

**The Impoverished Spirit**  
**in Contemporary Japan**  
**Selected Essays**  
**of Honda Katsuichi**

edited by John Lie

貧乏なる精神  
本多勝一



# ***The Impoverished Spirit in Contemporary Japan***

*Selected Essays of Honda Katsuichi*

*Edited by John Lie*

*Translated by Eri Fujieda,  
Masayuki Hamazaki, and John Lie*



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Honda is frequently the target of right-wing violence. When he goes out in public, he often wears a wig and sunglasses.

*The Impoverished Spirit* collects writings by the influential Japanese journalist and critic of Japanese society and politics, Honda Katsuichi.

Although unknown in the United States, Honda—the I.F. Stone of Japan—was recently named by Japanese college students as the “author whose work we are most interested in reading.” A staff writer for the prestigious newspaper *Asahi Shinbun*, Honda’s work has been collected in

over forty volumes but has never before appeared in English.

This edition of Honda’s writings covers three of his key areas of concern: his exposés of Japan’s treatment of minority groups, including domestic cultural subgroups and foreign nonwhite peoples; his fight against the collective amnesia and complacency about Japan’s responsibilities for atrocities committed during World War II; and his ongoing commentary on the poverty of Japanese political and intellectual life. Together they offer an insider’s view of Japanese life seldom available to Americans.

**John Lie** is professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an expert on Japanese society and history. His introduction places Honda and his writing in the political and intellectual context of postwar Japan. The essays were translated by John Lie, Eri Fujieda, and Masayuki Hamazaki.

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*To my friends  
at the Kawasaki Peace Information Centre,  
especially Uemura Hideaki  
and Tenymô Ako*





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***Introduction:  
Honda Katsuichi  
and Political and Intellectual Life  
in Postwar Japan***

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A 1987 survey of Japanese college students showed that Honda Katsuichi was the author they were “most interested in reading.”<sup>1</sup> Until his retirement in 1992, Honda was a star investigative reporter for the prestigious Japanese daily Asahi Shinbun. Since 1974, most of his essays have been published in the thirty-volume series *The Impoverished Spirit*; in addition, there are over twenty titles in the Honda Katsuichi series published by Asahi Shinbunsha. Large bookstores in Japan feature Honda “corners” where his bestsellers, ranging from travelogues to a manual for writers, are on display. It is difficult to invoke a comparable figure in the United States or the United Kingdom. Honda shares some of the concerns and styles of Alexander Cockburn, Paul Foot, and I. F. Stone, yet no one would expect American college students to name a hard-hitting, progressive journalist as the author they are “most interested in reading.”

In this introductory essay, I want to locate Honda’s work as a journalist in the context of postwar Japan, while preview-

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ing the major topics of this collection of essays. Honda underwent a major transformation after the Vietnam war. His earlier writings, which were inspired by youthful enthusiasm for adventure and science, were quasi-anthropological investigations of nonindustrial peoples. It was his celebrated and courageous coverage of war-torn Vietnamese villages that not only made him famous but politicized him. His interests became involuted; his writings focused on the corruption and complacency of Japanese life.

### *Postwar Japan and the Two Establishments*

Let me first offer a thumbnail sketch of Japanese political and intellectual development from the end of World War II until the mid-1960s. For the purposes of this essay, I will highlight the political dominance of the right and the intellectual dominance of the left.

Emperor Hirohito's surrender to the Allies on August 15, 1945, ended Japanese military aggression, which had continued without pause since the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. The U.S.-led occupation force proceeded to transform Japan from a military power into a peaceful country. Progressive legislation attempted to purge feudal and fascist elements from Japanese life. Prewar thought-control and press censorship ended overnight, unleashing critical writings and political activities. There was therefore a remarkable rejuvenation of leftist and labor movements immediately after the war.

However, by the late 1940s the U.S. occupation force had reversed its progressive policy; Japan's projected role shifted

from being the “Switzerland of Asia” to being the “factory of the Far East.” East Asia became a major site of the Cold War: the “fall” of China and the Korean war firmly positioned Japan as the bulwark against international Communism in the minds of U.S. policymakers. The occupation force therefore sought to stem increasingly militant labor and leftist movements, and the right enjoyed a resurgence, soon becoming the dominant political force in Japan.<sup>2</sup> Major politicians who were associated with prewar militarism and nationalism and who had been purged from political life were resurrected. Many of them assumed key roles in Japanese politics. Perhaps the most egregious rehabilitation was that of Kishi Nobusuke, a Class A war criminal, who served as prime minister in the late 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Prewar militarist and anti-American politicians became the core of a new group of conservative politicians who pledged unswerving allegiance to the United States. With the change in foreign policy, the guiding ideology became economic growth. This technocratic orientation is exemplified by Ikeda Hayato, prime minister in the early 1960s and one of the architects of postwar economic growth.

The conservative coalition has governed uninterruptedly since the amalgamation of the two conservative parties into the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1955. Neither liberal, nor democratic, nor a party, the LDP as an organization is dedicated to the control of the Diet (the Japanese parliament) through a number of interpenetrating and overlapping personal networks whose currency is campaign finance.<sup>4</sup>

Against the conservative dominance of parliamentary politics, the left has remained divided into myriad parties and factions. The two main left-wing parties in the postwar period have been the Communist Party and the Socialist Party.

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Although united in their criticism of the dominant LDP, the two have remained divided over many issues.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless the left dominated the cultural and intellectual sphere in the early postwar years. Partly because it was the sole organization to consistently oppose prewar Japanese militarism, the Communist Party, with its Marxist ideology, was influential among labor movements and intellectuals. Most intellectuals were anti-militarist and hence anti-LDP. In effect, the left establishment was composed of graduates of Tokyo University and other elite universities who went on to work at elite cultural institutions. For example, Iwanami Shoten and *Asahi Shinbun*, which represented, respectively, the pinnacles of publishing and journalism, were dominated by progressive forces and ideologies. Until the 1970s, very few university professors were affiliated with LDP politicians, *Asahi Shinbun* remained associated with progressive editorials, and Iwanami Shoten published Marxist and progressive novels, criticisms, and academic works.

It is in this context—the political dominance of the right, the intellectual dominance of the left—that Honda entered public life. But first, let us examine his earlier career.

### *Honda as an Outsider: Science and Adventure as Vocation*

Honda's early writings reflected his youthful interests in adventure and science. They were therefore of little concern to the mainline political and intellectual debates.

After finishing high school in his native Shinshû,<sup>6</sup> Honda studied pharmacy at Chiba University and then enrolled in a

graduate program in genetics at Kyoto University. Mountaineering, an enthusiasm he first acquired in high school, was his major interest in college. For example, he seriously contemplated climbing Mount Everest before Sir Edmund Hillary had done so.<sup>7</sup> His travels took him to the Himalayas, and his first book, published when he was twenty-six, was *The Unknown Himalaya*. In the same year, 1958, he began to work as a staff writer for *Asahi Shinbun*.

This sense of adventure dominates Honda's early writings. Indeed, he first attained national prominence in 1963 by covering the largest mountaineering accident to date in Japan. Partly as a reward for his scoop, he was able to satisfy his thirst for adventure by traveling to Canada to report on the Inuit. His report was serialized in *Asahi Shinbun* later that year and won wide acclaim and popularity. The dispatches were collected in *Canada, Eskimo*, which became a bestseller. The book was one of the first long-term investigative reporting projects in Japanese journalism.

Honda was one of the pioneers of the ethnographic method, which entails participation and observation, in Japanese journalism. Honda followed his foray into Canada with reports on the New Guinea Highlanders and the Bedouins of the Middle East. The trilogy of travel and adventure writings firmly established his reputation as a star reporter of *Asahi Shinbun*.

His empathetic mode of reporting combined a keen appreciation of his physical surroundings with the ability to grasp vivid details of social life. These documentary reports are, however, devoid of the political or social criticism that would mark his later writings. Indeed, they belong more properly to the genre of adventure and naturalism.<sup>8</sup>



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Why did Honda's anthropological adventures become bestsellers in Japan? In the period of prewar Japanese colonial expansion, writing about far-away lands and peoples had become popular. The hunger for colonial encounters with preindustrial peoples, however, had not been satisfied because of the Japanese defeat, postwar poverty, and restrictions on overseas travels. Honda's reports from distant parts of the globe fulfilled an interest that was widely cultivated but unattainable for the majority of Japanese in the early 1960s.

Honda's interest in the natural world and science dates back to his childhood. In a later reminiscence, Honda cites Jean-Henri Fabre's *Entomological Souvenirs* as the most influential book of his youth.<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth-century French entomologist's careful and objective description of the insect world was a popular book for Japanese children. *Entomological Souvenirs* developed in Honda a deep respect for the natural world, as well as the useful journalistic skill of close and objective observation. Further, the elegant Japanese translation of Fabre's work by a renowned Europhile, Hayashi Tatsuo, was to have an impact on Honda's prose style.

Honda's nascent scientific interest led to his graduate studies in genetics at Kyoto University. Although he ultimately abandoned a scientific career, his brief sojourn in academia brought him into contact with renowned Japanese naturalists, including Imanishi Kinji and Umesao Tadao, who practiced and advocated a humanistic and ethnographic approach to biology in the tradition of Fabre and Darwin. Honda also gained an abiding respect and concern for logic and rational argumentation—the basis of his blunt empiricism. Aside from sharpening his descriptive and analytical skills, Umesao in particular influenced his writing style.