



ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by
Giulio Pugliese
Andrea Fischetti
Michelguglielmo Torri

viella

A large, intricate mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns in a dark red color, set against the lighter red background of the cover.

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
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THE YOUNG ABE KŌBŌ'S ENGAGEMENT IN POST-WAR JAPANESE LITERARY
AND ARTISTIC SOCIETIES

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Abe Kōbō represents a milestone in Japanese literature. He stands as the ideal link between modern and contemporary times, the best embodiment of so-called «advanced modernism», halfway between modernism and postmodernism, together with authors such as Endō Shūsaku, Nakagami Kenji and Ōe Kenzaburō. This article analyses his involvement in Yoru no kai (The Night Society) and Seiki no kai (The Century Society), two artistic-literary societies that played a very important role in the movement of cultural rebirth of Japan in post-war years.

KEYWORDS – Abe Kōbō; Modern Japanese literature; Post-war Japan; Yoru no kai; Seiki no kai.

1. Introduction

Abe Kōbō (1924-1993), whose centenary will be celebrated in 2024, was one of the great figures of Japanese literature during the second half of the twentieth century. A candidate for the Nobel Prize several times, he was a cosmopolitan intellectual, a non-conformist prone to experimentation, a prominent figure recognized internationally yet never sufficiently appreciated, especially at home. Underpinning his difficult relationship with some Japanese critics and readers was his inclination towards an anti-realistic style, an iconoclastic and desecrating approach, and, moreover, some scathing attacks he levelled at the hyper-rationalism typical of Japanese society. Indeed, on several occasions, Abe affirmed his aversion to the most distinctly conservative aspects of Japanese ideology and culture, accusing his compatriots of «digitalising» their minds, leading to an ever-diminishing imaginative strength. Consequently, his work, which has influenced and continues to influence a large part of the Japanese experimental artistic-literary scene, is perhaps more appreciated abroad than at home.

Abe Kōbō also represents a milestone in Japanese literature; he stands as the ideal link between modern and contemporary times, the best embodiment of so-called «advanced modernism», halfway between modernism and postmodernism, together with authors such as Endō Shūsaku (1923-1996), Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) and Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935). The latter, Nobel

Prize for Literature in 1994, highlighted Abe's exceptional artistic stature, recalling his own beginnings:

When I started writing, my greatest desire was to imitate Abe Kōbō. I did my best to reproduce his way of thinking, but I never managed to achieve that clarity on the world only he was able to create. I immediately began to emulate him when writing my first story, its publication in one of the university magazines I was involved with marked the beginning of my literary career. Soon afterwards, the same magazine asked me to write a review of *Kemonotachi wa kokyō o mezasu* (*Beasts Head for Home*, 1957). Abe Kōbō was, therefore, fundamental to the beginning of my writing career, and even today, I still feel that I can talk to him face-to-face.¹

2. *In the beginning there were the «Night» and the «Century»*

In a country crushed by the aberrant image of the atomic mushroom, amidst the rubble of a bombed Tōkyō, two artistic-literary societies were born that heralded great novelties and testimonies of eternal truths: Yoru no kai (The Night Society) and Seiki no kai (The Century Society).

Among the founders of these groups and indeed of the entire Japanese cultural revival movement, we should mention, on the one hand, intellectuals of the calibre of Hanada Kiyoteru (1909-1974), Okamoto Tarō (1911-1996), Haniya Yutaka (1909-1997), Noma Hiroshi (1915-1991) and Shiina Rinzō (1911-1973), and on the other, promising young Japanese artists such as Abe Kōbō, Sekine Hiroshi (1920-1994), Segi Shin'ichi (1931-2011) and Teshigahara Hiroshi (1927-2001). Centred on a common desire for renewal, the union between the experience of the former and the youthful impetus of the latter lay the foundations of a movement that became the point of departure for a good part of post-war Japanese art and literature. It would later be a fundamental link between modernity and contemporaneity.

As evidence of their intense cultural activity, both Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai have left a series of magazines and publications. Of particular significance among these is a collection of essays with the programmatic title *Atarashii geijutsu no tankyū* (*In search of a new art*, 1949).² This volume, a

1. Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎, '安部公房案内' (A Guide on Abe Kōbō), in *Warewa no bungaku*, Vol. 7, Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1966, p. 480.

2. The collection includes the following texts: Okamoto Tarō, «Taikyokushugi» (Anti-Dialectical Principles); Abe Kōbō, «Sōzō no momento» (The Moment of Creation); Haniya Yutaka, «Hanjidai seishin» (An Anti-Epochal Spirit); Shiina Rinzō, «Ningen no jōken ni tsuite» (On the Human Condition); Hanada Kiyoteru, «Riarizumu josetsu» (Introduction to Realism); Noma Hiroshi, «Jikken shōsetsu ron» (On the Experimental Novel); Sekine Hiroshi, «Shakaishugi riarizumu ni tsuite» (On Socialist Realism); Sasaki Kiichi (1914-1993), «Fikushon ni tsuite» (On Narrative). A second volume was planned for the following year, 1950, but it never went beyond the design phase as the publishing house concerned closed down.

collection of lectures held by members of the two societies at various meetings and conferences, was published by Getsuyō shobō (in a certain sense heir of the historical Shinzenbisha), a reference point for progressive writers in those years and around which many of the aforementioned intellectuals gravitated. The headquarters of Getsuyō shobō and the newborn magazine *Kindai bungaku*, the classrooms of Tōkyō and Hōsei Universities, the homes of Okamoto Tarō, Haniya Yutaka and Abe Kōbō, and finally, the legendary Mon Ami café in Higashi Nakano, Tōkyō, became the changing setting for a story of avant-garde stories and revolutions: an interlocking script featuring writers, painters, literary critics, directors and poets who would chart a new course in the cultural history of Japan.

It all began in May 1947, when writer and literary critic Hanada Kiyoteru, having learnt of flattering comments made by Okamoto Tarō on a collection of his essays entitled *Sakuran no ronri* (*The Logic of Chaos*), decided to pay a visit on Okamoto to discuss the avant-garde. This legendary first meeting took place at Okamoto's home in Kaminogoe, in the Setagaya district of Tōkyō; it was the prologue to the founding of Yoru no kai, which occurred a few days later in Ginza, in the basement of a dilapidated building surrounded by ruins. Here is how Haniya Yutaka and Shiina Rinzō – the latter through the eyes of the protagonist of one of his novels – recall those first birth cries:

May 1947. There were piles of rubble as far as the eye could see; a single building stood alone in the midst of that sea of ruins. It had remained standing by some miracle, its walls blackened by the fire of bombs, like a surviving twin waking his dead brother. In its miserable basement, immersed in shadow, the inaugural meeting of Yoru no kai was held. Shiina Rinzō describes the memory of that first meeting in the pages of *Eien naru joshō* (*The Eternal Preface*): «The moment Anta set foot outside Yūrakuchō station, he thought that place could not be Ginza, perhaps he had made a mistake. [...] The wall of a building that had escaped destruction was as black as coal: perhaps, during the bombings, it had been repeatedly lashed by gigantic tongues of fire. There were many signs at the entrance, including one that read: 'Research Institute for International Socialism'. Anta tried to walk down a dark corridor, imagining that he would meet someone sooner or later. And instead, it was empty; there was not even the shadow of a human being. [...] Finally, he heard the cheerful and carefree voices of two or three young men, who seemed a little drunk. 'The Utopia Society? That sounds absolutely ridiculous! Ha-ha-ha! one of them sneered. Anta approached and saw the poster they were mocking hanging on the wall. It said, 'Today, debate on historical materialism at 3pm. Utopia Society, Shōwa Palace, fifth floor.»

Shiina mentions a «Utopia Society» on the fifth floor in his novel. In reality, our first meeting took place in a filthy and poorly lit basement; an

electric cable snaked across the floor, guaranteeing faint illumination. In the centre sat Okamoto Tarō, who never stopped speaking aloud, and Hanada Kiyoteru, his usual fearless expression printed on his face; scattered around them were the rest of us: yours truly, Nakano Hideto, Noma Hiroshi, Sasaki Kiichi, Shiina Rinzō, Umezaki Haruo, Abe Kōbō and Sekine Hiroshi.³

Yoru no kai was born in the presence of those listed by Haniya Yutaka (though the actual name was adopted later, at their third meeting). The first Japanese literary society to arise from the ashes of the Second World War had its two founders as spiritual guides. This was very much the case of the then very young Abe Kōbō and Sekine Hiroshi; they had been invited almost as if the masters, aware of their artistic potential, had wanted to elect them as privileged disciples. We will recount the evolution of the group and the almost contemporary foundation of Seiki no kai in the following pages, but let us now take a step back to analyse the historical circumstances that favoured the development of new cultural currents and the reasons that made two illustrious outsiders such as Hanada and Okamoto the heroes of the avant-garde movement.

The dark years of imperialist expansionism, the devastation of bombings and the dramatic atomic ordeal, had left Japan overwhelmed in an absolute sense of desperate emptiness as never before. It was, nonetheless, a blanket of despair under which lay hidden the fertile humus of hope and the will to recover. It was a desperation of multiple nuances: on the one hand, the painful and rational despair of the generations directly involved in that age of darkness; on the other, the unconscious and compelling despair of little more than twenty-year-old Abe and Sekine. The latter represented the first generation to become adults after the war. Like a good part of their peers, they were animated by a visceral urgency to affirm themselves and start from scratch in the hope of elaborating a new vision of the world. This was also thanks to a furious and sometimes reckless reaction against anything akin to tradition and, willing or not, part of a system imposed by the regime. These two generations were perfectly complementary: the young recognized the artists of the previous generation as authentic leaders, while the latter borrowed the enthusiasm of the former to exorcise the ghosts of the labour camps, censorship and an absurd and profane political vision. It is enough to think of the unhappy, dramatic situation of the young Abe Kōbō: he had returned to Tōkyō just over a year earlier on a ship quarantined due to a cholera epidemic after spending his adolescence in Manchuria, in Mukden (today's Shenyang), where his father worked as a doctor. His literary ambitions, seen in *Mumei shishū* (*An Anthology of Anonymous Poems*), published in cyclostyle print in May 1947, shortly before the meeting that

3. Haniya Yutaka 埴谷雄高, '埴谷雄高全集' (Haniya Yutaka Complete Works), Vol. 9, Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1999, pp. 87-89.

founded Yoru no kai, were undoubtedly inspired by meeting those older intellectuals in that Ginza basement. Later, as we gradually complete the mosaic of this «interlocking script», we will see how and why Abe was there that evening. We should now highlight the importance of this encounter of two generations in the composition of that fertile substrate that gave life to a good part of the art and literature of the subsequent years, the movement that was later renamed Sengoha (the post-war School).

During a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Tōkyō (Tōkyō bi-jutsu gakkō; today Tōkyō geijutsu daigaku, Tōkyō University of the Arts), Okamoto Tārō urged his students to «destroy everything with great energy, in the manner of Picasso, so as to rebuild the world of Japanese art».⁴ His unconventional cultural background, fuelled by his long experience in Paris (from 1929 to 1940), took a great hold on those, young and not so young, who wished to fill that devastating void evoked by the burnt out capital. Okamoto had studied ethnology at the Sorbonne and was highly active as an artist, especially within the two main movements: surrealism and Abstraction-Création.⁵ In Paris, he had occasion to meet a large number of surrealist artists and other intellectuals who, in one way or another, had been involved with Dadaism, Futurism, Constructivism and so on. Thanks to this French experience, Okamoto was a beacon for those in post-war Japan who sensed the distant reverberations of those avant-garde movements the regime had obscured. He was also seen as a hero, especially by the young: it was rumoured that he had been a victim of the secret police during the war, that he had been branded as a «subverter» and had been thus ordered to the front. This is how he remembers the foundation of the «Society of the Night» in an interview dated 1976:

Shortly after the end of the war, Hanada Kiyoteru and I took on the role of instigators and lit the fuse, founding the Yoru no kai. Following defeat and the collapse of the old regime, many things needed to change immediately, yet a heavy paralysis persisted, especially in the world of art and culture. We intended to force through a turning point, so we decided to create an authentic artistic revolution. In other words, we realised that the country absolutely needed a new artistic movement.⁶

4. Cited in David Elliott, Kazu Kaido (eds.), *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan, 1945-1965*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1985, p. 14.

5. It should be remembered that during the imperialist period it was not at all rare for Japanese artists to decide to move abroad (especially to France and the United States). Among others, the poet and art critic Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-1979) must be mentioned; he was actively involved in Breton's surrealist movement. When he returned home, he was among the founders of the artistic collective *Jikken kōbō* (Experimental Laboratory), which played the same role as Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai, but in the field of Japanese figurative arts.

6. Cited in Tani Shinsuke 谷真介, '安部公房レトリック事典' (Abe Kōbō Rhetorical Dictionary), Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1994, p. 368.

The cultural background of Hanada Kiyoteru is much less troubled. Though he could not boast of a period abroad, he too had extensive knowledge of the European avant-garde. During the imperialist regime, when the need arose he was quite able to stand up to the military authorities with a good dose of diplomacy, while remaining faithful to his Marxist political ideals.⁷ The intellectual partnership between Okamoto and Hanada was an exceptional keystone in the history of post-war artistic revival, sealed once and for all by the activity of the «Society of the Night» which, from that famous evening in Ginza, began to meet regularly twice a month.⁸

At this point, before continuing chronologically, we need to go back a few months and capture the moment that informed the origin of the other important group of this story: the Seiki no kai. This time it was Abe Kōbō who lit the fuse, during the last period of his medical studies at the Imperial University of Tōkyō (Tōkyō Teikoku daigaku; today Tōkyō daigaku, University of Tōkyō). Abe, as mentioned above, returned definitively from Manchuria in January 1947 and resumed his university studies which had been interrupted. His literary interests, which he shared with some classmates who nurtured ambitions more literary than medical, were fuelled by the climate of cultural recovery that had been spreading since the previous year as can be seen in the foundation of magazines such as *Sekai*, *Kindai bungaku*, *Shisō no kagaku* and *Shin Nihon bungaku* in 1946. Taking Okamoto Tarō, Hanada Kiyoteru, Haniya Yutaka and similar writers as models, at a meeting held most likely in Kanda in the autumn of 1947, at one of their father's clinics (Akatsuka Tōru, then doctor and painter), Abe and his companions decided to found Nijūdai bungakusha no kai – Seiki (the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century. The following year, the name would be shortened to Seiki no kai following a split in the group). Unfortunately, no official documents exist of that first meeting, nor can we be sure about the number of participants or their identities. However, thanks to some of the key figures and subsequent membership, it has been possible to list the following names: Abe Kōbō, Iida Momo (1926-2011), Morimoto Tetsurō (1925-2014), Ogawa Tōru (1923-1991), Hidaka Hiroshi, Nakano Yasuo (1922-2009), Tsubaki Minoru (1925-2002), Endō Rintarō, Nakata Kōji (1927-2021), Nakamura Minoru (b. 1927), Tatsuno Takashi (1923-2012), Kiyō'oka Takayuki (1922-2006), Hariu Ichirō (1925-2010), Watanabe Tsuneo (b. 1926), Masaki Kyōsuke (1922-2004), Segi Shin'ichi, Akutagawa Hiroshi (1920-1981) and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (the latter only participated in the initial

7. Cf. Kusahara Katsuyoshi 草原克芳, '夜の会の怪人たち: 花田清輝「楕円幻想」と日本の戦後' (The Phantoms of Yoru no kai: Hanada Kiyoteru's *Elliptical Illusion* and Postwar Japan), *Gunkei*, No. 43, 2019, pp. 30-43.

8. The meetings were usually held on Monday in honour of the publishing house Getsuyō shobō, which in a sense acted as a «sponsor» to the group by publishing the members' essays and novels (the Chinese character for *getsu* can mean «Monday»).

meetings).⁹ These future writers, poets, journalists and theatre directors were united by both their youth and their remarkable cultural depth. Here is how Nakata Kōji, a close friend of Abe and co-founder of the society, remembered those moments:

As we began to think about who to involve in the project, Mishima Yukio immediately came to mind. At the time he was already quite famous; nonetheless, he gladly accepted our invitation and introduced himself, saying that he preferred to join us rather than famous people. Mishima was number 26 on the list, Abe and I were numbers 1 and 2, respectively. [...] I remember that it was my job to print the provisional list with the names of all those present. Afterwards, we started to consider what name to give to the group and I suggested «Seiki no kai», inspired in some way by Dostoevsky's magazine. When we went to tell Haniya Yutaka, he immediately said to us (in Russian): «Ah, from *Epoch*, right?»¹⁰

3. Abe Kōbō a «connecting link» between two generations

In light of what has been said so far, it is clear that the first meetings were held before the summer of 1947, i.e. the first informal meetings of both societies, Yoru no kai and Seiki no kai. Their parallel but independent existence had Abe Kōbō as the only common member, at least initially, and in this sense, he was an intermediary between the two generations. This «double role» would later be shared with Sekine Hiroshi, a young poet Abe had had the opportunity to meet during the inaugural meeting of Yoru no kai.

Why was this privilege afforded to the author of *Suma no onna* (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1962)? More or less during the same period as the two groups' unofficial births, Abe Rokurō (unrelated), Abe's secondary school German teacher and a member of the editorial board of *Kindai bungaku*, introduced him to Haniya Yutaka, the magazine's founder and one of its top editors. The aim was to propose a manuscript by Abe: *Owarishi michi no shirube ni* (*At the Guidepost at the End of the Road*, 1948).¹¹ Haniya accepted and

9. Cf. Segi Shin'ichi 瀬木慎一, '戦後空白期の美術' (Postwar Blank Period Art), Tōkyō: Shichōsha, 1996, p. 91.

Cf. Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, '<夜の会><世紀の会><綜合文化協会>活動年表' (Yoru no kai, Seiki no kai and Sōgō bunka kyōkai's Activity Chronology), *Tokushima daigaku kokugo kokubungaku*, No. 17, 2004, p. 16.

10. Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, '世紀' (The Century), in Abe Kōbō, *Abe Kōbō zenshū* 'Sabu nōto', Vol. 2, Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1997, pp. II-III.

11. The first part of the novel (*Dai'ichi no nōto*) was published in the magazine *Kosei* (February, 1948). In September of the same year, the full version was published by Shinzenbisha.

was impressed by the young aspiring writer's style and linguistic expertise - he took him under his wing and had him collaborate on several fronts. Already the main driving force of the newborn «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century», Abe began to participate enthusiastically at «Night Society» meetings. He earned admiration all round, starting with Okamoto Tarō, who later, speaking of the group's first meetings, remembered him as «a young man with an extraordinary imagination, supported by impeccable logic and a rare persuasive force that could enthrall anyone».¹²

In May 1947, the second and third meetings of the «Night Society» were held respectively at the houses of Hanada in Komae and Okamoto in Kaminoge. The group's official name was finally chosen, inspired by a large painting by Okamoto entitled *Yoru (The Night)* that happened to be on display in his atelier. Subsequently, after a couple of meetings hosted by Haniya Yutaka in Kichijōji, the group moved to Mon Ami in Higashi Nakano, the society's historic headquarters. From the official foundation, on January 19, 1948, regular bi-monthly meetings at Mon Ami were held, thanks also to a small financial contribution from the Getsuyō shobō publishing house, initiated by Hanada. A few months later, probably on May 3, the two younger members of the group, Abe and Sekine, also decided to give official status to the «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds/Century», shortening its name to *Seiki no kai* and conferring a strong political imprint, in particular thanks to the growing influence of Hanada, a member of the Japanese Communist Party (*Nihon kyōsantō*). From that moment on, the classrooms of Hōsei University became the main venue for «*Seiki*» meetings, which were also bimonthly and almost always on Saturdays.

Both groups' main objectives can be summed up in the intention of establishing a culture without barriers of genre, in other words, an interdisciplinary movement aimed at promoting new models that amalgamated the various arts. Thus, a meeting on Kafka's writing might be followed by another on Mondrian's painting; a debate on the relationship between art and politics could give rise to another on cinema and philosophy; a writer could try his hand at painting and a painter at writing. This desire to proceed collectively is highlighted in the name of yet another group founded during the same period: *Sōgō bunka kyōkai* (the Association of Global Culture). The initiative was launched by Noma Hiroshi and saw the participation of many members of «*Yoru*» and «*Seiki*», including Hanada Kiyoteru, Sekine Hiroshi and the literary critic Katō Shūichi (1919-2008). Indeed, immediately after the end of the war, Katō Shūichi was among the first intellectuals to speak of the need to demolish the wall of silence and reserve that had been erected around conflict and defeat, he argued that it was necessary to speak openly and accept the answer so as to shake the people's conscience. Katō

12. Cited in Tani Shinsuke谷真介, '安部公房レトリック事典' (Abe Kōbō Rhetorical Dictionary), p. 369.

reiterated this concept in the pages of *Sōgō bunka* (Global Culture), the Association's magazine,¹³ praising the essay *Darakuron* (*Discourse on Decadence*, 1946) by Sakaguchi Ango (1906-1955). This authentic libertarian manifesto harshly criticised the imperial system (*tenmōsei*) as an entity that devoured the individual's identity and viewed the end of the war as an opportunity for the Japanese people to regain their lost identity. This is how Noma Hiroshi addressed readers on the front page of the magazine's first issue:

The defeat has clarified, once and for all, the mistakes that our country made at the outset in 1868. The ruins that now extend before our eyes constitute the real shape of our past. Our lives, reduced to ashes by the horrors of conflict, finally meet the very source of life in this rubble. [...] Our starting point is the life that rises from the depths of these ruins. Our principal mission is to transform this source of life into a purely modern life.¹⁴

On the other hand, though held regularly, the meetings of Yoru no kai were a sort of *divertissement* for the «veterans» who, because of their numerous professional commitments, could not attend with the same continuity as the members of Seiki no kai. The atmosphere at the Mon Ami café was usually relaxed and convivial, and, as Haniya Yutaka recalled, «alongside discussing various issues, they hardly ever forwent the pleasures of alcohol, dance and cinema».¹⁵ However, as has already been said, the highly formative role these meetings had for the younger members was fundamental. Again Haniya writes:

When I think how rapidly the young Abe Kōbō matured by attending the meetings of Yoru no kai, or recall Tanaka Hidemitsu's sighs of admiration, though a little from the sidelines, at our very friendly meetings, I can spontaneously affirm that Hanada Kiyoteru's avant-garde theories or Shiina Rinzō's amazing approach to realism, typical of those years, were an absolute novelty on the Japanese literary scene. It was an era that bore important fruits, an era of exceptional inflorescence.¹⁶

As the months went by, the meetings became less and less frequent, contrary to the progressive growth of Seiki no kai, to which Abe and his companions dedicated themselves with increasing zeal, based on Hanada Kiyoteru's coordinates: avant-garde, existentialism and communism. Hanada, the group's true mentor, blindly believed in the artist's political engage-

13. Nineteen issues were published in all, from July 1947 to January 1949.

14. Cited in Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, '安部公房の戦後—真善美社から<世紀の会>へ' (Abe Kōbō and Postwar: from Shinzenbisha to Seiki no kai), *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū*, Vol. 48, No. 5, 2003, pp. 34-35.

15. Haniya Yutaka 埴谷雄高, '埴谷雄高全集' (Haniya Yutaka Complete Works), Vol. 9, p. 89.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

ment and for this reason was highly sensitive to the events that continued to disrupt Japan during the American occupation. He insisted, for example, that men of culture should follow socio-political issues attentively and give their intellectual contribution to the first upheavals that arose due to the ban on general strikes imposed in 1947 by the McArthur regime. At the outbreak of the Korean War, when Japan became the headquarters for American troops, Hanada urged his young followers to realize, once and for all, that McArthur could not be seen as a potential source of democratic reform. Under such an ideological influence, Abe and his companions gave a certain practical strength to their considerations, distancing themselves from the fundamentally artistic matrix of *Yoru no kai*. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the group decided to take to the cyclostyle copier and come out in the open, publishing and disseminating at its own expense, especially within the university, studies and observations based on new ideas. Moreover, after the immediate post-war period, the drive of these young people was at its zenith, as Segi Shin'ichi argued years later, recalling those days permeated by an elated revolutionary atmosphere:

Many, young and not so young, enthusiastically embraced extremism in both art and politics so as to forget or even loathe the past. This was the main reason why many young artists wanted to participate in the avant-garde or be communists.¹⁷

Western art exhibitions, novels, and films that reached Japan after years of prohibition and brutal censorship were often central to the debates in *Seiki no kai*. To give free rein to their desire to express themselves, Abe Kōbō and his companions founded two magazines: *Seiki nyūsu* (News of the Century) in March 1949 and *Seikigun* (The Company of the Century) in August of the following year. At first, starting from the official foundation of the club, during the two usual monthly meetings, the following conferences were held – their thematic variety demonstrates a «global» orientation in line with *Yoru no kai* and *Sōgō bunka kyōkai*: *Shūruvuarizumu* («Surrealism», speaker: Tsubaki Minoru), *Gijutsu to geijutsu* («Technology and Art», Sekine Hiroshi), *Tetsugaku no unmei ni tsuite* («On the Fate of Philosophy», Watanabe Tsuneo), *Minshū ni tsuite* («On the People», Miyamoto Osamu – pseudonym of Iida Momo), *Nijūdai no hōhō ni tsuite* («On the Method of the Twenty Year Olds», Abe Kōbō), *Interigencha ron* («Study on the Intellectuals», Nakano Yasuo). Meanwhile, the group's official manifesto was published in the December 1948 issue of *Sōgō bunka*. It was simply titled *Seiki ni tsuite* (*On the Century*), the beginning reads:

The Century is the culture of the generation of twenty-year-olds, made by twenty-year-olds and for twenty-year-olds. Our only aim is

17. Segi Shin'ichi 瀬木慎一, '戦後空白期の美術' (Postwar Blank Period Art), p. 95.

to create a new century from the divisions and confusion of the post-war period.¹⁸

Shortly before, a debate involving some members had been published in the August issue of the same magazine (entitled *Seiki no kadai ni tsuite*, «On the issues of the century»), it included, among other things, a discussion on the «war problem», seen as an obscure and fundamental discriminating factor when compared to the previous century. Miyamoto Osamu, in particular, claimed that, unfortunately, «the enlargement of the world» in the twentieth century was due to the war, which had assumed global dimensions for the first time. The planet, from Europe to Asia, had been united under the banner of war. The participants in the debate talked about existentialism, phenomenology, Heidegger and Jaspers, concluding that the foundations had to be laid through a total renewal of culture to regain the identity lost after the conflict and create something really new.¹⁹

4. Global art for the «New Century»

A «new century», reiterating an intention to start from scratch already in the choice of name and, moreover, a probable intention to reconnect ideally with the western avant-garde of the start of the century. The point of departure was to be the West of futurism, surrealism, cubism and other avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The cultural crossover proposed by Abe and his group (the founding members were almost exclusively writers) soon attracted many exponents of the figurative arts, in particular, the painters Ikeda Tatsuo (1928-2020), Katsuragawa Hiroshi (1924-2011) and the multifaceted, rising star Teshigahara Hiroshi. As of May 1949, a painting section had been established in *Seiki no kai*, hosting regular meetings in addition to those of the mother group, and its members were both promoters and participants in the second edition of two important exhibitions held in Tōkyō: *Modān āto ten* (September 1949, at the headquarters of the Mitsukoshi department store) and *Nihon andepandan ten* (February 1950, sponsored by «Yomiuri shinbun»). This second event was fundamental, to say the least, in addition to proposing the first major retrospective of Matisse in Japan, over several editions it gave the Japanese public their first opportunity to admire the works of American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko.

18. Cited in Toba Kōji 鳥羽耕史, ‘安部公房の戦後－真善美社から<世紀の会>へ’ (Abe Kōbō and Postwar: from Shinzenbisha to Seiki no kai), p. 37.

19. Cf. Abe Kōbō 安部公房, Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, Sekine Hiroshi 関根弘 *et al.*, ‘二十代座談会・世紀の課題について’ (Twenty-year-olds’ Roundtable – About the Century), in Abe Kōbō, *Abe Kōbō zenshū*, Vol. 2, pp. 59-75.

The third issue of *Seiki nyūsu*²⁰ published Abe Kōbō's reconfirmation speech as president and leader of the group (17 April 1949). In that speech, he clearly expressed his will to imbue a new militant impetus and detach himself definitively from Hanada Kiyoteru and Okamoto Tarō's Yoru no kai. Nonetheless, they were to remain involved until the end as «special members», alongside Haniya Yutaka, Sasaki Kiichi, Noma Hiroshi and Shiina Rinzō.

Though Yoru no kai was founded with great intentions as an active artistic movement, it has not yielded the desired fruits, so now it is up to our generation, that is to say to us young twenty-year-olds, to enact a change by ensuring everyone hears our voice. At the beginning of this year, in agreement with Sekine and the other founding members, I thought of giving new energy to our society, resuming full activity. For this reason, we have drafted a regular corporate statute and founded an official magazine. Now, having reaped the bureaucratic and financial legacy of Yoru no kai, we can benefit from a stable foundation.

As you all know, the literary establishment of our country is founded on very rigid patterns and it continues to be assumed that it is necessary to be part of it and abide by its rules to make progress. Personally, I do not believe this. It is up to us to overthrow this system and establish a new artistic movement. Avant-garde movements and phenomena are taking place everywhere and all the time, but I want to emphasise that the real avant-garde is very different from modernism. Clarifying this difference must be one of our priorities to best promote a movement of pure avant-garde.²¹

It was a revolutionary speech, an authentic act of defiance against the decadent authorities; it reflected the influence of Hanada Kiyoteru's work of political awareness, which could also be heard in a short poem entitled *Seiki no uta* (*The Poetry of the Century*), which Abe had composed just a month earlier, in conjunction with the first issue of *Seiki nyūsu* and the group's new orientation:

Drying our days
 We distil the jar of tears
 And we imitate mummies
 When something will come to extinguish the fire
 To become that fire ourselves!²²

20. A total of eight issues were published from March 1949 to December 1950. The first five, numbered 1 to 5, were monthly from March to July 1949. The last three, numbered from 1 to 3, every second month from August to December 1950.

21. Abe Kōbō 安部公房, '真のアヴァンギャルドに' (In a pure Avant-garde), in Id., *Abe Kōbō zenshū*, Vol. 2, p. 231.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

These five lines sum up the essence of one of Japan's most intense seasons of cultural and literary protest. Abe Kōbō was among its most authoritative exponents, both in the form of the short story – think of the strong Marxist symbolism of *Akai mayu* (*The Red Cocoon*, 1950), *Kōzui* (*The Flood*, 1950) and *Suichū tōshi* (*The Underwater City*, 1952) – and many the essays he wrote at the time, some published in the group's magazine (the title of one that appears in number 5: *Kakumei no geijutsu wa geijutsu no kakumei denakereba naranu!* [*Revolutionary art must be an artistic revolution!*]) is programmatic, to say the least).

Within a couple of years, from being a young and admired supporting actor, Abe Kōbō had become the leader of a group in which each member proved their own contribution. This can be seen in the pages of *Seiki nyūsu* and even more so in those of *Seikigun*,²³ a sort of appendix devoted to specific themes consisting of monographic volumes in the name of «global art». The first issue, with a surrealist-inspired cover by Teshigahara Hiroshi, was dedicated to Franz Kafka and included the first publication in Japanese of some stories translated by Hanada Kiyoteru.²⁴ It is no mystery that Kafka, along with Sartre and Gide, was the favourite writer of many group members. Nakata Kōji recalls, for example, having lent *The Trial* (in a rare translation by Hanada) to his friend Abe even before the foundation of the «the Literary Society of Twenty-year-olds».²⁵ In addition, *Kafuka to Sarutoru* («Kafka and Sartre») was the title of a lecture Abe gave at the Faculty of Literature of Tōkyō University on May 14, 1949, as part of a cycle of lectures on 20th century literature organized by Seiki no kai. The second issue contains a story by Suzuki Hidetarō titled *Kamikire* (*A Piece of Paper*, 1950). The third was a translation by Segi Shin'ichi of an essay by Piet Mondrian²⁶, little known in Japan at the time, it included Mondrian's portrait of Teshigahara Hiroshi in «naturalist» style. The fourth and fifth issues contained two stories by Abe, *Mahō no chōku* (*The Magic Chalk*, 1950) and *Jigyō* (*Business*, 1950), once again with Surrealist-inspired covers, by Teshigahara and Katsuragawa, respectively. In the sixth issue, we find a collection of poems by Sekine Hiroshi entitled *Sabaku no ki* (*The Desert Tree*, 1950), with illustrations by Teshigahara and Katsuragawa under the evident influence of artists such as Ernst and Dalí. The seventh and final issue had a title page by Segi Shin'ichi. It included, not surprisingly, the translation of an essay by the Russian writer Aleksandr Fadeev (an important proponent of proletarian literature and general secretary of the Soviet Writers' Union from 1946 to 1956). It bears witness to a clear political U-turn for Abe, Teshigahara and

23. Seven special issues were printed between September and December 1950.

24. «The Bridge», «Prometheus», «The Silence of the Mermaids», «The Knight of the Bucket», «The City Coat of Arms» and a short fragment on fairy tales.

25. Cf. Nakata Kōji 中田耕治, '世紀' (The Century), p. II.

26. Dating back to 1943 and included in *American Abstract Artists*, New York: The Ram Press, 1946.

other members and, therefore, the beginning of the group's disintegration. Segi was among the first to leave, stating Abe Kōbō «is no longer the kind Rilke-loving man who once wrote romantic poems».²⁷

About two hundred cyclostyle copies of *Seikigun* were printed and sold at fifty yen each for self-financing purposes, modelled on the publications of the Japanese Communist Party. Meanwhile, on the inside back cover of *Seiki nyūsu* in August (1950) – the first issue after the radical change – the official statute of the club was published, the first two articles read:

1. The name of this association is: *Seiki* [«The Century»].
2. The association aims to promote an artistic revolution carried forward by the new generations and establish a new artistic movement that affects the various disciplines.

Katsuragawa Hiroshi, among the last to join the group but among the most active members, recalls the feverish activity at the time of the change and his personal enthusiasm in following the revolution enacted by Abe, Hanada and comrades:

What charmed me most was the group's concept of a «global artistic movement», based on clear and direct theses such as *Breaking down the barriers between genres and creating a total art* or *An artistic revolution is a revolutionary art*. There was an atmosphere of great conviction and maximum adherence to those ideals; it constituted the true cornerstone of the movement. Participating in the group's activities, I became fully aware for the first time of belonging to a new era dedicated to an «artistic movement» and exceptional changes. [...] The experience of «Seiki», especially being close to people like Abe Kōbō and Hanada Kiyoteru, was a sort of «ideal university» for me. What is more, it was free! It allowed me to acquire ideological and cultural experience that was fundamental to the formation of my personality and my ideas.²⁸

Following the departure of many artists who did not share the group's political change and a day after the dissolution of the figurative arts section, Katsuragawa was appointed as head of a new magazine *BEK* («century» in Russian); however, only one issue was published in May 1950. It was a special issue entitled *Geijutsu no unmei* (*The Fate of Art*), with articles by Abe, Katsuragawa, Segi and Hanada, the first part of Suzuki Hidetarō's story *Kamikire* (under his pseudonym Kinoshita Makoto). The cover consisted of an illustration by Katsuragawa and a poem by Sekine entitled *Senaka no me* (*The Eyes of the Back*). For the first time, the cyclostyle was abandoned in favour of

27. Cited in Dore Ashton, *The Delicate Thread – Teshigahara's Life in Art*, Tōkyō - New York - London: Kōdansha International, 1997, p. 54.

28. Katsuragawa Hiroshi 桂川寛, '廃墟の前衛 – 回想の戦後美術' (Ruins of the Avant-garde – Postwar Art Recollections), Tōkyō: Ichijōsha, 2004, pp. 39-42.

two-tone printing (green and black). In December of the same year, another special publication was issued, *Seiki gashū* (*the Century collection of paintings*). It was the group's swansong and summarized the movement's philosophy in the most straightforward manner: it presented five pictorial works by Teshigahara, Katsuragawa, Ōno Saiji (not an official member but a university companion of Teshigahara), Abe and Suzuki, in a true collaboration between painters and writers. Abe's work, entitled *Edipusu* (*Oedipus*), was an oil-coloured pencil drawing which gave an interpretation of the Oedipus complex. Suzuki's *Obuje bodesuku* (*Object bodesque*) was a pencil drawing depicting a highly surreal cross between a man and a tuber. Katsuragawa and Teshigahara, who were professional painters, were the authors of *Kita no hito to minami no hito* (*Northerners and Southerners*) – a woodcut on the dramatic situation in Korea –, *Haritsuke* (*Crucifixion*) and *Fushigina shima* (*The Island of Wonders*).

Meetings of «Seiki» suddenly became less frequent while the commitments of individual members intensified; Abe, in particular, was immersed in writing *Kabe* (*The Wall*, 1951), which would soon earn him the prestigious Akutagawa prize (July 1951); Teshigahara was developing a keen interest in documentary cinema, inspired by his passion for Italian neorealism. We should not forget that many members – Abe first and foremost – were actively involved in the Japanese Communist Party. The paths of the two most prominent figures in the group would cross again, about ten years later, when Abe Kōbō and Teshigahara Hiroshi collaborated together on an important chapter in the history of Japanese cinema. But that is another story, decidedly more thoughtful and less stormy than that of the avant-garde of the Night and the young revolutionaries of the Century. It seems legitimate to conclude once again with the words of Katsuragawa Hiroshi:

«Seiki» had now expressed its strength to the full, producing a series of works in total collaboration and in the name of a unitary spirit. We eventually realised that it was practically impossible to go any further, and so, at the beginning of 1951, activities ceased overnight. The words of Abe, who had previously said that «the essence of the Avant-garde lies in renouncing oneself in favour of the people», anticipated the group's epilogue, which concluded definitively in March of the same year. It lasted about two years (considering the official foundation), from the spring of 1949 to that of 1951. A Sturm und Drang that produced a storm of substantial change over a short period, comparable to at least ten years of other eras. In my opinion, a good part of what happened in the following decades originated precisely from that great storm.²⁹

29. *Ibid.*, p. 84.