

# The Origin of The Formation of Modern Japanese Nationalism

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**Abstract.** Nationalism is a complex and profound subject, with each country and region having its own characteristics. As a unique facet of East Asian civilization, modern Japanese nationalism exhibits traits such as homogeneity and independence, a strong spirit of groupism, a pronounced sense of inferiority, and islandism. In modern times, particularly among Japanese reformers facing internal and external challenges, there was a proactive exploration and adaptation of western theories. This fusion, along with the essence of “Japanese spirit”, gave rise to nationalism with distinct Japanese characteristics. Japan’s journey towards developing this unique form of nationalism resulted in its transformation into the first modern nation-state in East Asia society, marking a profound political and social reforms. The study of modern Japanese nationalism holds great significance for the broader understanding of nationalism, shedding light on how unique cultural, historical, and geopolitical factors can shape a nation’s identity and policies.

**Keywords:** nationalism; modern Japan; emperor system.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of nationalism has been a prominent topic in academic discourse. This recent concept has played an important role in shaping the modern history of the world. From the American Revolutionary War to the French Revolution, the influence of nationalism is unmistakable. The definitions and theories of nationalism have been debated within scholarly circles. Anthony Smith, a famous British scholar, believes that nationalism is an ideology that centered on the nation, driven by the pursuit of national interests. Smith identifies four fundamental dimensions: first, the process of formation and development of the nation; second, the feeling or consciousness of belonging of the nation; third, the language and symbol of the nation; and last, the social and political movement for the interests of the nation [1]. Naturally, due to regional, cultural, socio-economic and other factors, nationalism in different countries and regions have different characteristics. As Fusler aptly stated: “The only nationalism, the universal nationalism does not exist” [2]. This diversity underscores the richness and complexity of the subject of nationalism.

East Asia, being a significant and culturally diverse region with deep historical roots, holds a special place in the study of nationalism. In the era of robust nationalism, Japan, as the first country to establish modern nationalism, is undoubtedly an important sample to study the formation and development of nationalism in East Asia. Different from European and American political nationalism and Chinese cultural nationalism, modern Japanese nationalism has both characteristics, giving rise to a unique discourse system with distinctly “island-like” characteristics. In a word, modern Japanese nationalism is a trend of thought that lasts a long time, has a widespread and has a complex composition.

Japanese nationalism is not only an important driving factor that makes Japan start the modernization process, but also has a profound impact on the politics, economy, culture and society of modern Japan post-Meiji Restoration. It can be said that the development of modern Japan is deeply marked by the brand of modern Japanese nationalism. Therefore, the study of Japanese nationalism holds paramount significance in comprehending the formation and development of modern Japanese society, as well as in unraveling the intricacies of modern Japanese national identity.

This paper aims to explore the origins and factors contributing to the emergence of modern Japanese nationalism. It discusses and analyzes the social background of modern Japan, the germination and powerful common identity of pre-modern Japanese nationalism - the reconstruction of the imperial system, among other facets. By constructing a coherent logical framework detailing

the formation of modern Japanese nationalism, the paper seeks to provide readers with a deeper understanding of this critical subject matter.

## 2. Characteristics of Modern Japanese Society

Japan, located in the eastern end of the Eurasian continent, consists of the Japanese islands and mountainous, with a distinct island and mountain country. Japan has a single nationality and is almost entirely composed of Yamato ethnic groups, which has a strong homogeneity among its populace [3]. On the surface, this homogeneity might suggest that Japan would be predisposed to nationalism, a sentiment typically associated with a shared national identity. However, the reality is quite the opposite. Due to the rugged and mountainous geographical conditions of Japan and the influence of the vassal system, the Japanese people were actually divided into numerous “vassals”, which were equivalent to political entities with independent economic systems and social life, and rarely exchanged activities with each other. In the words of Yuyoshi Fukuzawa, a famous modern Japanese enlightenment thinker, “In Japan, tens of millions of people are enclosed in tens of millions of boxes, as if they were isolated by tens of millions of walls [4].” This Japan was neither public nor open, lacking a unified national consciousness.

The evolution of Japanese nationalism is akin to a rusty gear, turning slowly and heavily, but quickening its pace when confronted by external threats, akin to being lubricated by oil. In the beginning of the 19th century, the Western powers, propelled by the Industrial Revolution, had already targeted Japan in East Asia for conquest. Russia led the way, followed by Britain and the United States, with more than 50 encounters. The Opium War, the subsequent “black ship incident”, and the encroachments by the Qing Dynasty had a profound impact on Japanese society. At the same time, because of the defects of the feudal system, the class contradictions in Japan were intensified seriously, and the national uprisings were constant. Japan was facing an unprecedented national crisis.

The situation of internal and external challenges made the Yamato nation awaken quickly, advocating for “internal unification, external independence”. The cohesion of the Japanese nation was unprecedentedly enhanced. This crisis promoted the exploration of Japanese people of insight and contributed to the reversal of the curtain movement and the Meiji Restoration. After the overthrow of the Edo shogunate, the new Japanese government abolished the “vassals” through a series of policies and established the “prefectures” under the unified management of the state, which initially established the modern national state. Capitalism developed rapidly in Japan, accompanied by scientific and technological progresses, the proliferation of modern communications such as newspapers and telegrams, the development of modern transportation networks encompassing railways, highways and water transport, and progress in education and public culture [5].

A series of changes after the Meiji Restoration cleared away obstacles for the Japanese people to form a common national consciousness and national imagination. Consequently, nationalism spread and develop rapidly in Japan firmly taking root within the background of modern Japanese society.

## 3. The Influence of the Early Sprout of Nationalism

Modern Japanese nationalism, as a specific historical phenomenon, did not emerge out of thin air. It has long been rooted in Japanese feudal culture and society. First of all, the Confucian community played an important role in the germination of early Japanese nationalism. Chinese culture with Confucianism as the core has a profound influence on East Asia, and Japan is its representative. Confucianism developed rapidly and penetrated into every corner of Japanese culture, becoming the dominant ideological system.

In the process of learning, Japan also carried on the development and interpretation of Confucianism with Japanese characteristics and formed the unique Japanese concept of Huayi. Japanese Confucian scholars have formed a strong self-consciousness in the process of distinguishing “my race” and “other race”. The founder of Nipponism, Suyuki Yamagua, on the basis of

Confucianism, strongly opposed the Japanese people's self-abasement mentality of being Shimaichi and tried his best to emphasize the superiority of Yamato nation. Although Confucianism is essentially a tool to maintain the rule of the feudal shogunate, in the course of its development, it also made the Japanese people have a sense of self and set up a sense of national pride and played an important role in the emergence of early Japanese nationalism [6].

The second is the great influence of Shinto belief. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Catholicism spread and flourished in Japan, and Western missionaries attacked Japan's native Shinto ideology with scientific concepts, which caused dissatisfaction among traditional Japanese intellectuals and the ruling class. On the one hand, they vigorously developed a complete system of Shinto teaching, on the other hand, vigorously restricted and excluded Catholic and Western missionaries, which stimulated the concept of "other" among the Japanese people, provided an opportunity to unite the Japanese people as a whole, and also promoted the emergence of early Japanese nationalism.

Third, the rise of "Mito School" and "national studies" also provided rich nourishment for early Japanese nationalism. These two schools of thought integrated Confucianism, and actively intervened in politics, put forward the slogan of "respecting the king and resisting the emperor", believed that Japan was the mother of all nations, and actively instilled the theory of Japanese superiority in the Japanese people, which gave birth to the awakening of the Yamato nation.

Although the germination of early Japanese nationalism originated before modern times (Meiji Restoration), it was closely related to the modern Japanese nationalism that flourished afterwards. It can be said that without the foundation of early nationalism, the later Japanese modern nationalism could not have developed so vigorously.

#### 4. Reconstruction of the Imperial System

One of the most important elements of nationalism is collective identity. An important factor for the formation of a wide range of nationalist thoughts in modern Japan was that the Japanese rulers and intellectuals re-created the ancient concept of "God emperor" and reshaped "Heaven Emperor system" to become a symbol of the Japanese state and nation, so as to achieve political goals to unite the people [7]. Here collective identity is politicized, and so is the nationalism that underlies it [8]. Eric Hobsbawm states, "Nationalism sometimes uses cultural traditions as a means of uniting nations, and sometimes reinvents them in response to the need to form new nations [9]." It is also a true portrayal of the reconstruction of the "Emperor system" by modern Japanese rulers.

The imperial system of Japan has existed in ancient times, and the ancient Japanese people grafted "imperial system" onto "divine system", thinking that the emperors were the descendants of Amaterasu, the great god of Japan, and deified the lineage of the emperor. The idea of the emperor as a "god emperor" was woven into Japanese culture. However, the emperor did not rule for a long time in history, and the actual power was controlled by the shogunate composed of samurai for a long time. In this context, the living conditions of the imperial family were very poor.

However, the emperor is still nominally the supreme ruler of Japan, and any real ruler who wants to legitimize his rule cannot do so without his help. As a result, the concept of the emperor is divided: the emperor as a "man" and the emperor as a "god." The real rulers (such as the shogun) had to worship the emperor as a "god" even though they could not respect the emperor as a "man". The governor of the Muromachi shogunate said, "If it is not possible to have an emperor, either carved in wood or cast in gold, the living emperor or emperor will be exiled somewhere to avoid trouble" [10]. It can be seen that under the influence of the concept of "God Emperor". Even when the emperor had no real power, he remained popular as a cultural symbol. In this way, the view of the emperor was gradually developed into a theory with Japanese characteristics, which became the ideological source of the reshaping of the emperor system.

Modern Japanese society was in the midst of internal and external troubles, which produced the requirement of saving the nation and building a nation state, and thus needed a recognized authority to unite the whole Japanese people together. "The external threat is imminent and there is no way to

respond. As a result, the emperor has been the foundation of the unification of Japan [11].” The emperor with the status of “God emperor” was remembered by modern enlightenment thinkers, who successively launched the “respect the king” movement and the “reverse curtain movement”, swept away the shogunate feudal forces, and lifted the emperor to the center of power. After the Meiji Restoration, the power of the emperor expanded rapidly and became the dual leader of the regime and theocracy. Since then, the Japanese national system has evolved toward the absolutist imperial system.

Since 1868, the Restoration Government has promulgated the People’s Proclamation in various regions of Japan to establish the divine image of the Emperor to the Japanese people. The “proclamation” says, “The Son of Heaven is the mother and father of Japan [12].” At the same time, the government has also set up a series of institutions to establish a large-scale education system throughout the country and strives to instill the concept of “the absolute authority of the emperor” to the people, trying to establish the idea of supporting the emperor and worshiping God through education, which further determines the sanctity of the emperor. The reformers were successful in shaping the imperial system, and from 1868, Emperor Meiji began an unprecedented scale of local Tours, which almost spread throughout Japan, where “every household offered God wine and rice cakes to greet the emperor, like a festival of the village community [13].” The reconstruction of the emperor system established the image of the divine and supreme emperor to the whole of Japan and established the common authority of transcendence in the whole of Japan. With this strong common identity, Japan realized the integration of the nation state, and Japanese modern nationalism also developed rapidly.

## 5. Conclusion

Modern Japanese nationalism is a trend of thought that has exerted great influence in modern East Asia and even the whole world. The social environment of modern Japan, including the internal and external crises, the development of capitalism and the introduction of industrialization, and the development of education and culture, all had a significant role in promoting it. The theories of “Mito Learning” and “National Learning” provided the ideological origin for the pre-modern Confucian community. The “imperial system” that reformers and the ruling class sought to recreate also provided a common political and cultural symbol for this trend of thought. As a social trend of thought, the rise of nationalism also profoundly shaped the modern Japanese society. It brought the Japanese people together, quickly and successfully established a modern nation-state, stood out in the circle of East Asian civilization, and became one of the influential countries in the modern world.

However, this brand of nationalism also harbored a belief in Japanese exceptionalism. It advocated that Japan should emulate the world’s most dominant nations, aiming not merely to match their stature but to surpass them. Japan was to contend for its existence against powerful nations, vying for territorial expansion in competition with global powers. Consequently, this ideology gave rise to the proliferation of Japanese militarism and expansionism, with social Darwinism emerging as the guiding philosophy of modern Japan. It is worth noting that modern Japanese nationalism came into existence relatively late, and it was built on the ruins of Japanese curtain system, feudal system, and traditional culture. This historical context led to the characteristics of “congenital deficiency and acquired deformity”. The fate of Japan’s territorial expansion, its war of aggression, and its burial for the so-called “Japanese ideal” may have been sealed at the beginning of modern Japanese nationalism during the Meiji period.

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