayed with humor and striking eroticism – and with the same dignity and pathos as we find in Grass' work – is the enormity of the structure of tragedy that modern history has created, the seriousness with which humankind has lived and died the tragedy, and how it yet continues to yearn for the dim light of hope that makes humankind human. I shamefully reflected on my negligence as I reiterated to my students that a writer's work, his duty, lies in creating such an image of today's world.

It so happened that about this time Germany's former President Weizsäcker – a statesman whose genuine contrition as a German citizen I am sure you hold in as high a regard as I do – gave a lecture at the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra's commemorative concert. He noticed me sitting in front of the parquet and invited me to dine at his house.

We talked then, among other things, of the diplomatic excellence of the Chinese leadership, but in a letter he sent me later, he wrote that my son Hikari's music was "probably one of the most wonderful secrets ... of this cruel and mysterious twentieth century". Just as your little daughter must be a fountain of solace and support in this, your time of exile, my handicapped son and I, albeit in the form of a lukewarm bond, live all joy and suffering together. The sands of my writing career are running low, but Weizsäcker's encouraging words spur me on to write.

What I want to write to you now is about a young man from Taiwan who has lived in Berlin for quite some time. His aspiration is to become a journalist writing for a magazine in Taipei. The man appeared at my office without an appointment, stayed long, and accompanied me in the wintry twilight to the bus station where, if you missed one bus, you had to wait half an hour for the next. I think, however, that through talking with him, I obtained some information about Asia I had not been aware of.

The young man knew – through my lectures, broadcasts, and interviews in Germany and Switzerland – of my concern over the gathering tide of neo-nationalism in Japan. And this man, in the light of a similar upsurge in Taiwan, had, so to speak, a dual interest in this development.

The man explained that former President Lee Teng-hui's pursuit of the nationalist line had accelerated after his meeting with Tokyo governor Ishihara. I have gathered no information of my own concerning new, nationalistic developments in Taiwan's policies. I only know that Governor Ishihara is an advocate of neo-nationalism, that he fully supported a diet member who, although the issue requires tolerance and prudence vis-à-vis international law, resorted to the rash action of making a landing on one of the Senkaku (*Daioyu* in Chinese) Islands, claiming them to be Jap-

anese territory. Ishihara was there backing him up. Incidentally, the diet member has been ousted from his post of Vice Minister of the Self-Defense Forces for indiscreetly suggesting the possibility of Japan going nuclear, lacing his remark with blatant sexism. The man showed no sign of regret when he left his post.

The reason why I referred to the young man as having a dual interest in the matter is because, although he averred that he had become wary of Lee's nationalist line upon completing his military service and after having actually witnessed punishments inflicted upon draft shirkers, he asked me ardently what I thought about his information on Japanese neo-nationalists sending a "volunteer corps" – he even went out of his way to write the Chinese characters for these words on a notebook he had – in the event a war broke out between Taiwan and mainland China.

I replied:

The Japanese neo-nationalists have no military power, not a fragment of it. If such a war broke out, the binding U.S.-Japan defense cooperation guidelines would take effect, requiring Japan's Self-Defense Forces to discharge all their duty as rear guard of the U.S. forces. Should the war turn nuclear, there might remain a chance of survival for those living on mainland China and in the United States, but such hopes would be dim for inhabitants on the islands of Taiwan and Japan. The only thing the Japanese can do, therefore, is to pray for mainland China and Taiwan to pursue productive and everlasting peace. The Japanese people should exert every possible effort to realize that peace and should refrain from doing anything to fuel cross-strait tension. The same can be said for the two Koreas. From Lee's writings – at least from those prior to his meeting with Ishihara – I surmise he is a man who envisions peaceful coexistence with the mainland. And I am one who believes, as did my forefathers, in the profound wisdom of the Chinese people.

The young man, however, asserted that he did not think the leaders of mainland China, after the Tiananmen Incident, were making preparations to negotiate a large-scale compromise with Taiwan – although they might pay deference to her microchip manufacturing power. We both fell silent and trod on and on in Berlin's winter wind.

Now let me go straight back to your letter and quote a passage from there.

"There can be no positive guarantee that Japan will not repeat its mistake if it is only the intellectuals who repent the crimes of World War II, unless repentance comes from the Japanese people as a whole. The same goes for China. If even the intellectuals do not repent, if the Chinese people do not repent their spineless, sycophantic attitude toward authority, and worse yet, their conspiring to abet in a dictatorship, their dual person-

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ality that truckles to authority and cheats the meek, their ‘belligerent’, exclusive and revenge-seeking ethnocentrism ... a sea of suffering spreads endlessly before them.”

My dear Zheng Yi. We both spoke in faltering English in that restaurant, but we did strive sincerely to communicate truths to each other. And there was a word you used, *repentance* (*zange* in Japanese), which I interpreted to mean “being remorseful” (*kui*) and “mending our ways” (*aratameru*). I believe the younger generation understands *kui* and *aratameru* better than *zange*, and so it is with these two words that I hope to bridge the gap between the generations.

Reflecting upon our experiences – which were verily, as you say, none other than *a chain of defeats!* – we can perhaps say that our generation may be the last that can, by being remorseful and by mending our ways, and by broadening and deepening our perspective of our remorse and mended ways, speak of hope that the youth of our countries will become truly humane. I have faith in your persevering “readership” on mainland China, and I trust in mine in Japan.

Sincerely yours,  
Kenzaburo Oe