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Japan - My University Days: 1956-64 from entering university to joining the Japanese Revolutionary Communist League (JRCL)

Monday 10 July 2023, by [SAKAI Yoshichi](#) (Date first published: 10 July 2023).

I participated in the student movement right after entering Kyoto University in April 1956, but up to that point I had never been a leftist boy, though I was somewhat fiercely independent and rebellious. The first leftist book I read was the “Communist Manifest”, but this was just after I received my acceptance notice from the university in March 1956, and I could not understand it well.

My hometown is Omuta, a local city in Kyushu, the biggest coal-mining town of Japan, and the coal miners’ union there was the most powerful labor union of the General Council of Trade Unions. The miners’ union, however, was a definite economic one, and it was not particularly attractive to me, a son of a small pharmacist shopkeeper. Omuta was a culturally rather backward city, and my high school was a mediocre prefectural school in the city. By the time I finished high school, I had become a nihilist/anarchist who subjectivistically denied all value systems and existing authorities, and I longed to escape the “Omuta” that I felt was suffocating much. Although my brain was a physics-mathematics type, I chose to try the entrance exam for the faculty of letters, Kyoto University.

When I entered the university in April 1956, the campus for the first-year students was situated separately at Uji city, to the south of Kyoto. At the year, there were two CP members and two other pro-CP activists among the new students and I was the fifth member of the activist group. One of the two CPers became the key organizer to rebuild the CP students cell of the university from scratch in 1956-58, and the other CPer became the general secretary of Zengakuren (National Federation of Students’ Self-Government Associations) in 1959-60. One of the two pro-CPers became the vice-president of Zengakuren in 1958-59. At the summer vacation of the same year, I organized my high-school mates to conduct an anti-nuclear-weapon petition campaign in my hometown, so I was becoming a pro-CP activist when I returned to the campus in September.

Immediately after the summer break, I was found to have tuberculosis by an X-ray examination for the student loan, and I had to take a leave of absence from school for one year and a half. This absence from school had a significant meaning for my subsequent activist career. From the fall of 1956 to March 1958, I read books and pamphlets related to communism at the time, including silly Stalinist textbooks and pamphlets, and the two-volume selected works of Marx and Engels and the twelve-volume selected writings of Lenin had given me a basic understanding of the Marx-and-Engels system of thoughts and the outline of Lenin’s theoretical, political, and organizational struggles from the end of the nineteenth century to 1924. This knowledge about them became a decisive groundwork for me when I became a Trotskyist activist later on. I also read Mao Tse-tung’s selected works, and it helped me to understand the many “heterodox” characteristics of the Maoist Chinese revolution later on, too. At this period, I read all the three volumes of Marx’s “Capital”, but I could not understand the first chapter of Volume I, “Commodities”. I was also unable to understand Marx’s “Wage Labor and Capital”. That is, I was unable to grasp Marx’s theory of “value” at the time.

When I returned to the Uji campus for the first-year students in April 1958, I found four activist students, and the group of the four plus me became the nucleus of leftist political activities among the students. I joined the Communist Party around June, and two others of the group also joined the CP in the autumn that year. We joined the CP because it was still common for active left-wing students to become the party members in those days, although those activists did not have any political trust in the official CP leadership.

In those days, the CP was in a chaotic mess: the party center had no authority at all and the party members were doing as they liked without any disciplined organizational order: such a situation of the CP had been a result of the party's political bankruptcy of militaristic adventurism under the direct influence of the Chinese CP in the early 1950s. Furthermore, the 20th Soviet-CP congress of 1956 and its revelation of the Stalinist crimes had brought about the international crisis of Stalinism. On the other hand, the Zengakuren (National Federation of Students' Self-Government Associations) had also been totally disorganized until 1955, due to the CP's bankruptcy and disarray, but the Zengakuren movement was rebuilt autonomously by the CP students' efforts in 1956-57. Thereafter, a fierce confrontation developed between the radical Zengakuren faction of CP students and the conformist/parliamentarist official CP center in 1958, and various writings of Leon Trotsky began to be read by those CP students. By that time, several LT books had been translated by Ei'ichi Yamanishi and published: "History of the Russian Revolution", "Problems of the Chinese Revolution", "Writings on the German Fascism", "Revolution Betrayed" and the "Moscow Trials & Stalinist School of Falsification". But my return to the student movement was rather late, and I was not involved in the intra-party struggle for a while after joining the party in June 1958.

In that year, there were two major anti-government campaigns. The one was the struggle of the Japan Teachers' Union against the government project to strengthen the oppressive nature of the schoolteacher efficiency-rating system from late 1957 to 1958, and the Zengakuren participated actively in the teachers' campaign, especially due to the fact that the students of teachers' colleges constituted a major component of the Zengakuren. Subsequently, in October 1958, the government attempted to strengthen the repressiveness of the Police Duties Execution law, and there developed a massive nationwide movement against the government. The Zengakuren organized its national strike action in November, and the first-year campus of Uji went on strike as part of the Zengakuren action. All through those political campaigns I was reading the CP daily paper, and I could not find anything that seemed to be an active policy of the CP for the campaigns. In my case, this concrete sense of the party's incompetent passivity became an important element for my political rupture with the CP.

In late November or early December, a lecture meeting was held with the participation of about 20 CP students, on the main campus of the university: two Trotskyists gave their speeches and this was my first encounter with the Trotskyism. The two were Shiroh Oh'ya and Setsurei Tsurushima, both at the age of early 30s, graduates of Kyoto University, and the former being a medical doctor and the latter a lecturer of economics at Kansai University in Osaka. They were CP members, the former being a member of the CP Kyoto Prefectural Committee, and they had become Trotskyists under the impact of the 1956 Hungarian de-Stalinizing rebellion in 1957.

Oh'ya argued for the international perspective of world revolution, rejecting the Moscow-Peking line of "peaceful coexistence", and criticized the "by-stages" and parliamentarist course of "national democratic revolution" of the CP center, counterposing the perspective of the proletarian revolution. Tsurushima criticized the CP's irrelevant view of the post-war agricultural land reform enforced by the US Occupation Command. Oh'ya's speech was particularly shocking for me: my Stalinist misconceptions were shattered and thus I entered my path toward the Trotskyism.

Right after the Trotskyist lecture meeting, I was called to attend a factional meeting of the

oppositionist CP students, and there were six or seven members of the CP cell at the meeting, topics of which I don't remember now. This was my first oppositionist activity in the party. Following the meeting, I was elected to the leadership committee of the CP cell and its sub-cap in the following December. The leadership committee called a general membership meeting in March 1959 and the meeting decided to dissolve the CP students cell of Kyoto University. Meanwhile I joined a Japanese FI group, Japan Revolutionary Communist League (JRCL) in January 1959.

As mentioned earlier, the lecture meeting broke down my Stalinist misconceptions, and, thereby, the original thoughts of Marx-Engels and Lenin, which I had learned during my absence from university in 1956-57, came to the fore in my way of thinking. The thoughts of Lenin, represented by his "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism" and "The State and Revolution" in particular, were the major elements for me to join the Trotskyist JRCL. At that time, I had certain knowledge about Marx-Engels and Lenin, but no meaningful knowledge at all on Trotsky.

I particularly relied on Lenin's definite argument on the imperialist stage of capitalism: "imperialism is the eve of the social revolution. This has been confirmed since 1917 on a worldwide scale" ('Preface to the French and German Edition', "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism", The Complete Works of Lenin, Vol. 22, p. 194) In his "the Socialist Revolution and the Right of National Self-Determination" (1916), he asserted: "Imperialism is the highest stage in the development of capitalism. In the foremost countries capital has outgrown the bounds of national states, has replaced competition by monopoly and has created all the objective conditions for the achievement of socialism. In Western Europe and in the United States, therefore, the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat for the overthrow of capitalist governments and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie is on the order of the day" (ibid., p. 143). Therefore, my conclusion was that the immediate task ought to work for building a new revolutionary party in order to prepare the working class for the proletarian revolution. Such was my basic thinking and I was not a conscious Trotskyist when I joined the JRCL.

Such being the case, I began to read Trotsky's writings only after January 1959. As mentioned above, the "History of the Russian Revolution" and several other books of Trotsky had already been translated and published. His "My Life" and "Literature and Revolution" had been translated/published far earlier in the 1930s. The JRCL published a Japanese edition of "The Third International after Lenin" in 1959. A newly established publishing house began to publish a series of Trotsky's works in 1961. I. Deutscher's biography of Stalin had been published in 1953-54, and his trilogy of Trotsky's biography was translated by Ei'ichi Yamanishi and published in 1964.

I read all those books from 1959 to 1964, and I came to support the system of Trotsky's thoughts and consider myself to be a Trotskyist activist in 1962-63.

Yoshichi Sakai (July 2023)

P.S.

- Corrections introduced July 12, 2023.