

National Learning and Japanese Identity

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Because of China's great prosperity in the middle ages, other Asian countries were heavily influenced by the Confucian ideas of politics, culture and religion. Japan was no exception to that. Confucianism was a philosophical and ethical system developed by Confucius in China. On one hand, it focused on ruler's morality. Confucius explained the ruler had to rule morally. On the other hand, it stressed filial piety, and advocated that the people to respect their ruler. It was indeed for these two characteristics that Confucianism was introduced and endorsed to Japan by the Tokugawa shogunate, the military regime that ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867. During this time, Confucianism became the foundation of the Japanese society, just as China's society had been. Yet, anyone that has studied modern history of Asia knows that Japan succeeded in modernizing itself while China failed to do so in the late 19th century when the western countries sailed to Asia. How did this happen that Japan successfully modernized and China did not? What made the difference between these two? These questions can be answered in many different ways. However, it is not an exaggeration to say that the rise of National Learning in the 18th century was a significant break from Confucianism, and became the source of Japanese modernization.

National learning emerged in Japan in the 18th century as a different scheme to explain Japan. It claimed that Japan was solely different, original and even superior to the rest of the world. It was also unique in its condemnation of Confucian ideas in the understanding Japan. National Learning, moreover, endorsed the study of old verses as well as a new way to interpret ancient texts such as the Tale of Genji for the purpose of recouping the lost values of ancient Japan. This effort of seeking the country's identity in a somewhat ethnocentric way was a starting point of and gave rise to the modern Japanese nationalism, which then became the core of the Japanese modernization in the late 18th century.

One of the characteristics of National Learning that made it distinct from earlier studies is its focus on Japan's originality and superiority over the rest of the world. To explain Japan's superiority, National Learning employed Shinto, a religion native to Japan, and emphasized the Shintonic creation of the world as seen in *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. In "the Jewelled Comb-Box", Motoori Norinaga states, "Heaven-and earth, all the gods and all phenomena, were brought into existence by the creative spirits of two deities- Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi" (Motoori 291), and these creative spirits resulted in "the birth of all humankind in all ages and the existence of all things and all matter" (Motoori 291). Motoori further goes on to say that "the ancient tradition of the Divine Age has been correctly and clearly transmitted in our country" (Motoori 291). He, at the same time, argues that the inferiority of other countries, including China, is due to their ignorance of "the ancient tradition of the Divine Age," stating that "foreign countries revere such nonexistent beings and remain unaware of the grace of the Sun Goddess" (Motoori 291). This Shintonic emphasis that Japan is a land of Kami (God) was different from any other preceding studies in Japan. Thus, in this way, National Learning justified Japan's originality and superiority over other countries.

In addition to this Shintonic creation story, the Japanese imperial line was taken and referred to as another justification for Japan's superiority. Scholars like Motoori believed that Japan's imperial line

"represents the descendants of the Heaven-Shining Goddess" (Motoori 291) and is "designed to rule the nation for eons until the end of time" (Motoori 291). In the same sense, Okuni Takamasa claimed that the Japanese emperor is "the descendant of the ruler of Heaven" (Okuni 296) who "rules the world for eternity" (Okuni 296). In National Learning, the imperial line was seen as the descendants of the creators of the world, and this was used to validate the Japan's superiority over other countries.

National Learning's stress on the imperial line became also important in another sense for Japan's modernization process. During this time, the country was in the midst of abandoning the old customs and adopting the new ideas, the period very unstable. What preventing Japan from falling apart as a country was the idea of the continuing imperial line. The imperial line became the symbol of unchangingness in such changing time.

Another important achievement of National Learning was its praise for natural moral sufficiency of Japan. They contended that ancient Japan was moral without the instructions of any religious teachings. Hirata Atsune, one of the National Learning scholars, explains that in ancient time, Japanese "all correctly and consciously practiced what the Chinese called humanness, rightness, the five Cardinal Virtues, and the rest, without having any need to name them or teach them" (Hirata 295). As opposed to this, China had "so many sages [appearing]... to guide and instruct the Chinese" (Hirata 295). This was taken as the evidence of China's moral corruption and Japan's moral sufficiency. China's moral was, by nature, so fallen that many sages had to appear to correct the people while Japan did not have sages, showing that it correctly practiced morality without any sages or their teachings. This very difference was taken to be "a magnificent example of Japan's superiority to all other countries of the world" (Hirata 295). Drawing from this, National Learning made clear that Japan was better off without any teachings and instructions from outside because Japan's native tradition was sufficient and indeed superior than other countries.

Another characteristic of National Learning was its critical view of Confucianism and Buddhism. Since National Learning advocated that Japan's native tradition was sufficient, the scholars of National Learning harshly criticized Confucian teachings and urged the nation to eliminate them from Japanese culture. Among those scholars was Kamono Mabuchi. He called Confucianism "a human invention that reduces the heart of Heaven-and-earth to something trivial" (Kamono 288). He believed that Confucian teachings had "thrown China into disorder" (Kamono 289), and warned that they had been "hav[ing] the same effect on Japan" since its introduction (Kamono 289). He believed that "when ruling the country, [Confucianism] is of no help in the face of emergency" (Kamono 289). This very argument was unique to National Learning. This created a break from Confucianism in the Confucius based Japanese society.

On one hand, as argued above, the National Learning was the ideology to justify Japan's supremacy and originality over others. On the other it also was philology of ancient Japanese poems. The scholars of National Learning schools, such as Motoori Norinaga, put great emphasis on the studies of old ancient Japanese verses and ancient tales. This was done in order to understand the genuine meaning of ancient texts and tales without any Confucian frame-work, and to recover Japan's traditional mindset. Kamono Mabuchi contended that, since "Chinese... words and concepts (kokoro) entered our country...

creating confusion" (Kamono 287), one must learn "the poems of the ancient" (Kamono 288) and remember the time "when [Japanese] people's hearts were correct and... there was not a trace of foulness or staleness in the practices of their lofty and manly hearts" (Kamono 287). By doing so, it aimed to recoup the lost ideas and understandings of humanity, which ancient Japanese possessed.

As well as the endorsement of understanding old Japanese verses in a purely Japanese way, Japanese ancient texts began to be interpreted in a new way to understand its pure meaning. Among those texts was the Tale of Genji, which had been mainly interpreted "from the point of view of Confucian and Buddhist works" (Motoori 292) until this time. However, Motoori Norinaga insisted that these view points "do not represent the author's true purpose" (Motoori 292). Instead, he understood it as the one of the great expressions of the Japanese native spirit by insisting that the tale is "simply a tale of human life that dwells only on the goodness of those who are aware of the sorrow of human existence" (Motoori 293). This understanding of the tale was created through the idea of "the sorrow of human experience" for the purpose of pulling out the pure Japanese spirit from the tale. This salvation of genuine Japaneseness from the ancient tales and texts characterized the ideology of National Learning as philology.

At the end of the 19th century, National Learning represented Japan's important break from Confucianism. National Learning asserted Japan's originality and superiority over the rest of the world. This new style of learning, moreover, developed the intensive study of ancient verses as well as a new way of interpreting ancient tales and texts to recover the lost values of ancient Japan. In other words, National Learning was the embodiment of Japan's parting from Confucianism and search for its own identity in its own term. This is the difference that decided Japan's fate as well as China's, and finally led to Japan's success and China's failure in modernization. Indeed, China persisted to its old Confucian values and failed to renew itself. At the turn of the 19th century, what the rise of National Learning created in Japan was the farewell to the old, Confucianism, and the rise of new nationalism. This nationalism became the source of Japan's successful modernization and shaped Japanese identity for the decades to come.

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