



Japan's Modern Myths

Ideology in the Late Meiji Period

CAROL GLUCK

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For Peter

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Contents

I. IDEOLOGY AND IMPERIAL JAPAN

The Subject of Ideology	3
The Ideological Process	9

II. THE LATE MEIJI PERIOD

A Time of Settlement	17
A Sense of Nation	21
A Complicated Society	26
Ideology and Its Time	35

III. THE BODY POLITIC

An Unprecedented Ceremony	42
The Denaturing of Politics	49
The <i>Kan</i> and the <i>Min</i>	60
The Gentlemen of the Diet	67

IV. THE MODERN MONARCH

Custodians of the Imperial Image	73
The Emperor's Regal Roles	83
Local Renderings of the Emperor	94

V. CIVIL MORALITY

Morality and Nation	102
Patriotism and the Uses of Foreigners	127
"The Glory of our <i>Kokutai</i> "	138
The Schools and Civil Tutelage	146

VI. SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS

Social Fevers	157
The Agrarian Myth and <i>Jichi</i>	178
Ideologies of Striving and Success	204

CONTENTS

VII. END OF AN ERA

An Unprecedented Ceremony	213
The New Politics of Taishō	227
A Parliamentary Ideology	237

VIII. THE LANGUAGE OF IDEOLOGY

The Grammar of Ideology	247
The Context of Ideology	262
Orthodoxy and Diversity	275

IX. EPILOGUE: IDEOLOGY AND MODERN JAPAN

BIBLIOGRAPHY	287
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NOTES	313
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INDEX	389
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Illustrations

(NOTE: Black and white photographs are reproduced
to favor historical accuracy over visual quality)

Opposite page 132:

The Emperor Meiji (1888)

The Promulgation of the Constitution (1889)

Detail of the Rescript on Education *sugoroku* (1891)

Opposite page 228:

Members of the Village Plan Investigation Committee Gathered at the House
of Former Village Mayor Hori (Yokota village, Toyama prefecture, 1911)

Picture of Prosperity with Locomotives Running Back and Forth (1889)

Midnight Funeral Cortege of the Meiji Emperor (1912)

Page 196:

Construction of a Village (1927)

Japan's
Modern Myths

Ideology and Imperial Japan

THE SUBJECT OF IDEOLOGY

I

ALTHOUGH no society is innocent of collective notions about itself, some countries have made more of ideology than others. From the time Japan began its deliberate pursuit of “civilization” in the mid-nineteenth century, ideology appeared as a conscious enterprise, a perpetual civic concern, an affair, indeed, of state. Even as the exigencies of institutional transformation were met in the years following the Restoration of 1868, Japanese leaders expressed their sense that institutions alone were insufficient to secure the nation. It was not enough that the polity be centralized, the economy developed, social classes rearranged, international recognition striven for—the people must also be “influenced,” their minds and hearts made one.¹

In 1869, one year after the abolition of feudal rule, traveling missionaries were sent to the countryside to proselytize for the new imperial state. In 1881, a bureaucrat whose own illustrious career was devoted to drafting government legislation, including the Constitution, declared the most urgent national business to be “not government ordinances, but inspiration.” While the interest of those in power clearly lay in persuading the population “to yield as the grasses before the wind,” the opposition and others outside the political sphere were no less concerned with their own efforts to arouse the universal sentiment of the people.² From the 1880s through the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, Japanese sought first to conceive and then to inculcate an ideology suitable for modern Japan.

This proved no easy task. Although many believed in the desirability—and indeed the efficacy—of national exhortation, few agreed on its substance. The state missionaries in 1869 had briefly propagated Shintō as the Great Way of the new era; the legal bureaucrat

IDEOLOGY AND IMPERIAL JAPAN

in 1881 preferred Chinese and German learning as the vessels of inspiration. In the eighties and nineties some suggested imperial loyalty and filial piety, others, the Japanese aesthetic tradition, still others, sociology.³ In the early 1900s empire abroad and agrarian values at home were offered as the proper content for civic edification. In Japan, as elsewhere, the process of establishing a national ethos in a changed and changing social setting was a trial-and-error affair. Ideologies of the sort imperial Japan produced were neither created ex nihilo nor adopted ready-made. Without a text or a revelation to serve as a canonical source, views of state and society evolved fitfully, often inconsistently, into changing amalgams of past and present, near and foreign. This fitful and inconsistent process—the making of late Meiji ideology—is the subject of this book.

II

IN BOTH Japanese and Western writing it is often a disagreeable subject, since it quickly brings to mind Japan of the late 1930s and early 1940s. During those years of militarism and war, the Japanese were said to be imbued with the notion that Japan was the land of the gods, inhabited by a people uniquely superior in the world, who lived together, the whole nation as a single family, under the benevolent guidance of a divine emperor.⁴ This picture of a society mobilized by its mythology in service to the national cause was the backdrop against which the subject of *tennōsei ideorogii*, the ideology of the emperor system, was articulated in the early postwar period. In 1945 and 1946 the Japanese sought to understand the constellation of forces that had brought Japan to war, because they felt, as did their American occupiers, that the past was the obstacle to the future. In order for postwar Japan to begin anew, the first reckoning would be with history. In this turbulent intellectual context attention soon centered on the nature and origins of the prewar emperor system. From Douglas MacArthur to the Japan Communist Party, commentators attempted to identify the elements that had been responsible for the events of Japan's dark years.⁵

Ideology figured prominently in almost every rendering. MacArthur described the Japanese as having been made "abject slaves" to "mythological fiction," and the Occupation attempted to liberate them from "an ideology which contributed to their war guilt, defeat, suffering, privation, and present deplorable condition."⁶ Maruyama Masao began his famous essay of 1946 with a similar reference to enslavement, war, and an ideology which "succeeded in spreading a many-layered, though invisible, net over the Japanese people," who

had yet to be freed of its hold.⁷ Other Japanese felt the same way, some to a visceral extent. One writer recalled his chest constricting at the mention of the word "emperor"; the sight of the flag sent spine-chilling tremors through him. The recommended treatment for his "*tennōsei* neurosis" consisted of an aggressive pursuit of the ideas of the emperor system until they plagued him, and the country, no longer.⁸ Along with the generals, the bureaucrats, the industrialists, and the landlords, ideology assumed a place on the newly compiled list of prewar forces whose power had to be both examined and purged.

In the years since *tennōsei* ideology first appeared on Japan's post-war intellectual agenda, differences of interpretation have generated lively dispute among Japanese historians. But as with so many other issues that were defined in the gripping atmosphere just after the war, the essential nature of the problem has not changed. The outlines of the argument are these: *tennōsei* ideology was the product of the modern emperor system, of the period from 1890, when the Meiji Constitution established the new political structures of modern Japan, until 1945, when these structures collapsed with the surrender. The Meiji government is described as having developed this ideology to legitimate itself and support its modernizing programs. That is, the oligarchs, the bureaucrats, and their ideologues, realizing that some explanation was necessary to secure the cooperation of the people through the rigors of economic development and international expansion, created a state orthodoxy around the figure of the emperor and then imposed it upon the people. The orthodoxy was rigid and flexible at the same time. While its rigidity worked to prevent effective opposition by equating dissent with disloyalty, its vagueness enabled it to adapt its injunctions to different needs, so that sacrifice in war and savings accounts in peace could both be justified in terms of the same national myths. By moralizing and mystifying the nature of the state, politics was depoliticized. All that was required of the citizen was loyal and willing submission, and this he is said to have given as a result of an indoctrination that began in his elementary school years and extended eventually into almost every quarter of his social life. In one of the most common phrases, the people were "shackled" (*sokubaku*), and any efforts to escape were met first with intensified propaganda in the years after World War I, and then with increasingly repressive measures that culminated in police control of thought in the 1930s.⁹

For most Japanese writers *tennōsei* ideology represents both internal psychological constriction and external political submissiveness in

prewar Japanese society. Not only did ideological orthodoxy help ultranationalism and militarism to prevail, but, like the war itself, it represents a blight on Japan's modern experience from which the nation has not fully recovered, even today. The metaphors have changed: what Maruyama called an invisible net became in Irokawa Daikichi's work "an enormous black box into which the Japanese people unknowingly walked."¹⁰ But many of the scholars who study *tennōsei* ideology still do so for therapeutic reasons: they intend to explore whatever national conditions and predispositions enabled the ideology to take hold in the prewar years, and thus prevent its consequences from occurring again. It is for this same reason that Japanese intellectuals keep vigilant watch over what are called "*tennōsei* issues" in Japanese politics today. Whether it is the proposal to revive *kigensetsu*, the anniversary of the legendary founding of the empire and a prewar national holiday, or the move to reinstate government funds for Yasukuni, the shrine of the war dead and an important religious link in the prewar state orthodoxy—any suggestion of ideological recidivism arouses protest and concern.¹¹

Tennōsei ideology, defined and established as a scholarly subject in the months after the war, is thus as much a part of postwar intellectual history as it is a reference to the late Meiji period (1890-1912) during which the ideology gradually emerged. But the view from 1945 backward across the decades conferred on the prewar myths a substantiality that they did not possess in the earlier period. The suppression of the late thirties and wartime years had so solidified the civic dogma that it was naturally assumed to have been cohesive, purposive, and effective from the start. Meiji ideology, or for that matter any ideology that stops short of totalitarianism, would not likely have manifested such characteristics in its formative stages, if indeed it ever did. For ideology, like history, is less thing than process.

III

BEFORE the process can be described, some definition of ideology is required, even if a brief and eclectic one. From the theoretical possibilities available to the late twentieth century student of ideology, I draw the outlines of my subject from an approach common to recent anthropological, sociological, and post-Marxist analyses of the relation between ideas and society. For the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ideology renders social life significant for those who must live it; by both describing and prescribing, ideology provides "maps of problematic social reality" without which the societal arrangement

would seem meaningless and the individual's place in it unclear.¹² Any impression that such maps correspond in some geodetic way to the social topography of a given period, however, is misleading. Ideologies not only reflect and interpret the social realities that sustain them; they also, in Berger and Luckmann's term, construct those realities and remain in constant dialectical relationship with them.¹³ The study of ideology as process concentrates on that relationship, on what Althusser calls "the *lived* relation between men and their world."¹⁴ Since different people construe their world differently, there is always a multiplicity of ideological formations within a society. The question then arises, which—or whose—set of values and meanings becomes dominant and by what means. Gramsci's conception of hegemony recognizes that when a social group is successful in persuading others of the validity of its own world view, force does not greatly exceed consent. The consent, moreover, so permeates the society that to many it seems commonsensical, natural, and at times invisible. On the other hand, the means by which this permeation occurs are visible indeed. They include the disseminating institutions, both public and private, which though unconnected in their activities—schools and newspapers, for example—help to construct a shared ideological universe.¹⁵ Finally, though one speaks of ideological discourse as if it were singular and static, it is in fact a plural and dynamic field of ideas and practices "within which there are not only continuities and persistent determinations but also tensions, conflicts, resolutions and irresolutions, innovations and actual changes."¹⁶

Although the sources in this selective recitation differ from one another on many points, they have in common certain emphases that are shared here as well. Each considers ideology an essential social element, "not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of History."¹⁷ All societies, in short, produce ideologies which in turn help to reproduce the social order. These definitions thus avoid the common, but restrictive, equation of ideology with a systematic and manipulative political program. They further refrain from substituting terms like "belief system" or "national myth" in the hope that ideology by any other name would be a different matter. In general, they also relinquish the emphasis on fraudulence that was central to Marx and Engels' definition of ideology as an inversion of reality and a product of false consciousness.¹⁸ This last characterization, however, is the original source of the Japanese term *tennōsei ideorogii*, and the pejorative meaning of ideology predominates in Japanese scholarship, even among those who, like Maruyama or Irokawa, do not consider themselves Marxists. Authors who wish to pursue a "non-

evaluative conception of ideology," which was Mannheim's grail, occasionally prefer the word *shisō* (thought), while others may omit *tennōsei* and use *ideorogii* alone in a more neutral sense.¹⁹ Still, the content and immediacy of the particular ideology in question have made Japanese writers understandably reluctant to embrace the contention of recent theory that for those who live it, ideology is both real and "true." The issue of fraudulence aside, both Japanese and Western writers retain the post-Marxist concern with the social determination of ideas, insisting that ideological formations be tied to the social groups that produce and are produced by them. Despite the abstraction of the terms, ideology does not march disembodied through time, but exists in a concrete and particular social history that has not only dates but also names and faces.

Defined in this way, the subject under consideration here is the interpretation of the political and social world as the articulate elite lived it—or imagined they lived it—in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan. Since it is the eventually dominant versions that concern us, the focus is on the establishment and the ascendant social orders that constituted the ideological mainstream of the late Meiji period. Shared ascendancy notwithstanding, they were a diverse lot, whose efforts display no sign of a calculated or consistent ideological vision, but splinter instead into a jumble of contending positions. Often self-appointed to the task, they attempted to formulate views of state and society that they themselves could believe in, and then to persuade others to believe in them as well. Not cynical propagandists, they believed utterly in their depictions. The maps they redrew, partly along old, partly along new contours, were also, perhaps primarily, for themselves. Not theorists either, they addressed themselves to the people, interested less in argument than in suasion and its power to create *kokumin* (citizens, or countrymen) of them. Moralists, certainly, they were at home in the hortatory mode, which seemed at once comfortingly Confucian and, in the light of the latest Western treatises on moral education, also reassuringly European. They tackled large issues, defining the meaning of law, the place of politics, the role of the new middle class. They attended to details, the proprieties of imperial ceremony, the reading habits of youth, the extravagance of gold-rimmed spectacles. Impelled almost always by an acute sense of crisis, they prefaced their formulations with dramatic expressions of concern with the present state of social or national affairs. In the gap between what they said—the prefectural governors in 1890 deploring the lack of a unifying moral standard—and what they meant—fearing that the advent of party politics in the

first election would unseat them—lay a welter of purposes and cross-purposes in the midst of which different groups and their different views contended.²⁰

THE IDEOLOGICAL PROCESS

I

As THIS general characterization suggests, “ideologues” could be found in many quarters. There was no single group with official, or even unofficial, status as mythmakers to the Meiji state. The so-called “government scholars” (*goyō gakusha*) were not court ideologists but academic consultants who prided themselves on their intellectual independence. No one, in short, did ideology for a living. Instead there was an array of people who did something else for a living but took, one might say, an “ideological” interest—they would have called it public-spiritedness—most often in matters closely related to their work or position. Many were in government, although the leading statesmen who might have been expected to offer guidance in such things seemed, with the important exception of the oligarch Yamagata Aritomo, generally uninterested. A number of upper and upper-middle level bureaucrats in the central ministries, especially Home, Education, and to a lesser extent, Army, and Agriculture and Commerce, attended diligently to ideological enterprise. Their concerns, however, were various. In the years after the Russo-Japanese War, the army wanted its recruits willing and of good physique, while the Home and Agriculture Ministries wished to keep these same rural youth down on the farm working the ancestral lands instead of running off to the cities, “the graveyards of the people.”²¹ Not only were the doctrines designed to achieve such ends often at odds with one another, but institutional rivalries and bureaucratic regionalism were often so pronounced that instead of contributing to a single orthodoxy, each part of the government vied to produce its own. Also active were provincial bureaucrats at the prefectural and county (*gun*) levels, and a whole range of petty officials, village mayors, and other local notables who, even if they passed in and out of local office, neither thought of themselves nor were thought of by others as links to the central government, but as figures of repute in the locality.

Then, with ideology as with foreign policy in the Meiji period, the strongest views—the hard line—often came from outside the government, from the *minkan*, as it was called, from “among the