# Interwar Japan beyond the West

# Interwar Japan beyond the West: The Search for a New Subjectivity in World History

By

Oliviero Frattolillo

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Interwar Japan beyond the West:
The Search for a New Subjectivity in World History,
by Oliviero Frattolillo

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library



ISBN (10): 1-4438-4230-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4230-3

*to Tiziana, Riccardo, Andrea,*

*my Lifeline*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has taken shape gradually, and I owe a special word of thanks to Franco Mazzei, who encouraged me to focus my attention on this subject since I was attending my Ph.D. course. His constant support is invaluable.

I would like to express gratitude to James Heisig (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya) who read an early version of the manuscript and supported this project. I am also especially grateful for encouragement to Alain-Marc Rieu, who accepted to write the preface of this book.

I also gratefully acknowledge the anonymous experts of the Cambridge Scholars Publishing who recommended this manuscript for publication. Thanks are due to Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar for having assisted me through the submission of the manuscript with enormous patience.

I am also indebted to friends and colleagues who read parts of the text. Thanks also to Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean of the University of Napoli "L'Orientale" for all kind of support.

Finally, this book is dedicated to Tiziana, Riccardo and Andrea, my beloved family, to whom I owe more than I can say.

The Hepburn system has been adopted for all transliterations in this book. Japanese personal names appear in standard order, with the family name first.

# PREFACE

The originality of Oliviero Frattolillo's perspective is his decision to understand the Japanese conception of international relations, of the world order itself, in the very terms of Japanese thought and culture, from the mid 19th century to the Pacific War itself. By doing so, the author does not justify the Japanese government's decisions and policies, nor the involvement of Japanese political, cultural and economic elites. The author's goal is to explain *from inside* their perspective.

This approach asks from readers to search how to criticize a shared vision of the world based on long-term cultural and historical assertions, imagined and transmitted by generations of intellectuals who pretend, as shown in my own work, to be the true keepers of a native cultural essence, which they reactivate and invent at the same time. This work faces the most difficult problem of present research in the Humanities: to criticize a cultural construction on its own terms, without supposing that another culture (the culture of the winners) is a justified ground for this criticism, and without supposing universal norms and values, which were precisely ignored or denied by the culture under study as the projection of a given culture.

The author response is to study these presuppositions, the construction of these ideas and values and the role of the various groups acting as the builders and keepers of these constructions. He stresses and relies on two key explanations: the dominance in the 1930s of *culturalism*, of cultural explanations of phenomena, which could or should have been explained through political science, cultural, institutional and economic sociology. The second explanation is itself an example of culturalism, the well-known "Chūōkōron discussions" of the early 1940s. They have been extensively studied in the late 1980s in a post-modern perspective, with some Western bias OF intends to rectify. He mainly concentrates on Watsuji Tetsurō's philosophy, again not to justify his thought but to explain it in its own terms, including its French and German sources.

This book effectively complexifies and deepens our understanding of Japanese modern culture and the role of philosophy in this culture.

—Alain-Marc Rieu
Professor, Departement of philosophy,
University of Lyon-Jean Moulin
Senior Research Fellow,
Institute of East-Asian Studies (CNRS),
Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon

# INTRODUCTION

Any theory intended to describe
and analyze socio-historical reality
cannot restrict itself to the human spirit
and disregard the totality of human nature.
—Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*

While retracing the history of the rise of Japanese militarism, this book will focus primarily on the identity discourse, intended as reaction to the process of Westernization, and on the social and cultural dimensions of Japanese national experience (i.e. respectively, "the revolt against the West" and the *Chūōkōron* debates), which were closely related to the country's entering the war. Ample emphasis will be given to Japanese philosophico-political dimension emerged in those years, characterized by a refusal of Heideggerian existentialism and Western subjectivity to which it counterposed a new vision of World History, based on the ethics of the *In-betweenness* and of the overcoming of the subject/object Cartesian dichotomy.

Specifically, the aim of this study is to highlight the complexities of the cultural discourse standing behind the rise of Japanese militarism, avoiding the tendency to a western bias. In this way the book will attempt to explain how the Western philosophical tradition, which is mainly rooted in the Aristotelian and Cartesian thought, would have conceived a social ethic hopelessly anthropocentric that has greatly influenced the cultural dimension of historical events concerning Japan and the Pacific War. The ethics of *in-betweenness* - related to Watsuji Tetsurō - and the search for a new historical subjectivity antithetical to the Western tradition (both linked to the *Chūōkōron* debates and to the Symposium on "overcoming modernity") could provide a new reading of it, which seeks to embrace the Western idea of the Heideggerian *Self* with the Japanese (or Confucian, more generally) *Self* as "inter-being".

The first chapter is subdivided in three paragraphs, which focus on the rise of Japanese militarism, considering jointly the domestic driving forces linked to it and the weight exerted by the external variables (such as, primarily, the structure of the International System) on the development of this phenomenon. The analysis has been extended to the Japanese

imperialism during the early 1940s, merged into the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

In the late nineteenth century, Japan was the only non Western country to have successfully faced the challenges of the Westernization issued by the European powers. At the end of Meiji Era (around 1910), just three decades after the end of the country's feudal age, it became a Great Britain's ally, while its soldiers were deployed in Beijing, operating alongside the great European powers. Meanwhile, in Japan the perception of a scientifically and technologically advanced West became to be imbued by negative connotations, generated by the threatening Western presence in Asia. In order to avoid succumbing to European imperialist yoke, Japan has itself gradually converted its international status by embracing am imperialistic identity.

Pinpointing the factors which lie behind the rise of Japanese militarism is a complex historical undertaking. What is indisputable is that Japan, as a late-feudal country, was recently freed from a long experience of high authoritarianism. Seven centuries of feudalism probably made the militarist experiment more affordable than elsewhere, and the way in which Japan was forced to open up the West in 1852, under the threat of the American *kurobune* ("black ships") captained by Commodore Matthew Perry, triggered a phenomenon of growing popular resentment. A first form of ultra-nationalism emerged since the second half of the nineteenth century: it would be enough to think about the protest movement of those samurai who were ousted from the control of the new government, such the Satsuma rebellion led by Saigo Takamori in 1877. Over the years, and with the changing international situation in Asia, these ultranationalist trends converged in a specific political movement which supported the ultra-revolutionary social forces against the Western domination in other Asian countries. The international economic and political crisis of the 1920s and 1930s fomented the discontent, especially among the military corps. The ultranationalist movement made proselytes among the leaders both of the army and navy, concerned with the safety of the country. But these new ideological trends soon pervaded the masses, ready to think that Japan was hampered by hostile forces aimed at subjugating the country. The peasantry was indoctrinated with a sense of admiration and gratitude towards the military, and to venerate the idea of "serving the Emperor", willing to sacrifice on his behalf. Multiple and profound differences are discernible between Japanese militaristic experience and the events related to Nazi and Fascist regimes in Europe. The absence in Japan of a charismatic leader, as well as of an ideology, and of fascist mass party, contrasts with the European totalitarianism,

which were supported, especially during the first phase of party constitution, by a strong social component and a large consensus within the lower classes. Japanese militarism, conversely, was born between military academies. The roots of the phenomenon is certainly to be found in Japan's fast rising power, which started just after the institutional reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century. In less than twenty years, in fact, the country succeeded in defeating Russia, in conquering Korea, and in sitting at Versailles, among the winners of World War I. Nevertheless, in the years when it was diplomatically tied to the Western democracies, the main purpose of Tokyo's foreign policy was the transformation of China into a Japanese protectorate. The 1931 Mukden incident helped precipitate an international crisis already in progress: Japan invaded Manchuria, where it established the satellite State of Manchukuo, disembarked its troops subdued the government in Shanghai and Beijing for a series of humiliating ultimatum. In order to do so, the officers received the acquiescence of the senior officers of the army. The Emperor and the government officials tried to keep the incident under control, but had to acknowledge to be essentially powerless. A wave of nationalist euphoria will lead the country to the Pacific War, tragically culminated in the atomic holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the second chapter the historical discourse is further developed, as it is focused on interwar year's socio-cultural dimension, which expressed Japanese internal malaise, emerged simultaneously with the forces that enabled the rise of militarism in the country. The search for a new cultural identity, able to effectively manage the comparison with the West, became the main purpose of intellectuals and radical activists who evoked a distinctive experience for Japan.

If during the phase of great industrial and social transformations following the Meiji Restoration, Japanese leaders were considering the need to "Get out from Asia" (*Datsu-A*) - meaning thereby the areas of Chinese influence - and to "Turn to the West" (*Nyū-Ō*), that was reversed during the 1930s, when politicians decided to "Return to Asia and leave the West". The main aspiration was to conciliate the traditional Japanese values with those created by the new process of modernization under the motto "Japanese spirit and Western techniques" (*wakon-yōsai*). Getting back to the origins of Japanese culture would have been the main instrument to be used in counteracting Western hegemony.

From the political perspective, Japan as a new industrial power, had to deal with the emancipation of the other Asian countries, which would have encouraged Japanese primacy in the region, while removing the Western interferences. From the cultural point of view, "getting back to Asia"

would have allowed Japan to dominate its geopolitical sphere. The various terrorist actions and political murders of the early 1930s, which were often perpetrated under the banner of a "political *ishin*" ("restoration") and *kaizō* ("reconstruction"), were all made under the assumption that the history would have required specific actions aimed at creating a new order within Japan. Political thinkers and activists like Ōkawa Shūmei, Inoue Nisshō, Tachibana Kōsaburō, Kita Ikki and Gondō Seikyō promoted a "program for action" in order to "expel the barbarians" (*Jōi*) in the name of the "Japanese Culture and Spirit" (*Nihon seishin*). In such a complex context, some were willing to undermine the country's political structure through violent confrontations, emphasizing the inadequacy of Japan's constitution. Others, however, were willing to oppose the predominance of the "structure" over the individuals, advocating a return to the communitarian dimension of public life.

Although some intellectuals were ready to take into consideration the violence as an instrument of revolt, the position of these thinkers was closely linked to a kind of opposition, in fact, much more complex, which was properly articulated during the 1930s and expressed within the *bunkashugi* ("culturalism"). This movement came to involve many other intellectuals, including Tanizaki, Nishida, Watsuji, Yanagida, Yokomitsu. What really made these intellectuals close to each other was certainly not an "action program", rather than a search of common ethical values to which they could belong. The *kyōyō shugi* ("Human Culture") and the *Jinkaku shugi* ("Character") seemed the only way to go in order to achieve a true "cultural and spiritual renewal".

The question of the political organization of the "New Japan" was mainly linked to Gondō and Tachibana, who emphasized the bond existing between cultural criticism and political action. They started from a critique against the capitalistic international order, advocating a return to the primitive purity that would have allowed Japan to rediscover its Asian identity, that is an "agrarian communitarianism". The assimilation of Western models focused on the idea of a centralized government appeared artificial, an insult to the secular tradition of local self-government ruled by the *daimyō*. The Emperor should have played a key role, and the creation of a popular government would have finally recovered an age-old bond: the unity between the Emperor and his people, or a new social model which would leave behind the Western idea of the parliamentary politics. For the realization of such aspirations, Gondō and Tachibana did not disdain resorting to acts of violence and terrorism: both joined the *Ketsumeidan Jiken* – "League for the Blood Incident" - made up of extremist insurgents. The agrarian fundamentalism at the domestic level

coincided with the road of territorial expansionism ("the Co-Prosperity Sphere").

The third chapter focuses on an historical analysis that overthrows epistemologically the orthodoxy aimed at ascribing to the Kyoto School (*Kyōto gaku-ha*) the construction of the cultural foundations which served as endorsement for the Japanese militarist propaganda.

The definition of the boundaries of this circle remains a very complex thing, since around it gravitated intellectuals and representatives of very different ideological orientations. Probably, the unifying element of the School was in an ontology that assumed the "Absolute Nothing" (*Mu*) as a basis of reality. But the most original insight of the Kyoto School, is to have intertwined the notion of "Absolute Nothing" with the instruments of the Western dialectic. Between 1941 and 1942, the main concern of the School was to make more "tangible" the key-concepts developed by Nishida (*maître-à-penser* of the School), setting them in the current historical situation. Nishitani, Kōsaka, Suzuki and Kōyama worked on the organization of three famous roundtables, known as "*Chūōkōron* discussions" that took place over a year. A summary was published by the *Chūōkōron* magazine, but the works were analytically presented in a volume, entitled *Sekaishi tachiba to Nihon* ("The standpoint of world history and Japan", 1943). The first edition was soon exhausted. The enthusiasm with which the book was received was the result of the climate of oppression and tension, combined with the desperate desire to find a sense of what was happening in those days. In the postwar period, the circle entered in a shadow: those debates were seen as the symbol of intellectual endorsement to Japanese expansionistic project. Nevertheless, among the main purposes of the debates outstands the urgency to reflect on the position occupied by Japan in the world history, on which each member was asked to express his own opinion. The first systematic analysis of these works appeared in 1959, in Takeuchi Yoshimi's contribution entitled *Kindaika to dentō* ("Modernization and tradition"). Takeuchi must be credited for having brought to the attention of the international academic circles the question of the Kyoto School's involvement with the regime in a new light. He seems to distance himself from those who, in the postwar years, condemned without any possibility of conciliation the *Chūōkōron*'s work. Even without painting those intellectuals as victims of an expiatory historiographic process, he intended to explore the role they were asked to perform. The *Chūōkōron* discussions were probably interpreted as an attempt, absolutist in itself, aimed at creating a new values' system, the geopolitical vision of a Japan-centered hierarchical order, of which the militarist government could have

easily abused. According to Takeuchi, they did not produced a fascist ideology, nor an apology for war: they formulated (or should we say, they interpreted) public ideas. The ideological function they exercised depended on other causes, but their ideas did not conditioned the contingent situation. However, in his work, Takeuchi did not ask a question, indeed crucial for its relevance. The entire Japanese intellectual community had to be aware of the crisis the country was facing at the international level: why the formulation of a rational framework of what was occurring has been produced exclusively by the Kyoto School philosophers? This leads to a series of interesting reflections. Takeuchi's interests are limited to the factual content of the talks and the influence it had on the society at large. He was limited to considering the factual dimension of *Chūōkōron* discussions, without reserving as much attention to the inherent meaning of the topics debated, that is a new "philosophy of world history". The concept of "world" proposed during the debates, was projected in an objective universal horizon transcending the single nation, and where the Self would have achieved a full self-awareness. Conceiving the "world" with a centre (the nation, or the Self) and a periphery (the Other) would have been the most serious obstacle preventing individuals from realizing their own subjectivity. In this case, the "world" would represents only an abstract concept: within the *I-Thou* relation, the Self would not be realized *with*, or *in*, the understanding of the Other. Only through the self-awareness one can reach a global comprehension that would include the *I-Thou* combination in a wider horizon.

The new image of the world responding to the current historical situation could only result from a philosophy immersed in the historicity, far from its metaphysical dimension. In a philosophy mediated by history, the self-awareness would have coincided with the "historical manifestations of history". Based on these premises, the *Chūōkōron* group presented Japan's hegemonic aspirations as an expression of its "real historical manifestation". This sounded like an explicit declaration of supporting ideologically the country's involvement in the war. But what it was the meaning that the participants in the debates attributed to the idea of Japan's "real historical manifestation"? The answer lies in a moral obligation that the country saw as "the duty" of world history: overcoming the modern civilization while promoting a new culture. Japan would have been the only non Western country that, metabolized the modernization, could have used it to overcome modernity itself. It would be of some relevance to notice that neither the reports of the roundtables published by the magazine, nor those appeared later as a volume, is a totally faithful testimony of such work. Before being sent to press, the writings were

subjected to a careful censorship by the authorities, and what we can read today is the result of numerous omissions that "veiling statements in two or three layers of cloth". The central theme of the first roundtable (which took place a few weeks before the attack to Pearl Harbor), "How to avoid war," was changed to "How to conclude the war favorably, as soon as possible, in terms reasonably acceptable by the Army". According to Graham Parkes, the contribution of Najita and Harootunian, which appeared in the *Cambridge History of Japan* ("Japanese Revolt Against the West: Political and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century", 1988), does not discuss some crucial aspects related to the historical circumstances distinguishing the political context in which the *Chūōkōron* discussions were held and that exerted, in many ways, a decisive influence on the work. Their approach, seems to rely almost exclusively on Takeuchi's work which, as noted above, favors a more factual analysis. In the work of Najita and Harootunian the positions of the intellectuals who participated in the debates are overshadowed by the fascist label with which has been marked the entire Kyoto School. The omission of the complex political circumstances that influenced the circle's statements contributed to further fuel the univocal image of the Kyoto philosophers' ultra-nationalist vocation in the postwar years. It goes without saying that what is historically important is not condoning Japan's military aggression, nor fulfill the intellectuals who spoke out in favor of this, but rather to emphasize the complexity of the historical and political context and qualify the support provided by the country's intelligentsia. Ōshima Yasumasa's contribution ("Daitōa sensō to Kyōto gaku-ha. Chishikijin no seiji sanka ni tsuite", *Chūōkōron*, 1965) shed light on some aspects of the political climate permeating the roundtables. Disciple of Tanabe, Ōshima worked as secretary for a "secret society" founded in the Department of Philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University, at the behest of the Imperial Navy, six months before the attack to Pearl Harbor. The purpose of this "secret society" was to stop the military escalation advocated by the Army. Opposing the logic by which the military managed the ongoing war, but split on the inside, the Navy was aware of not being able to represent a united front against the Army Ministry. Betting on the public opinion as a potential ally remained the only way to go. The favor of the Kyoto School would have helped to exercise influence on public opinion. Nishida met the Prime Minister Konoe Fumimarō and the Navy hoped that a direct intermediation of the former over the latter could have facilitated a turnaround in foreign policy. The passage of the office to the Army Minister, Tōjō Hideki, thwarted all efforts and auspices of the Navy. The control over the work of the Kyoto School became more pressing, and

both Nishida and Nishitani were investigated, while the police censored all the criticism expressed about Tōjō during the *Chūōkōron* discussions. According to Ōshima, one of the main reasons for the hostility that the Army fed towards the circle was in its attempt to emphasize the "point of view of the world history" and to address the meaning of war in that direction.

The fourth chapter, lastly, focuses on Watsuji Tetsurō, who gravitated around the Kyoto School. The choice has fallen on this philosopher as he perfectly embodies the case of the Japanese intellectuals at the forefront during the interwar years, and of controversial figure for decades in the postwar period, finally rehabilitated by an overthrow of the Pacific War orthodoxy. The case is particularly striking, given that his philosophical system has been purified from the responsibility of an alleged geo-determinism, assuming instead the pioneering character of a sort of social constructivism. A slow, but effective, process of historical revisionism, based on the reinterpretation of the original sources (which were often ignored), shed new light on Watsuji's thought. His theory of relational coexistence is now studied and resumed in more epistemological areas, as an expression of a new cosmopolitanism. Attention has been paid, in particular, to his theory of *ningen aidagara*, or *in-betweenness*, which is traced primarily through an examination of his two major works, *Fūdo* ("Climate and culture", 1935) and *Ningengaku toshite no rinrigaku* ("The significance of Ethics as the study of Man", 1935).

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE RISE OF MILITARISM IN JAPAN: EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL DIMENSIONS

Frivolous thinking is due to foreign thought.
Japan must no longer let the impudence
of the white peoples go unpunished.
It is the duty of Japan to fulfil her natural destiny,
to cause China to respect the Japanese,
to expel Chinese influence from Manchuria,
and to follow the way of imperial destiny.
—Araki Sadao (1877-1966)

## 1.1- Variables of Japanese militarism

By the 1930s Japan had already overcome a number of challenges that had produced significant changes within the country, both culturally and politically. The victories against China (1895) and Russia (1905), the end of the fragile Taishō democracy and the experience of the First World War were among the historical moments that marked an important transition. The crisis the country was to face in this decade, however, would have profound impacts, very different from anything Japan had experienced before. On February 9, 1935, *The Literary Digest* (p. 15) published the following words:

> What was called a Japanese "Monroe Doctrine for Asia" whereby Japan would wield dominance there, especially in Chinese affairs, was announced last April, and drew the immediate attention of the world's press".

In 1935 the Japanese army mobilised the Imperial Military Reserve Association in order to obtain an official repudiation of Minobe Tatsukichi's liberal constitutional theory (Miller, 1965; Mazzei, 2006) and the proclamation of imperial sovereignty, based on the principle of *kokutai* (national character). This created the necessary ideological and institutional

conditions for the establishment of a totalitarian regime under the supreme authority of the Emperor.

Most historians argue that the nature of the Japanese militarist regime is not comparable to that of Italy or Germany.[1] Many differences could be highlighted between the regime that ruled Japan from the 1930s and European Fascism, particularly the lack of a charismatic leader and a single party. Although the figure of the Emperor assumed a role as a charismatic leader in Japan, the kind of leadership that the he exercised was very different from that of the Fascist or Nazi leaders in Europe (Storry, 1979). With regard to the single party, in Japan there were mass movements promoting the Fascist message, but these were not real parties. The military performed the function of the single party, through the mobilisation of the Imperial Military Reserve Association. In 1935 they succeeded in creating mass support in favour of the abolition of the liberal theory of the Meiji State (Gluck, 1985). Nevertheless, most Japanese historians tend to use the term *Fascism*, since it allows a grouping of the three countries, which had to deal with a belated process of modernisation in a similar manner during the second half of the nineteenth century. These similarities are mainly in terms of the time and the methods used by these countries to establish a modern state and their economic and social modernisation processes. As in Germany and Italy, also in Meiji-era Japan the delay of modernisation "from the top down" allowed the preservation, in traditional peasant society, of a section of society willing to support reactionary political regimes in times of severe economic and social difficulties. This was the case with the 1929 crisis, when the closure of foreign markets drove Japan towards the conquest of a privileged area of economic expansion in Asia, while internally the military and bureaucrats replaced the parties at the helm of a government which implemented a series of totalitarian measures, including continuous warfare (Howe, 1999). Finally, on September 27, 1940, Japan, Germany and Italy signed the *Tripartite Pact*, which became known as the *Axis alliance*. Undeniably, there were similarities between European Fascism and the regime which became established in Japan, since the bureaucratic classes that came to power were often inspired by Fascism and Nazism in terms of economic policy and the creation of a totalitarian regime. Despite this, Japanese historians tend to specify the characteristic features of Japanese Fascism using the term *Tennōsei fashizumu* (Emperor-system Fascism) (Miyachi, 1980; Miyachi, 1991). It should be noted, however, that Japanese Fascism

[1] See Tanaka (1960); Morris (1963); Ouchi (1974); Duus & Okimoto (1979); Gordon (1991); Martel (1999).

was not a regime limited to a specific era, the beginning of which is often linked to the great recession in 1929, but should be considered as an element of continuity: the kind of totalitarian state that was established by bureaucrats and the military was, in fact, prepared by a series of authoritarian mobilisation efforts during the early part of the twentieth century. However, according to Maruyama Masao (1963, pp. 26-27), the outstanding theoretician of Japanese Fascism and *maitre-à-penser* of the so-called "community of contrition", or "community of repentance" (*kaikon kyōdōtai*) (Koschmann, 1981-82, pp. 609-631; Koschmann, 1993, pp. 395-423)[2], the development of the Fascist movement in Japan can be divided into three stages. The first is the *preparatory period* (from 1919, just after the First World War, until the occupation of Manchuria in 1931), in which right wing movements arose from among the civilian population. During the second phase, the *period of maturity* (from the occupation of Manchuria to the attempted coup on 26 February 1936), the movement that developed among the civilian population was allied to military power sectors; in this way the army became the guiding element of the Fascist movement, gradually taking over key positions in the national government. This was also the period in which a planned coup d'état was discovered, followed by episodes of right-wing terrorism, and the problem of Fascism became an issue of national importance. Furthermore, the Fascist movement abandoned its negative role of mere opposition to left wing groups and assumed the features of a real social movement. The third phase can be defined as the *period of completion* (the coup of 26 February at the end of the Pacific War). Maruyama (1963, p. 354) views the February 26 incident as a dividing line: it led to the demise of the grassroots radical Fascist movement and ensured that the Japanese drive towards Fascism would take the form of either a Fascist revolution or a coup, as happened in Germany and Italy. For this reason, its development ultimately led to an organisation within the framework of the existing political structures that could be considered a strengthening of state control from above. During the Pacific War, Tōjō Hideki's leadership reduced political freedom to a minimum, almost eliminating it, even though the

[2] "Modern subjectivity" was one of the most debated issues in Meiji Japan, as well as during the second postwar period. Koschmann views an explicit rejection of the recent past as creating the conditions for the Japanese to participate in intellectual debate during the early postwar years. According to him, the post-war community - which he defined as a "community of contrition" - was created as a consequence of the iconoclastic effect of the defeat, as well as the discredit of the political institutions.

conditions to achieve this situation were already present before the spread of war.

Maruyama introduced the distinction between "Fascism from above" (as a regime) imposed on Japan by the power block through the actions of the bureaucracy and the military, and "Fascism from below" (as a movement), which came to power in Italy and Germany (1963, pp. 166-167). The Japanese militarist regime was established "from above" in a gradual manner through the occupation of all the state structures. The ideology expressed by the Fascist movement became important in the first and second stages, while during the third period Fascism became a true state structure, with the movement no longer serving as its mouthpiece.

In his analysis, Maruyama undoubtedly finds common traits with Italian Fascism and German Nazism, basically consisting in the opposition to liberalism and parliamentarianism, its political expression and the fight against Marxism and modern international capitalism. Other common features were the insistence on overseas expansion, a tendency to glorify militarism and war, a strong emphasis on racial myths and the national spirit and rejection of the class struggle based on totalitarianism. However, Maruyama (1963, pp. 34-40) also identifies specific aspects that were emphasised in Japanese Fascist ideology – such as familism (*kazoku-shugi*), agrarianism (*nōhon-shugi*), and Pan-Asiatism (*Pan-Ajia-shugi*), which were not simply characteristics that distinguished this regime from other similar authoritarian political experiences, but also demonstrated the strong ideological continuity between pre-Fascism and Fascism.

The first particular feature that can be observed is familism, which was exalted as a fundamental principle of the state. The nation should preserve the original structure of society, viewed as an extended family composed of a principle branch (the royal family) and collateral branches (the subjects). This concept had been strongly reaffirmed since the Meiji era, as the legislative framework of that period emphasised the ideology of *kazoku-kokka*, or the family state, according to which the hierarchical family reflected the order of the state, ensuring the loyalty of subjects to the national "family", with the Emperor as its head. Fascist ideology elevated this to an absolute level, with the *kokutai* as a fundamental principle. The *kokutai* is the nation-body: the Emperor is the head, while all subjects belong to the social body as its organs, without distinction. Class differences disappear in a single, integrated national system, in which active fidelity to the sovereign is what counts. In this perspective, the samurai became the people. In other words, the seed of a modern mass army is sown. As a leading exponent of the radical movements of those years, Kita Ikki's project for a national reconstruction programme

described Japan as "an organic and indivisible great family".[3] This idea, which was common to all factions of Japanese Fascism, was not seen in Italian and German Fascism. The insistence on the family system can therefore be defined as an inherent characteristic, and is linked to the failure of Japanese Fascism as a mass movement.

Another peculiar feature of Japanese Fascist ideology was the prominent position assumed by the ideology of agrarianism, which the regime proposed as a foundation for the social model of the imperial system. This theory placed the farming community at the centre of society. Agrarianism, which was constantly in conflict with industrialisation, was manipulated by the power bloc to hinder true class antagonism, i.e. the proletariat. This characteristic, which sought autonomy for the villages in an effort to curb the expansion of the industrial production power of the urban centres, was, according to Maruyama, inconsistent with the realistic aspects of Fascism: the need to expand of military production and the reorganisation of the national economy around the arms industry. It was intended to justify the totally negative attitude towards workers, who were generally despised (Gatti, pp. 242-243). There was a tendency, on the one hand, towards a greater strengthening of the absolute sovereignty of the state, focused on the Emperor and, on the other, towards an understanding of Japan mainly based on the history of its provinces. In fact, the right wing included both those who supported a strong development of industry, and wanted to increase state control for this purpose, and those who rejected this idea and thought in terms of an agrarianism centred on the villages. Many supported both points of view. Without doubt the most important exponent of provincialism was Gondō Seikyō, whose ideas were completely based on provincialism and even revealed anti-nationalist tendencies.[4] Among the most important social causes of the sudden rise of the Fascist movement in 1930-31 was the 1929 economic depression, the most serious consequence of which was a serious crisis in Japanese agriculture. The extreme poverty of the villages was fertile ground for the growth of the Fascist movement, and especially for the right wing terrorist actions that became a constant occurrence after 1931. The destitution of the villages led the Young Officers to adopt radical positions, since many of them were sons of small and medium-size landowners or farmers. However, the emphasis on agrarian ideology in the Japanese militarist regime was in contrast to the more realistic components of Fascism, which called for an increase in military production and a reorganisation of the

[3] Kita and his thought are fully covered in the second chapter.

[4] Gondō and his thought are fully covered in the second chapter.

national economy around the arms industry. Therefore, as soon as Fascism descended from the realm of abstract ideas to the real world, agrarianism appeared as an illusion.

The third characteristic was Pan-Asiatism. This concept, highlighted since the Meiji period as necessary for Asian peoples in order to free themselves from European colonialism, was transformed through Fascism into the idea that Japan ought to replace Western imperialism in Asia with its own hegemony.

The National Mobilisation Law was approved in 1938. This was a prelude to so-called "total war", the participation of all citizens in conflict. (Large, 2003, p. 77) The idea of "total war" included the reorganisation of the economy to support the war effort (through intensive and bureaucratic state centralisation), greater authoritarian control in politics and society, and finally, the reform of the party system with the creation in 1941 of the *Taisei yokusankai* ("Imperial Rule Assistance Association"), in which all the conservative parties, trade unions and patriotic associations were obliged to converge (Tipton, 2002, p. 214). During the promulgation of the National Mobilisation Law, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimarō (1937–39, 1940–41) announced the plan to establish a "New Order" in Asia. The main purpose of this law was to strengthen Japan's role in the area of Asia. According to Kita, Japanese expansion in eastern and southern Asia was aimed at driving white imperialism out of the region (Kita, 1959; Kita, 1975). This view was endorsed by the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Matsuoka Yōsuke (1940–1942), who in 1941 declared that the European nations, the USA, the USSR and Japan would divide the world into four zones under their respective influence (Lu, 2002, p. 242). As argued by Gatti (1997, pp. 101-102), this doctrine, which provided for the creation of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was intended to legitimise the Japanese expansionist campaign in Asia. Pan-Asiatism had been cultivated in Japanese nationalist thought since the beginning of the twentieth century, when a number of secret societies arose with the aim of fulfilling the destiny of Imperial Japan in China, through acts that included terrorism and political assassinations (McVeigh, 2006, p. 48).

During the 1920s, nationalist thinkers had started to talk about a worldwide Japanese hegemony as a consequence of the superiority of the Japanese people. The first step in the conquest of this hegemony was to unify Asia under Japanese control and free the region from the yoke of Western imperialism, against which a clash was inevitable. A Pan-Asian perspective was gradually adopted by members of the Japanese government and then endorsed by the military establishment that led the country in the second half of the 1930s. An alternative conservative view

displayed the same sense of superiority towards Asia, although it aspired to position on a similar level to that of the most developed European nations and advocated cooperation rather than confrontation with the West. This view was typical of Meiji Japan, and became triumphant in the democratic post-war years.

This new ideal positioning of Japan implied that the country should not have any particular regard for its Asian neighbours due to their geographical location, but should treat them in a way similar to that of the westerners. Rather than being Pan-Asiatic, this was a divisionist view that involved apportioning Asia out in agreement with the major Western powers, and concealed a similar sense of superiority over the old "master" China and the other Asian countries (Gatti, 1997, p. 73).

Nevertheless, Japanese militarism was fuelled by the rural movement in the countryside, which provided the ideology and manpower, and for which the army became a structure and institution that enabled political penetration. Extremely significant support also came from economic groups (*zaibatsu*), for whom the war provided a commercial outlet for the production of arms (Mimura, 2011, p. 39). Capitalism and agrarianism joined forces with a common interest to create new markets, through the use of military force, thereby perpetuating the family model beyond national borders.

Finally, a very important feature of Japanese militarism was religious nationalism, as interpreted and applied in the politics and propaganda implemented by the ruling class through State Shintō in the 1930s and 1940s. The Japanese nationalism embodied in Shintō was not the result of propaganda or created by the upper echelons of the army and navy or the many right-wing groups, but originated in an ancient past that had been kept alive and had a solid foundation, rooted in beliefs that survived in an almost instinctive way at the grassroots level (the conviction of being a race possessing divine attributes, a unique national structure represented by the imperial system, and a sacred mission to save the world). In this sense there is a remarkable difference between this myth as a symbolic reality felt by the entire Japanese nation and the myth of the Roman Empire evoked by Italian Fascism or the superiority of the Aryan race in Nazi Germany. The break with tradition was much less pronounced in Japan than in Europe. As stated by Rosella Ideo Rindi (1982, pp. 107-108), the image that the Japanese militarist state adopted at that time was simply the amplification and tragic consequence of the ideological indoctrination and thought control that was developed to safeguard "national morale" by the Meiji oligarchy in the late nineteenth century, based on a revival of the nationalist ideology that had been prominent in the latter half of the

Tokugawa era (1603-1868). With the Meiji renewal, Shintōism was institutionalization as the national religion and its status remained unchanged until the end of the Second World War. It was presented as a set of values to which the Japanese had a political duty to adhere. The policy of the Japanese government was to reinterpret Shintōism as a national moral cult rather than a religion (Skya, 2009, p. 15). At the same time, the Shintō sects were acknowledge as having religion importance and granted privileged status in comparison to other religions.

In Japan, the transition from an authoritarian to a totalitarian state (capable of integrating society to the greatest possible extent), which rapidly accelerated in the 1930s, had been gradually developing and gaining ground since the Meiji period. In Japan, unlike Italy and Germany, there was no specific episode that triggered the totalitarian phenomenon. The amalgamation of the various power groups at the pinnacle of society took place progressively through the country's increasing commitment to overseas expansion and the development of the capitalist system. Already during the Taishō democracy there had been an increase in coercive measures and police activity that went hand in hand with the assumption of power by the military and eliminated any possibility of dissent (especially by intellectuals influenced by Anglo-American liberalism or Marxism) (Schencking, 2005, p. 8). These measures were aimed at curbing the process of democratisation and repressing all movements that threatened national solidarity, based on the *kokutai*.

Also, whereas in Italy, as the war progressed, the image of the fascist state lost its appeal among the same middle classes that had benefited from the regime, in Japan, during the 1930s and beyond, the ideology of the imperial system did not collapse. This was due to the huge mobilisation movement that had a very significant social levelling effect (Ideo Rindi, pp. 115-116). Furthermore, in assessing the characteristics that Meiji religious nationalism had assumed by the end of the Second World War, we should not underestimate the widespread fear of loss of national identity due to colonial subordination or an excessive process of westernization. In this sense, the *genrō* (Meiji oligarchs) codified the spiritual identity of the Japanese nation in State Shintō.

The propaganda of so-called "Japanese Fascism" reiterated the concept of the superiority of the people and land of the Empire of the Rising Sun. The heads of government that led the country during the 1930s and 1940s underlined Japan's distinctive features to make it immune to Western ideologies.

## 1.2- The Mukden Incident and the spread of war

The incident in Manchuria was one of the most significant events in the Far East since the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. Japan invaded Manchuria in September 1931, with the tacit approval of Western imperialist powers. Even the Chinese Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek did not make any serious attempts to condemn Japanese aggression. (Lee, 1983, p. 12) The invasion of Manchuria could have effectively thwarted the growth of the local communist movement, and it was viewed favourably. The main concern of the world's major powers was the instability of the international order and, consequently, of their own interests. Great Britain wished to protect its valuable trade in the Far East and was not entirely opposed to seeing an imperial Japan oppose the USSR. France adopted a similar stance in its concern about the security of Indochina. China itself was plagued by floods, famine, poverty and military despotism.

The Manchurian incident was not the cause of a turning point in Japan's military expansionism, but rather a symptom of acute internal problems and rising international tensions. The distancing of Japan from the Western community, which reaffirmed an "open door" policy with regard to China, had become increasingly manifest since the end of the First World War. The results of the Washington Conference and the high tariff policies adopted by the USA after the Great Depression made relations between Japan and America even more difficult. At the same time, Japan's "special interests" in China were thwarted by a hostile Great Britain and the resurgent Chinese Nationalist government (Goldstein, Maurer, May, 1994, p. 258).

The aggression in Manchuria, carried out in retaliation to an incident that had been carefully staged, would allow the military to create an independent power base that could later be used as leverage to manipulate the government and finally overthrow the power of the parties. The high command and the government initially permitted and then supported the operation, because the international situation at the time (with the crisis reducing the possibility of intervention by other powers) appeared favourable to affirm Japanese rule in Manchuria and creating a protected area in which to expand its economy, without competition from other capitalist countries. With the occupation of Manchuria, the Japanese imperialists thus began the "fait accompli" policy that would lead, through a succession of incidents, to involvement in Second World War and at a domestic level, to the emergence of the totalitarian regime. Thus, in response to the crisis, the Japanese socio-economic system tended to

relieve its tensions through aggressive actions abroad and subversive measures at home, leading to a series of incremental changes in the foreign and domestic policy system.

On 18 September 1931, Kwantung Army soldiers used the excuse of a small attack by Chinese troops on the (Japanese-owned) South Manchurian Railway, near the city of Mukden (perhaps even deliberately staged by the Japanese), to occupy strategic positions in Manchuria. In fact, all investigations of the famous railroad bombing reveal indirect evidence that it was perpetrated by the Japanese secret service in order to create a pretext (Beasley, 1987, p. 187). The Japanese garrison in Manchuria entered Mukden shooting indiscriminately in a retaliatory action that was actually the first phase of an invasion. The Wakatsuki Cabinet (April–December 1931) could do nothing to reassure the Western powers of the government's good intentions to attempt to suppress the military manoeuvres. The leaders of the Kwantung Army fabricated accounts of provocation in order to continue their efforts. They claimed to be acting to defend themselves against the threat of Stalinism and of a united China under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. The officers of the Kwantung even denounced Hirohito's order to withdraw as an "outrageous act", stating that regardless of what the Emperor might say, the troops could not turn back (Brendon, 2000, p. 215). As the military operations proceeded, overwhelming Chinese resistance everywhere, and as Manchuria gradually came under the control of the Kwantung army, a ferocious wave of nationalism spread through Japan. For many Japanese, South Manchurian had acquired a mystical importance, as so many lives had been lost there in the conflict against the Russians. Furthermore, due to the depression, the expanses of Manchuria were considered to be very important as a potential solution to Japan's demographic problem (Howe, 1996, p. 393). The government headed by Inukai Tsuyoshi (December 1931-May 1932), which replaced Wakatsuki in December 1931, was the last party cabinet in Japan until the end of the Pacific War. In the autumn of 1931 another plot was discovered, organised by officers in Tokyo. This conspiracy, organised by the extreme right-wing Sakurakai (Cherry Blossom) Society, was aimed at the elimination of the entire cabinet and the establishment of a military junta to control state affairs (Scalapino, 1975, p. 364). The plan proposed to eliminate the power of the political parties, thus creating the necessary conditions to allow a "national restructuring" designed to limit the economic power of big business and important landowners. The concentration of political and economic power at the state level was intended to free the necessary resources for the development of the defence industry, in order to confront the war. The plot was crushed by the