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# Nationalist thought in pre-war Japan<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author notes that this article partially draws on an essay published in Japanese (Tsuneki 2018). In this present article, I have extended the arguments, adding many new insights I developed after the first publication, and reorganized the basic structure of my presentation on Japanese nationalism to make it more accessible for English-speaking readers outside Japan.

## **Nationalist thought in pre-war Japan**

Abstract: This study aims to clarify the nature and effects of nationalist political thought in pre-war Japan (1800–1941). Despite a common belief that Japanese nationalism is unique and anti-modern in the sense that it is anti-liberal-democratic, feudal, hierarchical, and militaristic, which is sometimes called ‘Ultra-Nationalism’, through an analysis of specific texts, I argue that Japanese nationalism from 1800 to 1941 had a multilateral nature and its dominant aspect was neither feudal nor anti-modern. The findings from the analysis demonstrate that Japanese nationalism can be classified into three specific forms over this period: first, nationalism consistent with a constitutional monarchy and international cooperation with Western countries; second, nationalism assimilated with state socialism and Asia-centred regionalism; and third, the movement to re-establish the pre-modern Japanese social system and morals in modern Japan. The analysis reveals that the first and second types of Japanese nationalism were modern or, in a sense, even post-modern as they flexibly maintained substantial influence over real politics, whether the ruling power was more liberal-democratic or more totalitarian-militaristic at any given time. In contrast, the third type of Japanese nationalism, with an ‘Ultra-National’ nature, was unable to exert political influence over the ruling political power.

Keywords: Japan, nationalism, Kokutai, ultra-nationalism, constitutional monarchy, state socialism.

## Introduction

This study aims to clarify our understanding of nationalist political thought in pre-war Japan (1868–1941). Japanese nationalism is generally seen as unique and anti-modern in the sense that it is anti-liberal-democratic, feudal, hierarchical, and militaristic, even today. Both right-wing advocates and left-wing critics share this perception, thereby perpetuating a situation where the debate over Japanese nationalism remains based on this misinterpretation. This study will attempt to end these debates over the nature and political implications of Japanese nationalism.

The characteristics of Japanese nationalism described above were propagated enthusiastically by the Japanese army in the 1930s and 1940s as a way of encouraging a war spirit by advocating loyalty to the *Ten-nō* [emperor], and hence, to the army. After 1945, this image became the generally accepted definition of Japanese nationalism, via its interpretation by the New Dealers in the General Headquarters (GHQ) who led the Occupation Revolution,<sup>2</sup> and by the post-war democratic intelligentsia in Japan who

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<sup>2</sup> After Japan's defeat during the Pacific War, General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Japan as head of the Allied Occupation Force. MacArthur's office, named GHQ, executed the radical reforms for democratizing Japan both politically and economically. Given that the series of reforms were drastic, they are often termed the 'Occupation Revolution'. See Dower (1999) as a careful survey of the process and consequences of the Revolution.

welcomed the GHQ's democratization policy and the establishment of the present Constitution of Japan.

These two groups shared the opinion that Japanese people did not know how to be independent, democratic people and were mired in feudal and militaristic sentiments. Compared with German Nazism or Italian fascism, the putative backwardness of Japanese society and the consciousness of the Japanese people were viewed as the fundamental driving forces of the military dictatorship established in the 1930s and Japanese aggression abroad up until 1945.<sup>3</sup>

Several dominant intellectuals belonging to the post-war democratic intelligentsia shared this view of pre-war Japanese society and consciousness and emphasized the importance of democratizing Japan, both as a social institution and in the people's consciousness. Among them, Masao Maruyama had a dominant role in Japanese political science, especially the history of political thought,<sup>4</sup> and named this mentality, supposedly shared by the Japanese public and pre-war political leaders, 'Ultra-Nationalism' (Maruyama 1969).

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<sup>3</sup> Maruyama's (1969, 1–24, 34–65) would be a typical argument.

<sup>4</sup> In social science, Toshiyoshi Miyazawa (constitutional law), Takeyoshi Kawashima (civil law), and Hisao Ōtsuka (economic history) are representative. My study will sometimes denote this type of argument, represented by Maruyama in political thought, as the post-war democratic view; however, it should be clear that this view was not specific to Maruyama and was extensively shared by the group of scholars mentioned above and their followers.

This view is far from outmoded and is firmly ensconced among many Americans, Europeans, and especially East Asian peoples who experienced the brunt of the suffering at the hands of the Japanese empire both before and during the war. It has formed the basis of the belief that any nationalism developing in Japan is a dangerous threat to peace in East Asia. Therefore, and to clarify the real danger of the recent rightward trend in Japanese politics, the idea that military aggression during the pre-war and war periods was essentially motivated by near-feudal and 'Ultra-National' sentiments and social system particular to Japan needs to be re-examined.

In this article, this idea is refuted, and instead it is argued that, to this day, Japanese nationalism has had a multilateral nature and that its pre-war dominant aspect was neither feudal nor anti-modern. Although not completely identical to Western nationalism, Japanese nationalism was modern or, in a sense, even post-modern as it flexibly maintained substantial influence throughout this period and especially in the period 1868-1941, whether the ruling power was more liberal-democratic or more totalitarian-militaristic. The military aggression instigated by Japan after 1930s was not due to the 'Ultra-Nationalism' specific to Japan, but was caused by the political dominance of militaristic state socialism over liberal democracy, as was the case in Germany and Italy.

I should also note the significance of my study in comparison with more recent contributions which have analyzed nationalism in modern Japan. The first one is Harootunian (2000). This is a path-breaking contribution which contradicted the late-development hypothesis of Japanese capitalism and the associated dogma that Japanese nationalism was more feudal or backward than its Western counterpart. Instead, he argued the modernity of Japanese nationalism in pre-war and wartime Shōwa Japan as a counter-reaction to global capitalism and its uneven development. In the part of my article where I discuss nationalism in the pre-war Shōwa era, I argue that Harootunian's analysis of Japanese nationalism, ingenious as it is, is fatally distorted by his insistence on viewing the question through a narrow post-modern Marxist lens, whereby modern society as a capitalist system is by definition assimilated with fascism.

The second important contribution, by Doak (2007), also tries to salvage nationalism in modern Japan from post-war prejudice about its backwardness, though his standpoint is totally contrary to that of Harootunian. I agree with Doak's view on Japanese nationalism in many regards, but I doubt that his framework for the analysis of Japanese nationalism, which views it as a conflict between *Minzokushugi* (ethnic nationalism) and *Kokuminshugi* (civic nationalism), is sufficiently effective, especially as his point of view obscures the fascist element within pre-war Japanese nationalism. I prefer the framework that originated with de Tocqueville (1835/1840) and was

completed by Hayek (1973, 1976, 1979) for the analysis of the conflict within pre-war Japanese nationalism, where the core ideological conflict was between individualistic liberalism and its counter-reaction, either populism or restorationism.<sup>5</sup>

Let me also remark that this article treats nationalism in Japan as a social fact, and therefore this analysis deliberately avoids applying value judgments to it. This by no means implies that this article intends to deny past injustices carried out by Japan during the period of the war. The analysis instead intends to provide a definitive picture of Japanese nationalism to (re-)evaluate it as the driving force behind those injustices and clarify the nature of the nationalism currently developing in Japan.

## **The development of nationalism in modern Japan until 1890**

### *Early modern foundations*

Before its modernization in the late nineteenth century, Japan experienced a highly distinctive pre-modern stage during the Edo era (1603–1868) under the regime of the *Tokugawa bakufu* [military bureaucracy]. The Edo era has long been mistakenly

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<sup>5</sup> Hayek's groundwork (Hayek 1973, 1976, 1979) on which my framework for the analysis builds, clarified the universal relationship among capitalism, liberalism, and democracy, a highly powerful model for analyzing the social and ideological system of modern society.



identified as a feudalistic historical stage, roughly corresponding to Medieval Europe.<sup>6</sup>

However, recent historical research has revealed that the Edo era was characterized by completely different features than Medieval Europe. The ruling warrior class (*bushi* or *samurai*) in the Edo era was more akin to bureaucrats serving a *daimyō*, the local head of warriors in his domain or *han*. Nationwide, the *daimyō* themselves were under the rule of the *Shōgun* (military generalissimo).

During this period, Japan's borders were largely closed, both to trade and immigration (*sakoku*), but with steady growth in the domestic agrarian economy, the focus of labour moved from agriculture to industry and commerce, which grew significantly in the later Edo period. The division of labour and economic development were more advanced than in Medieval Europe and more comparable to early-modern Europe. Under this stable regime of steady economic growth and peaceful social circumstances during its isolation, Japan extended education to the general public and built a nationwide infrastructure in transportation and communication, binding Japan together as a socially unified polity.

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<sup>6</sup> See Norman (1940), who argued for the feudal nature of the Edo era and its persistent effects on modern Japan. Norman's contribution had a strong influence on the liberal intelligentsia in Japan, Asia, and the West.

Simultaneously, nationalism developed among the Japanese, as reflected by the political thinkers of the Edo era. Confucianism (of Chinese origin) had an overwhelming influence on political thought, although it was reinterpreted with 'Japanese characteristics' to justify the Tokugawa regime (the *Bakuhau Taisei*).

Bitō (2014) distinguished the special character of Japanese Confucianism in terms of three features. First, the nation and its geographical boundaries are naturally determined, contrasting with Chinese Confucianism in which the concept of a nation hinges critically on the moral virtue of the governor. Second, the independence of the nation and prosperity of the people are the most important values protected by policies which promote the nation's safety and advance the people's secular welfare, rather than the virtue of the governor. Third, people in Japan have an absolute obligation to their nation and its hierarchical class system. This obligation is rooted in the traditional festival rite performed by the *Ten-nō* (emperor), who prays for the nation's unification and the people's welfare. Although the *Ten-nō* was the supreme political actor in Japan, the role lacked any political power or responsibility, and existed only to conduct festival rites and ensure the people's sense of obligation to the *Bakuhau Taisei* system.

Within this school, Seishisai Aizawa wrote *Shin-Ron* (A New Treatise) in 1825, in which he proposed opening the country to the world. However, he argued that Japan must simultaneously recognize itself as a unified nation-state, politically controlled by

the *Tokugawa bakufu*, but under the *Ten-nō* as the supreme leader and guarantor of unification, to avoid the temptations of Western civilization. Aizawa named this entity—with the *Ten-nō* on top as a symbol of unity—*Bakuhan Taisei*, meaning political control by the warrior class for the security and safety of the state, and the common people working for the national welfare, the *Kokutai* [national polity or identity], the first time the term was used in this way. This theory, *Kokutai-Ron*, clarified the unity of Japan and exerted a strong influence over Japanese nationalism throughout the pre-war period and still does so even today.

Although Aizawa supported the Tokugawa regime when he wrote *Shin-Ron*, the treatise had revolutionary implications for the establishment of Japan as a modern nation-state when it first labelled Japan as a unified nation, using the word *Kokutai*.

***The constitutional monarchy as the harmonization of Kokutai and Western statecraft: 1868 –1890***

Although the Edo era was closer to European early-modern socio-economic levels of development, it could not truly enter the modern era for a variety of reasons, one crucial one being that property rights security and contract enforcement were not legally protected; instead, these were delegated to custom and convention. There was no freedom to choose one's occupation. The right to land was not well-defined and hence, the sale of land was not only prohibited but impossible (Kawaguchi 1998). Leadership

was purely hereditary. Addressing these issues was key to the agenda of the political leaders who pursued the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

During the Restoration, leaders such as Toshimichi Ōkubo, Hirofumi Itō, and Aritomo Yamagata abolished the *Bakuhhan Taisei* and accomplished the centralization of the administrative system with the mandatory return of *han* from the *daimyō* class to the new Meiji government. The power to impose taxes was also concentrated in the central government and not the local *daimyō*. The warrior class lost its position, receiving a fixed pecuniary compensation, and a universal military draft replaced this category. The new government abolished caste differentiation and guaranteed the freedom to choose an occupation. It ensured the legal protection of the private right to property, especially to land, and allowed for the legal sale of land.

These reforms by the Meiji oligarchy correspond to the securing of civil rights for the people. In the period from the Meiji Restoration to the late 1870s, the great political philosopher Yukichi Fukuzawa wrote two important books, intended for a mass audience, where he argued for modernization. In the first book (Fukuzawa 1872–1876), which was a best-seller, he made a thorough criticism of the hierarchical ethics of Confucianism and emphasized the importance of people's equality under the law, freedom of choice, and personal effort in educating oneself as a modern, independent person. In the second book (Fukuzawa 1875), he made more academic observations on

the significance of introducing Western civilization into Japan while renouncing the Confucian moral ethics that, according to his argument, had barred the development of Western-style civilization in Japan.<sup>7</sup>

For Fukuzawa, Western civilization and values were not the final goals of Japanese modernization. For example, civil rights, especially freedom of religion, conscience, speech, and expression, are generally seen in the West as indispensable values and, therefore, are strictly protected by the constitution or basic law. In contrast, for Fukuzawa, civil rights were only a mechanism for making Japan wealthier and more powerful by encouraging effort and competition among people in the free market, thus protecting Japan's independence from the threat of Western imperialism. The protection of the *Kokutai* was the final objective for Fukuzawa, and the introduction of Western civilization was the instrument for attaining his goal. Fukuzawa, therefore, elegantly reconciled the traditional *Kokutai-Ron* and the Westernization project of Meiji Japan.

Beginning in the late 1870s, the *Jiyū-Minken Undō* [Movement for Civil Rights and Freedom] flared up. Based on a Marxist analysis, this movement has long been interpreted as representing the development of the bourgeoisie class in Japan, countering the *Ten-nō* system of absolute monarchy. However, it was more a political

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Fukuzawa (1875, 17–20). Note that his concept of civilization exclusively meant Western civilization and evaluated both Edo Japan and China as less developed.

movement of former oligarchy leaders, such as Taisuke Itagaki and Shigenobu Ōkuma, who had been expelled. To return to power, they began the movement in alliance with the class of rich farmers and merchants with the aim (among others) of securing the establishment of an elected legislature, thereby removing power from the oligarchy currently monopolizing it and vesting it in an elected body (Ramseyer and Rosenbluth 1996, 15–40).

As its result, the politicians and people who joined the movement had no antagonism towards the *Ten-nō* system itself. Instead, they argued that establishing the institution of the Diet strengthened the *Ten-nō* system by eliminating the oligarchy's political monopoly and reinforcing public support for the government and hence the *Ten-nō* system itself. In this sense, the movement was an alternative way to reconcile the traditional *Kokutai* and Western political institutions.

In response to the movement, the oligarchy declared that it would introduce a constitution and limited democracy. Japan's most powerful political leader, Hirofumi Itō, and his adviser, Kowashi Inoue, drafted the Imperial Constitution, where they rejected party democracy and stipulated that ministers, including those representing the army and navy, answer directly to the *Ten-nō* rather than to the cabinet. This independent political role gave those ministers enormous power and a virtual veto over cabinet decisions.

Thus, the Imperial Constitution has often been regarded as a reactionary, near-feudal document and not a modern constitution, especially from the post-war democratic perspective. Maruyama emphasized that the pre-war Japanese political system, based on the Imperial Constitution, did not create a modern European-style state based on the key component of state neutrality according to internal values, such as religion and conscience of the people.<sup>8</sup> According to Maruyama, the pre-war Japanese nation-state was, instead, best characterized as what he called an ‘ultra-nationalist’ state, based on the state’s stance not of neutrality but of enforcing substantial moral precepts, especially the absolute duty of the subject to the *Ten-nō*, with the consequence that freedom of religion, or even art and scientific research, was not allowed.

Although Maruyama’s argument was shared by the Japanese intelligentsia and foreign researchers, I think his evaluation is false. The Imperial Constitution secured

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<sup>8</sup> Maruyama’s argument was first proposed in his monumental article ‘Chō-Kokkashugi no Ronri to Shinri’ (The Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism), first published in 1946. This article is incorporated in Maruyama (1969, 1–24). He draws his concept of state neutrality from the argument of the German public lawyer, Carl Schmidt, who characterized the essential nature of the modern state as ‘*ein neutraler Staat*’, where the basis of national sovereignty is laid on a purely formal legal structure separated from internal values such as truth and justice.

and protected the people's freedom and their basic human rights, in a similar way to other European countries under a constitutional monarchy.

It is especially noteworthy that Kowashi Inoue attributed the basic significance of the Imperial Constitution to ancient political governance through the *Ten-nō*. Inoue argued that the monarchies in Europe and China were characterized by the privatization of people and land, which were treated as the monarch's private property. However, the authority of the *Ten-nō* was exclusively based on the *Ten-nō*'s 'virtue', having no interest in people's property. In this tradition, Inoue argued that the emperor's sovereignty and subjects' rights to private property were strictly separated in Japan and, therefore, the logic of the constitutional monarchy had already been embedded within this ancient Japanese political system. Hence, he advocated the encoding of the *Kokutai* in the written constitution and constitutional monarchy and its establishment without any ideological factors, such as civil revolution or social contract.<sup>9</sup>

This may not be historical truth per se and, thus, it was regarded as a fictitious construction. More importantly, Inoue wanted to establish a highly modernized constitutional monarchy reflecting a tradition pertinent to Japan, even to the extent of

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<sup>9</sup> See Kawaguchi (1998, 200–201) for a review of Inoue's argument.



referring to a mythical argument on the tradition of the *Ten-nō* system having begun during its ancient period.

Inoue made serious efforts to reconcile the traditional Japanese convention, the *Kokutai*, with the modern values and legal institutions meant to make Japan a modern nation-state, capable of strong economic and social development.<sup>10</sup> Through the efforts by Itō and Inoue, ‘modern moral values’ were built into the constitutional system and were disseminated among the Japanese people.

## **The development and transformation of democracy: 1890–1920**

### *The development of democratic ideology*

Despite the careful deliberations of Itō and Inoue, the oligarchic leadership could not survive the constitution’s establishment. The right to deliberate on the budget granted to the House of Representatives was a powerful weapon to reduce the power of the oligarchs (Banno 2014, 129–130). In 1900, Itō himself became the leader of a political party, *Rikken-Seiyūkai* [The Friends Club for Constitutional Politics] (hereafter, *Seiyūkai* for brevity), ushering in the era of party democracy in Japan.

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<sup>10</sup> As Anderson (1991) and Gellner (1997) have clarified, nationalism is not a traditional idea, but its modern reconstruction represents the adjustment of a national tradition to fit a modern state.

At first, party leaders shared political power with the oligarchs who controlled the administration, especially the army; however, the call for party democracy, ‘Taishō democracy’, emerged in the Taishō period (1912–1926), when a two-party political system was formed. Kei Hara, the leader of *Seiyūkai*, became the first prime minister who had not formerly been a Meiji oligarch.

In the first stage of Taishō democracy, Sakuzō Yoshino was a representative ideologue. Yoshino called his ideological position *minpon-shugi* [theory of government for the people]. Yoshino honoured the supremacy of the *Ten-nō* in the government. However, *minpon-shugi* was concerned with the maximization of the people’s welfare as the aim of the government. From this political position, Yoshino argued substantially for a representative democracy with universal suffrage in Japan. He also recognized the importance of democratic socialism, such as Fabianism, to promote welfare and equality and expected that full suffrage would become the basis for socialism in Japan within the electoral system.

An extensive group, comprising the intelligentsia, politicians, and citizens, shared Yoshino’s two interests, the establishment of universal suffrage and social democracy. They created a large social movement called *Kaizō Undō* [Remodelling Movement], which purported to make Japan a more democratic country. However, Taishō democracy and *Kaizō Undō* had absolutely no anti-imperialistic implications.

Including Yoshino, the agreement among the members who joined the movement was to make Japan a more powerful state which could compete with Western imperialism by strengthening national integration among Japanese people through the introduction of party democracy.

### ***The advent of the Taishō radicals***

The pacifist tendency became explicit in Japan only after the First World War, with the subsequent rise of pacifism in international politics. The prominent argument was that of President Woodrow Wilson, and was therefore named 'Wilsonian idealism' or 'Wilsonianism'. President Wilson criticized the international power politics that had caused the First World War and he was the driving force behind the establishment of the League of Nations, in which equal sovereign states could meet to resolve their differences.

This international political shift split the Taishō democracy movement (*Kaizō Undō*, among others) into two groups. The first view, supported by the liberal intelligentsia and politicians who intended to establish representative party democracy in Japan, emphasized cooperation with Western countries in international politics acknowledging the agreement made at the Washington Naval Conference (1920-1921).

In contrast, the radical group wanted to remodel Japan more democratically to include socialism and introduce total mobilization in the case of war.<sup>11</sup>

Yoshino regarded the League as representing the universal ideals of democracy and pacifism. He argued that Japan should follow President Wilson and mitigate its imperialist policy to support the League. From this viewpoint, Yoshino began supporting the democratization and prospective independence of the Japanese colonies in Korea and Taiwan (Mitani 1995).

The rival argument regarded Wilsonianism as reflecting the vested interests of Western countries and fixing those interests as an international status quo. This argument arose in anticipation of an impending crisis in post-war Japan, based in turn on the expectation that the next war would require total mobilization. Within the *Kaizō Undō*, right-wing groups, which wanted to establish democracy and prepare for total mobilization in Japan, supported this argument.

At the Washington Naval Conference, Japan had been criticized for its colonization of Asian countries, and its interests on the Chinese continent were severely limited. In reaction to this, Japanese right-wing groups promoted *Ajia-shugi* [Asia-centred regionalism] which argued for military intervention by Japan in the Asian

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<sup>11</sup> See Itō (1978), who proves this fact with careful research.

continent to fight Western imperialism. It is crucial to note that this kind of nationalism was alien to the traditional *Kokutai-Ron*, as it emerged quickly after the First World War as a reaction to the new international political situation.

The common view held by postwar democratic historians, that Japanese militarism in the Shōwa era (1920–1941) was developed by subverting the liberal-democratic pacifist movement in the Taishō era, is a fatal misunderstanding. In truth, ‘Japanese Fascism’ emerged as a dominant stream of Taishō democracy to pursue direct democracy and aggressive imperialism.

Mitani (1995) importantly noted that democracy, which justifies the participation of people in political power, was not weak within the political tradition of modern Japan and did not necessarily contradict either nationalism or imperialism. In contrast, liberalism, which emphasizes freedom from political power, was far weaker. These two political aspects, liberalism and democracy, are often opposed to each other when democracy approaches populism, and Mitani argued that this contradiction reached its peak in the pre-war Shōwa era.<sup>12</sup> When the *Kokutai-Ron* was combined with

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<sup>12</sup> As Mitani admitted (1995, 330), his argument is built on de Tocqueville’s (1835–40) classical dichotomy approach. A more modern treatment is presented in Hayek (1973, 1976, 1979).

direct democracy or populism and Asia-centred regionalism countering Western imperialism, militarism emerged in Shōwa Japan.

### **Political thought underlying the emergence of militarism from late Taishō to pre-war Shōwa Japan (1920–1941)**

This section reconsiders the political thinking concerning militarism in pre-Second World War Japan from 1920 to 1941. The existing accounts are often oversimplified or ideologically biased, as they establish a linear development of militarism right back to the Imperial Constitution of 1889. Forty more years were required for militarism to germinate, with the Manchurian Incident in 1931 when Japan began its incursion into China.

While the colonization of Korea, Taiwan, and many Pacific islands, and the capture of interests in Northern China occurred before the 1930s, this should not be regarded as 1930s-type militaristic aggression but as part of the imperialism that prevailed globally. Japan's imperialistic behaviour is certainly blameworthy, especially from the perspective of the colonized Asian countries, but this criticism can equally be applied to Western countries that had imperial interests in the region.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a balanced view on the nature and development of colonial policy in pre-war Japan, see Peattie (1996).

Japanese incursions into China, beginning in the late 1920s, were a unilateral revision of the status quo utilizing militaristic violence and disrupting the international order established after the First World War, which Japan had also committed to protecting. In Japan, it was mirrored by the destruction of the democracy that had developed after the establishment of the Imperial Constitution and ended in a military dictatorship that lasted until 1945.

The development of militarism in pre-war Japan can be divided into three periods: 1920–1932, 1932–1937, and 1937–1941. The first stage, 1920–1932, is the brief period of Taishō democracy and its subsequent sudden disintegration in pre-war Shōwa Japan.

### ***The end of democracy in pre-war Japan: 1920–1932***

The Imperial Constitution was the foundation of Japanese militarism, and it guaranteed the military's independence from control by the cabinet. However, democracy developed steadily with the promulgation of the Constitution until the end of the 1920s. During this period, an oligarch leader, Aritomo Yamagata, and his group of militants and politicians controlled the army. Although Yamagata was an imperialist who promoted the expansion of Japanese colonies, his careful choices always avoided

militaristic adventurism, and the army never deviated from political prudence and civilian political decisions.

The tables were turned when Yamagata passed away in 1922, in an era of burgeoning pacifism after the First World War. The military underwent severe budget cuts, and the generals felt a serious sense of crisis and a lack of *raison d'être* in the new environment. In the 1920s, the elite officers who did not belong to Yamagata's faction and resisted its monopoly of power within the army assembled under the leadership of General Tetsuzan Nagata and established a group called today the 'military reformists'. Later, Kanji Ishihara, Hideki Tōjō, and other soldiers who achieved power in the military dictatorship became members of this group (Nakamura 1998).

Ideologically, the military reformists were military technocrats rather than ideological leaders, mainly interested in expanding Japan's (perceived) national interest, particularly in East Asia, and extending the army's political influence. However, they also believed that introducing a general mobilization system in Japan was vital to attain their objectives, and hence, they were highly sympathetic to state socialism and a planned economy, even though communist ideology was their direct enemy. The anti-capitalist perspective of the military reformists merged with the state socialist ideology, spurring the collapse of democracy and pacifism in pre-war Japan (Nakamura 1998).



Within the same period, civil society in Japan also experienced a serious shock unrelated to the military. When the Shōwa era began, the *Rikken-Minseitō* [Constitutional Democratic Party] (hereafter, *Minseitō*) held power and promoted a democratic, pacifist policy. The government of Osachi Hamaguchi, in particular, proposed a generous social-democratic policy for the working class and a pacifist foreign policy based on the protection of the Washington Naval Treaty. At first, the Japanese people strongly supported Hamaguchi's peaceful and democratic policy and his honest image.

However, *Minseitō* made a mistake in returning Japan to the gold standard, and Japan was in a serious economic depression by the early 1930s, which was further exacerbated by the worldwide economic crisis.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, *Minseitō* declined a proposal from a rival party, *Seiyūkai*, to form a coalition cabinet, conditional on dropping its depressive economic policy (Banno 2014). This decision by *Minseitō* weakened the political basis of the cabinet system.

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<sup>14</sup> See Nakamura (1998, 68–73) for an analysis of the consequences of *Minseitō*'s economic policy.

The Manchurian Incident, on September 18, 1931, and the 15 May Incident, in 1932, occurred during this period,<sup>15</sup> and the Japanese people welcomed army intervention because of their despair over the economic depression and dysfunctional party politics.

### ***The structure of the right-wing movement in pre-war Shōwa Japan***

When we consider pre-war Shōwa history from an ideological perspective, it is important to focus on the contribution of left-wing and right-wing radicals after the First World War and the Russian Revolution. This is a new political perspective, different from either the traditional right-wing ideology dating back before the Meiji Restoration or the constitutional democracy developed through the *Jiyū-Minken Undo*, the Imperial Constitution's establishment and the Taishō democracy movement.

Among these radicals, a leftist group represented by the Japan Communist Party wished to make Japan a communist country under the Soviet Union's influence.

However, only members of the intelligentsia and university students supported this movement, and it did not penetrate the working class as expected. Indeed, textbook Marxism and the orders of the Comintern neglected the reality of the working class in

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<sup>15</sup> The Manchurian Incident saw an alleged Chinese bombing of a Japanese-owned railway line; this was used as a pretext for a Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The 15 May Incident was an attempted military coup d'état by elements of the Japanese Army and Navy.

Japan and were unworkable in the Japanese context. In addition, the Safety Protection Law promulgated in 1928 eliminated freedom of movement for members of banned left-wing groups, and many Marxists converted to state socialism. Therefore, the influence of Marxism was outweighed by the two right-wing groups.<sup>16</sup>

The influence of Soviet communism in pre-war Japan was transformed into state socialism (which I call 'Right-A'), as many would-be politicians or bureaucrats learned about Marxism and strongly believed in the possibility of a socialist revolution occurring that would destroy the capitalist system. They believed that introducing a socialist planned economy and a general mobilization system was indispensable for rectifying the shortcomings of the free market economy and could avert a revolution.

This radical group is essentially different from the traditional right-wing, which I call 'Right-B', and consisted of the *Kokutai-Ron* mentioned above.<sup>17</sup> The Right-A

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<sup>16</sup> Itō (1969) pioneered the study of pre-war Shōwa political history and articulated the importance of the struggle between the two types of right-wing strands within the military, political parties, and the Privy Council. His framework was used for the general history survey of pre-war Shōwa Japan by Nakamura (1998, 1–255). Banno (2016, 174–231) is also a useful survey of the period.

<sup>17</sup> In the pre-war Shōwa era, representative ideologues within the Right-B included Kiichirō Hiranuma, a member of the House of Lords, who led the right-wing association *Kokuhonsha*, and Mitsuru Tōyama, who led the most powerful right-wing activist association, *Gen'yōsha*. Doak (2007)'s category of ethnic nationalists broadly corresponds with the Right-B group in its ideological nature, but many of the ethnic nationalists were also attracted to the Right-A program because of their preference for populism.

ideology developed far later. It began no earlier than 1900 and grew quickly after the First World War and the Russian Revolution as a reaction to the development of Soviet socialism and international Wilsonianism, symbolized in Japan by the articles of the Washington Naval Treaty. The Right-A ideologues formed the group *Yūzonsha*, with its charismatic leader Ikki Kita. As Osamu Kuno, an important proponent of Masao Maruyama's theory on Japanese political thought, clearly stated (Kuno 1956, 139), Kita was the ideological origin of Shōwa 'Ultra-Nationalism', distinct from the traditional nationalism of the Meiji era.

Table 1 compares the differences in ideological positions between Right-A and Right-B, and the latter naturally asserted the sovereignty of *Ten-nō* as emperor. In contrast, Kita argued that sovereignty resided in the people of Japan as a unified state-socialistic country, with the *Ten-nō* as the supreme organ of that state. He argued for the radical redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, from capitalists to the working class, and for the elimination of institutional discrimination against rank or gender. The army, who represented the people's sovereignty, should implement these changes in the interests of all the Japanese people. Kita also asserted that Japan should occupy Asia by depriving the Western states of their colonies and imperialistic interests. According to

Kita, this intrusion was justifiable to establish distributive justice, in the same way as the domestic redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.<sup>18</sup>

Compared to Kita's program for reforming Japan, the Right-B's arguments for the ideal political regime and economic system were vague. Japanese nationhood was the most important concept, but its precise meaning was undefined. Socialism and communism were bad because they were anti-nationalistic, but the Right-B often criticized capitalism and praised pre-modern agrarian society as the basis of Japanese nationhood. Fundamentally, its notion of social institutions was built on nostalgia for a pre-modern Japanese society, which could never be effectively reproduced in modern times.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The political and ideological situation in the intermediate period: 1932–1937***

The period 1932–1937, until the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, was a transition from party democracy to militarism. The postwar democratic view argued that

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<sup>18</sup> See Nakamura (1998, 14–16) as a summary of Kita's argument.

<sup>19</sup> The international aspect of the policy programs by the Right-B was also ambiguous. The superiority of the Japanese nation within Asia was regarded as self-evident, and for them this simple belief was sufficient to permit an incursion into the Asian continent. However, the incursion itself was not manifest destiny as in the case of the Right-A program. The protection of Japanese nationhood was essential; thus, Japan's independence was far more important than any expansion, colonies, or outside interests.

fascist movements suffused Japan, carried out coups and acts of terrorism, and provoked the suppression of free speech by the military, finally subverting liberal democracy and establishing military fascism in Japan.

Maruyama<sup>20</sup> is representative of this argument, and with his concept of *Nihon Fashizumu* (Japanese fascism), which connected ‘Ultra-Nationalism’ to the fascist movement’s characteristics particular to Japan, Maruyama argued that it reflected historical backwardness, compared not only with liberal democracy but also with European fascism which developed from democratic politics. Due to its backwardness, it is characterized ideologically as the tendency towards the family-system and agrarianism, and its social support was founded not on highly educated urban citizens but the lower-educated class in rural areas who formed public opinion. Maruyama (1969, 62) considered these local opinion leaders as ‘pseudo-intelligentsia’. These near-feudal and agrarian origins were the social basis of Japanese fascism. Maruyama’s concept of Japanese fascism corresponded to the Right-B, and he identified the essential nature of fascism in Japan as a movement belonging to the Right-B group.

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<sup>20</sup> This was in his article *Nihon fashizumu no shisō to Undō* (The ideology and dynamics of Japanese fascism). This article was originally given as a lecture in 1947 and translated by Maruyama (1969, 25–83).

Unsurprisingly, the basic ideology of ordinary young officers was based on the traditional Right-B, and they attempted a series of coups, including the 15 May Incident in 1932 and the 26 February Incident in 1936. However, in neither case did they receive significant support from their peers and in the case of the 26 February Incident, the larger of the two incidents, the top army leaders took severe action: the soldiers involved were sentenced to death, and the army leaders who had expected the plan to succeed took responsibility and left politics. Therefore, it is highly doubtful that the coups by these young officers were the core incident(s) that established military fascism in Japan.

The political situation changed during the period between the 15 May Incident in 1932 and 1937.<sup>21</sup> The 1932 election resulted in a landslide win for *seiyūkai* with 301 of the 466 seats, because people strongly supported the expansionary fiscal policy of the Minister of Finance, Korekiyo Takahashi, as a route to recovery from the depression. However, it is highly likely that *Seiyūkai*, as a pro-army party, would have chosen a right-wing army leader as prime minister. Instead, under the leadership of Kin-mochi Saionji, the last *Genrō* (elder statesman who advises the *Ten-nō* in political decisions),

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<sup>21</sup> See Banno 2016, 204–216.

the *Ten-nō* was directly advised to nominate first Minoru Saitō, and then Keisuke Okada as prime ministers to bar *Seiyūkai* from power.

Both ex-navy leaders, Saitō and Okada belonged to the liberal group who had contributed to the cooperative international policy in the Taishō period. On the whole, the Japanese cabinet system was undemocratic but civilian at that point, until the 26 February Incident, when Okada narrowly escaped assassination following an attack. Korekiyo Takahashi had continued to hold the position of Minister of Finance, as he was trusted to guide the economy out of depression, but he was assassinated in the 26 February Incident, along with ex-prime minister Saitō.

The post-war democratic view has argued that Japanese fascism, influenced by the opinion of the ‘pseudo-intelligentsia’, surged in this period and subverted democracy. However, what occurred in this period was not a struggle between democracy and fascism. By this point, the real struggle was, instead, between the radicals and conservatives, Right-A and Right-B. *Minseitō* and the ‘New Bureaucrats’ or ‘Reformist Bureaucrats’ supported the two cabinets as a party base and in the state’s concrete administration. The Reformist Bureaucrats grouping improved its position due to the declining power of the politicians and had a strong sympathy for socialism and antipathy towards the free market economy. Therefore, the government’s overall position was close to the Right-A program. However, it did not have a firm political



foundation, for *Seiyūkai* held the overwhelming majority of the diet seats that had a clear and strong electoral mandate.

Despite its defects, most conscientious pro-democratic politicians and the intelligentsia gathered around the group which supported the Saitō and Okada cabinets. As a representative case, Tatsukichi Minobe, the most influential constitutional lawyer, who supported the pro-democratic interpretation of the Imperial Constitution, proposed a ‘Round-Table Top-Level Conference’ in which the top leaders of the political parties, military, business, and workers would gather to make final political decisions, bypassing the cabinet (Banno 2014). Surprisingly enough, the dominant opinion leaders of the Taishō democracy and their followers in the academic sphere, having assimilated state socialism by that stage, supported the two cabinets in reforming the corruption of party politics and limiting army access to civilian political affairs.

In conclusion, the real ideological struggle was much more singular than the stereotypical conflict between democracy and fascism. The elitist, Right-A intelligentsia connected to liberal politicians close to the *Ten-nō*, such as Saionji, Saitō, and Okada, reformist bureaucrats, and in party terms, *Minseitō* and the still-legal socialist parties (who had reconciled themselves to egalitarian state socialism), versus the more conservative Right-B concept held by the traditional right-wing army group, right-wingers, and their political associations, and in party terms, the *Seiyūkai*. It advocated a

prompt return to party democracy to regain power as the majority of the diet, and at the same time, criticized the innate state-socialist nature of its opponent as fascist during the notorious *Ten-nō Kikan-Setsu Jiken* [The Emperor Organ Theory Incident] in 1935.<sup>22</sup>

Contrary to the logic of Maruyama, the Right-B group failed in its struggle. The election just after the *Kikan-Setsu Jiken* was an overwhelming victory for *Minseitō*, even though *Seiyūkai* was a rural-based political party. Although the 26 February Incident occurred one week after the election, it led only to a further decrease in the political power of the Right-B group in the army and of *Seiyūkai*, which had lost credibility among the Japanese people.

Finally, the Right-A leaders expelled the Right-B leaders who were in the army and connected to the young soldiers that had planned the 26 February 1936 Incident. The *Shin-Taisei* [New Regime] established under Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe in 1937, right before the start of the second Sino-Japanese War, incorporated all players, including the army, under a national framework based on the Right-A ideology.

As this new regime was a mixture of various interest groups with many contradictory agendas, there was no real power to make responsible political decisions. In particular, no one was able to stop or even control the army's incursion into the Asian continent. Just

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<sup>22</sup> See Banno (2014, 211–216) for a detailed description of the incident, which revolved around the view that the Emperor was merely an 'organ of the state'.

before the Pacific War with the Western Allies began in 1941, Konoe stepped down from power, for his new regime was unworkable.<sup>23</sup> Hideki Tōjō, who led the army at the time, succeeded Konoe and oversaw the war effort under the general mobilization system that was established.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the common belief that Japanese nationalism is unique—feudal, hierarchical, and anti-liberal-democratic—my study has clarified that it included various

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<sup>23</sup> See Itō (2013) for an analysis of the political process of *Konoe Shin-Taisei* and its failure.

<sup>24</sup> Up to this point, my analysis appears to have overlooked the existence of other groups of right-wing ideologues discussed by Harootunian (2000). His analysis covers the entire broad class of ideologues but emphasizes two groups in particular, the Kyoto School of Philosophers represented by Shūzō Kuki, Tetsurō Watsuji, and Kiyoshi Miki, and the group of native ethnologists represented by Kunio Yanagida and Shinobu Orikuchi. For both these groups, Harootunian's analysis concentrates not on the significance of their research per se, but the background nationalistic motivations contained within their research, how these motives were connected with Japanese fascism, and hence how their serious studies were finally integrated into the ideology of the fascist political process. While I agree with many individual aspects of Harootunian's analysis as highly brilliant, his overall insistence on a strict Marxist interpretation of the nature of capitalism in Japan fatally undermines his conclusions. In my opinion, both native ethnologists and the Kyoto School philosophers were no more than peripheral ideologues within either the Restorationist or Reformist Right-Wing groups; the analysis of their ideas and contributions by authors such as Harootunian (2000) does not indicate any need to change my earlier outlined framework for the analysis of nationalist thought in pre-war Japan.

components, some of which are strictly modern, including the dominant type consistent with liberal democracy.

The prototype of Japanese nationalism developed in the early modern Edo period, when the *Kokutai-Ron* established a consciousness of the unity and independence of Japan as a nation-state. After the Meiji Restoration, constitutional writers like Hirofumi Itō and Kowashi Inoue synchronized the *Kokutai-Ron* with social institutions introduced from the West, such as private property rights, a competitive market economy, and party democracy, culminating in the establishment of the constitutional monarchy with the adoption of the Imperial Constitution.

After the adoption of the Constitution, the Japanese political system also came closer to representative democracy, as symbolized by the establishment of full male suffrage and the two-party political system in the early 1930s. Pacifism and international cooperation also became dominant after the 1920s.

However, this democratic movement also saw the introduction of an alternative model of democracy—direct democracy, such as anarcho-syndicalism or Soviet-type socialism. Furthermore, some right-wing groups had a strong sense of crisis concerning international movements after the First World War, the exclusion of Japan from the imperialistic interests of Western countries, and the threat of communism due to the emergence of the Soviet Union. Surprisingly enough, the left and right amalgamated in

the early Shōwa era as the state socialist movement, combined with military and bureaucratic reformists, and became a new right-wing group promoting the establishment of a general mobilization system and an Asia-centred regionalism.

In the 1930s, when Japanese democracy collapsed, two groups holding power in the military, the Right-A group and the more traditional Right-B group, struggled for political power. The power consolidation by the Right-A in the late 1930s led to Japan's full penetration into East Asia. It is the Right-A's nationalism that largely justified and promoted militarism and foreign aggression in the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War.

In summary, Japanese nationalism, as it emerged from the *Kokutai-Ron*, assumed three aspects over the Meiji–1941 period: nationalism consistent with a constitutional monarchy and international cooperation with Western countries, nationalism assimilated with state socialism and Asia-centred regionalism, and the movement to re-establish the pre-modern *Kokutai* in modern Japan.

This study makes a significant contribution to the discussion concerning recent political issues. It is sometimes argued that the recent rightward trend in Japan and the resurgence of nationalism are signs of an impending re-militarization.<sup>25</sup> Despite this

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Harootunian (2019, 326–327) warned that the recent return of Shinzō Abe as prime minister and his ambition to revise the peace clause within the Japanese Constitution

fear in other countries, nationalism in Japan, as it currently exists, is the descendant of an assimilated liberal-democratic nationalism, or the nostalgic *Kokutai-Ron*. I agree that some elements of the latter group, who for example repeat hate speech targeting non-Japanese Asian people, are shameful. However, they have no concrete political conception of themselves, as the Right-A did before the last World War, without which they will find it difficult to become the source of any political movement for militarism or otherwise.

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could be regarded as a resurrection of ultra-nationalism as a core social and political value in Japan, and even as a sign of the surfacing of fascism. As is pointed out earlier, his argument here builds on the failed social theory of Marxism, where the inalienable relationship between capitalism and fascism is presupposed without any theoretical basis. If this theoretical presupposition is rejected, which would be the case for me and many other scholars, it can be confidently asserted that the recent rightward trend in Japan does not represent a resurgence of pre-war ultra-nationalism.

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## Tables

	Mainstream political position (1889–1932)	Right-wing (1919–1936)		Militarism (1928–1945)
		Right-A (radicals)	Right-B (traditionalists)	
Political regime	Constitutional monarchy	State sovereignty	Emperor sovereignty	Military dictatorship
Economic system	Capitalism	State socialism	N/A	Bureaucratically planned economy
Political position towards Western countries	Cooperation	Liberation of Asia from Western imperialism	Isolationism	Expulsion of Western countries from Asia
International position towards Asia	Preservation of the status quo set at the Washington Naval Conference	Support of Asian nations and people against Western imperialism	Superiority of the Japanese nation over other Asian nations	Aggressive policy towards Asia under the pretext of liberation from Western imperialism

Table 1: The structure of political ideologies in Japan before and during the Second World War. Table source: Author's analysis

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