CHAPTER 1
What Is “Society”?

This chapter describes Yanaihara’s concept of society (shakai) as a point of departure for the understanding of his study of empire and international relations. As a social scientist, Yanaihara perceived society as a central unit of political, economic, and social interactions. The fluidity and complexity of society determines the transformability of both international and domestic orders. As later chapters will discuss, with the application of “scientific” (kagakuteki) approaches such as Marxism, he analyzed the structural problems of socioeconomic issues. Yet he never separated social issues from the qualities and attitudes of human agents. At the center of his study there was a philosophical and social recognition that the current form of society reflected the quality of individual personality and moral ethics. The goal of this chapter is to present the fundamental social values that he developed and maintained despite the dramatic change of the Japanese political system after 1945. For the analysis of the predominant focus and interest of his study, I will use his academic and nonacademic writings.

This chapter starts with the intellectual background of Yanaihara’s youth, especially, what I call the “humanist tradition” of Japanese political thought in the late Meiji (1869–1912) and early Taisho (1912–1926) periods. His perspective of society, nation, and the state largely derives from the ideas of Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), and Yoshino Sakuzō (1878–1933). Although Yanaihara was writing during the Taisho era, the influence of Meiji intellectuals on his thoughts was enormous, as Yanaihara himself later admitted. The second section moves onto his philosophical account of society. In this section, I will articulate his ideal society of harmony and cooperation for which social justice is an indispensable prerequisite. From a Christian perspective, he suggested that any social reform of the
government could not guide the individual to take a selfless action that was required for the attainment of social justice. The third section shows that Yanaihara took the political position of neither laissez-faire liberalism nor Marxism to guarantee social justice because he primarily relied on the moral compass of society’s members to achieve social justice. The fourth section argues that his humanist perspective of society persisted despite the dramatic changes of the Japanese political system and social climate after the defeat of Japan in 1945.

The Humanist Tradition in Imperial Japan

In the early Meiji era, the Japanese translation of the European concept of society was not fixed to *shakai*. Without a sense of national community and the political apparatus of a unified independent state, society was translated into various terms such as “to associate,” “to assemble,” “companions,” “association,” “company,” “intercourse,” and “troupe.” Only from about 1875, *shakai* was accepted as the translation of the Western concept of society.\(^1\) However, in the emergence of a modern nation-state in Japan, society itself did not capture the center of attention. Rather, it was understood as part and parcel of a national community. Aligned to the governmental aim of creating a modern nation-state in Japan, Tokyo Imperial University, a newly established state-sponsored academic institution, took German *Staatwissenschaft* (literally, the study of the state) as a model to study how to establish state institutions and to govern the people in Japan. Japan’s Association for the Study of Social Policy [Shakai Seisaku Gakkai], established in 1896, also followed the example of Germany’s *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, whose aim was to solve social problems by state intervention.\(^2\) As the Meiji constitution declared the emperor as the sovereign of the nation, the Faculty of Law at Tokyo Imperial University was dominated by the state-centric approach with an emphasis on emperor sovereignty, initiated by Hozumi Yatsuka (1860–1912) and Uesugi Shinkichi (1878–1929). Based on Hozumi’s presupposition on emperor sovereignty, Uesugi developed “the study of the state” (*kokugaku*) in which the constitution refused to undermine the supremacy and transcendentalism of the emperor by any means, and it was an unquestionable obligation for the Japanese nation to obey Imperial commands.\(^3\)

However, not all intellectuals and academic scholars endorsed a strict understanding of the supremacy of the state, or even of the emperor, over the Japanese nation. During the Meiji and Taisho eras, some liberal