

Japanese Thought from the Taisho Era to the Second Sino-Japanese War and Its Impact on East Asian Relations

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Abstract. During the Japan Taisho era to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the thoughts of the Japanese scholars experienced large disagreements and enormous alterations. The public, including soldiers, chose Fascism, which is an extreme ideology from all existing thoughts. In the literature review, the current studies either only mentioned the differences and adjustments of the thoughts of the Japanese scholars, or merely discussed the manifestations of militarism and Fascism in Japan. There is a lack of research on the public's choices of the ideology. This research analyzes the reasons of the choice of the Japanese public based on the legacy of militarism in Meiji era, Showa financial crisis, the development of education level, and the violent changes that the path brought to the relations between East Asian countries. The history of Japan becoming extreme provides a negative example for today's countries, global leaders should formulate reasonable educational syllabus and impartially avoid ideological education and cult of personality.

Keywords: Japan, fascism, militarism, East Asia.

1. Introduction

During the 1930s and 1940s, East Asia experienced a colossal catastrophe, the second Sino-Japanese War, which is also known as the Anti-Japanese War. Most scholars attribute this war to the rise of Japanese militarism and fascism. However, before the war, Japan went through a period of democratization during the Taisho era. In the 1920s and 1930s, many Japanese scholars turned to communism, and left-wing movements also happened in Japan. This represents that the thoughts of Japanese intellectual experienced significant changes in a short period. Finally, Japan turned to fascism and embarked on a path of aggression. For a war to occur, the support of the public is usually necessary, which means that it was the public's choice of fascism that influenced the government to start the wars.

The purpose of this research is to find out the reasons and processes behind the changes of thoughts and ideas in Japan from the Taisho era to the second Sino-Japanese war, explain why the public chose fascism over other ideologies, and discuss the effects on Japanese foreign policy and relations between East Asian countries.

Existing research primarily analyzes the developments of ideas in Japan or the measures of the Japanese government. There is a lack of analysis on the support of the public, an important condition for starting a war. Between the ideas of scholars and the measure of a government, the public is an indispensable topic. The proper order should be as follows: scholars propose ideas, the public choose among them, and the government makes decisions with the support or influence by the public. Existing research cannot adequately reflect the public's role in choosing ideas.

2. Literature Review

In the first part of the main part of the research, the reason of the changes of thoughts will be discussed. The changes can mainly be separated into two points: the economy crisis and problems in education. This part primarily discusses three scholars' work on this topic, including Hugh T. Patrick's Japanese Government Macro Policy: Failure in the 1920's Success (of a Sort) in the 1930's, Yuji Kurokuma's Showa Depression: A Prescription for "Once in a Century Crisis", and Germaine A. Houston's Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan [1-3]. Patrick mainly describes

the economy crisis in Japan from 1920s to 1930s, including analyses of the failure of the banks. Kuronuma in his work shows the rice riots caused by the soaring prices and field damaged by industrialization. Lastly, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* argues that most of the Japanese scholars considered that the change of Japan was imminent.

At the same time, the victory of Lenin gave Japanese scholars hope. As a result, some of the scholars turned to Marxism and tried to use Marxism as a guiding ideology to reform Japan. During the 1920s, the Russian Revolution influenced the Japanese scholars. Some of them, including Kawakubo Hiroshi and Yamakawa Hitoshi studied the Marxism and tried to apply to the actual situation in Japan. Soon the financial crisis intensified social contradictions and provided the situation for the dissemination of Marxism.

The second part discusses the situation of national education and the tendency towards militarism in Japan in that period. Both of them lay the groundwork of turning to fascism. The discussion in this part draws information from several scholarly works, including S. Suzuki's *New Education in Public Elementary Schools in the 1920s: Teachers' Educational Studies in Tokyo*, Mizuno, Hiromi's *Science, ideology, empire: A history of the "scientific" in Japan from the 1920s to the 1940s*, *The Culture of Japanese Fascism*, and RL Buell's *Militarism in Japan* [4-7].

S. Suzuki mainly describes the situation of education in Taisho era in Japan and shows that the militarism education already existed [4]. Mizuno shows the problems that the public cannot receive the education including critical reading [5]. As a result, it reveals that the public in Japan were only scholar's vassal, and did not get a chance to develop their own thoughts. In *Militarism in Japan*, the author suggests that the status of the Japanese military at that time was very high and had a direct influence on government decision-making [7]. Moreover, *The Culture of Japanese Fascism* illustrates the rapid transformation of Japan's Marxist thought into fascism [6].

Based on the existing research, this paper seeks to further discuss how and why the public and ordinary soldiers, under the influence of Japan's legacy issues, economic crisis, and new ideas, merely chose fascism and supported the war, while democracy, communism, and fascism all emerged at the same time. By doing so, the paper further examines the influence of Japanese thought on government decision-making and its impact on East Asian international relations based on the following literature: Ben-Ami Shillony's *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident*, Robert H. Ferrell's *The Mukden Incident: September 18-19, 1931*, Richard Rubinger's *Education in Wartime Japan, 1937-1945*, and Kenneth Colegrove's *Militarism in Japan's Foreign Policy* [8-11].

For example, in *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident*, Shillony demonstrates the coup of the Japanese military [8]. He argues that, although they lost, the other military controlled the government. This argument aligns with the opinion in *Militarism in Japan*, which examines the influence of the military on the government [9]. The latter two works, *The Mukden Incident* and *Militarism in Japan's Foreign Policy*, investigate the policies of the Japanese government during that period [10,11]. These policies significantly impacted the Eastern Asia relationships. The policies and their impact are also well illustrated in *Education in Wartime Japan, 1937-1945* [10].

3. Reasons for the Japanese Public's Path

First of all, is the financial crisis from 1920s to 1930s in Japan. The beginning of the financial crisis. During the World War I, the battle in the Europe led to a significant increase in the demand for food in the international market, resulting in a gradual rise in food prices internationally. In 1918, the Japanese government promulgate "Government of the Empire of Japan Announcement" and send the 12th Hohei Shidan to the Siberia. This represent Japan was going to intervene the Russian civil war.

The influence of the international market, mobilization of a large number of armies, and the expansion of the military infected the price of the rice in Japan. In the end of 1917, if one defines the price of the rice per liter in Japan as 1 unit, on the 3rd in August in 1918, the price of the rice per liter was 3.3, 3.8 on the 5th, then increasing to 4 and 4.5 in the following three days [12]. The price of the

rice in Japan was rising day by day. In the time above, the Japanese public was trying to let the government lower the price.

From the 11th to the 20th of August, riots have erupted in various parts of Honshu Island in Japan. After the riot, in 1919, the number of the labor unions in Japan decreased from 71 to 11 in 1917. Non-profit organizations like Yuuai Kai also became a labor party. All these figures suggest that the Japanese scholars and the public realized the importance of reform of Japan.

In the 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake happened in Japan. When the earthquake struck, the economy was stagnant, and due to the extension of the emergency decree, a considerable amount of foreign debt was injected into the reconstruction work, but half of the money was spent on the power industry during the period of introducing thermal power generation. On the 15th of March, 1927, Watanabe Bank of Japan was unable to bear the huge subsidy debt and declared bankruptcy. Subsequently, a large number of banks collapsed within a week.

Misfortunes never come singly, the Great Depression break out in the US and soon spread to Japan. In April 1930, the price of rice was 26.91 yen per dan, and it dropped to 17.7 yen in December of the same year. At that time, the production cost of rice per dan was 27-28 yen. Therefore, although the rice harvest was good, the price plummeted and there was a "good harvest and famine". In the spring of 1929, the price of silkworm cocoons was 7.57 yen per guan (3.75 kg). It fell to 4 yen in 1930 and 3.08 yen in 1931 [13]. This dealt a fatal blow to the silkworm farmers, who accounted for 4/10 of the total farmers in the country. As a result, seventeen local banks in silkworm-raising areas were also closed down. A series of crises in Japan promoted the determination of Japanese scholars and the public to find a way out.

Furthermore, the problems in the situation of education in Japan and the remnants of militarism also influenced the thoughts of the public. During the Meiji Restoration, education was vigorously developed in Japan. In 1873, the Meiji government of Japan promulgated the School System, which established the content of education for Japanese students. By this time, the main purpose of developing education in Japan was to learn advanced Western technology so that Japan can supplementing the lack of Japanese artifacts rapidly. The School System emphasized earning advanced Western instruments, while the education on the ideological level was neglected. Japanese youths who grew up in this era, such as Japanese thinkers and educators such as Saionji Kimmochi and Uchimura Kenzo, learned about the modern Western system and pointed out the problems of Japan's national system in the hope of making Japan progress.

However, these suggestions challenged the emperor's authority and undermined the personality cult of the emperor in Shintoism and the Japanese state system. In 1890, the Meiji government of Japan promulgated the Imperial Rescript on Education, which established the framework of Japanese education and supplemented the lack of ideological education. The content of the Imperial Rescript on Education focused on nationalism, mainly making students learn Shintoism and the majesty of the emperor, so that Japanese youth would build a personal worship of the emperor. The text of the Imperial Rescript on Education was once deified by the State Shinto. By the Showa era, all Japanese national schools, whether in the mainland or in the colonies, had to set up a Hoanden, where photos of the Emperor Meiji and his wife were enshrined together with the Imperial Rescript on Education, and students were forced to recite it.

During the Meiji era, Japan rapidly developed its armaments and won the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese War. These became propaganda tools for the Japanese government. Under the government's propaganda, joining the army became an honor, and the successive victories were the direct source of the birth of Japan's national superiority. On this basis, Japan established the "Continental Policy", which laid a broad and far-reaching foundation for the expansion of militarism. It can be seen that Japan's educational goals have always retained a certain religious color, nationalism and personality cult, and Japan's policies and propaganda are also full of militarism. This made the Taisho period, although it was called democratic, still have the risk of leaning towards militarism.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the reasons for the choice of Japan's path to militarism and eventually fascism in modern times. The reasons include Showa financial crisis, the development of education level, and the militarist legacy from earlier eras. The paper demonstrates the violent changes that Japan's path had brought to the relations between East Asian countries, such as the Sino-Japanese War.

During the Taisho Democracy Period and the early Showa Period in Japan, scholars proposed various ideas, but the people chose fascism under various factors. This needs to be learned and reflected upon by the whole world. Japan's blind personality cult and hateful education eventually led to the people's lack of judgment, which brought pain and far-reaching disasters to the people of East Asia and even the world. Therefore, every country in the world today must promote critical thinking and education, so that every citizen can become themselves, rather than someone else's vassal.

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