

INTRODUCTION

At the time of this writing, hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and these numbers show no signs of abating. The disease has exposed various forms of inequality, revealing that death, far from being democratic, preys especially upon those who society has rendered the most vulnerable. From the perspective of the living, the response to this horrific situation reveals the presence of death across the broad spectrum of time: we may wish to remain close to the dead whose lives now belong to the past; we may seek through our words and deeds to preserve life and reduce the number of dead in the future; and finally we may find ourselves gripped in the present by an anxiety that either we or our loved ones will fall victim to the disease and join the ranks of the dead. It seems that wherever we turn, from our everyday focus on the present back to the past and then ahead to the future, death is already there.

In this way, the historical specificity of our current time provokes fundamental questions about the relation between life and death. These questions demand reflection insofar as our initial response to death is typically one of disavowal. Death, in this account, is that which happens to others, and if it happens to me it does so only at the far extreme of my life, such that its presence remains quantitatively minor and otherwise unconnected to the sum total of experiences that will have preceded it. Death can be conceived in this manner because it is regarded as the very opposite of life. In order for life to be present, that is, death must be absent, and conversely death appears only at the site where life has disappeared. Yet these formulations raise the question of whether the relation between life and death is best understood on the basis of logic and its system of oppositions. At the very least, it seems that the act of

honoring the dead on the part of the living points to the possibility that these two spheres may not be separated by such a pure and absolute gulf.

If life and death appear resistant to a thinking of logical opposition, this is because each of these terms may be seen to partly inhabit the other. Just as there can be death within life, so too might life be detected within death. At issue here is the notion of animation, derived from the Latin *animus*, meaning “breath” or “soul.” This term is commonly used to refer to life itself, but in truth life is less a fixed state than a kind of movement or activity that can affect death as well. The act by which the living remember the dead is one in which the latter can be said to receive the animating gift of breath. This breath allows the dead to be raised beyond the stillness of the grave and commemoratively take their place among the living. However, the living must not be thought to occupy a realm of perfect presence where they play the role of active agents in unilaterally determining when and how the dead will be mnemonically revived. For the fact is that death, too, possesses a kind of breath that brings the living close to it. In constantly reminding the living of the fate that awaits them in the future, the dead have the ability to influence life and ensure that its presence and activity remain diluted. In this way, the breath that is *animus* gestures toward a more general form of life, one that serves as the common source from which the division between life and death then comes to emerge.

The present volume views death above all as a question, and I have sought to keep this inquiry open and resistant to those determinations, based either in metaphysics or common sense, that might prematurely limit its scope. Death is *not* that which happens to others, then, nor is it something that happens to me only at the point of my extinction. Moreover, death is *not* to be conceived in a logical or formal sense as the strict opposite of life. To these negative assertions we may now add another: the force of death is *not* restricted to the realm of the organic. To be sure, death indiscriminately claims as its own humans, animals, and plants, but there is no reason to draw the border between life and death exclusively at the level of such concrete entities. Even more abstract things, such as, for example, youth, love, or friendship, come to suffer deterioration and death. In precisely the same manner as humans, the phenomena of love and friendship that endow human life with such value can suddenly emerge or be destroyed at any moment in time. And, indeed, it is this reference to time that arguably provides the key to approaching this issue of death. For the negativity of death

is indistinguishable from the negativity that enables all temporal movement. In order for time to live, so to speak, it must at each moment die to itself, since the radical difference that is time prohibits the survival of any moment as purely self-identical. In its broadest sense, death is thus to be reconceived as the past in which all present instants come immediately to be extinguished.

My insistence upon conceiving of death primarily as a question, one that unsettles many of its most traditional determinations, owes much to the work of Jacques Derrida. As Derrida comments with regard to Philippe Ariès, the historian most noted for his research on death:

First, there is the semantic or onto-phenomenological type of limit: the historian knows, thinks he knows, or grants to himself the unquestioned knowledge of what death is, of what being-dead means; consequently, he grants to himself all the criteriology that will allow him to identify, recognize, select, or delimit the objects of his inquiry or the thematic field of his anthropologico-historical knowledge. The question of the meaning of death and of the word 'death,' the question 'What is death in general?' or 'What is the experience of death?' and the question of knowing *if* death 'is'—and *what* death 'is'—all remain radically absent *as questions*. From the outset these questions are assumed to be answered by this anthropologico-historical knowledge as such.¹

Any approach to death must first self-reflexively take into account the methodological tools it uses to examine its object. Bypassing this initial step opens the possibility that certain conceptual prejudices embedded in one's methodology might unfairly predetermine the results of the inquiry. As Derrida suggests, the study of death from the perspective of the empirical sciences must presuppose that such essential issues of identity and ontology have already been resolved prior to research. However, death seems to throw a wrench into these assumptions. When considered in its relation to negativity—that which is irreducible to what "is"—death appears to refuse all attempts to presentify it in the form of an object. On the contrary, reflection on death leads directly to the realization that the operation by which objects are constituted on the basis of identity and ontology must itself now be rethought from the perspective of the negativity introduced by death. In other words, death

is not simply an object to be treated by concepts more fundamental than itself; rather, death is itself conceptually bound up with a thinking of nothing and negativity that serves to expose the presentism intrinsic to empirical research.

Throughout this study I have tried to examine death from this more primordial perspective. In my account, the strange interweaving of death within life and life within death signifies that any fixed distinction between interiority and exteriority must now be reassessed. A consideration of death necessarily involves a thinking of negativity and time, and I believe that nothing is left untouched by this generalization of our understanding. What comes to be affected is not merely this or that particular object, but rather the entire edifice through which object constitution is enabled by the concepts of presence and identity. Here a contradiction might be perceived in my project insofar as I limit my object of research to the geographical site of East Asia as opposed to dealing with the problematic of death as such. As should be clear, however, such delimitation in no way implies that death may be fruitfully treated from a culturalist perspective that would seek to determine the particular characteristics of an Asian view of death in its distinction from, say, a “Western” approach.² On the contrary, my attempt to conceive of death in its generality means that all such claims of identity now come to be disturbed in the movement by which present entities are constantly subjected to the loss of themselves via the restless negativity of time. If death is narrowly seen as the mere opposite of life, then vital questions of presence and identity may easily be excluded from its scope. The aim of my work runs directly counter to this. By expanding the way in which we think about death, I propose, much of what appears to be the stability and fixity of life comes to be dissolved and open to remaking.

In this regard, the present volume can be said to form a pair with my previous book, *Before Identity: The Question of Method in Japan Studies*.³ There I sought to demonstrate that the general forces of time and textuality are given insufficient expression within the identitarian framework of area studies. In order for such fundamental insights to appear, I believe the relation between object and method must be explicitly rethought along both conceptual and institutional lines. Here it is a matter of recognizing that particularism in its various forms—cultural, racial, ethnic, national, etc.—remains grounded upon a notion of subjective presence, one that disciplinary structures too often reinforce rather than dismantle, and that such subjectivity works to denude the

relation between human and world of much of its inherent complexity. When, for example, a human being dies, the meaning (and loss of meaning) of such an event is poorly grasped by determining the individual on the basis of those particular identities bequeathed by society. In my reading, the occurrence of death rather comes to empty those identities of their significance in exposing a core vulnerability that is essential to one's status as a living being. While it is certainly true that Hegel's conception of the mediating relation between part and whole allows us to understand crucial aspects of the modern world and its forms of knowledge, there are nevertheless certain instances where valuable truths come to be obscured by this system. As a methodological principle, my analysis of the presence of death in the works of Kurosawa Akira, Tsai Ming-liang, Takeuchi Yoshimi, and Lu Xun avoids placing these figures within such a mediating chain of identity. My hope, however, is that this decision might allow these texts to come forth and engage us at their most foundational and disquieting level.

To be sure, the thinking of death never takes place in a vacuum. Thought must occur in a world whose materiality comes to the fore in the differential markings of ideas in time and space. Yet to acknowledge this materiality is not simply to yield to an empirical discourse in which issues of cultural identity have surreptitiously been resolved in advance. The following pages chart an itinerary that passes through such sites as Japan, Taiwan (via France), and China, but at no point are these particular areas allowed to conceal the general force that is the negativity of death. Of central concern here is the notion of priority, which sets in motion an operation of reversal that is in truth nothing more than a restoration. Grasped in its most fundamental sense of loss and disappearance, death shows its generality in taking place only by way of singular difference. This difference, significantly, *precedes* the relation between universal and particular that appears when area is determined as national culture, as this otherwise abstract universal comes to gain concreteness when content is added to its specific national forms. Hence the disturbance created by death cannot be so easily neutralized by anchoring its occurrence to such particular entities as, for example, Japan, Taiwan, and China. If death were considered in the particularist terms of Area studies, then it would leave untouched those forms of national identity in which it takes place. The negativity of death, in other words, would emerge only after the formation of these national entities in their positivity. The argument set forth in the present work contests such privileging of identity, for only

in this way can the unsettling effects of death be considered in their proper generality.

In chapter 1, “Lines of Mortality in Kurosawa Akira’s *Ikiru*,” I examine various questions of death and mortality that arise in the Japanese filmmaker’s 1952 work *Ikiru* (To live). This movie is unique in Kurosawa’s oeuvre in presenting death as something that is both internal and protracted. Whereas the director’s action films typically depict death as a sudden, spectacular event, abruptly ending life in an act of external violence, *Ikiru* instead focuses on an individual who is gradually forced to confront the fact of his own mortality in the form of stomach cancer. As Kurosawa shows, however, this individual does not exist in isolation but rather actively participates in a complex network of social relations that centers on the family and the state. These institutions, I suggest, maintain themselves on the basis of an awareness of the inevitability of death. In order for these entities as a whole to continue over time, that is, the mortality of the human beings that fulfill their constituent parts must be taken into account and utilized. In this way, the actual occurrence of individual death does not disable these institutions but, directly to the contrary, leads to their constant renewal and replication. Kurosawa introduces this vital point through the notion of succession. In parallel plotlines, he reveals how the imminent death of the protagonist provokes a battle of succession in his dual role as father and minor government official. As I argue, Kurosawa comes to resolve this tension between possible successors by determining individual death in far broader terms as meaningful for the social entity as a whole.

Chapter 2, “Tsai Ming-liang and the Time of Survival,” considers the films of the Malaysian-Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang from the period 1992–2013. These diverse works, I contend, are tied together by a sustained thinking of the fragile border between life and death. For Tsai, this border is seen as all the more unstable since he determines death beyond its traditional biological meaning to include all instances of temporal loss and disappearance. Given the fact that the movement of time takes place through the permanent negation of what presently is, the question becomes how to retain for the future that which at each instant is irrevocably lost to the past. In this way, the relation between life and death comes to be conceived more generally as that between keeping and losing. Without exception, all of Tsai’s works are devoted to this core project of keeping that which is otherwise condemned to disappear. Tsai intriguingly links this issue of life and death with the relation

between space and time, and this determination allows me to investigate a certain hesitation or perhaps inconsistency that appears between his interviews and films. At issue here is cinema's ability to preserve that which is constantly threatened by the possibility of erasure. I then turn to Tsai's long-term collaboration with his principal actor Lee Kang-sheng and explore the complex dynamics involved in the manner in which this relation consciously repeats the famous partnership between the French New Wave director François Truffaut and the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud. Tsai's staging of these relations along the lines of filiation raises disturbing questions about the notions of rebirth and temporal order.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift the focus from cinema to literature as I provide an assessment of the Japanese critic and Sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi's study of the founding figure of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun. In chapter 3, "From Culture to Finitude: The Question of Death in Takeuchi Yoshimi's Reading of Lu Xun," I turn to Takeuchi's personal reflections on his 1944 work *Ro Jin* (Lu Xun) in order to grasp the mechanics of identification by which Lu Xun's death in 1936 allowed him to more openly confront the possibility of his own demise during the final stages of the Pacific War. Takeuchi is remembered today for his powerful thinking of modernity, but I claim that the notion of negativity that informed much of his sociopolitical insight must be partly traced back to Lu Xun's enduring fascination with death and its productively negative presence within life. Here it is a question of thinking death and negativity in a manner that exceeds their status as the logical opposites of life and presence. For Takeuchi, Lu Xun's notion of life is not to be understood along the lines of mere biological survival but rather as that which, while certainly distinct from death, nevertheless remains continually haunted by it. From Takeuchi's standpoint, it is primarily for this reason that Lu Xun merits the status of "thinker," as he calls him. For both these figures, the relation between life and death contains elements that offer themselves to psychological and historical analysis. My claim, however, is that the concepts of interiority and exteriority that serve to ground these perspectives in their mutual difference fail to account for the unsettling presence of death within life, thereby pointing to the limits of such empirical inquiry.

Chapter 4, "Interlacings of Nothing: The Question of Death in Takeuchi Yoshimi's Reading of Lu Xun II," extends my analysis of Takeuchi and Lu Xun with regard to their thinking of death and negativity. This extension is at the same time a broadening, however, as I now pursue

the chain that links the negativity of death with the notions of forgetting and darkness. In his reflections on Lu Xun, Takeuchi puts forward a generalized view of negativity that he regards as foundational to Lu Xun's literature. Such conception can be seen in what I call the "death of death" in which, following Lu Xun's depictions, the individual flesh that has already been deprived of life and yet remains as a trace of that being comes subsequently to be extinguished by time. In this way, the being is returned to the nothing from which it originally sprang. From the perspective of the mourner, recognition that life cannot be kept yields to a focus on material traces through which to remember the deceased. Yet even these are susceptible to destruction, Lu Xun realizes, and this acknowledgment leads in turn to the conclusion that the trace must be spiritual rather than material if the deceased is to be truly kept. The problem, of course, is that even spiritual traces in the form of memory are themselves at any moment subject to loss in the possibility of forgetting. The chapter ends with an examination of Takeuchi's analysis of the relation between light and darkness in Lu Xun. Here I connect Takeuchi's assertion that all light is grounded in darkness with a certain blindness that appears as an essential attribute of human praxis in its distinction from knowledge.