Race and Empire: The Establishment of Ethnic Nationalism in Imperial Japan

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan faced significant challenges as it sought to establish itself as a member of the international community. Increased interaction with Westerners had begun in the 1850s, and would continue as trade and cultural exchanges brought the Japanese into contact with a hitherto unimportant source of influence. The attempt to create an empire, through military conquest, cultural hegemony, and colonization, occurred alongside an attempt to define what it means to be Japanese. The simultaneity of these two actions is encapsulated in two Japanese terms for nationalism: minzokushugi and kokuminshugi. According to the intellectual Oyama Ikuo, minzokushugi is “the insistence on liberating one or more nationalities from the statist domination of another nationality,” while kokuminshugi is “when a nationality [minzoku] that occupies a dominant position within a state attempts to fulfill its desires to express its existence in the form of an independent nation-state by carrying out assimilation policies or oppressing weaker nationalities.”¹ The first term thus refers to the creation of ethnic nationalism, often against some form of domination, while the second term is the imposition of domination by a nationality that has gained power over a state, often an empire.

Minzokushugi, or ethnic nationalism, arose in Japan as a broader alternative to the civil nationalism of the urban bourgeoisie. It expressed itself early as opposition to the state, but later to the urban classes, who were perceived to be oppressing the rural populations. This was not only applicable to Japan, though. In Manchuria similar nationalist movements emerge during

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foreign rule, first by Russians and then by Japanese. *Kokuminshugi* is the practice of foreign domination, or imperialism, that both grew out of the formation of a Japanese ethnic nation and coincided with it. Indeed, many of the opposition movements grew out of actions that were at least in part imperialistic. For example, the Hibiya riots of 1905 arose as a direct consequence of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) and the perceived injustice of the Treaty of Portsmouth’s terms. Furthermore, the dispatch of troops to Russia, from 1918-1922, to support the Russian White Army against the Red Army, and the attendant buying of rice stocks by the government, contributed to the rice shortage which caused the Rice Riots of 1918. Thus, though they are distinct forms of nationalism, they are largely dependent upon one another for their development.

Ethnicity was a fluid, artificial construct, and thus the form of nationalism that it underpinned was not firm. By the 1930s, a system that opposed the government had been co-opted by it, and a theory emerged about the distinction between the nation and the state. The separation of these two entities provided justification for the existence of the imperial state in that it allowed foreigners to become a part of the political state without being included in the ethnic nation. Furthermore, as ethnicity underpinned the formation of ethnic nationalism, the concept of race supported Japanese claims to empire. As Asians, they were better suited to govern Asian affairs, but they racially differentiated themselves from Taiwanese, Koreans, and Chinese, and thus justified their dominance of those peoples. Race, like ethnicity, was a fluid concept, manipulated by the Japanese to fulfill their ambitions. *Minzokushugi* and *kokuminshugi*, understood thus as being founded upon fluid, ambiguous identifiers, allowed Japan to adapt to international circumstances and respond to the changing threats to its imperial claims.
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After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan faced significant challenges as it sought to establish itself as a member of the international community. Increased interaction with Westerners had begun in the 1850s, and would continue as trade and cultural exchanges brought the Japanese into contact with a hitherto unimportant source of influence. The attempt to create an empire, through military conquest, cultural hegemony, and colonization, occurred simultaneously with an attempt to define what it means to be Japanese. This was the fundamental problem that the Japanese faced, and indeed the one that any empire faces. A heterogeneous society must form a homogeneous core around which the society may assemble, presenting a monolithic face for those whom they attempt to annex or assimilate. For the British Empire, and in large part for Americans, this core is civic nationalism, the adherence to an abstract notion that one’s society embodies and practices those principles which are held to be most desirable. The Japan and its people mobilized around race and ethnicity. Importantly, nations, as Kevin Doak asserts, are modern artificial constructs, as are the abstractions like ethnicity that underpin them.² But their effects are concrete, and so understanding what ethnicity and race mean, where they came from, and what their impact is on the foundation of nation and empire are of primary concern. This essay will seek to answer these questions, arguing that ethnicity was primarily a means to create a group internally so that Japan could establish imperial dominance externally.

At the beginning of the Meiji period, in 1875, the progressive Fukuzawa Yukichi remarked that “in Japan there is a government but no nation.”\(^3\) There was a struggle around the turn of the century to self-define, especially as Japanese faced the cultural influences of the West. Early zeal for Westernization, evident in the repeal of the ban on Christianity in 1871 and the Iwakura Embassy of the early 1870s, which sought to learn about Western culture and implement it for the development of the Meiji state, gave way by the 1890s to a return to traditionalism. The imperial government again supported Shintoism, and even Western influences, especially in art and architecture, were used to bolster the authority of the central government. The Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 lent prestige to the state; it appeared to be establishing itself on the international stage.

This was, as Donald Roden puts it, a “quest for national dignity,” and at a more individual level was present in the introduction of baseball and its assimilation into Japanese culture.\(^4\) Westerners were themselves largely responsible for the implementation of physical activity in Japanese schools, with baseball chosen because it reflected Japanese values: “order, harmony, perseverance, and self-restraint.”\(^5\) The team from the First Higher School (Ichiko) of Tokyo played a twelve-game series against the team of Americans from the Yokohama Athletic Club between 1891 and 1904, proceeding to trounce them, scoring a combined 230 runs to the Americans’ 64.\(^6\) While not ethnically, based, the dignity won by these victories is itself a form of reactive nationalism to perceived Western cultural hegemony and arrogance. A song composed in 1905, the “Baseball Club Rouser”, commemorated the Yokohama series, and concludes with the following verse:

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\(^3\) Ibid., 286.
\(^5\) Ibid., 519.
\(^6\) Ibid., 529.
Ah, for the glory or our Baseball Club!
Ah, for the glitter it has cast!
Pray that our martial valor never turns submissive
And that our honor will always shine far across the Pacific.  

The militaristic context is clear. At the time of composition, Japan had already fought and won two wars, both of which increased the state’s own international standing. “Honor” and “martial valor” signal the acquisition by the Japanese of crucial self-identifiers that distinguished them as a nation. Indeed, we might easily read this as a metaphor for the entire Japanese state in its search for glory and recognition by Western powers through aggressive militarism.

The search for this recognition, however, could not happen without the formulation of a theory of nation and state. What was their relationship? At the beginning of the Meiji period, power resided in an alliance between the Satsuma and Choshu domains – the “Satcho” clique. The possibility for profound social transformations contrasted sharply with the political expediency that the Satcho state represented, and this marks the beginning of an attempt to define nationhood in a way that sought to identify all people with the Japanese state. The political structure was unacceptable for most normal Japanese, and so the civil nationalism that was widespread in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century was inapplicable. Ethnic nationalism provided a solution. Imported from the mainland, the use of ethnicity as an abstraction to support the foundation of nationhood was artificial: there was no objective reality behind ethnicity and no need for any real ethnicity to have political usefulness. 

One of the most important aspects of ethnic nationalism in Japan is the existence of two terms denoting nationalism. Oyama Ikuo makes the distinction:

What I would like to add here is a reflection on how such terms as ethnic nationalism (minzokushugi) and nationalism (kokuminshugi) are generally

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7 Ibid., 534.
8 Ibid., 288.
understood in their actual usage. The insistence on liberating one or more nationalities from the statist domination of another nationality usually is expressed through the term *minzokushugi* ... In contrast, when a nationality [*minzoku*] that occupies a dominant position within a state attempts to fulfill its desires to express its existence in the form of an independent nation-state by carrying out assimilation policies or oppressing weaker nationalities ... we usually call the guiding principle behind such efforts *kokuminshugi*.9

The former category, that relating to nationalities (*minzoku*), encompass nationalities or ethnic groups that exist domestically. Therefore, the process of *minzokushugi* is the assertion of internal dominance over other nationalities for the purpose of creating a nation. An important aspect of this definition is the existence of statist domination over nationalities, which suggests that *minzokushugi* is closely identified with anti-state movements targeting oppressive actions or measures. This is indeed what we see in early twentieth-century Japan. The Ashio copper-mine poisoning galvanized opposition movements in the 1890s, as did the Hibiya riots in 1905 and the Rice Riots of 1918. All sought to fight against what was seen as “internal colonialism” imposed on the people by the state.10

The process of *minzokushugi* was not only found in Japan, though. In the 1920s, the city of Harbin and its inhabitants sought to define their own identity. As James Carter states it, “was [Harbin] culturally a Chinese city with many Russian inhabitants or a Russian city on Chinese territory?”11 In the 1920s, Chinese authority came to replace Russian power, which fractured after the Russian Revolution of 1917. In addition, the Japanese were involved in the power struggle, seeing Manchuria as within its sphere of influence. Harbin thus represented an area in

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9 Doak, 291-2.
10 Ibid., 289.
which “different representations of different nations negotiated.”\textsuperscript{12} This struggle yielded a local form of Chinese nationalism. Opposing the Twenty-One Demands of 1915, Zhang Taijun said, “If we are to avoid losing our nation, then all the common people must oppose the foreign powers with all our might.”\textsuperscript{13} This exhortation is an articulation of Oyama’s definition of minzokushugi, albeit one in which the dominant nationality is foreign. By February 1922, there were demonstrations against Harbin’s foreign community, with the Russian-language newspaper Rossiya reporting in April that demonstrators were “calling on the Chinese population to unite against the foreigners who are trying to steal the CER [Chinese Eastern Railway].”\textsuperscript{14} Chinese authority was implemented and, among other measures, removed the extraterritorial rights of the Russians. This was in part a result of a younger generation coming to power, “interested only in asserting Chinese sovereignty over the city and removing foreign influence.”\textsuperscript{15} Harbin thus represents a foreign analogy to the contemporary Japanese situations: the growth of ethnic nationalism – minzokushugi – in opposition movements against other dominant groups.

By the early twentieth century in Japan, however, the object of opposition would not be the state, but instead the perceived civil class: bourgeois urban society. Civil nationalism was associated with capitalism, while ethnic nationalism assumed a socialist bent. Oyama Ikuo, who defined the distinctions between forms of nationalism, sought to reconcile the state and society, which were increasingly at odds with one another. He saw ethnicity and ethnic nationalism as a broader identification for the Japanese people. Hasegawa Nyozekan, the writer, supported this, substituting the ethnic nation for civil society.\textsuperscript{16} If a nation-state were to be established, it would be as a result of a broad consensus founded upon the concept of ethnicity, not the narrower focus

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{16} Doak, 294.
of civil society upon the state and government. *Minzokushugi* in Japan at this time thus represents the attempt of rural society, led by Leftist intellectuals like Oyama, to establish an alternative to the rule of the state and bureaucracy which oppressed them.

How does the creation of a nation relate to the formation of an empire? Ultimately, this is Japan’s goal, and the domestic developments which give rise to resistance movements occur alongside imperial actions. For example, the Hibiya riots of 1905 arose as a direct consequence of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) and the perceived injustice of the Treaty of Portsmouth’s terms. Furthermore, the dispatch of troops to Russia, from 1918-1922, to support the Russian White Army against the Red Army, and the attendant buying of rice stocks by the government, contributed to the rice shortage which caused the Rice Riots of 1918. At first glance, therefore, it would appear that *minzokushugi*, the formation of an ethnic nation based upon rural society, would be opposed to imperial actions. This was not to be the case, though, for ethnic nationalism by the 1930s came to support the actions of the government.

This change in focus came because the government began to co-opt ethnic nationalism. While Hasegawa opposed the “cynical use” of ethnic nationalism to by the state “to shore up its own crisis in legitimacy,” he nevertheless recognized that stopping it was impossible, as “ethnic nationalism was not constrained by any essential nature.” Ultimately, the very artificiality of “ethnicity” and “ethnic nationality” allowed it to be manipulated by any group. The concepts of the nation and the state, therefore, came into conflict in the 1930s as the latter, embodied by the government, attempted to assimilate the former. Intellectuals of the time, however, understood the two as being distinct. Tanaka Kotaro argued that “the nation was not a mere invention of the state; rather, the nation assists in the formation of the state, although the state also helps

17 Ibid., 295.
strengthen the nationality.” Nation and state are therefore complementary facets of society. In negative terms, the state can help strengthen nationality by drawing attention to the dichotomies within society, especially the perceived oppression of the rural Japanese by a civil bourgeoisie.

We may understand the converse in more positive terms. Tanaka used his conclusions about the relationship of nation and state to argue a theory of natural law that supported the multi-nation imperial state. A view prevailed at the time, against which Tanaka fought, that favored the ethnic nation-state to multi-nation states, which would themselves comprise of multiple ethnicities. Tanaka argued instead that “the ethnic nation (minzoku) must be secured within a trans-ethnic, constitutional political order.” While this initially allowed Japan to use Western-style constitutional theory without fear of cultural loss, it nevertheless ultimately provided justification for empire. It permitted Japanese ethnic identity, created as a result of minzokushugi, to continue to exist, but denied the same process for nationalities in Korea and China. This corresponds to Shirayanagi Shuko’s own separation of nation and state, arguing that the Japanese political nation included Taiwan and Korea, but that the ethnic nation excluded them. Thus, in distinguishing nation and state, Japanese intellectuals were able to support the creation of a Japanese ethnic nationality, which both contrasted with and complemented the expansionary and assimilationist goals of the imperial government. These goals are kokuminshugi, the dominance of nationalities who have not yet formed a state by a nationality that has succeeded politically.

As has been stated, ethnicity as the basis of ethnic nationalism was an artificial concept. For ethnic nationalism, however, to transform into a means of dominating others (kokuminshugi), ethnicity must be more clearly defined. One way to do this is by defining ethnicity as race.

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18 Ibid., 296.
19 Ibid., 297.
20 Ibid., 298.
Westerners had already developed numerous ways – pseudo-sciences – to define in- and out-groups based on race. The facial angle measured the angle of the head and compared it to the Greek ideal and the angle of apes in an attempt to grade the species. The cephalic index measured the ratio between the breadth and length of the cranium, while an American, Samuel Morton, claimed to corroborate the notion of racial hierarchy with a measurement of cranium capacity. A theory of recapitulation envisioned the races arrayed vertically, with lower races representing different stages of higher races’ physical development. Just as the abstract concept of ethnicity was manipulated in order to mobilize the Japanese and form a nation-state, so were supposedly scientific processes employed to draw a distinction based on race and, more importantly, establish Western dominance.

If we look at the place of race in discourse, we may see that it not only reinforces cultural distinctions but also shapes political consciousness. Rotem Kowner tries to determine why there was such a rapid transformation in the West from regarding the Japanese as “an almost unknown racial entity to a national group Westerners perceived as a major racial threat.” In America an established racial prejudice regarded Americans as superior to those “inferior races incapable of sharing in America’s republican system and doomed to permanent subordination or extinction.” A similar theory existed in Europe, shaped by centuries of colonial conquest. Modern racial prejudice thus began in part as a result of imperial expansion. External factors thus played an essential role in the discourse. This is made more evident in the attempt to distance the Chinese and Japanese, making the Japanese seem more white, as the Chinese lost favor with the West. With Russia’s loss in 1905 to the Japanese, this trend reversed, and Japanese and Chinese were

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22 Ibid., 103.
23 Ibid., 109.
24 Ibid., 113-4.
conflated in the Western mind and labeled the “yellow peril”.

Thus, the concept of race, like the concept of ethnicity, was a fluid one, dependent in large part upon the contemporary political and cultural context. But while race is an ineffective means of precise categorization, it nevertheless is suitable for the creation of stark distinctions – Asian and Western, for instance.

The Japanese, in the pursuit of empire, attempted to differentiate themselves racially as well. Shirayanagi did not address race directly, but he did define the ethnic nation as a “group possessing a common physical appearance (which he conceded might have resulted from assimilating various races), a common language, common religious beliefs and rituals, and a common way of life.”

In Japan, this definition would naturally exclude Taiwanese, Koreans, and Chinese, not to mention Westerners, and so it implicitly defines the Japanese ethnic nation in racial terms. It is important to keep in mind that Japan was the only non-Western colonizing power, and so it had to carefully negotiate two straits: being racially distinct from its colonies and being closely related to them, and therefore the power best suited to dominate them. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere epitomizes this line of reasoning.

Racial classification in imperial records is one means of showing the difficulties that the Japanese faced in their role of dominance. Mariko Asano Tamanoi investigates racial classification by the Japanese in Manchukuo, and argues that the Japanese faced two tasks. The first was to separate Manchuria from China, thus permitting it to be colonized. The second task is to establish the relationship between the Japanese and the other groups, including Mongols, Koreans, Manchus, Chinese, Russians, foreigners, Moslems, and natives. As regards this second task, what is immediately clear is the ambiguity of such classifications. In

25 Ibid., 126.
26 Doak, 298.
classification categories, sometimes the Japanese include Koreans, while other times Koreans are excluded. The category of “Manchukuons” was empty, as the Manchuko government had never enacted its own nationality law. Classification by Japanese government functionaries is confused, and Tamanoi argues that colonial racism arose out of an effort to hide this confusion. What is important here, though, is not that racism might have had a less firm foundation that might immediately be supposed, but instead that differentiation along racial lines, however tenuous, was viewed by Japanese functionaries as a remedy for the larger problem of Japanese imperial claims in Manchuria.

The first problem continues this effort to determine the role of Japan vis-à-vis its neighbors. Ishiwhara Kanji in 1928 stated, “Manchuria does not belong to the Han Chinese. The relation between Manchuria and Japan is dense, and those who speak of racial self determination must understand that Manchuria belongs to Manchus and Mongols, and that the Manchus/Mongols are closer to Japanese race [than to Chinese].” The racial association of Manchus with Japanese thus established a pretext for Japan’s right to colonize and dominate Manchuria, as it would do in 1932. Again, race is a fluid concept, one easily manipulated by politicians to serve imperial goals. One question arises, though: does this racial relationship mean that Manchus/Mongols and Japanese are of the same ethnicity? According to Shirayanagi’s definition of the ethnic nation, no. While race might create similarities in physical appearance, ethnicity encompasses common language and way of life as well. Thus, Japan’s attempt to connect the Manchus to the Japanese racially draws them into the Japan politically, but the separation of nation and state creates a distinction between Manchus and Japanese which gives the latter a pretext for domination over the former.

28 Ibid., 256.
29 Ibid., 258.
30 Ibid., 253-4.
Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan sought national identity. The establishment of empire requires that the would-be imperial power coalesce mobilize its people around some abstraction. The conflict in late nineteenth-century Japan between civil and rural society made civic nationalism too narrow and unpalatable a solution. Intellectuals saw ethnic nationalism as a better option. There are two strands of this, one internal (minzokushugi), whereby an ethnicity gains power against the oppressive actions of a statist government, and one external (kokuminshugi), whereby a nationality that has formed a state dominates other nationalities that have not. The former movement grows out of opposition movements, either against one’s own government, as in Japan, or against foreign domination, as with the Manchurians against the Japanese in the 1930s, or the citizens of Harbin in the early 1920s.

Kokuminshugi, however, was not a consequence of minzokushugi; in fact, the two arose simultaneously. The riots between 1905 and 1918 that formed the basis of ethnic nationalism, and so minzokushugi, often occurred because of imperial, or kokuminshugi, actions by the government. By the 1930s, therefore, there was an attempt to determine the relationship between the state and the ethnic nation. Ultimately, the two were determined to be separate yet intertwined, with either supporting the other. Out of this rose justification for Japan’s empire. Race and racial distinctions became a fluid concept for justification of kokuminshugi, as ethnicity had been for minzokushugi. The creation of ethnic nationalism allowed Japan to emerge on the international stage as a nation-state and, ultimately though disastrously, as an empire.
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