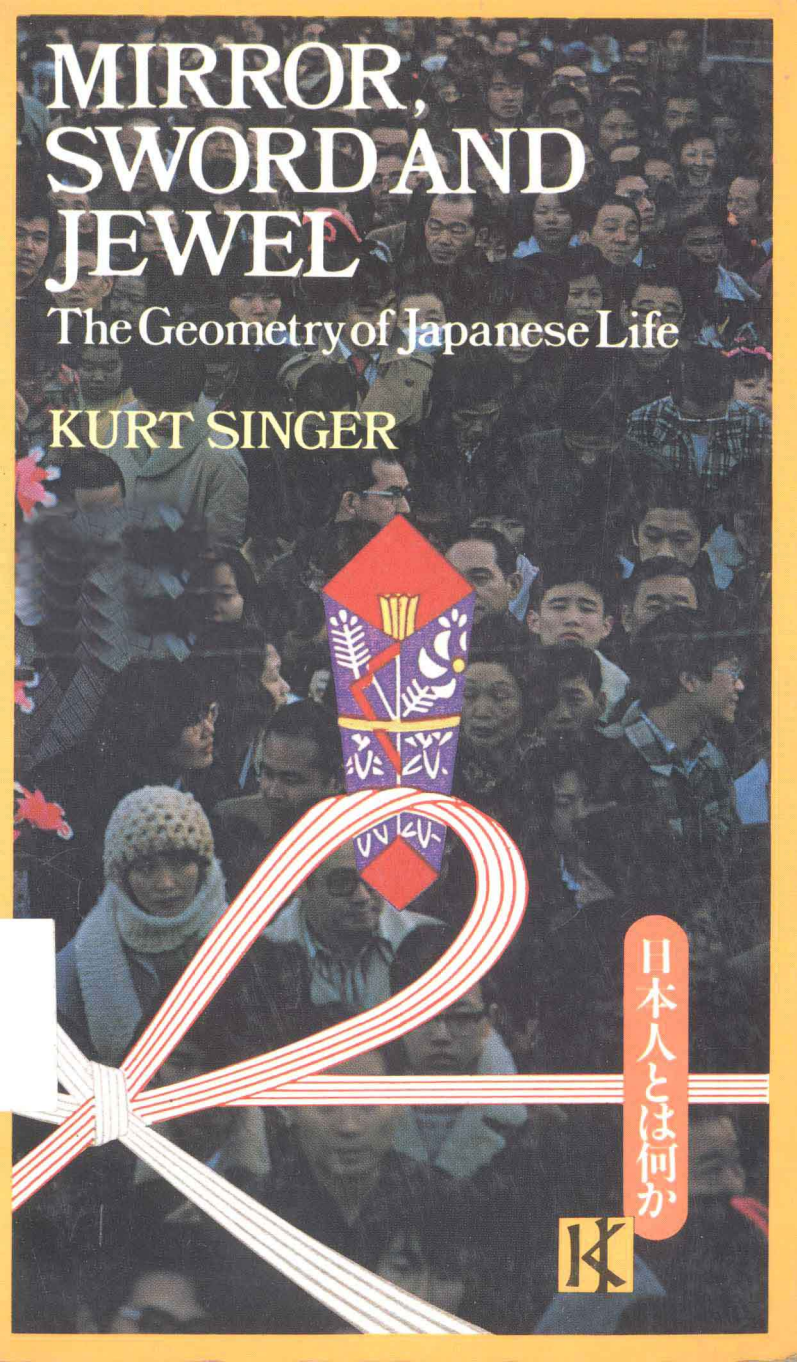
MIRROR, SWORD AND JEWEL

The Geometry of Japanese Life

KURT SINGER



日本人とは何か

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Edited with an Introduction by
Richard Storry

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THE AUTHOR: Kurt Singer was born in Germany and went to teach economics and sociology at Tokyo Imperial University in 1931. He left Japan in 1939 and joined the economics faculty of Sydney University in 1946. He died in Greece in February 1962.

THE EDITOR: Richard Storry is a Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, and Director of the St. Antony's Far Eastern Centre. He is the author of several works on Japan including *The Double Patriots* and *The Penguin History of Modern Japan*.

TO THE MEMORY
OF
KARL WOLFSKEHL

Introduction

BY RICHARD STORRY

It must be more than two years ago now since I received an unexpected letter from London, from Dr Eduard Rosenbaum, who got in touch with me at the suggestion of a mutual friend, Professor James Joll. Dr Rosenbaum informed me that he had the MS of an unpublished book on Japan, the work of a friend who had died some years earlier in Greece and who had lived in Japan during the 1930s. Would I be interested in reading it?

The package that arrived in Oxford a few days later contained just over 300 quarto pages of typescript. As soon as I settled down to read them I recognised that here was a work of audacious insight by an unusual man. Dr Kurt Singer, I discovered, had taught economics at Tokyo Imperial University and had then moved north to Sendai, to the Higher School in that city. He had arrived in Japan in the late spring of 1931 and departed, for Australia, in the summer of 1939. *Mirror, Sword and Jewel* was written after the end of the Pacific War, while the author was at the University of Sydney. It represented his considered reflections on Japan and the Japanese. It was clear that Kurt Singer brought to his study of Japanese characteristics a first-class intellect, nourished by a classical education and refined by more than twenty years of writing and teaching in Germany. His approach was metaphysical. Singer was an economist with the soul of a poet.

German-Jewish by birth and upbringing, he commanded an English style that only occasionally ignored the claims of euphony. This lent an added flavour to one's appreciation of the MS; but what imposed respect was the perceptiveness of his comments on Japanese attitudes and traditions. At times, it is true, he seemed to be writing about a society that had ceased to exist. But it was only

in certain areas, and superficially, that his views could be described as dated. He had lived—as I had, when I first went to Japan—in an atmosphere infected by the poison of radical nationalism. But like myself he had been lucky enough to work in an academic environment, for the most part in a provincial city far from Tokyo. However, unlike myself, he was a mature scholar, with an established position in his own country, when he first set foot in Japan. Indeed, Kurt Singer's arrival in that country must have more or less coincided with his forty-fifth birthday. Of the 1880s, the decade in which he was born, Singer was to write:

> "The generation born at that great watershed had the advantage of growing up within a social framework which had not yet exhausted its last resources of coherence and stability. Their educators were eminently mature minds, their youth coincided with movements opening new horizons of thought and beauty, their wills were kept in tension by a growing but not yet critical antagonism of forces."[1]

It was perhaps, in part, this inheritance, confident and well-ordered, that enabled Singer to look beyond the ephemeral to the real springs of Japanese life.

His stature, mental and physical, was such as to make a most favourable impression on the Japanese. He was an authority on Plato—his work on "Plato the Founder" (*Platon der Gründer*) had been published in 1927—and he belonged to the circle of the imperious and visionary post-Symbolist poet, Stefan George. He was a friend and admirer of Maynard Keynes, who had started contributing articles soon after the First War to an economic journal edited by Singer in Hamburg. At Tokyo Imperial University he lectured on political economy and sociology. He was a versatile and productive writer for such recondite periodicals in Japan as *Shiso* ("Thought"). In short, he was everything that a Japanese would expect a European scholar to be. And he possessed a further asset. As a former Tokyo colleague recalls: "Dr Singer was an exceptionally small man for a European, smaller than

myself, who am small even among the Japanese."[2] This, in Japan in those days, was a real advantage. He is still remembered to this day with great affection by his former Japanese students.

When he sailed from Europe Singer intended to spend no more than three years at most in Japan. He was technically on leave from the University of Hamburg. In the Preface to *Mirror, Sword and Jewel* he confesses "not to have felt bored during those eight years [in Japan] during a single quarter of an hour". And after he left the country he told an acquaintance that in Japan "there was always electricity in the air". But we may be sure that he would have resumed his career in Germany, had not Hamburg University deprived him of his Readership in the spring of 1933, on the grounds of his Jewish origin.

The persecution of the Jews did not leave German Jews in Japan unscathed. Tokyo Imperial University declined to renew Singer's appointment at the end of his three-year contract. However, the Higher School in Sendai (*Dai Ni Koto Gakko*) gave him a lectureship on a year-to-year basis. This too was terminated, in the spring of 1939, thanks to pressure on the *Mombusho* (Ministry of Education) applied by the Nazi Teachers' Association in Japan. As Singer was to remark in later years: "In Japan all foreigners are treated as unwanted as soon as they cease to be *persona grata* in their own country."[3] He must have been tempted to make much the same kind of comment about the country of his second exile, Australia.

It appears to have been on the advice of Keynes that Singer chose Sydney as his destination when he left Japan in August, 1939. But the first years, at least, in Australia were not happy. Singer's status as a Jewish refugee seems not to have been recognised. Indeed, from June 1940, until October 1941, he was interned as an enemy alien; and it was not until 1946 that he was able to achieve a certain security, thanks to an appointment in the economics faculty of Sydney University, after he had chosen to acquire British nationality.

Kurt Singer never married. At the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 his only close relative was a younger sister in Hamburg.

In October 1941 she was sent to a camp in the East (Lietzmannstadt) in which it is presumed she met her death.[4]

In 1957 some financial restitution was made to Singer by the Hamburg Senate. In his appeal to the authorities of that city and university he could speak with justice of "pressing sorrow, hindered endeavour and offended honour".[5] It was in the autumn of that year, 1957, that he returned to Europe, living for a time in Rome and Switzerland. Finally he settled in Athens, where he found a certain peace and happiness. In the words of one of his friends, "Greece gave him the fulfilment of an old longing (*Sehnsucht*)." He died there in his seventy-sixth year on 10th February, 1962.

In *Mirror, Sword and Jewel* Singer, reminding us that his chapters are based on observations made in pre-war days, declares (p. 60):

> "I am still inclined to think that, in spite of legislative changes which may in the long run affect some social relations, the fundamental pattern that has grown through centuries, following its own organic logic, will not be readily changed in a political environment of great instability. If I should be mistaken Japan will have ceased to be the nation I have known, and my account will record a closed chapter of some memorable centuries of social history."

It must be said that many foreigners well acquainted with Japan, as impressed by the liberation achieved in the post-war years as they are depressed by the ugly competitiveness and materialism of the present day, believe that important areas of the Japanese tradition, in art, social life, and religion, have disappeared. The writer Mishima took his own life in 1970 precisely because he was convinced that Japan had ceased to be the nation he had once known. Mishima straddled the generation gap. It is not uncommon for younger Japanese, indifferent and sometimes

hostile to their heritage, to be totally baffled by the *mores* of their elders. If Kurt Singer had visited post-war Japan how far, if at all, would he have revised his MS? It is perhaps vain to speculate. But it is worth noting that Singer's belief in the durability of "the fundamental pattern" is shared by such acute and experienced scholars as Chie Nakane and Fosco Maraini. The former argues that the basic nature and core of personal relations and group dynamics in Japan have scarcely been touched at all by the manifold changes that have occurred. Imported Western cultural elements, she tells us, "are always partial and segmentary". The "operating system"—the driving force—remains the same.

> "It is like a language with its basic indigenous structure or grammar which has accumulated a heavy overlay of borrowed vocabulary; while the outlook of Japanese society has suffered drastic changes over the past hundred years, the basic social grammar has hardly been affected. Here is an example of industrialization and the importation of western culture not effecting changes in the basic cultural structure."[6]

Dr Maraini turns the whole question inside out, as it were, with his *apercu*: "the Japanese have been modern since prehistory."[7] Indeed, central to Maraini's interpretation of Japan is his concept of *the future of the past;* from the earliest times to the present day there is "a pattern of continuity".

To my mind, at any rate, the passages in *Mirror, Sword and Jewel* that can be described as peculiarly redolent of pre-war Japan are not essential to Singer's main thesis, which is that "the Japanese mind and its products, at their best, bear the mark of two qualities rarely, if ever, united in one civilisation: nearness to origins (*Ursprunglichkeit*) and aristocratic distinction (*Vornehmheit*)" (p. 97). For example, recalling an everyday scene in pre-war Japan that is now much less common, at least in the big cities and towns, Singer refers to the gait of a Japanese woman carrying her child on her back—"she often pauses, seems to swing softly on the spot, casting a glance across the shoulder and humming an age-old song into the ears of the half-somnolent child"

(p. 35). This is a faithful evocation. The reader who knew Japan until very recent years will immediately acknowledge the truth of that description. It is now thought to be injurious to a woman's figure to carry the infant in the traditional pick-a-back. But the increasing use of baby-carriages does not mean a lessening of that devoted attention given, throughout its waking hours, to the Japanese child by the mother. The country remains a "children's paradise". The conscious and unconscious Japanese memory of childhood in Arcadia depends surely on the constant proximity, concern, and availability of the mother; if these are not removed, a pram is almost—if not quite—as satisfactory as a pair of shoulders.

Singer's reference to "nearness to origins" is related to his comprehension of the fidelity of Japanese instinctive feelings. He makes the impressive observation that the Japanese "are peculiarly sensitive to the smell of decay, however well screened . . . they resent haughtiness but adore unsullied greatness of mind and strength of will" (p. 39). It is a statement amply endorsed by a study of Japanese history, and by one's personal experience. Yet I know of no other foreign writer on Japan who has noted that point about the sensitivity to the smell of decay, *however well screened*. This is something which those who wish to understand Japan should never forget.

Indeed, Singer's reflections may serve as a practical guide. Of course he underlines traits and habits well attested by other witnesses. He points out, as others have pointed out, that in conversation and daily behaviour the main concern in Japan seems to be how to wrap up ideas, things, feelings; and he goes on to say that "wherever Japanese life is not governed by this law of laws behaviour is in constant danger of becoming arbitrary and uncouth, crude and repulsive" (p. 45). It is chapter 2 which discusses, in lively fashion, that "law of laws"—the phrase is, if one may use the term, a characteristic "Singerism"—and it deals with a perennial and significant aspect of Japanese conduct, still of fundamental importance although less prominent today than in the 1930s. But it is in a later chapter, *The Law of Harmonious Flow*,

that the reader who is given a chance to visit or live in Japan, will find a piece of advice most helpful to his well-being.

> "Let him, experimentally but unreservedly, behave according to Japanese custom, and he will instantly feel what a cell endowed with rudiments of human sensibility must be supposed to feel in a well-coordinated body. There is a bewildering number of conventions and taboos, in various degrees of unintelligibility; if these are mastered and observed, life becomes singularly easy and entrancing" (p. 64).

Singer suggests that the ultimate purpose of the Japanese system of ritual customs is "the transformation of everyday life into a quiet stream". This is what is meant by "Harmonious Flow". And it is undeniable that only by following Singer's advice will a *Gaijin* (foreigner) begin to savour the remarkable *cosiness* of Japanese domestic life. And if no effort at all is made to behave in Japan according to Japanese custom, the foreign resident, as Singer points out, "will remain a source of chronic wonder and anxiety to his environment". It was Lafcadio Hearn, entranced by his first years at Matsue, who used the imagery of a dream to describe the peculiar charm of the flow of ordinary social life in Japan. The foreign resident who fails to experience this phenomenon misses one of the best things that Japan has to offer.

Yet like Hearn, James Kirkup, and others who have wisely allowed themselves to be led far up the Japanese garden path, Singer comes to the end of the dream at last.

> "Dark powers thinly veiled will not fail to do their saddening work, appearances and reality will diverge. But this awakening, recalling Prospero's *Epilogue*, does not detract from the magical charm of the dream as long as it was dreamt" (p. 67).

Related to "Harmonius Flow" is *The Law of Small Numbers.* Here Singer identifies a feature of Japanese life which has attracted a good deal of interest among sociologists and political scientists,

both native and foreign. "The smooth flux of ordinary Japanese life" rests on a "dense tissue of small society relationships" (p. 82). And Singer makes the interesting and valid point that age groups and patron-client relationships may be at least as important as the family relationship. Indeed he suggests that excessive attention has been paid to the "family system", that this is in fact a late growth, transplanted from China, institutionalised by the Tokugawa Shogunate for political ends. The very rigidity of traditional family rules and rites, "contrasting sharply with the fluidity and suppleness peculiar to Japanese ways of life, points to a foreign origin and purposive exploitation" (p. 86). Here, however, Singer has in mind the enlarged family, with its "main house" and collateral junior branches. This phenomenon was characteristic of Japan when Singer lived there. It is by no means prevalent today.

But even by comparison with the small family, in which the natural ties of affection have always been strong, the age group and the patron-client relationship are of great significance. Anyone familiar with Japanese life will know how assiduously maintained are the friendships formed at school, in the same age group. As for the patron-client (*oyabun-kobun*) phenomenon, its importance can hardly be exaggerated. Singer sees a parallel between the Japanese patron-client relationship and the ancient Roman bond between a man of rank and influence and his many clients. To describe this relationship as "feudalistic"—a favourite term of the Japanese Left—is unhistorical; for the *oyabun-kobun* nexus is indeed much older; and it is to be observed, needless to say, in the most "progressive" circles of Japanese life.

Kurt Singer maintains that "it is one of the most characteristic traits of Japanese life that it has reduced the realm of genius to a bare minimum, with a rigour unknown in any other civilization" (p. 94). A little later he perpetuates an old fallacy, with his comment that the Japanese "invent few things", although they "excel in the art of adapting, adjusting, fitting" (p. 98). The process of assimilating foreign modes is compared with "the mimicry of animals, or the submission by women to a new fashion".

(Femininity is a Japanese trait to which Singer—rightly in my view—attaches much importance.) The truth, surely, is that, like any other people, the Japanese imitate foreign models for strictly pragmatic reasons. Up to a year or two ago it was common to read and hear criticisms of Japan on the grounds that the country had become fundamentally "Americanised". This ignored the staring fact that Great Britain, for example, has been increasingly "Americanised" during the last seventy, or even eighty, years. But the penetration of literary styles, governmental and business structures, journalism and the universities, sartorial fashions, and colloquial terminology, by trans-atlantic modes has by no means suppressed, although it may have marginally discouraged, the inventiveness of the British people. It is the same with Japan.

In two chapters concerned with Sino-Japanese "polarities", Singer exhibits a masterly command of the use of symbolism to drive home certain assertions on basic Chinese and Japanese instinctive beliefs and characteristics. They will probably irritate the scientifically fastidious as profoundly as they must enchant the mind that is drawn to metaphysical speculation. In these chapters Singer's insight into things Japanese is illuminating. He either throws a new light on a facet that is familiar, or brings out of darkness what seems to be a quite new feature of the scene.

> "If there is a law governing this un-cosmic world of the Japanese, both in his highest modes of being where he aims at the Absolute and in his everyday life where he is concerned with mere utilities, it can only be a law of inescapable change and universal impermanence. In no literature of a great nation is there less room than here for the pure radiance of the stars and for the geometrical order of their courses; neither the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres nor the Platonic idea of ideas speaks to the Japanese. Identity, Measure, Immutability do not correspond to inborn needs of his soul . . . For everything leads the Japanese back to himself; to him seeing is a circuit. His is the existence of a Monad leading a

life that gravitates on an internal abyss of whirl-pool like forces" (p. 109).

Recalling that a monad is "an ultimate atom; an elementary organism", we see that the last line of that passage expresses Singer's concept of "nearness to origins" applied to the Japanese. The passage as a whole underlines the force of a later sentence:

> "Metaphysics have never stirred the intellectual passion of the Japanese; who tend to take pragmatist attitudes and are always eager to shorten the circuit from one action to another" (p. 118).

For Singer exmphasises repeatedly the central importance in Japan of movement, of action, of inspired spontaneity. He contrasts this with the Chinese tradition of a symmetrical, balanced view of life and art. He refers to Japan as existing in "the realm of Time"; whereas China is in "the realm of Space". Space is linked with cosmic beliefs, order, and symmetry. Time is associated with *movement*. In Chinese writing, suggestive of perfect equipoise, the hand guides the brush in a plane perpendicular, at a right angle, to the paper. In Japanese writing the angle is usually oblique. In this difference Singer perceives an illustration of his theme. The departure from the vertical plane by the Japanese frees the impulse of movement "from the rigid pattern of symmetry and balance". And in every other sphere of Japanese art, according to Singer, "it is not space that rules . . . but time, duration, spontaneous change, continuity of movement" (p. 147).

An astute Korean soldier-politician once told me that Chinese and Japanese chopsticks symbolise the contrasting tempers of the two nations. The long chopsticks used in China are suited to a rounded, relaxed, personality, eating at ease, with little fear of interruption. The shorter Japanese *hashi*, on the other hand, are indicative of a people "on edge", eating in a hurry, alert against emergencies. Folklore of this kind—like nearly all "old wives' tales"—usually contains an element of truth. The tension, "the electricity in the air", ever present in Japan is certainly related

to that impulse of movement in "the realm of Time" which Singer finds so significant.

Kurt Singer's last chapter, on the samurai, treats a fairly well-worn subject that seems, at first sight, to have not very much relevance to present-day Japan. Singer's examination is nevertheless instructive. In a revealing passage he observes:

> "Questions of honour are singularly ill-suited for statistical treatment. We have no means of knowing whether the majority of the samurai—or, for that matter any class in any country—did or did not remain below the standard set by codes and treatises" (p. 161).

I am sure he is right when he argues that samurai ethics imposed demands which were fully met only by a moral élite; that those who could not live up to such standards were, nevertheless, unable to deny their excellence. Thus, "it would be a serious mistake to believe that it was governmental propaganda that made the modern Japanese ready to fling their lives away and suffer what appears intolerable" (p. 166). Singer dismisses pre-war exploitation of the samurai image as vulgarisation, the work of propaganda in the service of acquisitive imperialist aims. It is extraordinarily difficult, it seems to me, to know what weight should be given to the factor of deliberate political manipulation of public opinion in Japan during the exceptional and critical years from 1931 to 1945. Singer clearly distinguishes between "the political and propaganda fictions" of the twentieth century and the process, in the Meiji era, of giving a new orientation to the concept of loyalty. For this concept, at the heart of the samurai code, was by no means necessarily associated with war or bloodshed. The most notable treatises on the samurai code in no way reflect a scale of values redolent of a military caste devoted to the arts of combat, and bent upon self-glorification. Yet Singer is bound to admit that the reader must face some difficulty in reconciling the ideal image with what "he has seen of, and read about, the callous insensitivity and unbridled violence of Japanese warriors".

The great merit of Singer's work is that it enhances our

imaginative understanding of traditional Japan. Even where well-informed critics might disagree with Singer, they must pay tribute to his lively, well-trained mind.

An English savant wrote of Stefan George:

> "His circumstances favoured his adaptation of Greek ideas to his own life and prevented him from minding that the experience was fundamentally esoteric. He felt that if others could see things as he did, they would be the better for it. Nor did he think this impossible. Just as in the Middle Ages Germany had presented its ideal in such a masterpiece as the Rider of Bamberg, so George seems to have felt that it might again recognise such an ideal, and if it did, the gain would be great. The strength of his confidence and conviction shows how much George owed to his culture, how strongly it shaped his life. He had found his values in a study of the great civilisations of the past. It was only natural that he should interpret the present through what he had learned from them."[8]

Substitute Singer's name for that of George, and the words apply with precision to one who was, after all, a disciple of Stefan George. Indeed, they may serve as a memorial to Kurt Singer, and as an overture to his work.

I must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Dr Eduard Rosenbaum for many things, above all for bringing Kurt Singer's study to my notice. I am indebted also to another friend of Singer's, namely Dr Georg Peter Landmann of Basel. I must express my appreciation, too, for much practical help, to Mr David Croom, Fräulein Marie-Louise Recker, Professor and Mrs Kan'ichi Fukuda, Dr Joshua Sherman and Miss Susan Kay.

RICHARD STORRY

St Antony's College,
Oxford.
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