

## Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (2)

## Does Nationalism Really Exist in Japan?

By Nakano Osamu

A Japanese sociologist remembers the time when he was studying in a German provincial city in the 1970s and one evening went to a tavern to drink beer. A German sitting next to him talked to him and their conversation turned to World War II. In high spirits, the German jokingly said, "We (Germany and Japan) lost the war because we were allied with Italy. Let us fight just by ourselves next time. Then, we will never lose."

The German's remark was so sensational to him that the Japanese scholar was at a loss for an answer. He realized for the first time that ordinary German people had such feelings even now. But he found himself unprepared to give the German the nod. For him, as perhaps was the case with most other Japanese, forming an alliance with Germany once again to fight the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and other major countries of the world was unthinkable. To his mind, Japanese people, under the war-renouncing constitution, have no will to defend their country even from unwarranted aggression, let alone think of re-arming the country and starting a new war.

Without a positive response from the Japanese drinking partner, the German left the bar disappointedly. As he gazed after the German, the Japanese sociologist reminded himself of the history of mankind which witnessed repetitions of war and aggression, victory and defeat, triumph and humiliation, and another round of unrepentant massacre and bloodshed. He wondered which feeling, Japanese or German, was normal. Naturally, nationalism, which had only negative implications in Japan's post-war value system, recurred in his mind with neutral implications, as he later admitted. He had to think that for 30 years since the end of World War II (up to the 1970s), Japanese people including himself may have been unaware of, or may have intentionally avoided being aware of, being part of

Japan.

Why did Japan choose to plunge into World War II? What enabled Japan to put up a good fight in the early stages of the war although the country was eventually defeated? To follow the conventional theory, the answer is "ultra-nationalism," the ideology which dominated Japan's modern history since the Meiji Period, particularly in the years preceding and during World War II. After the war, the academic world and journalism in Japan were abnormally eager to get rid of ultranationalistic spirit and sentiment. Even a trifling expression of nationalistic feeling was dismissed outright as a revival of nationalism and was subjected to concentrated attack from academia and the press.

Moral and ethic education aimed at teaching children how to behave in daily life, such as yielding seats to the aged on trains and buses, was opposed on grounds that such teaching represents a revival of the notorious wartime ethics education and could result in the enforcement of self-sacrifice. The absence of public manners in present-day Japan, symbolized by young people's failure to yield seats to the aged and handicapped, is known globally. What I want to say is that post-war Japan is sensitive to a revival of nationalism to such an extent. Most Japanese take such sensitivity for granted. That is why the Japanese sociologist mentioned before was so surprised by the remark made by the German he met at the bar, which was in stark contrast to post-war Japanese mentality.

In the 1980s, there was no longer any relevance in the argument that Japanese people were still as belligerent as they were from the Meiji Period to World War II. Indeed, pundits began to note Japanese people's extreme lack of national consciousness, a phenomena known as "peace euphoria." Even so, some people, both at home and abroad, still had the fixation that Japanese

national characteristics could hardly change and alleged Japanese belligerence was criticized on various occasions.

In the late 1970s, Japanese products began to flood U.S. and other markets. Japanese economic activities were globalized to such an extent as to be called "economic aggression." Notorious Japanese trading houses, known as *sogo shosha*, not only exported Japanese products, but also hunted globally for raw materials and energy sources. Japanese global economic activities were reminiscent of similar U.S. moves in the 1950s, which earned Japan the nickname "Yellow Yankee." Nobody had expected Japan to expand, or to be allowed to expand, on a global scale. Global economic activities brought Japan enormous wealth. Detractors throughout the world, including some Japanese, saw something unthinkable or unpardonable in the Japanese accumulation of wealth. They regarded Japan's global economic activities as "aggression," which was a metamorphosis of belligerence and revenge for its defeat in World War II.

In other words, the detractors contended, Japan has basically remained unchanged and was trying to regain or obtain what it had lost or sought in World War II. In their judgment, Japan's economic activities were essentially the same as its wartime aggression, and differed only in form and shape; that is, Japanese nationalism developed in a different direction. Such arguments were first raised by Japanese intellectuals, who typified the post-war tendency of considering self-denial and self-persecution as intelligent. Their aberration escalated to the point that they argued, not jokingly, that National—the trade name of Matsushita Electric Co., a key player in Japan's exports of consumer electronic equipment—symbolized the nationalistic nature of Japanese economic activities. Such nonsensical talk went unchallenged, per-



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Nationalism?: cheers, tears, and the waving of small flags were seen at the World Cup Asia Qualifying Round

haps because Japanese economic activities reminded not a few Japanese of pre-war and wartime belligerence, aggressiveness and nationalism.

But were Japanese economic activities during the high-growth period really nationalistic? Did they reflect the solidarity of Japanese people, with each citizen aware of their mission of developing their nation? I am doubtful.

Most songs composed before and during World War II were aimed at boosting national morale. But as already widely noted, there were a large number of songs popular during the period that depicted the misery of and antipathy to war, entirely different from morale-boosting songs and devoid of belligerence and aggressiveness.

Before and during World War II, when I was an elementary school student, I often heard vicious rumors about the Imperial Family. I suppose such rumors were more prevalent among Japanese people during the war than after the Emperor declared himself no longer sacred and popularized himself after the war. People, particularly adults, were enjoying conversations apparently with some vicious intent, as

if by custom.

I wonder if ultranationalism, based on the deification of the Emperor, really existed in Japan? It seems to me that at least the general populace was unfettered by ultranationalistic dogma.

In World War II, Japan, then an economically minor country, fought advanced Western countries. So, it was a matter of course for Japan to enforce strict economic controls. But buying things on the black market was a general practice even from the outset of the introduction of economic controls. Apart from an exceptional few, all people from top government and military leaders down were involved in black market deals one way or another. Those who refused to eat black market foods were doomed to death, like the widely reported case of death from hunger of a judge, who contended with "honest" poverty.

Economic control was a logical means for achieving the national goals of the war. Black marketeering constituted treason against the nation. So, those people who were unhesitatingly involved in the black market economy were far from being nationalistic. Nationalism did not exist deep in their heart. They only preserved a facade of nationalism, if any.

The consciousness or behavior of Japanese people, from top leaders down to the general populace, from the Meiji Period to the present day, has never been based on nationalism in reality, though they may have outwardly behaved nationalistically, even during World War II.

I am convinced that nationalism has never existed in Japan, let alone ultranationalism. Then what prompted Japan to bluster into a thoughtless and crazy war?

Some leaders of the Meiji Restoration did possess nationalistic consciousness. But otherwise, did Japanese from the Edo Period through to the present day, whether they were samurai or farmers, really possess nationalistic consciousness? Not a few samurai in the Edo

Period did sacrifice themselves. But they did so not for their country or countrymen, but only for the sake of protecting their own honor in conformity with the norm of *bushido*.

The historically famous Ako Incident (in which a group of samurai of the defunct Ako clan killed in revenge a feudal lord who humiliated their master and doomed him to death) showed that the samurai observed their moral duty, but ignored the interests of the whole clan, that is, its restoration.

Even without nationalism, the accumulation of actions based on such a principle enabled Japan to continue war for 15 years from the Manchurian Incident, including the last four years during which Japan fought major Western countries. If Japan had had clear national or racial consciousness, Japan would not have suffered such a clumsy defeat or a clumsy manner of defeat.

A series of unfortunate incidents that took place in the final days of the war, such as the meaningless suicidal attacks on U.S. warships (known as kamikaze attacks) by young Japanese pilots, the destruction of main Japanese cities through U.S. aerial bombing and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all resulted from a delay in Japan's accepting defeat. And the delay was a product of typical Japanese behavior based on negative norms; that is, the absence of subjective actions.

To my mind, Japanese leaders' adherence to the maintenance of the Imperial system and the position of the Emperor, which was among the key factors in Japan's delay in accepting defeat, had nothing to do with nationalism; it rather ran counter to nationalism.

Japanese people's extraordinary friendliness to U.S. occupation force soldiers, their generosity in the face of crimes committed by the soldiers and their other behavior after the surrender went beyond Japanese leaders' anticipation, and their anxiety proved unwarranted. Japanese submissiveness came as a surprise to the U.S. occupation authorities too. In a way, Japanese submissiveness went to such an extent that they disappointed Japanese war-time

leaders who propagated the slogan "Down with American and British Devils." Some Japanese academicians blame such submissiveness on Japanese characteristics of getting easily excited and quickness in cooling down. But I assume that no Japanese had believed in what Japanese war-time leaders branded as "American and British devils" and ultranationalism had never existed in this country.

If ultranationalism never existed in the first place, then there can be neither a decline nor a revival of ultranationalism.

The custom of hoisting the "Rising Sun" national flag at the gate of each household on national holidays almost died after the war. The custom has been revived only on a small scale since the late 1950s, which was said to have marked the end of the post-war period. The Ministry of Education has instructed public schools to hoist the national flag, but the flag hoisting has not become a general practice, due to strong resistance from "renovationist" (leftist) forces. The same is true of the singing of the national anthem in schools.

In every Olympic Games, the Japanese media take up the issue of the hoisting of national flags and the playing of national anthems in honor of winners. Behind such a phenomena lies Japanese ambivalence toward nationalism. Whether it exists or not, Japanese people have complex and delicate feeling toward nationalism.

After hard-fought preliminaries, the Japanese soccer team recently won the long-coveted right to participate in the 1998 World Cup. National excitement during the preliminaries, from the excessively enthusiastic cheering by hooligan-like supporters to media frenzy, as well as the national exaltation that followed the Japanese team's qualification for the World Cup, testified to the existence of what can be called nationalism.

This national excitement can be explained in the context of nationalism. Yet, the national morale-boosting over the World Cup in Asian and African countries and the cheering by hooli-

gan-like supporters in European countries cannot be discussed in the same context.

The former does represent the expression of nationalism, but the latter simply represents the expression of social frustration common to advanced countries, where modernization has reached a limit or hit a deadlock.

Needless to say, Japan belongs to the latter case. The Japanese frame of mind is on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Japan's phenomenal economic development and the raising of Japanese people's standard of living, brought about by the high economic growth that started in the 1960s, were all extraordinary and exceptional in human history and simply unequalled in the world. In trying to understand this extraordinary phenomenon, it is natural to recollect the abnormality of a small island nation that challenged the major powers of the world several score years ago.

But when we look back on the days when high economic growth began, we can wonder whether it was nationalism or ultranationalism that was behind Japanese motivation.

The post-war constitution portrayed cultural and living standards equal to those in Western countries as the ideal for Japan. When Ikeda Hayato, on his assumption of the prime ministership in 1960, unveiled his pet project of doubling people's income and promised to eradicate hunger and disease, let all people possess durable consumer goods equally and provide each household with a house, it seemed as if he was deriding the unproductiveness of ideological and political conflicts that had continued to pester the country since the end of the war. People themselves were tired of political and ideological conflicts and struggles. The economic development that originated from Ikeda's income-doubling policy has resulted in almost 100% ownership of color televisions, cars and reasonable condominiums, and brought overseas tours, golfing and skiing within everybody's reach.

Though the affluence is still modest, wealth was distributed equally among people. But equal distribution of wealth

required Japan to become a major economic power; that is, the country had to engage in torrential exports, buy up raw materials and energy resources. The global activities of powerful *sogo shosha* were essential. Their activities were so intense as to be described as economic aggression. If their activities constituted aggression, that may have been motivated by nationalism. But even if Japanese had aggressive desires, they were modest and thoughtful, and there was no nationalistic paradigm in their consciousness or intention of seeking enhancement of national prestige, control of the world economy or pursuit of national interests.

Nationalism may be defined as a catalyst establishing a transcendent value which 1) allows the extension of hegemony overseas in pursuit of national interests and removes any obstacles with violence, and 2) with which people voluntarily identify themselves.

If that is so, the motivation for Japan's economic growth since the 1960s was not nationalism. Japan's fast economic growth in substance was a result of the massive accumulation of fair realization of people's self-seeking, modest desires. To my mind, such achievement represented the result of Japanese people's honest pursuit of modernization, which was the erstwhile human ideal.

That being so, before we refer to nationalism, we should first attempt to analyze the mechanism and momentum of modern industrial society which 1) represents the massive accumulation of fair realization of people's modest desires based on their free will, and 2) appears to be a huge mass and energy to the outside world and pose a threat.

Unless we do so, we will be blamed for a lack of capacity to think if we define the motivation for Japanese economic expansion as nationalism. ■

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