Forming a National Identity

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To learn about Japanese cultural identity, it is important to know about some key events and crucial turning points of history that have influenced the ways the Japanese live today. In this section, we want to survey some catalytic events in the past that have had a profound impact on Japanese life.

We will consider four turning points in recent Japanese history:

(A) 1868 (The Age of Modernity and the Meiji Restoration)
(B) 1931 (The Imperial Age and the Asia-Pacific War)
(C) 1945 (The Age of Postwar Reforms, Rapid Growth, and Affluence)
(D) 1989 (The Global Age of Uncertainty, Economic Stagnation, and Refocusing Social Goals)

At each moment, Japan stood at the crossroads of self-definition and, each time, Japan emerged renewed with a hybrid identity of diverse cultural influences.

But before surveying the key historical events, let us think first about three distinct features of pre-modern Japan. They have had hugely important consequences for the development of Japanese social organization and cultural identity.

1. Seven centuries of military rule (1183-1868)
2. Three centuries of feudal caste society (1600-1868)
3. Two centuries of formal seclusion from the international world (1639-1853)

1. Seven centuries of military rule (1183-1868): The long-standing rule of the military class (the samurai) left a mixed legacy for modern Japan. On the one hand, it explains a certain level of cultural tolerance for authoritarian power, social hierarchy, discipline, and social surveillance that is still evident today. On the other hand, the strong popular commitment to pacifism today in spite of this military past provides the Japanese with a sense of radical departure from the past.
2. Three centuries of feudal caste society (1600-1868): During the feudal Tokugawa period, people were born into a status in an occupational stratification system called the caste system. The caste hierarchy at that time was defined rigidly, and there was virtually no chance of moving upward or downward by individual merit and achievement. At the top of the ladder stood the military class (the samurai who comprised about 5% of the total population), then the peasants, artisans, and merchants, in that order. To some extent, the sense of ordered hierarchy in Japanese organizations today, as well as a status consciousness-by birth order, by gender, by age, and by educational attainment-are a legacy of this hierarchical system, legitimated by the Confucian world order and modified to fit the demands of society today.

3. Two centuries of formal seclusion from the international world (1639-1853): Japan also opted to close itself off from the international world during a period of formal seclusion, to protect itself from global threats like Christian ideology and economic dependence that would jeopardize its political stability. For two centuries, Japan left only a small outpost off the coast of Nagasaki open to limited trade with Dutch and Portuguese merchants, though trade and diplomatic relations were maintained with China and Korea. This long seclusion left some important cultural, social, and political traces. It left Japan largely a pre-modern society for a period up until the mid 19th century. It also left Japan free from West European colonization that was occurring during that time. As a result, Japan remained relatively 'inexperienced' in international power politics, which nurtured a hunger for new, foreign, and international life, as well as a sense of vulnerability toward Western economic and technological power. As with most people in non-Western societies, the Japanese developed a deep ambivalence about the West that is tempered with a sense of both inferiority and superiority.

(A) The Age of Modernity and the Meiji Restoration (1868)

The social contradiction between a rigid caste system and fledgling mercantile capitalism grew, bound for a collision course, and that is indeed what happened eventually in the 19th century. Japan was already embroiled in social upheaval when it was threatened by encroaching global Western imperialism (Perry's demands, 1853). That led to the collapse of the Tokugawa regime. What followed was the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a 'restoration' of Imperial rule, which marked the beginning of Japan's wholesale modernization and industrialization. Japan took to modernization methodically and consciously, modeling itself on the 'modern' social institutions of the West. Examples of such new institutions were the aristocracy-led parliament, an election system, military conscription, international commerce and financial conglomerates, mass production capitalism, national police and schooling systems.
Modernization brought about a radical transformation of everyday life for Japanese individuals, deemed from above. They came to see themselves as experiencing European enlightenment, rationality, and scientism, infused with a sense that their feudal identities were exchanged for something new that represented 'progress.' The message was clear: trading in old identities could lead to gaining new ones with a promise of a better life.

(B) The Imperial Age and the Asia-Pacific War (1931)

Unfortunately, "creating the new nation-state modeled on the West" also meant molding Japan to become an Imperialist colonial power like the West. Japan's confidence and ambition to expand its territorial reach to China and Korea was fuelled further by the success in fighting China and Russia at the turn of the century before World War I. Japan's colonial aggression led to Japan occupying Manchuria and Taiwan and the annexation of Korea; a protracted war on mainland China lasted for fifteen long years. This is known as the Asia-Pacific War, Japan's disastrous expansion and military conflict across the Asian Continent and the Pacific—which is the Asian theater of World War II—indisputably the most lethal blunder in Japanese history. The War finally ended, after twenty-five million deaths, with Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allied military forces.

The world experienced this military conflict as a total war, a war that involved not only combatant soldiers, but also civilians and families on all continents of the world. World War II produced colossal destruction on all fronts, in lives, homes, and livelihoods, and culminated in the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In wartime Japan, people voluntarily and involuntarily embraced the fascist state headed by the Emperor and military leaders. The state demanded absolute allegiance and subjugation to the Emperor and the state; people lived in a state of emergency and under censorship. Those opposed to the state were intimidated and persecuted. The pain, loss, resentment, and guilt of the War still remain a bitter experience for many Japanese who lived through it. A sense of mistrust toward political ideologies and political leadership lingers today in part from this disastrous legacy.

(C) The Age of Postwar Reforms, Rapid Growth and Affluence (1945)

The rebuilding of Japan after the catastrophic defeat began with the U.S. Occupation in 1945. The Occupation, which lasted until 1952, brought forth many reforms. They included economic reforms like land reform, currency reform, corporate reform, and tax reform; political reforms like parliamentary reform, universal suffrage, and the drawing up of a new democratic constitution (1947) and civil law (1947); and social reforms like education reform, which was designed to transform an elite education system into a
mass education system, change moral education into social studies, and promote co-education. In this process, the Emperor, who did not abdicate after the War, was "humanized" and de-politicized.

Japanese people experienced the Occupation with a mixture of humiliation and liberation, and most dedicated themselves first and foremost to rebuilding their own lives. The rebuilding, however, had to be done with radically different rules of the game. Defeat and the Occupation brought a transformation in the moral order akin to the revolutionary changes brought by the Meiji Restoration. With defeat, what was "right" and what was "wrong" traded places overnight. For example, what was "right" like state Shintoism, militarism and fascism became "wrong;" what was "wrong" like American superior power became "right." Now governed by the former enemy, the Japanese again experienced a radical and revolutionary transformation thrust upon them from above. People’s response to the myriad confusing and contradictory changes was to embrace the moral rupture, divest from the haunting military past, and invest in an economic future.

Thus, the Japanese people turned to the postwar national goal of economic recovery with an intense determination to succeed. Explosive economic growth came soon enough, precipitated, ironically, by the Korean War in the early 1950s. The economy grew in double-digits during this period. Japan pursued a strategy of developing an export-oriented economy based on its strengths in manufacturing. This strategy made up for the shortage of natural resources and complete dependence on imports of raw materials with willingness to work long hours, to delay gratification, and to make sacrifices in individual and family life. In this way, Japan grew from a "developing country" to an affluent country in a relatively short period of time. The exponential economic growth peaked in the 1980s, when Japan became the second largest economy in the world.

Nowhere was this transformation more apparent than in the area of governance. The U.S. Occupation brought democratization to Japan, again from above. Although it came by decree and not by popular choice, democracy brought political stability. Japan today is a parliamentary democracy, run by a prime minister and an elected Diet, with an Upper and a Lower House much like in the United Kingdom. But unlike the United Kingdom, one large party has held office for most of the period: the Liberal Democratic Party has held power in Japan since 1955, virtually uninterrupted. With the LDP's dominance, Japan's conservative elite bureaucracy generated most of the legislative initiatives. As the Emperor is still nominally the head of state as a constitutional monarch, some have also dubbed governance in Japan as "Imperial democracy."
International security remained a challenge for Japan throughout the Cold War. Japan renounced the rights to wage war and create a military in its postwar Constitution's Article 9. But during the Cold War, military "Self-Defense Forces" were created nonetheless. Japan's international security is founded on U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which also has the effect of delaying postwar reconciliation with its East Asian neighbors who were the Communist block-the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, and North Korea. The United States still maintains military bases in Japan, especially Okinawa, as part of the Security Treaty. Although strong economic ties have developed with China and South Korea, political relations are still strained over war memory. Today, both Japan's defense budget and international aid budget are among the highest in the world.

Citizens' identity was much influenced by the pragmatic, affluent, and consumerist nature of a postwar Japanese society oriented toward science, rationalism, and efficiency. (The U.S. Occupation banned the cult of the Emperor and state Shintoism; and there are no longer national religious holidays in Japan). However, this secularism is nevertheless built on past Shinto and Buddhist spiritual practices. Japan is aesthetically and morally rooted in Buddhism. It is also indebted to Confucianism for its knowledge systems, ethics and hierarchy, and to Shintoism for its sense of moral boundaries (purity). Most surveys show that people tend to be ambiguous about their religiosity and reveal both low religious beliefs and high spirituality simultaneously. Given that there has been no historical tradition of a monotheistic God with absolute supernatural authority as in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, it is not surprising that a search for ontological security in this world is important. Cultural values are learned more at home and at school, less in temples and shrines.


The end of "postwar" for Japan began with the death of the Shōwa Emperor in 1989, which was a symbolic transition for the nation. In the 1990s, Japan found itself in this transition, as the Cold War ended and as economic and cultural globalization intensified. Social institutions and economic organizations that served to Japan's advantage during the postwar decades began to lose their relevance. The paternalistic and protectionist social, economic, and political institutions were now rapidly growing out of synch with the new global realities that made new demands. In concrete terms, the economic bubble burst in 1989-1991 when the overheated economy turned downward. The ripple effects were enormous: a gradual breakdown of life-long employment, which was the pillar of Japan's job security; a gradual shift from a seniority-based reward system to one based more on merit, etc. Discontent grew in the middle class and among the younger generation in this climate of uncertainty. There was no longer any social
guarantee that life was always going to get better if only one worked hard, long, and diligently.

In the rapidly globalizing world, Japan's task has been to remake its social institutions and transform itself from a society that prizes planning and discipline to one that prizes flexibility and uncertainty. In effect, this was tantamount to a conscious re-making of its hybrid identity: it meant undoing a cultural preference for order, hierarchy, and certainty. It meant undoing a cultural preference for the safety of isolation and protection that are no longer tenable in the increasingly borderless world. It meant embracing improvisations, uncertainties, and multiethnic immigration. It meant creating a genuinely multiethnic society with 5 million minority residents (4% of the population) and millions of foreign workers. Although the myth of Japanese homogeneity has long been undone, a sense of threat about growing hybridization continues nevertheless. In more ways than one, Japan is already irrevocably swept in the tide of international economy and global culture. It already has, for example, the largest number of McDonalds (over 3,300 outlets) outside the United States.

The search for a new identity in Japan today involves selecting a new vision for society in the post-economic growth era. Japan has now attained affluence and a certain degree of social stability, so what should be its new goal? To continue to work as hard, or to continue to earn as much foreign currency and incur as much trade imbalance as in the past? At the core, the Japanese must answer fundamentally existential questions: "Who are we, and who do we want to be in the future? What do we value, and what moral principles do we choose?" These choices will no long come along from top-down as they did in the past, but must be chosen by individuals. As social discontent for Japan's social rigidity continues to grow-as we witness in the lowering birth rates-Japan seems as yet unwilling to embrace wholesale change. Changes are likely to come slowly and gradually. Part of the difficulty for Japanese identity is the fact that it has incorporated so much of the West in its hybrid identity, yet racial barriers never disappear, and the Japanese will never become "Western" as such. The new cultural identity is nevertheless likely to incorporate growing individualism and maturity tempered with a deep-seated desire for wealth distribution and equity.

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