Japan's Identity and What It Means

By Kitaoka Shin'ichi

1. Introduction

Not all countries feel a burning passion to clearly define their own national identities, and fewer still are obsessed with this issue as much as Japan. The Japanese search for a clear identity has not been a steady and continuous one, though, and this pursuit has been characterized by a significant ebb and flow.

The passion explicit in the Japanese search for national identity likely stems from the fact that Japan lies on the outskirts of the Chinese cultural sphere but has a strength and a distinct character that has never been completely overwhelmed by the influence of China. At the core of great civilizations there has been little need to inquire into an identity that is self-evident, and small dependent countries on the outskirts of such great civilizations are seldom troubled by the issue of establishing their own national identities.

It is when a country is confronted with new and fundamental challenges that its pursuit of identity becomes most vigorous. Countries able adequately to handle their domestic and foreign affairs through traditional approaches are unlikely to undertake a serious examination of their own identities. Thus the search for national identity is more of an effort to address new realities than a confirmation of traditions, and today's search began in Japan as the country gained international influence in the 1980s and as history marked the end of the Cold War.

Be that as it may, the identity of any single country comprises an enormous range of facets, making a simple definition impossible. For the time being, therefore, I would like to begin by looking back over the history of Japan's groping for a national identity. As starting this examination from ancient times would be too roundabout an approach, I will limit my discussion here to the modern age.

2. The Quest for Identity in Modern Japan

The start of the modern age in Japan was marked by the shock of an encounter with the West, but Japan's response was strikingly different from that of China or Korea. Having maintained a certain distance in its contacts with China, earlier seen as the center of culture itself, Japan was able most importantly to maintain a similar distance in its dealings with the West.

Photo : Fukuzawa Memorial Center for Modern Japanese Studies, Keio University

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), who wrote *Datsu-a Ron (An Essay on Abandoning Asia)* in 1885

Unlike China, self-conceited in its conviction of its cultural superiority, and Korea, which saw itself as the legitimate heir to Confucian culture, Japan responded to this new challenge not with a knee-jerk overreaction but in a relatively cool-headed manner on the basis of a comparatively objective assessment of the West's power. The course that Japan chose in light of the merciless advance of the West into a stagnant Asia was defined by the concepts of *fukoku kyohei* (a rich country and a strong military), *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment), and *datsu-a nyu-o* (abandoning Asia and joining the West). As evident in the case of Fukuzawa Yukichi, neither a simple infatuation with the West nor a belief in the essential superiority of Western civilization were behind this decision; objectively speaking, there was no other path Japan could take.

The goal of *datsu-a nyu-o* was achieved for the most part with the conclusion of an alliance between Japan and Great Britain in 1902 and Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. In the opinion of Yamagata Aritomo, though, this martial victory, however, far from demonstrating the superiority of the yellow race, showed nothing more than that members of the yellow race who had acquired a thorough knowledge of Western culture could defeat members of the white race who had not, and he cautioned against rising nationalism.

While the end of World War I in 1918 saw Japan's status as a great power further enhanced, it also created a number of thorny issues. Japan did gain admission to the club of great powers, but it did so as the lowest ranking member in a club devoid of a principle of racial equality. The termination of hostilities also brought with it the collapse of both Germany and Russia, the end of militarism, and the advent of an age of democracy. Though seen as a world power in the midst of these upheavals, Japan still stood on very shaky foundations.

The unease that followed World War I became even more real in the early years of the Showa era. Ugaki Kazushige remarked that Japan's difficulties lay in the fact that it was surrounded by nothing but wayward countries – be it the US, the USSR, or China – that did not recognize traditional foreign policy realities. All three of these countries rejected the imperialistic poli-

cies of Japan, a country which had gained admission to the great powers club, albeit at the lowest rank, through a traditional imperialistic policy.

It was in such a context that Asianism reemerged in Japan. When the US, China, and the USSR each in their own way began expressing disapproval of Japan's special rights and interests in China, Japan diverged from the policy of cooperation with the West that it had maintained since the early years of the Meiji era, rejected the "open door" policy, sought closer Japan-Manchurian-Chinese cooperation, and eventually aimed for a "New Order in East Asia" and later a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere".

Addressing Konoe Fumimaro's confrontational attitude towards the foreign policies of Great Britain and the US, Saionji Kinmochi, the last of the Meiji era elder statesmen, argued that, since Great Britain and the US effectively dominated the world, it would be to Japan's advantage to cooperate with these two powers and that to do otherwise would be foolish. Nevertheless, Japan did indeed choose the path of non-cooperation.

3. The Search in Post-War Japan

It was often suggested after World War II that Japan's future lay in becoming a cultural nation, and a great number of people agreed that Japan should become a pacifist cultural country even if it meant being a poor and small one (similar to the "small but brightly shining country" spoken of by Takemura Masayoshi several years ago). In the pacifism dispute that began in 1950, many intellectuals advocated a peace with all (i.e., with both the US and the USSR) and leveled criticisms at government policy. From our present vantage we can see that their idea was an unfeasible argument which signified nothing more than a wish to prolong the state of peace that Japan enjoyed, but there were many who wanted to distance Japan from the realities of the Cold War and who were unhappy with Japan's continued subservience to the US.

The Diplomatic Bluebook of 1957 is

Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922), a principal architect of the Meiji military system

famous for setting forth the three principles of subsequent Japanese foreign policy – diplomacy centered on the United Nations, membership in the Asian community, and maintenance of cooperation with the free world – with the ties between Japan and the free world listed third. Japan's policy was one of "cooperation" with the free world and relatively few Japanese saw their country as an integral part of this democratic camp. Japan had just achieved its long cherished hope of UN membership in December 1956 and been first elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the excitement over this no doubt played a part in this foreign policy decision. The 1960 protests over the Japan-US security treaty also showed that opposition to the US was still strong among intellectuals and students.

The sense of connectedness with Asia gradually faded away, however, as the rapid economic growth continued in the 1960s. The debates over Japan's identity soon died down. Substantive arguments such as those made in Umesao Tadao's 1956 *Bunmei no Seitaishikan Josetsu* (*An Introduction to the Bionomical View of Civilizations*) and Kosaka Masataka's 1964 work *Kaiyo Kokka Nihon no Koso* (*The Vision of The Maritime Nation of Japan*) as well as modernization theories imported in the 1960s were all arguments emphasizing the differences and disparities between Japan and Asia against a back-

ground of economic growth. Strong interest in Asia did reappear to a degree in 1972 when Japan and China restored diplomatic relations but only temporarily.

Increasingly from the latter half of the 1960s questions about the essential characteristics of Japan or those aspects of Japan that were especially praiseworthy were answered with the comment that Japan had become an economic power. The economic strength of Japan was frequently cited as a key element in Japan's identity, disregarding the military, political, and cultural aspects of identity to which countries normally point.

Acknowledgment of Japan as an ally of the West in the Cold War among a somewhat larger segment of the Japanese public came at the end of the 1970s under the Ohira administration. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Japan took part in the economic sanctions against the USSR by the West and boycotted the Moscow Olympics. These actions were deemed proper policy by the Japanese people, and the groundwork for such public approval had been laid in the summit meetings between heads of state from the West and the Japanese prime minister held annually from 1975.

Although the policy of placing Japan within the Western camp did come under pressure during the Suzuki administration, it regained solid footing under the Nakasone administration. At the Williamsburg summit, Prime Minister Nakasone declared that security was indivisible and that Japan was a member of the Western security alliance. The term "military alliance" even came to be accepted without much opposition.

The sharp climb in Japan's economic status in the 1980s became a source of increased friction between the US and Japan, and there was much discussion over what Japan's place should be, given its economic size. The need for an expansion of imports was pointed out, and Japan-US structural talks even went so far as to address structural issues within Japanese society itself.

The end of the Cold War and the Gulf

Photo : Shoko Shuseikan

The Satsuma clan (Kagoshima) fought against the British Navy in 1863 – a result of the sonno-joi movement

War had an even greater impact on Japan. Until that time, Japan had for its own protection been an integral part of the framework of the Western security alliance. As the threat from the Soviet Union and then Russia diminished, though, Japan was brought to keenly realize the obvious fact that limiting its concerns to domestic affairs would make it difficult to fulfill its obligations to the international community. The expression "a normal country" popularized by Ozawa Ichiro is one that appears at first glance to run counter to the idea of a distinctly separate identity, but in fact Ozawa criticized the concept of identity held theretofore that was overly biased towards Japan's economic status and stressed that Japan could only define its identity after fulfilling the role of a normal country.

4. Identity and Japan's Political System

The above sketch reveals that the search for identity has not simply been a matter of intellectual or cultural interest but rather is an issue requiring serious choices in the realm of international politics. Consequently this issue is connected with the debates over Japan's political system and who should run it; let us examine this point from a historical perspective.

The crisis that Japan faced at the end of the Edo Period was first and foremost a foreign policy concern and thus was clearly seen as a matter to be resolved by the shogunate. Doubts about this responsibility were rare even for some time after the arrival of Commodore Perry's "black ships"; this was most certainly an occasion requiring the exercise of power by the shogun. The shogunate, however, had seen a considerable decline in its military strength, while the various clans were similarly weakened by corruption among their more privileged members. In the end the Satsuma and Choshu clans, the two clans who had most effectively utilized the human resources available to them, took up the symbol of the emperor and rose to national prominence.

Japan proceeded further in this direction from the Meiji Restoration, as the *sonno-joi* (revere the emperor, expel the barbarians) movement came to stand for the creation of a unified state headed by the emperor that could stand on equal terms with the Western countries.

In adopting this course, Japan took a number of excessive measures and even revised its reading of history to suit its new purposes. One of these measures involved the status of the emperor. Excepting ancient times, the emperor had generally been regarded as a powerless symbolic presence, but the Meiji leaders altered the state structure in such a way that the emperor would possess the same power and authority as European kings and emperors. Particularly noteworthy here is that the emperor was given supreme command of the armed forces in imitation of the major European powers of the day. The Japanese emperor has throughout history been a symbol of the civilian ruling class, not the warrior class, but the new state nonetheless placed the emperor in the unnatural position of supreme military commander.

The idea that Japan had a time-honored tradition of universal conscription, too, was a fiction. Warriors accounted for no more than around 10% of the general population, and many of these had already forgotten their pride as members of the military caste and become remiss in obeying their martial code of conduct. Omura Masujiro and Yamagata Aritomo, the principal architects of the Meiji military system, were scornful of the upper echelons of the warrior caste and this sentiment led them to advocate the abolition of the warrior as a social class.

Military service was a concept foreign to the vast majority of Japanese not of the samurai class. By confiscating the weapons of farmers in his famous "sword hunt", Toyotomi Hideyoshi had also freed the farmers from any obligation to perform military service. Thus, when universal conscription was introduced in the Meiji era, it naturally met with considerable resistance.

Be that as it may, the West was used as a model in creating the Meiji state and various traditions reinterpreted or used in ways suited to the founders' purposes. This system bolstered Japan through the Russo-Japanese War.

World War I offered the first challenge to this system. As democratization gained ground worldwide, Japan found it necessary to dispel its image as the Prussia of Asia and the formation of a new cabinet by Hara Takashi near the end of WWI was truly symbolic of this. The phrase *kensei no jodo* (regular procedures of constitutional government) became fashionable and Minobe Tatsukichi's "emperor-as-organ-of-the-state" theory gained wide acceptance, and neither of these arose from a strict interpretation of the Meiji Constitution. Thus Japan once again adapted itself to the trend of the times by reinterpreting its traditions.

With the 1930s and the collapse of the international framework for cooperation came calls for a stronger governmental structure to lead Japan as the world became involved in bare-faced power

struggles. Though these calls ultimately went unanswered, they did at the very least bring about an end to party government.

One reason for this is the crucial fact that the US, a model for Japan, appeared to have met its ruin. For Japanese intellectuals heavily influenced by Marxism, the start of the Great Depression in 1929 was seen as the first step in the historical "inevitability" of capitalism's collapse. The future was thought to lie with government by strong leaders, be it Stalinism, Nazism or fascism.

In the post-WWII era, to summarize very briefly, the "1955 system" under which the Liberal Democratic Party controlled the government, kept in check by the Socialist Party, was very much in line with Japan's sentimental commitment to unarmed neutrality and its glorification of economic prosperity. Hence Japan has always had a domestic political system corresponding to its place and identity within the international community.

## 5 "Government by Harmony" and Leadership

In this fashion Japan has responded to trends in the international community by reinterpreting its own traditions, altering its perspective on its own identity, and changing its political system. This has been far more difficult than simply changing foreign policies under the existing political system, but the needed changes in foreign policies were in fact so formidable that they necessitated changes in the political system.

Professor Kosaka Masataka once stated that the first article in a truly Japanese constitution would be "Harmony must be respected." Arriving at a consensus and proceeding smoothly from that consensus with as little friction and dispute as possible is a fundamental rule in Japan, and a political culture imbued with this principle makes it tough to effect major changes.

Major changes have been nonetheless necessary, though, and several of the leaders who guided Japan through these transitions – Okubo Toshimichi, Hara Takashi, and Hamaguchi Osachi – met

their end at the hands of assassins. In the post-WWII era, Yoshida Shigeru, regarded highly by later generations, was at the time of his resignation the object of severe public criticism.

The "1955 system" brought with it a diminishing of strong leadership, a decentralization of authority, and greater equalization within parties. With the exception of Ishibashi Tanzan (who retired due to illness), every President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) between 1955 and 1972 served more than one term; Kishi Nobusuke was elected twice, Ikeda Hayato three times, and Sato Eisaku four times. However, only one of the
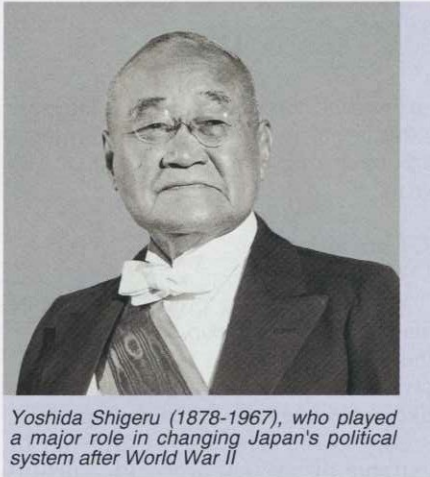
Yoshida Shigeru (1878-1967), who played a major role in changing Japan's political system after World War II

Presidents serving between 1972 and 1993 won reelection.

Promotion within the party and to the cabinet came to be based on the number of times a politician had won reelection,with anyone who had emerged victorious in six or seven elections eligible for a cabinet position. Frequent reshuffling of cabinets became customary and ministers served an average term of only 11 months. The usual means of forming cabinets in Japan thus differed substantially from the standard practice worldwide of forming the strongest cabinet possible with the most capable members of the ruling party, who then seek to hold on to their posts as long as possible.

There was a fierce inter-service rivalry between the Imperial Army and Navy

before WWII. Military officials from both branches fought bitterly over budgets and prerogatives, and the nation's security became of secondary concern. As a result, compromise and consensus between the two services was accorded an even higher priority than the avoidance or successful prosecution of wars. While the LDP-led government has experienced nowhere near this degree of rivalry, there is little difference between this government and the pre-war Army and Navy in their emphasis on harmony within and between organizations to the detriment of the ultimate mission, in the LDP's case the creation of a capable administration.

Great respect for harmony is a Japanese tradition and certainly an important element in Japan's identity. Nevertheless, it will be difficult with that alone to maintain a practical Japanese identity that defines a place for Japan within the international community.

6. Japan and Asia's Identity

One feature of the post-Cold War age has been the revival of a form of Asianism. A few years ago, as Asia's economies roared ahead, many people argued for an "Asian" politics and "Asian" economy. However I have strong doubt as to where and to what degree Asia and Japan shared elements in common politically and economically.

Take the idea of "top-down modernization", for instance. The Japanese government might well be said to have provided stronger leadership from above in this regard compared with its Western counterparts, but it played a rather limited role in comparison to other Asian governments. It was not through the amount of capital invested but instead through the suggestions and guidance offered the private sector on areas of pursuit worthy of attention that the Japanese government contributed most to modernization. Top-down guidance combined with bottom-up initiatives made possible Japan's particular style of development. Japan's government only began taking a strong and
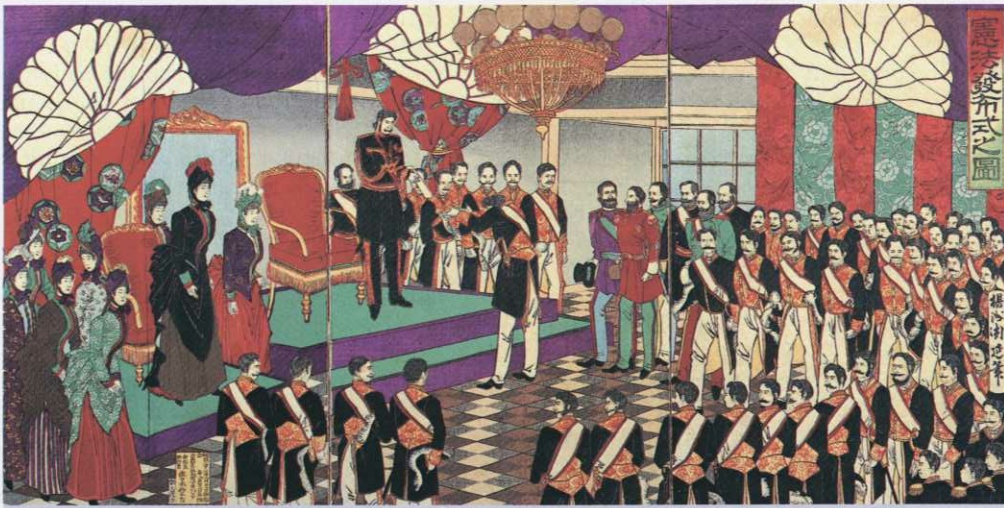
The promulgation of the Meiji Constitution - February 11, 1889

Photo : Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library, Tokyo Shiryo Bunko

As a country long torn between the maintenance of traditions and Westernization, Japan has confronted such issues for nearly 150 years.

Our predecessors in the Meiji era advocated the idea of Japan as a bridge between the West and the East, and the core of Japan's identity lies in the fact that the country sits on the outskirts of Western civilization but continues to thrive as an independent civilization not completely overwhelmed by Western culture. This example itself is perhaps the most important message that Japan can send to other cultures.

active role in national economic development from the 1930s, so this should not be viewed as an enduring characteristic of Japan.

There are significant differences with Asia in political systems as well. Since the formation of the first national political party, the Liberal Party, in 1881, party politics have enjoyed a 117-year history in Japan.

Japan's first parliamentary government was not far at all behind its contemporaries. The Diet opened in 1890, featuring a House of Representatives with considerable legislative authority and with stronger budgetary authority than that granted the lower house of parliament in the Prussian constitution. Only a few years after the Diet opened cabinet ministers were being selected from among the political parties, and the Diet's eleventh year saw the leader of a political party named prime minister.

This contrasts starkly with the governments of many Asian nations. Singapore, for example, with a standard of living only second to Japan in Asia, has since its foundation had a government ruled by the People's Action Party and opposition parties have found it nearly impossible to survive long. While Singapore does conduct free elections, the election system is weighed heavily in favor of the government.

Democratization is to a great degree an inevitable process, and the Japanese experiment in democratic government has been ongoing for more than 100 years.

7. Conclusion

While no reliable predictions can be made on how the world will change in the 21st century, the greatest common divisors in the kind of world we would like to see might be the following.

One is the peaceful resolution of extreme disparities in wealth, such as that exemplified in the North-South issue. Bringing about peaceful change to the status quo has always been challenging and, to that end, development in the South through its own efforts is absolutely essential. In this regard, Japan might serve as a useful model of self-reliant development in the face of pressure from developed countries.

Another is the co-existence of a variety of cultures as a certain degree of convergence occurs. Many cultures in the modern world will not likely be able to co-exist in their present form. Certain Islamic customs, for example, will have to be abolished and authoritarian regimes will have no choice but to move towards greater liberalization. Crony capitalism and similar systems will find themselves increasingly uncompetitive in a competitive world.

As has been discussed thus far, the difficulty here is that the Japanese are apt to shut themselves off from the outside and find their peace within harmony. Consequently, our Meiji forefathers stressed *kaikoku shinshu* (the need to open the country to the outside). In drafting the Meiji Constitution, Ito Hirobumi thought that the only way to prevent political disputes from turning into unprincipled compromises (harmony) or limitless competition was to make the imperial household the axis of the new state.

Today it is very difficult to say just where the axis of the state or the roots of the Japanese community are to be found. Nevertheless, while it may appear a tautology, the very affirmation of the fact that Japan has developed as an independent presence on the outskirts of Chinese civilization and as an entity independent of Western civilization as well is a prerequisite to any attempt at discovery.

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