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Foucault's Zen Body:

The meeting between Michel Foucault and the Zen master Ōmori Sōgen*

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1. Introduction

During his second trip to Japan in 1978, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) spent some time at Seitaiji, a temple belonging to *Rinzai-shū* 臨済宗 (Rinzai school, one of the three sects of Japanese Zen). There he practiced *zazen* 坐禅,[1] meeting also one of the most famous Rinzai Zen masters of the 20th century, Ōmori Sōgen 大森曹玄 (1904-1994). Besides being a Zen master, Ōmori was the president of the Rinzai Zen Buddhist University of Hanazono 花園 and a master of swordsmanship and calligraphy, arts that he included in his way of teaching Zen alongside with traditional methods. Having been the founder of both Seitaiji 青苔寺 and Chōzenji 超禅寺 (the latter a temple in Honolulu, Hawaii, the first Rinzai Zen temple outside Japan), Ōmori had several disciples, active both in Japan and overseas.[2] Transcriptions of the dialogues happened during that time appear in Foucault's *Dits et écrits* (Sayings and writings)[3] and in Ōmori's *Zen no hassō* (Zen thought),[4] but Foucault never discussed this meeting in detail.[5] Furthermore, Daniel Defert, Christian Polac and Moriaki Watanabe dampen the interest Foucault may have had in Zen, claiming that his stay at the temple was nothing more than mere "media

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[1] While the name of the temple is widely reported as Seion, this is probably due to a misreading of Seitaiji 青苔寺. Also, there are contradictory reports about the length of Foucault's stay at the monastery. As inferred from Daniel Defert's chronology, the overall trip to Japan lasted for 20 days, out of those only a few were dedicated to the stay at the temple. See Defert, "Chronology," 67.

[2] See Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*.

[3] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen." The translation of the dialogues has been made by Christian Polac. See also Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction." For a Japanese translation, see Foucault, "M. Fūkō to zen."

[4] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*. A few translated passages can be found in Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen,* 85–91.

[5] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient*, 199.

hype."[6] However, Defert also reports that Foucault was an avid reader of Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*[7] and that he had read several books on Zen preparing prior to his trip to Japan;[8] also, Foucault himself declared to have had a great interest in Buddhist philosophy.[9]

Despite the lack of any significant reflection on Zen in Foucault's writings, a few scholars argued that interpreting and elaborating on the topic could reveal fundamental aspects of his thought. According to Lauri Siisiäinen, Foucault's interest in Zen was not by any chance incidental, since it falls squarely within his interests during the late '70s and the early '80s, namely spirituality and de-subjectivation. Furthermore, Siisiäinen extensively elaborates Foucault's reflections on Zen, arguing that they can help us understanding Foucault's concept of *resistance* and the various ways to oppose *power*.[10] Uta Liebmann Schaub goes further claiming that Foucault's concern with Eastern philosophy should be reconducted to an Oriental subtext in his thought, or in a generative code beneath his discourse,[11] that could explain parts of his work and which serves the purpose of criticizing Western civilization.[12]

As for the meeting between Foucault and Ōmori specifically, an interesting perspective has been given by Adrian Konik. According to him, Foucault decided to practice Zen with Ōmori, rather than with Buddhist teachers who were residing in France at the time (i.e., Taisen Deshimaru and Thich Nhat Hanh),[13] in virtue of specific features of the former. Konik suggests that Ōmori's Zen, which had strong political aims oriented towards the imperial restoration, could be seen as in part opposed to the Western disciplinary/bio-power of Euro-American heavily influenced post-war Japan; furthermore, he argues that the warrior-like rhetoric of Ōmori and his Zen contemporaries, alongside with their politicization of Zen (which involved complex disciplinary dynamics), could have been of high interest for Foucault. [14] I will thus elaborate on the topic considering this already existing scholarship, focusing on the reason behind it and its meaning for Foucault's worldview; I will also try to offer a personal interpretation of Ōmori's stance, starting from his own original texts. Confronting Konik's view on the matter, I will propose a different viewpoint, also briefly considering the implications of a deep analysis of Ōmori's work within contemporary Zen studies.

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[6] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,*199.
[7] Gros, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 227.
[8] Defert, "Chronology," 67.
[9] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 618.
[10] Siisiäinen, *Foucault, Biopolitics and Resistance*, 153–160.
[11] Schaub, "Foucault's Oriental Subtext," 307.
[12] Schaub, "Foucault's Oriental Subtext," 315.
[13] Konik, "Reconsidering Foucault's dialogue with Buddhism," 47.
[14] Konik, "Reconsidering Foucault's dialogue with Buddhism," 48.

2. Subjectivities and Bodies

In the short preface to the transcript in Dits et écrits, it is said that Foucault started developing his interest in Zen while working on Christianity,[15] focusing in particular on Christian mysticism:

> I think Zen is totally different from Christian mysticism. And yet, I do think that Zen is a form of mysticism. […] What is impressive regarding Christianity and its **technique**, is that one is always looking for more and more **individualization**. One tries to understand what is at the bottom of an **individual**'s soul. "Tell me who you are," here lies the spirituality of Christianity. As far as Zen is concerned, it seems that all the **techniques** linked to spirituality, on the contrary, are intended to attenuate the **individual**. Zen and Christian mysticism are two things that cannot be compared, while the **technique** of Christian spirituality and the one of Zen are comparable. And here there is a big opposition.[16]

Both Christian mysticism and Zen are, in Foucault's own terminology, techniques of the self,[17] a kind of techniques that allow someone to operate on their own body, soul, thoughts and conducts in order to transform or modify themselves, so as to arrive at a sort of perfection state, happiness, purity, even gaining supernatural power.[18] This kind of techniques, for Foucault, is not made up by the individual, but constitute patterns that are proposed or imposed by culture or society.[19] In a dialogue with Moriaki Watanabe[20] that was held in July 1978, Foucault declared that Christianity played a key role in shaping Western subjectivity;[21] in his words, Christianity was so important because it formed the pattern for the modern creation of subjects, a pattern subsequently secularized by the modern forms of governing.[22] The aim of Foucault was then to find alternatives to this modern subject. Furthermore, following Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, Foucault thematized the idea of an experience capable of annihilating the subject.[23]

> I would love to compare these Christian techniques with those of Buddhism or Eastern Asian ones; to compare techniques that look like each other to a certain point but may have a completely different result, because the rules of Buddhist spirituality aim to a deindividualization, to a desubjectivization, to really bring individuality to its limits and beyond its limits, so as to free the subject […] That's the first point, the second point would be to be able to find people in far Eastern countries interested in this kind of issues, in order

[15] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 618.
[16] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 618; emphasis added.
[17] Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 18–22.
[18] Foucault, "Sessualità e solitudine," 147–148. It is very important to notice that here Christianity and Buddhism are opposed once again, also in relation to the concept of Truth.
[19] Foucault, "The ethic of the care for the self as a practice of freedom," 11.
[20] Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie."
[21] Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie," 592–593.
[22] Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini, "Introduction," 8.
[23] Trombadori, *Colloqui con Foucault*, 34–35 and 44–48.

> to conduct studies, if possible simultaneously, or at least, crossing and echoing each other, about the disciplines of the bodies or the constitution of individuality.[24]
> …this dissolution of European subjectivity,[25] of the coercive subjectivity imposed upon us by our culture after the 19th century is still, I think, one of the challenges of the current fights. That is my interest in Zen Buddhism.[26]

As in the above-mentioned quotes, Foucault's aim was to use the experience of Zen techniques in order to deepen his concept of *techniques de soi* and advance the related genealogy of modern subjectivity on which he was focusing. A specific technique itself is what, in Foucault's own words, can be compared between two different cultural realities such as Christianity (i.e., Christian mysticism) and Zen. Foucault does not specify to which techniques he refers to. As for Zen, we can infer that the main technique considered by Foucualt is *zazen*, being also the technique he practiced while at Seitaiji. *Zazen* is a type of silent meditation largely performed in Zen monasteries, assuming a crossed-leg position and, depending on one's sect, not focusing on a given object[27] but/or counting one's own breaths.[28] Lauri Siisiäinen, when studying Foucault's reflections on Zen, considers as Christian techniques the ones belonging to the Benedectine monastic order, such as the practices of obedience, humility and poverty, as well as praying and performing silent meditation (the latter being, as a form of self-investigation, substantially the only reference for Foucault).[29] Significantly, however, Foucault claimed that Christianity adopted techniques and practices both from Greco-Roman antiquity[30] and Asian spirituality[31]:

> Christianity had in front of itself, or rather next to itself, behind itself, an intense model of religious life, which were Hindu monasticism and Buddhist monasticism, and the Christian monks who spread over the whole Mediterranean Orient starting from the 3rd Century, who largely resumed ascetic practices.[32]

The results of his involvement with Zen practice were recalled by Foucault in these terms:

[24] Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie," 592–593.
[25] I.e., the Cartesian self. See: Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie," 590–593.
[26] Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie," 592.
[27] Ui, *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary*, 334–335.
[28] Yamada, "Zazengi kōwa," 25. For Zen's seated meditation as intended by Ōmori Sōgen, see Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training* and Ōmori, "Suwaru."
[29] For a wider overview of the concept of Christian technique in Foucault, please refer to Siisiäinen, *Foucault, Biopolitics and Resistance*, 156–158.
[30] A privileged field of inquiry for Foucault, especially in relation to the concept of "care of the self" in the Greek/Roman antiquity. (*Cf.* Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini, "Introduction," 8).
[31] Siisiäinen, *Foucault, Biopolitics and Resistance*, 155.
[32] Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir," 565.

> If I could feel something through the posture of body in Zen meditation, that is to say the right posture of the body, it could be a new relationship that could exist between mind and body, and furthermore, a new relationship between the body and the external world.[33]

The statement of Foucault about a "new relationship between mind and body" becomes clearer when confronted with Ōmori's emphasis on the "oneness of mind and body" of Zen (which recurs repeatedly in his texts). In Ōmori's words, we could configure this experience in terms of learning Zen with one's own body (*shingakudō* 身学道),[34] so as to unify mind, body and breath:

> Since *zenna* 禅那 (meditation) is thought as the process of unification with the mind, *zazen* is the state where breath, body and mind are unified or are becoming unified through sitting.[35]

Zazen posture, according to him, should be seen as a "purely physical method of regulating one's body" and Zen as the way of "regulating the mind."[36] The other kind of new relationship that Foucault experienced, "the one between his body and the external world," resonates in a passage where Ōmori speaks about a particular state during *zazen*, where "the whole body is lost and the distinction between sitter and surrounding is forgotten."[37] After his practice, Foucault asked to Ōmori:

> Europe's thought, education and social customs all share the idea that "mind and body" are separable. Through my experience of Zen, however […] mind and body were one. Is this experience wrong?[38]

Ōmori examined the question and finally answered:

> European view is wrong. In eastern thought, and especially in Zen, body and mind are unified. Your experience is correct.[39]

In conclusion, the "new body experience" constitutes the centrality of Foucault's Zen practice at Seitaiji in 1978. This is further clarified by Watanabe's question to Foucault, asking him if his Zen practice had the aim of "verifying on the spot that the meaning of the body in Zen practice is different [from that of Christianity]" with Foucault's answer that "Zen is a totally different religious exercise in which the body is grasped as a sort of instrument."[40] Foucault's aim was neither to propose a factual replacement of the modern

[33] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 621.
[34] *Cf*. Ōmori, "Suwaru," 75.
[35] Ōmori, "Suwaru," 58.
[36] Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 23.
[37] Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 96.
[38] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 164.
[39] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 164.
[40] Quoted in Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 212.

subjectivity with Zen's subjectivity, but solely to prove the existence of other kinds of subjectivity rather than the modern one. "I am not looking for an alternative; you cannot find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people."[41] On the same lead: "I think that re-examinations [of Western thought] can be pursued confronting Western thought with Eastern thought, too."[42] Anyways Foucault, practicing *zazen*, allowed himself to "experience" firsthand a culturally different technique of the self (that is, a technique of the self codified by other people rather than the ones who "experience" modern subjectivity) upon himself, so to transform himself; all of this resulted into the already mentioned "experiences"[43] of "new relationships between body and mind and body and the external world."

3. About borders

Foucault expressed what he felt was the aim of Buddhism as "bringing individuality to its limits and beyond its limits."[44] Limit is a key word in order to understand the cultural otherness of Japan in Foucault's thought.[45] When asked if his interest in Japan was either deep or superficial, Foucault answered:

> Honestly, I'm not constantly interested in Japan. My interest is the history of western rationality and its **limit**. About this point, Japan poses a problem that cannot be avoided, it is an illustration of it. Since Japan is an **enigma**, very difficult to decipher.[46]

In Foucault's view, there is some sort of connection between his idea of limit and Japan, which is situated beyond that limit, thus representing something that can't be easily understood. It becomes clearer when examining the 1961 preface of *History of Madness*, deleted in subsequent editions, where he describes the Orient as the inaccessible limit posed by western rationality.[47] As Marnia Lazreg notices, the Orient-Occident division is never questioned or problematized by Foucault.[48] The reason for this Western-posed divide, as Marnia Lazreg says, lies in Foucault's belief that a

> Culture has limits internally, creating an exterior edge within its interior, and externally with another culture […] Western culture draws two fundamental limits, one within itself,

[41] Michel Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 229. In this context the other people were the ancient Greeks.
[42] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 622.
[43] I insist on the word *experience* because Foucault himself does so. See Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 624. It is also noticed in Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 207.
[44] Foucault, "La scéne de la philosophie," 592–593.
[45] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 192.
[46] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 620; emphasis added.
[47] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 193.
[48] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 193.

> between madness and reason, the other between Orient and Occident.[49]

However, this limit needs to be carefully analyzed. If the Western culture poses a limit to itself (the Orient), then what is the status of this limit, which is a limit to something that Foucault claims has become *universal* (so limitless)? [50] He says, for example:

> Europe situates itself into a determined region of the world and into a specific historical era. That said, it presents the particular feature of having created a universal category that characterizes the modern world. Europe is the place of birth of universality.[51]

This quote seems to find a perfect answer in the statement by Naoki Sakai that "What we normally call 'universalism' is a particularism thinking itself as universalism, and it is worthwhile doubting whether universalism could ever exist otherwise." [52] In fact, Foucault himself was, on a certain degree, aware of how Europe had universalized many of its concepts, extolling them from the historical and cultural context in which they were born.[53] However, as Marnia Lazreg notices:

> Indeed, Foucault leaves unquestioned the "universal" character of the Western ratio. As Kobayashi suggests, "universal reason does not permit division." In this sense, "Foucault positioned himself within Western history (and European societies). In so doing, he left in abeyance the significance, for the presumed universality of Western reason (itself a particular or regional reason), of the limits within itself." To return to the quotation, Western reason establishes its universality through "colonization," implicitly as if to compensate for the cultural division it makes and that it cannot resolve culturally.[54]

Interestingly, Foucault's idea of a crisis of Western thought is linked by him to the end of imperialism, that is, the end of the universalistic project;[55] in other words, I would argue that imaginary orientalist geography and its categories built by euro-American colonialism could no longer grasp the complexity of the world.

Sakai Naoki and Jon Solomon also stress the fact that Foucault's thought is characterized by "the construction of respective 'Western' and 'Eastern' regions with their corresponding 'ways of thought'."[56] This is due to what Sakai and Solomon call a "joint matrix, the recursive admixtures of world and thought": a matrix they call "amphibological region."[57] They describe Foucault's Europe as:

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[49] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 194.
[50] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 196. On the same lead, Sakai and Solomon ask: "where would 'outside Europe' be in an age when 'Europe' is synonymous, as Foucault asserts, with the universal?." Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 14.
[51] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 623.
[52] Sakai, "Modernity and its Critique," 98.
[53] Siisiäinen, *Foucault, Biopolitics and Resistance*, 152.
[54] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 196.
[55] Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 5.
[56] Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 5.
[57] Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 17.

> A definite geographical region and as a universal category of thought through which categories themselves appear. As such, the amphibological region corresponds exactly to what Foucault, in The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses), calls the 'empirico-transcendental doublet' that characterizes the emergence of Man as both subject and object of (self-)knowledge in the modern period. The amphibological region is, thus, precisely, the quintessential bio-political habitat corresponding to Foucault's modern Man.[58]

It is possible to say, then, that going to Japan Foucault sees himself as a representative of the modern man (who belongs to the European amphibological region, a man characterized by a specific subjectivity) interacting with other people[59] of another amphibological region and with other kinds of subjectivity: specifically, the distinctive form of subjectivity of Zen.[60]

But Foucault was not the only one imagining a world composed into geographically divided regions, which were also the *loci* of specific ways of thinking. In Ōmori's writings we find several claims explicitly recalling the ideas of a specific "western thought" and an "eastern thought." For example, he outlines the different conceptions of the self that existed between East and West recalling Immanuel Kant and the Chan master Hyakujō Ekai 百丈懷海 (Ch. Baizhang Huaihai): if Kant's self is the autonomous and rational self which is "the subject of the sacred moral laws because of its free independence,"[61] Hyakujō's self:

> is the subject which is one with Absolute Nothingness and has cut duality of before and after while dropping all fetters from mind and body. The difference between Hyakujo and Kant lies in this point. **Without detecting this difference it will be impossible to distinguish between the Eastern and the Western modes of thought.**[62]

Ōmori, however, says that Zen is a universal truth that could be equally recognized by both Westerners and Easterners. Answering Foucault's question if Zen was separable from Buddhism, he stated as follows:

> You have just said that you have felt a new relationship between the mind and the body and between the body and the external world. I find it admirable that you felt this with such a short experience with Zen. Feeling that the mind and the body become one, and that oneself and the world become one as well, aren't these universal experiences? This shows that Zen has an international and universal character. Zen is small if only thought as part of Buddhism, but we don't consider it a part of Buddhism. If you could understand Zen in this sense with your experience, I think you would be convinced of the universality of Zen.[63]

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[58] Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 5.

[59] *Cf.*, again, to Foucault's own words in Dreyfus, Rabinow, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 229.

[60] "Foucault located the specificity of Japan in Zen, which purportedly shapes a mind-set that distinguishes Japanese culture in spite of its Western-like modernity," Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 202.

[61] Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 174.

[62] Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 174; emphasis added.

[63] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 622. See also Foucault, "M. Fūkō to zen," 224–225. Whether

We have thus encountered an alternative universality from Foucault's European one: the universal experience of Zen. Ōmori often stresses this quoting Bernard Phillips, professor in the Religious Studies department of Temple University, with whom Ōmori declares to have had several agreements on Zen:[64]

> There is no true world religion except for Zen. Undoubtedly, many other religions claimed to be "world religions," but they have all been affected by a specific time, place and regional feature. They all made the mistake of absolutizing a specific method or belief. Since the eyes of modern humanity gaze at the infinite and at the universe that is expanding everywhere without obstacles, the religion it needs should also have a center expanding everywhere like its universe, and this center should have peripheries in no place.[65]

Although Ōmori also thought that meditation was something common to both East and West,[66] one of Ōmori's teachers, Tanouye Tenshin 田上天心, claimed that there was nothing close to *shugyō* 修行 (proper training) in the West, and therefore asked Ōmori to introduce it there. This request was concretized in the establishment of Chōzenji, "a place of Zen training where people of any race, creed or religion who are determined to live in accordance with Buddha Nature (the Inner Self or the Way) may fulfill this need through intensive endeavor."[67] Ōmori also appears to be conscious of Zen's overall condition in Europe and America, and how much importance a Japanese master teaching *zazen* could have in its spreading. He quotes Trevor Leggett, head of the BBC's Japanese service and expert of Japanese culture and martial arts:

> "What we expect from Japan is something new that has never been developed in the West." […] People involved in Zen teaching do not explain in detail how to do *zazen*, but only the principles, and because of this there are very few Zen centres. "Not only that, but there was also not anyone who could follow his (author note: D.T. Suzuki) lead." Therefore, the seeds were sown, but the gardeners who look after the land are rare. As a result, many foreigners read Suzuki's writings, creating personalized forms of Zen. Some are far from Japanese Zen. Together with "pure Zen," there are several weeds growing in the garden […] "Pure Zen" is the aforementioned group of Japanese Zen masters who travel abroad so as to provide direct teaching, and the "weedy" Zen could stand for the hippie-way "reading Suzuki and making up a personalized Zen."[68]

Ōmori believed that the modern West needed a deep change that only Zen could give.[69] He was strongly critical of the modern man and of his idea of self:

Foucault could have agreed on the universality of Zen as exposed by Ōmori or not is opened to debate. See Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 207 and Siisiäinen, *Foucault, Biopolitics and Resistance*, 161.

[64] Besides the following quotes, Phillips is also mentioned in Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 86 and Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 251–253 about the same topics.

[65] Ōmori, "Suwaru," 52. Ōmori is cautious in calling Zen a religion, carefully explaining in which terms Zen can be defined as such in Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 253–254.

[66] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 113, and Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 9–12.

[67] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 77–78.

[68] Ōmori, "Suwaru," 53–54.

[69] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 165–166.

> If one experiences this [Zen's ultimate realization], modern man's present ideology will naturally be criticized. But by being criticized, change will take place. […] Just simple theory, however, is not enough. It is necessary to have physical experience behind it. If you experience this, the view that only man is the center of the universe (in exclusion to others also being the center) will become absurd.[70]

The self of the modern man is, I argue, not what Ōmori called Hyakujō's self but what he called Kant's self: the western self.

> Contrary to our expectation that the epoch-making development of science and technology would bring about the most supreme blessings to human beings, the modern world has begun to reveal itself as the most disturbed period unprecedented in the history of the human race. [...] At this turn of our era, we must go beyond the age of science in order to ask anew what human beings are and to inquire into our true selves.[71]

Ōmori could find in people like Phillips reasons to believe that the West needed Zen. He writes:

> Westerners were attracted by Zen because it "seemed to offer a possible solution" to their four hundred years old spiritual hunger.[72] I think that this should be kept in mind by those who reflect on how things are going in Zen. In other terms, until now Zen has been conceived as a path to liberate oneself from the ideas of life and death, emancipating from the personal suffering of life, ageing, illness, and death; but now the thing is that there are people who seek in Zen the liberation from social suffering that cannot be cured addressing personal issues only. Professor Phillips writes that the spiritual starvation of western people is caused by the corrosive effects of modern disciplines and the modern way of life on the traditional religions of the West. To put it simply, I think that this is more a civilizational issue than a personal one.[73]

Thus, when Foucault asked:

> In Europe, there is the idea that "Nature and Humankind are separated," and humans are the subjects that conquer nature. Through my experience, man and nature were one. How so?[74]

It was then natural for Ōmori to answer that:

> Humankind conquering nature is their presumption.[75] European way of thinking is just the thought of a humanity that for four hundred years has lost God.[76] As Bakunin said in his book *God and the State*, mankind has pulled God down from its throne, and has put itself

[70] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 88–89.
[71] Ōmori, *Introduction to Zen Training*, 254.
[72] This is something that Phillips claimed.
[73] Ōmori, "Suwaru," 51.
[74] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 164–165.
[75] In particular, in Buddhism *zōjōman* 増上慢 means to think to be enlightened without actually being it.
[76] *Kami* 神.

> on its place. This is the false anthropocentrism. Because of that nature is polluted and, contrary to every expectation, humankind is close to death. Thus, some people, as life scientists, started to notice the errors of modern civilization, and began using the term "ecosystem." Surely, humans can only live in an ecosystem, and that is the correct thought, the correct knowledge.[77]

The criticism towards modern civilization is the criticism of the West, of the culture that produced the modern man who, reading Phillips, Ōmori learnt (or confirmed) was needing of the universal spiritual guidance of Zen.[78] Ōmori even suggests that Zen should change its focus from the traditional Buddhist domain of liberating from the sorrows of life and death to solving wider social issues. Using Konrad Lorenz's "Eight deadly sins of humanity" as representatives of modern global issues of his times, Ōmori asks:

> Should not Zen, in principle, being a universal religion, also take responsibility for answering these problems? […] I think Professor Lorenz's "eight deadly sins of humanity" could be solved by this awakening of Buddha and a committed spiritual life based on it, right?[79]

And finally, coming to Foucault:

> That such a respected philosopher would have a realization will be the reason for a qualitative change in the modern civilization of Europe. […] This sense of oneness which Foucault experienced is what Zen can contribute to modern society.[80]

Following Sakai and Solomon, I argue that we can configure Foucault's Japanese and Zen experiences as encounters, dialogues between individuals who pose themselves as *fixed subject positions*, where participants see themselves as national and civilizational subjects.[81] These fixed subject positions are not built up as a monologue,[82] but as a dialogical conversation between the subjects themselves and a mutual agreement of each other.[83] It is a Zen monk who firstly introduces the theme of the "crisis of the Western thought" and "how can Eastern thought contribute to it" when talking with Foucault;[84] it was Foucault that questioned Ōmori about the universality of Zen and about the different conceptions of mind/body and nature in Europe and Japan, leading Ōmori to ask himself:

[77] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 165.
[78] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 87–88.
[79] Ōmori, "Suwaru," 52.
[80] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 87.
[81] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 16.
[82] Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 34.
[83] Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 34.
[84] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 622.

> Isn't it wonderful that someone as Doctor Foucault could speak openly about his doubts concerning Western civilization, write and ask questions and approaching Eastern thought looking for a "change of civilization?"[85]

What I argue is that the fixed subject positions in Foucault-Ōmori encounter are constructed in a complex mirrors-like identity game, where the Orientalized tried to declare their own autonomous identity confirming and responding to the orientalism of the "Orientalizers" and vice-versa.[86]

4. Conclusion

Foucault's trip to Japan is summarized by Marnia Lazreg, quoting Yasuo Kobayashi, saying that

> "Foucault encountered the Orient, the Oriental, the Asian, the Japanese. But in the end he could not refine his view (perhaps due to lack of time), his methodology, and really work on the 'limit' […] Japan may not even have been the Orient he was looking for." What he was looking for was perhaps, in Kobayashi's view, "the body," the elusive yet tangible body in Zen as ushering in the unrealizable knowledge of the Orient.[87]

Following this quote, in line with the first part of this paper, I argue that the cornerstone of this experience is what we can call the Zen body, the set of new relationships between body and mind and between body and external world that Foucault claimed to have experienced while undergoing the strict exercise of *zazen*.[88] Furthermore, in the context of the orientalist borders set by the two parts of the encounter, I argue that the experience of the Zen body holds a particular status between the amphibological regions of this imaginary geography.[89] During meditation Foucault relaxed his fixed subject position, transforming himself in the attempt of reaching a proximity point, a common ground with the ones he was encountering.

I will now try to examine carefully Konik's thesis that Foucault, somehow, could have preferred Ōmori's Zen to the one taught by the Buddhist masters living in France at the time because of the underlying political implications of the former. It has to be considered that, on one hand, Foucault declared that his interest was mainly in "the life in a Zen temple," where "a whole different mentality from ours is formed,"[90] and it is reported that he was brought to Seitaiji by the French embassy;[91] since Foucault never expressed any reason which would have led him to choose Ōmori instead of other Zen masters, and we have no hint that Foucault was aware of recent Zen history (something

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[85] Ōmori, *Zen no hassō*, 165–166.
[86] *Cf.* Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 34.
[87] Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient,* 239.
[88] See also Sakai and Solomon, "Introduction," 17.
[89] *Cf.* Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*.
[90] Foucault, "Michel Foucault et le zen," 618.
[91] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 89, Defert, "Chronology," 67 and Ōmori *Zen no hassō*, 164.

that became known outside of Japan only with relatively recent scholarship), I think we can conclude that Foucault simply wanted to see a *Japanese* Zen temple in *Japan*, and thus there was no point for him in engaging with the Buddhist masters that were living in France.

On the other hand, Konik rightfully includes Ōmori within what Robert Sharf (one of Konik's main references for Zen history, alongside with Brian Victoria and Bernard Faure) identified as a "contemporary Zen discourse," strongly tied with nationalist politics; certainly, Ōmori cannot escape the accusation of nationalism, having been active in violent far-right groups.[92] While Konik mainly focuses on Ōmori's and his contemporaries' usage of Zen as a political weapon,[93] broadening the context in which Ōmori operated considering other cultural aspects may deepen the research. I would add that the similarities between Ōmori and such discourse are even more evident when considering how Ōmori was, somehow, trying to adapt Zen to the modern age proposing it as a spiritual solution to the problems of modernity and its spiritual "anxiety."[94] Moreover, this discourse stresses the idea that Zen should be considered as a non-sectarian mystical experience[95] and inverts the old orientalist stereotypes in favour of Japan and "the East."[96] Figures such as Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and D.T. Suzuki[97] (who, according to Sharf, was the main proposer of such discourse), were in fact acquaintances of Ōmori (as Konik remarks[98]). However, one interesting thing to notice is that Sharf argues that

> D. T. Suzuki, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao, […] all lacked formal transmission in a Zen lineage, and their intellectualized Zen is often held in suspicion by Zen traditionalists. We should be cautious before uncritically accepting their claim that Zen is some sort of nonsectarian spiritual gnosis, for such a claim is clearly self-serving: by insisting that Zen is a way of experiencing the world, rather than a complex form of Buddhist monastic practice, these Japanese intellectuals effectively circumvent the question of their own authority to speak on behalf of Zen.[99]

But Ōmori, who was a high representative of "institutional Zen," nonetheless promoted Zen as a universal experience, thus it would be worth considering further research on the topic outside Zen laity.[100] In any case, while surely figures such as Ōmori had strong

[92] Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, 39–66.
[93] Konik, "Reconsidering Foucault's dialogue with Buddhism," 50.
[94] Sharf, "Whose Zen?," 49–50.
[95] Sharf, "Whose Zen?," 44.
[96] Sharf, "Whose Zen?," 48. It should be noted that Hori (in Hori, "D.T. Suzuki and the Invention of Tradition") contextualizes Suzuki's attitude of privileging Japan and Zen as a response to the orientalist scholars who claimed authority above Buddhism and to Euro-American colonialist aims.
[97] Hosokawa, *Ōmori Sōgen*, 68–70.
[98] Konik, "Reconsidering Foucault's dialogue with Buddhism," 45.
[99] Sharf, "Whose Zen?," 43.
[100] It should also be noted that Sharf's thematization of "Zen experience" as a XXth century invention drawn from Euro-American influences has been criticized by scholars such as Victor Sōgen Hori in Hori, "D.T. Suzuki and the Invention of Tradition," 55–57, who claims that far from being a modern invention, the idea of Zen as an experience is in fact traditional, and Stephan Kigensan Licha in Licha, "Hara Tanzan and the Japanese Buddhist discovery of 'Experience,'" who argues that the concept of experience was

political interests, a more complex analysis would help avoiding an "ideological reductionist"[101] approach to contemporary Zen.

In conclusion, I think that Foucault's encounter with Ōmori offers a great example in acknowledging the stereotyped fixed subject positions on which certain dialogues are based. But such stereotyped encounters are, after all, just first encounters, and thus constitute a first form of overcoming the imaginary borders posed by historical and social constructions.[102] I argue that, somehow, Ōmori tried to adapt Zen to the modern times reworking orientalist tropes, using them as a tool for making Zen known to the world in a particular historical context, in a similar fashion to D.T. Suzuki himself.[103] Foucault and Ōmori's encounter gives us a hint in order to cross those borders: the firsthand body experience that, maybe, could help forming the ground for a better understanding of human beings within their cultural diversity.

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already being sustained by figures such as Hara Tanzan (1819–1892) and emerged as an intercultural product of local Japanese and overseas influences.

[101] *Cf.* Hori, "D.T. Suzuki and the Invention of Tradition," 62: "the concept of satori has an ideological use and can be used strategically for political ends. However, I add a methodological caution: the fact that a statement has an ideological function does not mean it is otherwise meaningless. To always ignore the content of a statement and to insist that it has meaning only as ideology would be ideological reductionism."

[102] Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 130.

[103] Ogawa, *Goroku no shisō-shi*, 409.

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