

Japan's Identity and Its Separation from Asia

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Introduction

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Japan enjoyed its position within the relatively stable Sinocentric order, where China had functioned as the cultural and political center of East Asia. Japan at this time was a feudal structure ruled by a martial government, but one that had been at peace for over two centuries. This prolonged stability caused military technology to fall out of favor in comparison to the arts. Swords and early firearms became ceremonial, and the warrior class transformed into bureaucrats who focused on poetry and learning of the classics rather than military tactics and training. Japan was a participant in the cultural realm that scholars now call the Sinosphere, a network of Confucianism and Chinese script that united China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam into a shared, but asymmetric, civilizational sphere.¹

This order was violently and suddenly disrupted in 1853 when American 'Black Ships'² appeared off the coast of Edo Bay, forcing Japan to

open its ports to Western powers. Japan was left helpless against signing a series of unequal treaties that granted Western nations economic and legal privileges. This humiliation served as the turning point in a broader struggle over how Japan would define its identity within the new Western-led world order. It shook Japan from its position and led to the question that would entice Japanese intellectuals and statesmen for the next century: where did Japan belong in a world now organized by Western power?

This paper argues that Japan's answer to that question underwent a cyclical transformation across four major historical phases. In the first phase, Japan was a member of the Sinocentric order, drawing on institutional and cultural elements from the Chinese center. In the second, during the Meiji period, Japan decided to sever that connection and turned toward the West, internalizing European standards of civilization and constructing a new identity defined by its differences from the rest of Asia. In the third,

¹Sinosphere: The East Asian cultural sphere which was shaped by centuries of Chinese cultural, linguistic, and institutional influence. Literary Chinese served as a lingua franca among elites. The Sinosphere brought about political and cultural development across East Asia from antiquity through the nineteenth century. Joshua A. Fogel, *Articulating the Sinosphere: Sino-Japanese Relations in Space and Time* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

²Black Ships (黒船): American naval vessels commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry, which arrived in Edo Bay (present-day Tokyo Bay) in July 1853. The fleet's arrival would end more than two centuries of Japan's policy of sakoku (national seclusion). Sanctioned by U.S. President Millard Fillmore, Perry's mission was aimed to open Japan to American trade. Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 273–310.

following its racial rejection at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the economic catastrophes of the interwar period, Japan pivoted toward Pan-Asianism and wartime expansion, reclaiming an Asian identity, no longer as just a member, but as the leader of a hierarchically organized sphere. In the fourth and current phase, following its unconditional surrender in 1945, Japan was restructured and reintegrated into the Western order under American occupation and has remained there through institutional, economic, and security ties ever since.

What makes this journey significant is not simply that Japan changed its orientation several times, but that each reorientation was built upon the residue of the previous ideology. Japan never fully abandoned the sets of frameworks it had adopted but rather reorganized them. The civilizational hierarchy internalized from the West was never discarded; it was redirected. The sense of Asian solidarity invoked during wartime could never be egalitarian as it was hierarchical from the start. And the Westernization that followed defeat in 1945 was not a new fresh start, but a return, deeply shaped by the realities of Cold War geopolitics and the continuing logic of civilizational alignment. Understanding this cycle is necessary for understanding Japan's contemporary foreign policy posture, its

persistent ambivalence and strained relations toward its Asian neighbors, and the enduring orientation towards the West.

I. Pre-Modern Identity and the Chinese Cultural Order

For centuries before the arrival of Western powers, Japan's cultural and political identity was shaped by its position in the Sinocentric world order. The Sinosphere, a term used by historian Joshua Fogel to capture the complexity of Sino-Japanese relations, was not simply a system to serve Chinese dominance. It was a shared cultural region that organized political power, literature, philosophy, and diplomacy across East Asia. Chinese writing served as the lingua franca of government and scholars from Japan to Vietnam. Confucian philosophy structured social order and political virtue. The Chinese tributary system provided the system through which regional rulers acknowledged the Chinese emperor's preeminence.³

Japan's relationship with this order was never one of total subordination. As Fogel notes, Japan formally distanced itself from the tribute system during the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), issuing its own trade credentials to Chinese merchants after 1715 to avoid the implications of tributary status. This diplomatic independence, however, coexisted with a sense of deep cultural

³Joshua A. Fogel, *Articulating the Sinosphere: Sino-Japanese Relations in Space and Time* (Harvard University Press, 2009). Fogel argues that the Sinosphere offers a more nuanced framework than the strictly hierarchical

Sinocentric model, allowing for degrees of cultural adoption and resistance among peripheral states including Japan.

connection: Japanese intellectuals studied Confucian classics, bureaucrats wrote official documents in literary Chinese, and the court drew on Chinese models of governance and aesthetics. The use of literary Chinese, especially, represented, as Nanxiu Qian and Richard Smith have argued, 'a common cultural identity' organized around shared philosophy and administration.⁴

This pre-modern identity was not simply a function of the close geography. It was actively cultivated and chosen. Japanese scholars of the Tokugawa period engaged in sinology, debated the merits of Chinese philosophical schools, and produced vast amounts of literature in literary Chinese. At the same time, a countermovement of nativist scholarship, called *kokugaku*, or 'national studies', worked to revive what its proponents saw as an authentic Japanese identity that had been disregarded in favor of Chinese cultural influence. This tension between Sinophilia and nativism was already present before the Western ships arrived; it would erupt once Western civilizational frameworks were absorbed.⁵

The Sinosphere thus provided Japan with both a cultural foundation and the intellectual tensions that would shape its response to threats

of Western invasion. When U.S. naval officer and diplomat Matthew C. Perry's fleet arrived and forced Japan to confront the undeniably superior military and industrial power of the West, the question of Japan's relationship to the Chinese cultural sphere became impossible to ignore. Modernizing along Western lines would require not only the adoption of new technologies but also the rejection of a civilizational framework which Japan had known for centuries.

II. The Meiji Restoration and the Construction of a New Identity

The weakness of the Tokugawa military government in the face of Western pressure caused a civil war that culminated in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration, leading to the formal return of imperial authority and the beginning of one of the most rapid national transformations in modern history. The primary objective of the new Meiji state was the preservation of sovereignty, shown in the slogan *fukoku kyōhei*, meaning 'a rich country, a strong army.' The new government undertook a total reorganization of Japanese society on Western societal models that included a national constitution, a conscript national army, a national education system, a modern legal code, and a capitalist economy.⁶

⁴Nanxiu Qian, Richard J. Smith, and Bowei Zhang, eds., *Reexamining the Sinosphere: Transmissions and Transformations in East Asia* (Cambria Press, 2017). The editors emphasize that despite Japan's distancing from formal tributary relations, literary Chinese persisted as the lingua franca of elites well into the modern period.

⁵Kokugaku (国学): An intellectual movement in Tokugawa Japan that sought to bring about an authentic Japanese identity and literature free from Chinese influence. Key

figures included Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843). Kokugaku laid the groundwork for the Meiji-era ideology of imperial nationalism and the elevation of the emperor

⁶Meiji Restoration (明治維新): The 1868 restoration of direct imperial rule under Emperor Meiji (1852–1912), ending the Tokugawa Shogunate. *Fukoku kyōhei* (「富国強兵」) means "rich country, strong army", a major slogan of

Because the West was simultaneously a looming threat and the only available model of a successful modern power, modernization became inseparable from the imitation of Western society. Japanese intellectuals and officials who had observed Western institutions firsthand, especially through the Iwakura Mission of 1871–1873,⁷ in which a high-ranking delegation spent eighteen months touring Europe and the United States. They returned with the conviction that institutional reform was required for diplomatic parity with the West. Japan could not simply import Western technology, but it had to remake itself in the image of Western civilization.

At the center of this ideological project was Japan's adoption of the Western concept of the 'Standard of Civilization'⁸, a hierarchical and progress-oriented framework that ranked societies from 'savage' to 'civilized,' with Western Europe and the United States at the top. As Gerrit Gong has argued, this standard functioned not just as a description of international hierarchy but as the determining system to which states were admitted to the full rights and protections of the

international order. For Japan, internalizing this framework meant accepting its own initial lower position behind the threshold of 'civilized' status, and committing to the hope of ascending by demonstrating institutional development.

This adoption of the Standard of Civilization led to changes in how Japan understood its relationship to Asia. As Prasenjit Duara⁹ has argued, the concept of 'civilization' in modern East Asia was a hierarchical theory of power imported from Europe and internalized by local Asian elites. To demonstrate civilizational fitness meant distinguishing oneself from those ranked below, with 'below' meaning the rest of Asia. Japan's distance from the continent changed from a matter of geography to ideological opposition, in which Asia was conceptualized as the 'backward' against which Japan's progressive ability could be measured.

This ideology was explained best by Fukuzawa Yukichi, the dominant public intellectual of the Meiji period. In his 1875 work, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, Fukuzawa had already argued that civilization was a

Meiji modernization policy. W.G. Beasley, *The Meiji Restoration* (Stanford University Press, 1972).

⁷Iwakura Mission (岩倉使節団): A Japanese diplomatic delegation that traveled to the United States and Europe from 1871 to 1873. Led by court noble Iwakura Tomomi and also including future prime ministers such as Ito Hirobumi and Okubo Toshimichi. The mission purpose was to renegotiate the unequal treaties and to study Western political structure, economics and law. Though it failed in its diplomatic goals, it shaped the direction of Meiji reforms.

⁸Standard of Civilization: A concept in nineteenth-century international law that distinguished between 'civilized' states (entitled to full sovereignty and treaty rights),

'barbaric' states (partially recognized), and 'savage' peoples (subject to colonial governance). The standard was explicitly Eurocentric, measuring civilizational achievement against Western institutional benchmarks. See Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (Routledge, 2009).

⁹Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,' *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 (2001). Duara argues that both pro-Western modernizers like Fukuzawa and Pan-Asianists operated within the same civilizational theory that came from Europe. They simply reached opposite conclusions about which direction Japan should turn.

universal process through which any nation could progress, framing it as an aspiration rather than an inherent Western quality. But it was his 1885 essay *Datsu-A Ron*, 'On Leaving Asia', that formalized the ideological implications of his framework into a controversial political debate. The essay is not merely an analysis of the growing gap between East and West based on technology or governance; it is a passionate advocacy for a complete intellectual and political severance with the old order.¹⁰

In *Datsu-A Ron*, Fukuzawa portrays Asia as a neighbor's house festering with the 'smallpox' of backwardness and despotism. For Japan to thrive and avoid infection, it must physically and mentally 'leave Asia' and join league with the civilized West. The shared cultural history of the Sinosphere is transformed from a linked sphere into a source of contagion, a drag on Japan's destiny. Amputation becomes a necessary and patriotic act of national hygiene and self-preservation. As Dwight Tat Wai Kwok's (2009) analysis emphasizes, Fukuzawa's call should not be read as simply anti-Asian and pro-Western, but rather it reflects the structural and geopolitical pressures of the era. The urgency is derived from the threat of Western imperialism and Japan's

desire to be recognized as a modern nation-state among equals.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki¹¹ has shown how Japan's modernization project involved not only industrial and political reform but also a fundamental reordering of historical time and civilizational space. Japanese elites adopted Western historical frameworks to conceptualize the nation's place in time, portraying Japan as uniquely progressive while treating other parts of Asia as backward or stagnant. By redefining Asia as the 'past' and Japan as the 'future,' these intellectuals created a narrative that simultaneously justified emulation of Western norms and rooted Japanese nationalism in a unique civilizational identity. Stefan Tanaka's analysis in *Japan's Orient* extends this argument to show how Japanese intellectuals constructed the category of 'the Orient' (*Tōyō*) as a historical object, simultaneously claiming to be the heir and the successor.

One of the core systems through which this ideological transformation became institutionalized was the modern education system created during the Meiji period. The Ministry of Education, established in 1871, developed a national system of compulsory schooling that served the dual purpose of

¹⁰Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901): Widely regarded as the most influential Japanese intellectual of the nineteenth century. Founder of Keio University, he advocated strongly for Western learning and liberal political values. His face appears on the Japanese 10,000-yen note. *Datsu-A Ron* was published anonymously in the newspaper *Jiji Shinpo* on March 16, 1885, and was likely authored by Fukuzawa

himself, though this attribution was debated for much of the twentieth century.

¹¹Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998). Morris-Suzuki examines how Japanese intellectuals used Western historical frameworks to position Japan as uniquely capable of progress while rendering the rest of Asia as static.

promoting technical modernization and creating a shared national consciousness. Through language standardization and moral education, such as the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890,¹² which made loyalty to the emperor and the Japanese nation the supreme civic virtue, the youth were instructed that Japan's historical development was uniquely predisposed for modernization and progress. Japan was to stand in contrast to its Asian neighbors, particularly China and Korea, which were portrayed as stagnant and unable to reform.

The educational narrative was further reinforced by European intellectual concepts that gained traction in Japan during the late nineteenth century, particularly Social Darwinism.¹³ As Shogo Suzuki has argued, Japan's internalization of European standards of civilization was ultimately an effort to gain recognition within the imperial world order of the time, and Social Darwinist logic provided the intellectual justification for why this recognition mattered. Nations were organisms competing for survival, and only the most advanced and adaptable would endure. If Japan failed to modernize and demonstrate its strength, it would inevitably end up like the rest of Asia: exploited or colonized. Distancing itself from the perceived

weakness of its neighbors thus became not only a strategic necessity but an ideological imperative.

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 served as vindication of these beliefs. Japan's stunning victory against Qing China shocked the international community and dramatically shifted the regional balance of power. For Japanese intellectuals and politicians, the outcome validated the belief that Japan had successfully broken free from a failing Asia. As Stefan Tanaka notes, this moment formalized a particular vision of civilizational hierarchy, with Japan occupying a unique position as both the inheritor of ancient Asian cultural heritage and the vanguard of its modernization. Rather than simply rejecting Asia, Japan transitioned to claim the role of its legitimate leader and interpreter, a move that required maintaining a degree of civilizational connection even as it asserted hierarchical distance. What had begun in the 1870s as a pragmatic and defensive emulation of the dominant powers had, by the 1890s, been vindicated as ideological superiority. This directly justified Japan's imperial aspirations in Taiwan and Korea, completing the transition from seeking to separate, to returning with dominance.

Taiwan was ceded to Japan through the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, becoming Japan's

¹²Imperial Rescript on Education (教育勅語, Kyōiku Chokugo): A document promulgated in 1890 to promote moral education. It emphasized loyalty to the emperor, filial piety, and dedication to the state, drawing on Confucian ethics but channeling them toward nationalist ends. The Rescript was read aloud at school ceremonies across Japan and remained central to public education until its official repudiation in 1948.

¹³Social Darwinism: The application of Charles Darwin's evolutionary framework to human societies. The concept that nations and civilizations competed for survival in a struggle for existence provided a justification for both Japan's drive to modernize and later expansion. Figures such as Herbert Spencer were widely read and discussed in Japanese intellectual circles.

first formal colony and the opening test of what Japanese imperial governance would actually look like. Japan presented colonial governance as a form of tutelage that would bring Taiwan's population up toward Japanese civilizational standards. Early decades were characterized by military pacification and the suppression of armed resistance, followed by a longer period of infrastructural development. These included railways, irrigation systems, public health programs, and educational institutions that would outlast the colonial period itself. Taiwan thus became the first concrete demonstration that Japan had not merely emulated Western imperial power ideologically but had begun to reproduce it institutionally.

Yet the separationist narrative never went unchallenged. Alongside the drive toward Westernization, a counter-ideology of Pan-Asianism persisted throughout the Meiji period, creating an alternative narrative of Japan's relationship with the continent. Figures like Miyazaki Toten actively supported Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary efforts in China, sharing a vision of Asian liberation from Western imperialism. The art critic Okakura Tenshin, while introducing Japanese art to Western audiences, opened his 1903 work *The Ideals of the East* with the declaration that 'Asia is one.' Many conservatives

retained a deep respect for Chinese classics and Buddhist philosophy, maintaining a cultural connection to the continent even as the political discourse of separation increased. There was also a persistent anxiety about Japan's intermediate position: the fear that it would be caught between an Asia it was trying to leave and a West that would never fully accept it as an equal on racial grounds. As subsequent events would demonstrate, this anxiety was well-founded.

III. Civilizational Parity and Its Limits: Race, Rejection, And Disillusionment

By the early twentieth century, Japan's strategy of Western emulation appeared, on the surface, to have succeeded. Japan had industrialized, built a modern military, revised its unequal treaties, and achieved a series of military victories that had shocked the world. Its triumph in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905¹⁴ marked the first time in modern history that an Asian nation had defeated a major European power, a fact that reverberated across Asia and the colonized world as proof that Western dominance was not inevitable. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 had formalized Japan's recognition as a legitimate regional force and a partner within the global balance of power. Japan had gone from a middling power on the verge of colonization to a rising empire, and these

¹⁴Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905): Concluded with Japan's decisive victory and the Treaty of Portsmouth, mediated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. Japan's victory had sympathies across Asia and the colonized world, showing that a non-Western nation could defeat a

major European power. However, Japan felt cheated of its spoils when diplomatic pressure from other Western powers resulted in a peace settlement that denied Japan the financial compensation it had sought.

developments reinforced the belief that alignment with the West was the correct direction for national development.

A protectorate in Korea was established in 1905 in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, and full annexation came in 1910 with the absorption of the Korean imperial court into the Japanese Imperial House and the replacement of Korean administrative and legal institutions with Japanese ones. Where Taiwan had been an overlooked, remote province annexed from a weakened Qing dynasty with limited capacity for organized resistance, Korea possessed a distinct national identity with a living memory of independent statehood. The March First Movement of 1919, in which mass nonviolent protests against Japanese rule consumed the peninsula and were put down with force. For Japan, the suppression of the movement was an administrative necessity; for Koreans, it became a moment of national memory that permanently colored the meaning of the entire colonial period.

However, no amount of national progress could erase the issue of race. While Japan had been allowed into the halls of the international order as a rising power, it remained subject to racial hierarchies that placed a permanent ceiling on its aspirations. This tension became visible at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.¹⁵ Japan

attended as one of the great powers, the only non-Western member of that exclusive group. They were expecting that their contributions to the Allied cause in the First World War would be recognized accordingly. Its delegation submitted a proposal for a racial equality clause to be included in the Covenant of the League of Nations, which would establish the principle that all member states, regardless of race, should be treated as equals.

Naoko Shimazu's study of the episode reveals the complexity of Japanese motivations. The proposal was simultaneously a principled stand against racial discrimination, a bid to secure Japan's great power status within the new League, and a practical attempt to resolve the issue of anti-Japanese immigration restrictions in the United States and British Dominions. Though the proposal received majority support among the delegations present, it was ultimately struck down when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, serving as the commission chair, ruled that it required unanimous approval, an impossible threshold given the opposition of the United States and Australia. As Shimazu argues, this rejection exposed the unchangeable racial foundations of the international system, revealing that Japan's inclusion had always been conditional and strategic rather than genuine.¹⁶

¹⁵Paris Peace Conference (1919): Gathered representatives of the Allied powers to negotiate the terms of peace following World War I. Japan attended as a 'Big Five' power alongside the United States, Great Britain, France, and Italy. The racial equality proposal was formally submitted to the

Commission on the League of Nations on February 13, 1919.

¹⁶Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (Routledge, 1998). This remains the most comprehensive English-language study of the episode. Shimazu argues that the failure of the proposal

The civilizational hierarchy that Japan had worked so hard to ascend was not the ladder of societal development that any nation could climb, as had been previously thought. It was a structure designed to sustain white dominance. This realization that no amount of institutional imitation or military achievement could overcome the racial foundations of the international order created a crisis of identity. The earlier optimism that Japan could achieve full equality through modernization was crushed. It was replaced by a skepticism toward the West and distrust in the institutions that it led.

Britain's decision to end the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1922, under pressure from the United States at the Washington Naval Conference, further deepened Japan's sense of isolation. American relations deteriorated as Japan acquired Pacific islands from Germany and as anti-Japanese sentiment intensified on the West Coast of the United States, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924,¹⁷ effectively barring Japanese immigration to the United States entirely. These developments furthered the humiliation felt in Paris, confirming for many Japanese politicians and military leaders that the strategy of Western alignment had reached its ceiling and that another reorientation was necessary.

The economic disruptions of the interwar period accelerated this process of disillusionment. As global markets contracted following the Great Depression, rising protectionist tariffs, most notably in the United States, damaged international trade and hit Japan's export-driven economy particularly hard. Unemployment rose, social unrest increased, and Japan's fragile experiment with democratic governance was destabilized. The notion that assimilation into Western institutions was inherently unstable and threatening to Japan's national interests gained popularity among policymakers and military leaders. Asia, with its raw materials, markets, and manpower, presented an alternative economic lifeline. Autarky, or economic self-sufficiency, replaced international trade as the guiding principle of Japanese economic thought.

IV. The 'Return' To Asia: Pan-Asianism and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

Amid political and economic difficulties, Japan began to formalize its shift away from the West and toward a reengagement with its Asian neighbors. This 'return' to Asia, however, was not a return to the pre-modern Sinosphere identities. While Japan felt disillusioned with the West, it did not abandon the knowledge, institutions, or ideological foundations it had adopted from them.

had profound domestic political consequences in Japan, fueling nationalist sentiment and deep skepticism toward the Western-led international order throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁷Washington Naval Conference and Immigration Act of 1924: The Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922)

resulted in treaties that restructured the balance of naval power for the five main victors of WW1 but favored America and Britain. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act) included the Asian Exclusion Act, which banned virtually all immigration from Asia and was widely perceived in Japan as a direct racial insult.

It rather sought to apply them in a new environment, redefining its relationship with Asia through the perspective of a powerful vanguard positioned to lead the continent's disunited masses. The earlier drive for separation had already established the distinction between Japan and its neighbors; now this distinction would be mobilized in a new direction.¹⁸

Pan-Asianism, which had existed alongside Westernization sentiment throughout the Meiji period, gained renewed prominence during this nationalistic era. As Sven Saaler and Christopher Szpilman¹⁹ have documented in their examination of Pan-Asianism, the ideology was never a single, coherent doctrine. Rather, it was a flexible set of ideas capable of accommodating both anti-Western sentiment and assumptions of Japanese leadership. In its earlier, more egalitarian forms, Pan-Asianism had emphasized the cultural unity of Asia and the shared heritage that separated it from Western civilization. In its nationalistic iteration, these ideals were distorted to serve Japan's strategic interests, becoming a justification for imperial expansion rather than a mutual Asian solidarity.

Even as Japan turned away from the West, it did not reject the underlying logic of civilizational hierarchy that had been the foundation of its earlier development. It rather chose to reposition itself within that hierarchy. Japan was no longer adopting from Europeans to emulate them, but it continued to define itself as more advanced than the rest of its cohort. The 'return' to Asia would not just be a return to a common cultural sphere, but the establishment of a new form of relationship in which Japan occupied the apex. The civilizational hierarchy had been reoriented, not dismantled.

By the 1930s, this reorientation had solidified into formal policy. Japan's foreign policy increasingly reflected a growing emphasis on regional expansion justified through a combination of economic necessity and a vision of liberation from Western restraint. The invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the subsequent establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo²⁰ marked the first major step in Japan's formal rejection of the international order. As Germany's military resurgence demonstrated in Europe that the postwar order was far more fragile than it had

¹⁸The shift from Westernization to Pan-Asianism was not sudden but gradual. It could be traced through the 1920s in the growth of nationalist and militarist political movements, the rise of figures like Okawa Shumei who synthesized Pan-Asian ideology with imperial ambition, and the increasing influence of the military in civilian politics. By the early 1930s, with the Manchurian Incident of 1931, this shift had become the mainstream doctrine.

¹⁹Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History*, Vols. 1–2 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011). Pan-Asianism is traced from its early forms in the 1850s through its radicalization in the 1930s–1940s, documenting how the ideology evolved from a

vision of Asian solidarity against Western imperialism into a justification for Japanese imperial hegemony.

²⁰Manchukuo (滿州国): The Japanese established a satellite state in Manchuria (northeastern China) in 1932, following the Kwantung Army's involvement in the Manchurian Incident of September 1931. Its nominal ruler was the last Qing emperor, Puyi, but power largely rested with Japanese military and civilian officials. The establishment of Manchukuo was condemned by the League of Nations, leading to Japan's withdrawal from the organization in 1933.

appeared, Japan drew the lesson that the structures built at Versailles and Washington could be dismantled by force. Like Germany, Japan had grown increasingly disillusioned with an international system that had promised recognition but served limitations; both nations found common cause in their shared resentment.

Japan framed Manchukuo as an independent state and a model of pan-Asian development; its propaganda celebrated it as a harmonious multiethnic society free from Western exploitation. Chinese nationalists under the Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek viewed it as just another set of Japanese encroachments. The Nanjing government refused to recognize Manchukuo's legitimacy and resisted Japanese pressure to formalize any broader political accommodation. For Japan's military and civilian leadership, this refusal was increasingly intolerable. A China that remained hostile was not simply a diplomatic inconvenience; it was a structural threat to the entire economic and strategic logic of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, which depended on access to Chinese markets, raw materials, and labor.

Full-scale war came in July 1937, when fighting broke out between Japanese and Chinese sides at the Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing. What began as a localized exchange of fire rapidly escalated into a continental war that neither side had planned for. Japan's military leadership initially believed that a swift, decisive campaign would force the Kuomintang to the negotiating

table on Japanese terms. Chiang Kai-shek calculated that prolonged resistance would eventually draw in the Western powers and exhaust Japan's capacity to sustain a total occupation. Japan could not deliver the knockout blow it expected, and China could not expel Japanese forces through conventional military means. The result was a grinding war of attrition that would last eight years and consume millions of lives.

Japan did eventually find a Chinese collaborator willing to give the Co-Prosperity Sphere's claims a measure of legitimacy. Wang Jingwei, a senior Kuomintang figure and longtime rival of Chiang Kai-shek, broke with the Chongqing government in 1938 and established a collaborationist regime in Nanjing in 1940. Japan recognized Wang's government as the legitimate government of China and incorporated it into the structure of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. Wang himself argued sincerely that collaboration offered China a path to genuine sovereignty within a new Asian order. It drew on pan-Asian ideology and presented itself as a peace movement against the futility of continued resistance. Wang's government struggled to gain popular legitimacy and depended entirely on Japanese military protection for its survival.

The gap between the Co-Prosperity Sphere's rhetoric and the reality of the China war was impossible to paper over. Japan was simultaneously proclaiming the liberation of Asia from Western imperialism and waging a massive

military campaign against one of its core members. The resources extracted from occupied China directly contradicted the Sphere's stated principles of mutual prosperity. The violence of Japanese occupation, particularly in the early years of the war, generated a legacy of grievance that would permanently discredit Japan's claims to pan-Asian solidarity in Chinese historical memory. China's refusal to submit to Japanese leadership was not merely a military or diplomatic problem but exposed the contradiction between Japan's egalitarian rhetoric and its hierarchical practice.

As German forces swept across Europe and the Western powers lost their grip on their colonial empires, Japan saw its opportunity. The combination of wartime needs from the fighting in China, opportunistic expansion, and the Pan-Asian ideology formed into the proclamation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a concept first publicly articulated by Foreign Minister Arita Hachiro in June 1940. Jeremy Yellen's analysis of the Co-Prosperity Sphere demonstrates how it represented the convergence of two powerful forces: total empire and total war. Pan-Asian ideology provided the moral justification for Japan to wage a war of

expansion while simultaneously declaring the conflict a 'holy war' for the liberation of Asia from Western imperialism.²¹

Officially, the Co-Prosperity Sphere was framed as a system of cooperation in which Asian nations would work together to achieve mutual prosperity and independence from their former Western colonial masters. Japanese propaganda employed themes of liberation, unity, and shared Asian destiny, portraying Japan as the undisputed leader of the free Asia movement. In some cases, this narrative found genuine sympathies. In the Dutch East Indies, many among the Indonesian population interpreted the arrival of Japanese forces as the fulfillment of a prophecy attributed to the twelfth-century king Jayabaya²², who had foretold the expulsion of 'White rulers' by 'yellow men from the north.' Japanese policies in the early period of occupation, such as the release of Indonesian nationalist leaders from Dutch prisons and their placement in newly established administrative roles, reinforced this perception. Anti-colonial leaders across Southeast Asia initially viewed Japan as a potential ally in their struggles against European overlords.

The realities of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, however, began to diverge from its stated ideals.

²¹Jeremy A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War* (Cornell University Press, 2019). Argues that the Co-Prosperity Sphere was neither simply cynical propaganda nor a genuine vision of Asian solidarity, but a combination of Pan-Asian idealism, Japanese imperial interests, and total-war mobilization.

²² Jayabaya Prophecy: Jayabaya was a twelfth-century king of the Kediri kingdom in Java, credited with a prophetic

tradition that foretold a period of foreign white-skinned domination followed by the arrival of yellow-skinned liberators from the north who would rule briefly before Javanese sovereignty was restored. The prophecy circulated widely in colonial-era Java and was invoked by Indonesian nationalists and ordinary Javanese alike to interpret the Japanese invasion of 1942 as a fulfillment of divine prediction.

Rather than being a coalition of equals, the sphere was organized around Japan's undeniable primacy. As its only fully established member, Japan exercised dominant political, economic, and military control over occupied territories. Japanese rule in Korea, China, and Southeast Asia manifested differently across regions, but all involved strong Japanese oversight, wartime mobilization, and the exploitation of local resources and labor. The framing of eventual national liberation, which was to be granted once the war was won, masked practices that often emulated the very colonial systems Japan claimed to be dismantling. As the war progressed, resource extraction, conscript labor, and martial law eroded whatever legitimacy the Pan-Asian narrative had created. The missing link between ideological promises and material reality produced mass disillusionment with Japan's claim to benevolent leadership.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, while a tactical victory, accelerated Japan's overextension. Japanese propaganda framed the conflict with the United States as a battle between civilizations: Asia under Japanese leadership versus the Western powers, a framing that echoed the racial dynamics of the Paris Peace Conference rejection. But the demands of total war, combined with the logistical and administrative challenges of managing a sprawling empire, strained Japan's

capacity to maintain even the appearance of the Co-Prosperity Sphere's stated ideals. As John Dower has argued, the racial ideology that shaped Japanese conduct in the Pacific War ultimately consumed Japan's own strategic effectiveness, rendering the Pan-Asian message internally contradictory and externally unconvincing.²³

Japan's defeat in August 1945 brought this ideological project to an abrupt collapse. The fall of the empire exposed the fundamental contradictions of the Co-Prosperity Sphere and discredited Japan's claims to pan-Asian solidarity in the eyes of most of its former members. Japan would retreat inward, losing its connections with its Asian neighbors and facing the challenge of rebuilding a destroyed nation under American occupation.

V. Defeat, Occupation, and the Second Wave Of Westernization: Japan's Reintegration into the Western Order

Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, and was now under the authority of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), led by General Douglas MacArthur. The American occupation undertook a systematic program of political, social, economic, and institutional reform that lasted until 1952 and reshaped almost every dimension of Japanese public life. John Dower's Pulitzer Prize-winning study *Embracing Defeat* is a vital account of this

²³John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon Books, 1986). Analysis of the racial dimensions of the Pacific War examines how both

American and Japanese wartime propaganda employed dehumanizing racial imagery, and how Japan's own racial hierarchy undermined its Pan-Asian rhetoric.

transformation, documenting how Japan's experience of defeat, in what Dower calls the condition of *kyodatsu*, or total exhaustion, created the openness that made Japanese society receptive to the occupation's reformist agenda.²⁴

The occupation's reforms were structurally transformative. SCAP demilitarized the Japanese armed forces, purged wartime leaders from public life, dissolved the zaibatsu industrial conglomerates, redistributed agricultural land, legalized trade unions, and extended full political rights to women. Additionally, it oversaw the drafting of a new constitution, which was adopted in 1947, that renounced war as a sovereign right, transferred sovereignty from the emperor to the Japanese people, and enshrined a bill of rights. This constitution, drafted under American direction by progressive New Deal lawyers within SCAP, was in many aspects more radical than its American model, and it fundamentally restructured the relationship between the Japanese state and its citizens.²⁵

The occupation's democratic idealism, however, was not sustained. Beginning around 1947–1948, the realization of Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, coupled with the prospect—of Communist victory in the Chinese civil war,

prompted what historians call the 'Reverse Course.' Occupation officials shifted priorities from democratization and demilitarization to economic recovery and political stabilization, rehabilitating many purged politicians and business leaders, suppressing socialists, and beginning to rearm Japan. The primary goal of American policy in Japan ceased to be a total transformation and became instead the consolidation of Japan as a reliable Western ally in the emerging Cold War order. Japan was to become the 'factory of Asia,' an economic engine powering the Western position in the Pacific.

Japan's postwar Western orientation was established by the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, both signed in 1951 and coming into effect in 1952. Together, these agreements ended the formal occupation, restored Japanese sovereignty, and tethered Japan firmly within the Western side of the Cold War. In exchange for American military protection and the continued stationing of U.S. forces, Japan accepted a subordinate security relationship that effectively outsourced its national defense to the United States and relinquished independent Japanese military action. G. John Ikenberry's analysis of postwar order building demonstrates how this arrangement was not just a bilateral

²⁴Kyodatsu (虚脱, total exhaustion/Prostration): John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999). This work examines the American occupation (SCAP - Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) from the perspective of Japanese society at all levels. Dower frames the occupation as simultaneously a transformative democratic project and a neocolonial exercise of American power.

²⁵Article 9 ('peace clause'): Article 9 of the 1947 Japanese Constitution permanently renounced war as a means of settling international disputes and prohibited Japan from maintaining a standing military. This provision, which remains in force today, has been a source of ongoing political debate in Japan, with nationalist politicians, most famously Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, repeatedly advocating for its revision or reinterpretation.

security pact but part of a broader American strategy of absorbing former Axis members, constraining them structurally and making their reorientation self-reinforcing.²⁶

The economic dimension of Japan's postwar Western reintegration was equally comprehensive. Access to American markets and technology enabled the Japanese economic miracle of the 1950s–1970s, a period of explosive growth that transformed Japan from a devastated, impoverished nation into the world's second-largest economy, even overtaking the USSR. This economic success was dependent on the Western order: Japanese exports flowed primarily to the United States and Western Europe; Japanese corporations adopted American management practices and technologies; and Japan joined the Bretton Woods institutions that formed the foundation for the postwar international economy. The prosperity that resulted became a powerful ideological endorsement of Japan's Western orientation. It served as a demonstration, echoing the Meiji-era logic, that alignment with the West was the path to national prosperity.

Japan's domestic political landscape reinforced this new reorientation. The Liberal

Democratic Party (LDP), which was initially covertly funded by the CIA to serve as an anti-communist bulwark, has dominated Japanese politics almost without interruption from 1955 through the late twentieth century. It was firmly committed to the U.S.-Japan alliance and to Japan's integration into the Western-led international order. Opposition to the alliance, which was most dramatically expressed in the massive Anpo protests of 1960²⁷ against the revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, was ultimately suppressed, and the LDP's alignment with the United States became the foundation of postwar Japanese foreign policy. Carol Gluck's analysis of how Meiji ideology was constructed and institutionalized offers a parallel: just as the Meiji state used education and official narrative to normalize its civilizational hierarchy, the postwar Japanese state used LDP dominance and the narrative of the 'economic miracle' to normalize Japan's Western alignment.

The cultural dimensions of Japan's postwar Western reintegration were equally impactful. American popular culture, such as jazz, rock music, Hollywood films, consumer goods, and fashion, flooded into society during and after the

²⁶G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Ikenberry argues that the United States used its postwar dominance to build institutions that constrained its own behavior and embedded new allies within a rule-based order. This institutional architecture made Japan's Western orientation self-perpetuating.

²⁷Anpo Protests (安保闘争, 1960): Massive public demonstrations against the revision of the U.S.-Japan

Security Treaty (Anpo). At their peak, hundreds of thousands of protesters surrounded the National Diet building in Tokyo. The protests ultimately failed to prevent ratification of the revised treaty. Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke resigned in the aftermath, but the demonstrations marked the high point of postwar Japanese political mobilization against the American alliance.

occupation, and Japanese popular culture increasingly absorbed these influences and reexported them. At the same time, the Japanese state and intellectuals undertook the difficult construction of a postwar national narrative in which Japan was repositioned as a victim of militarism and war, a peaceful democracy, and a responsible member of the international community. The wartime Pan-Asian ideology was officially burnt away; the emperor was recast as a 'symbol of the state'; and the project of an Asian empire was reframed as a historical aberration rather than the progression of national ideology.

VI. Contemporary Japan and the Persistence Of Western Orientation

Japan's contemporary foreign policy posture reflects the enduring legacy of the historical cycle this paper has traced. Despite the dramatic rise of China and the deepening economic integration of East Asia over the past three decades, Japan has consistently relied on its alignment with the United States and Europe. The U.S.-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of Japanese security policy; Japan is a member of the G7; it has enthusiastically supported international organizations built around norms of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law; and it has,

under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy, actively worked to build coalitions of democratic states to counterbalance Chinese power.²⁸

This orientation, however, coexists with persistent tensions in Japan's relationships with its Asian neighbors. Japan's inability to achieve genuine historical reconciliation with China and South Korea over the legacy of colonialism, wartime policies, and the ongoing disputes over official commemoration reflects the unresolved contradictions of Japan's identity formation. The construction of an Asian identity that positioned Japan as superior to its neighbors was never fully dismantled, but it was repressed, officially disowned, and occasionally reasserted in the form of nationalist revisionism. The recurring controversies over Japanese politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals, shows the difficulty of fully extricating the postwar democratic Japan from the ideological residue of the prewar imperial project.²⁹

The divergence in postcolonial memory between Taiwan and Korea illustrates how the same imperial system could produce radically different legacies depending on the specific

²⁸**Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP):** A strategy endorsed by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo from around 2016, calling for cooperation among democratic states that includes the United States, Australia, and India, to maintain a rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific region against the challenges of Chinese revisionism.

²⁹Yasukuni Shrine (靖国神社): A Shinto shrine in Tokyo enshrining the spirits of over 2.5 million Japanese war

dead from 1867 onward (including conscripts from Taiwan, Korea and Pacific islanders). Fourteen Class A war criminals convicted by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East were added to the spiritual registry in secret in 1979. Visits by Japanese prime ministers and cabinet members have repeatedly provoked strong protests from China and South Korea, who view such visits as evidence of ongoing Japanese failure to reckon honestly with its wartime past.

policies applied and the political contexts each society entered after 1945. Taiwan's collective memory of the colonial period is considerably more ambivalent. Japanese infrastructure investment was substantial and lasting, and the Kuomintang government that assumed control of the island after 1945 was experienced by many Taiwanese as more immediately oppressive than the Japanese, most prominently the February 28 Incident of 1947, in which Kuomintang forces massacred thousands of Taiwanese civilians. The close economic and cultural ties that developed between Taiwan and Japan in the postwar decades further the colonial memory, producing a relationship characterized more by pragmatic affinity than by historical grievance. Korea's postcolonial memory followed a very different trajectory. The annexation was experienced as the termination of an independent civilization, and the policies of the colonial period such as the suppression of the Korean language, forced name changes, and the conscription of wartime labor, left wounds that no subsequent rapprochement has fully closed. Collaboration existed in Korea as it did in Taiwan and remains a sensitive and contested subject in Korean historical memory. Japan's difficulty in achieving historical reconciliation with South Korea, in contrast to its far warmer relationship with Taiwan, is not

incidental;³⁰ it reflects the direct legacy of choices made during the colonial and wartime periods.

The contemporary situation thus reveals the historical cycle. Japan's current Western orientation is not a result of postwar institutions; it is the latest expression of a cyclical pattern of identity construction rooted in the modernization period. The logic that drove Japan to leave the Sinosphere in the 1880s and the belief in alignment with the dominant civilizational power of the moment being the only viable path to sovereignty, security, and status continues to operate, even if the specific content of that alignment has changed. The West of the twenty-first century is not the imperial West of the nineteenth century, but the structural logic of civilizational alignment that Fukuzawa argued for, and that the Meiji state would institutionalize, continues to shape Japan's place in the world.

It is equally significant that Japan's economic integration with East Asia, such as with China, which became Japan's largest trading partner in the early 2000s, has not produced a subsequent political reorientation toward the region. Japan has deepened its economic interdependence with Asia while maintaining its political and security alignment with the West. As Pekka Korhonen's³⁰ (2013) conceptual history of *Datsu-A Ron* shows, the term and its associated ideas have been reinterpreted differently depending on the

³⁰Pekka Korhonen, 'Leaving Asia? The Meaning of Datsu-A and Japan's Modern History,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 11, no. 50 (2013). Korhonen traces how the concept of Datsu-A has been invoked and reinterpreted

across different historical moments, from the Meiji period through the postwar era. He argues that its meaning has never been fixed and continues to be a site of contestation.

historical situation, taking on new political meaning as Japan's position in the global order has shifted. What began as a pragmatic response to the threat of colonization has become a foundational myth of Japanese national uniqueness, one that continues to structure how Japan understands its place in the current order.

The rise of China as a rival to the United States has reinforced Japan's Western alignment by reactivating historical anxieties about Japan's position between a dominant Asian continental power and a Western international order. For Japan's security establishment, an increasingly assertive China which has been making territorial claims in the East China Sea, expanding its military capacity, and challenging the rules-based order that Japan has invested so heavily in upholding, represents a threat that makes the U.S.-Japan alliance necessary. The Cold War logic of anti-communism that originally tied Japan to the West has been replaced by the strategic need for democratic balancing against Chinese authoritarianism, but the outcome is the same. Japan's identity and security interests remain deeply oriented toward the status quo international system.

What the historical cycle ultimately reveals is that Japan's contemporary orientation toward the West is not inevitable, or uncontested. It is the product of a specific history of choices made under conditions of coercion, aspiration, disappointment, defeat, and reconstruction. Each phase of that history left its mark, in institutions,

narratives, political arrangements, unresolved historical grievances which shape the conditions of possibility for Japan's identity today. Understanding that history is essential not merely for academia, but for making sense of the dynamics that will shape East Asia's future: the management of historical memory, the prospects for genuine regional integration, and the question of whether Japan's twenty-first-century trajectory will reproduce the pattern of the previous century or finally break from it.

Conclusion

This paper has traced Japan's modern national identity across four major historical phases: its pre-modern participation in the Sinocentric order; its Meiji-era construction of a new identity through deliberate separation from Asia and alignment with the West; its interwar disillusionment and wartime embrace of Pan-Asianism; and its postwar reintegration into the Western-led international order. Throughout this journey, one structural logic has remained constant: Japan has consistently oriented itself toward whichever configuration of power it judged most capable of guaranteeing its sovereignty. In the nineteenth century, that meant the West. In the 1930s and 1940s, it meant a Japanese-dominant Asia. Since 1945, it has meant the West again, but now embedded in a web of institutional, economic, and security arrangements that make the orientation self-reinforcing.

What has changed across these phases is not the underlying logic but the specific content and context of Japan's choices. The Standard of Civilization that Meiji intellectuals internalized from the West has been replaced by a standard of liberal democratic governance; the Anglo-Japanese Alliance has been replaced by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty; the Sino-Japanese War's 'civilizational validation' has been replaced by the postwar economic miracle's validation of the Western development model. But in each case, Japan has sought external validation from the dominant power of the moment, and in each case, it has built its national identity partly through differentiation from those it judges to be below that threshold.

This structural continuity does not mean that Japan is trapped in an eternal repetition of its past. The country has genuinely changed through its functioning democracy with a civil society, a still-

dominant economy, and a commitment to multilateral governance that represents a genuine departure from its prewar trajectory. But it does mean that the marks of the Meiji ideological project, the hierarchical constructions of civilizational difference, the unresolved historical grievances with Korea and China, and the deep institutional embedding of Western alignment, continue to shape the conditions within which Japanese political agency is exercised. As Prasenjit Duara observed, the choices available to Japanese thinkers in the late nineteenth century were constrained by the civilizational discourse that was available from the West. The cycle endures, but whether it will reproduce itself indefinitely, or whether Japan will find a new system that succeeds it, remains only a theoretical question which cannot be answered in the present.³¹

³¹The question of Japan's historical reconciliation with its neighbors has become increasingly urgent with China's rise. Genuine rapprochement between Japan, China, South Korea and Southeast Asia, of the kind achieved between France and Germany after World War II, is a prerequisite

for stable East Asian regionalism. However, it could be seen that the specific differences between the European and East Asian cases make such reconciliation far more difficult to achieve. See Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

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