The Middle Classes and Militarism in Early Twentieth Century Japan: Plutocrats versus Technocrats

This study is concerned with that portion of society referred to as "the middle class (es)" in American literature but which Europeans would tend to call the petite bourgeoisie (skilled workers, technicians, small businessmen, and white-collar workers including intellectuals). It builds upon my earlier work The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought (University of California Press, 1981) and uses somewhat similar materials but concentrates on the 1920s-1940s and covers a broader social spectrum. It is in part an attempt to provide a Japanese equivalent to the classic work by David Schoenbaum, **Hitler's Social Revolution** (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967).

My central concern is the question of how did the economic and social changes of the 1920s, especially the Great Depression, impact the various elements of the middle class(es) and in turn how did their experiences relate to the rise of militarism and fascism. This is a relation little studied by Japanese scholars who have tended to assert that the social basis of Japanese fascism was the lower (old) middle class plus the "big bourgeoisie" (zaibatsu). The intelligentsia (new middle class) is portrayed as either indifferent to fascism or forced into compliance

This view was most thoroughly stated in the oft-cited essays of Maruyama Masao. This study shows that this analysis reflects more what Japanese intellectuals such as Maruyama wanted to believe about themselves rather than what the historical record actually reveals.

While researching a concluding chapter to Self-Made Man , and examining placement guides aimed at university graduates, I discovered that militarism had had a very positive impact on the Japanese intelligentsia . It had brought deficit spending that stimulated the economy and a proliferation of government agencies both at home and in Japan's colonial areas. This expansion created a seller's market for the intelligentsia by 1937, a sharp contrast with the preceding two decades when up to seventy percent of higher education graduates did not have firm jobs even one year after graduation. This relation gave the intelligentsia a stake in expansionism and state control (national socialism). Writings of the time stress that state planning and control had to be the work of specialists (= intelligentsia) rather than politicians if Japan was to succeed in its goal of building a national defense state to liberate Asia.

Comparison of the economic impact of militarism with that on other segments of the middle class(es) led to further doubts about the quality of postwar Japanese interpretations of militarism and its supporters. In contrast to intellectual enthusiasm for a planned economy, social control, and grandiose schemes for Asian unity (under Japanese technocratic control), I found criticism of government policy from both large and small business. With rare exceptions, business in general was hostile to the National Socialist inspired proposals of technocrats and academics. Small business was resentful of the near monopoly enjoyed by state-sponsored capitalism in Manchuria and other colonial areas.

When the group by group distribution of profits from militarism are examined relative to the standing of each group as a result of the Great Depression, previously inexplicable "peculiarities" of militarism and fascism in Japan appear quite consistent with issues of class self-interest. By looking beyond the pages of publications aimed at the intelligentsia

such as Kaizô [Reformation], Chûô kôron [Central Review], Shakai seisaku jihô [Social Policy Bulletin], and Nihon hyôron [Japan Review] to publications such as Shôtenkai [Retail World] and Jitsugyô Nihon [Business Japan], the reasons academics and technocrats welcomed militarism and fascism and the reasons the old middle class did not appear in terms of direct class interest. Similarly the financial press, publications such as Tôyô keizai shinpô [The Oriental Economist], Daiyamondo [Diamond], and Ekonomisuto [Economist], show wide variation in business enthusiasm, again tied directly individual firm expectations for gains or losses from militarism and fascism.

Although "agrarian fascism" has loomed large in Japanese accounts, the agrarian sector receives limited coverage here. The technocrats and academics who supported the militarization of Japan in the late 1930s and early 1940s and who sought to introduce European fascist models had no significant agrarian connections. Their counterparts in the military had at most a romantic rhetoric concerning agriculture even as their programs were thoroughly industrial and national socialist. On close examination the same pattern is found in the terrorists of the 1920s and 1930s. The agrarian sector is not unimportant, but its role in carrying Japan in militaristic and fascistic directions is trivial compared to that of technocrats, fascist-inspired academics, and high technology industrial firms looking to prosper from larger armaments budgets.

While a structured comparison of the Japanese experience with that of Europe is beyond the scope of this study, European and American examples have been introduced at various points. The use of the term fascism inherently requires this. Comparison shows that many of the differences between fascism in Japan and in Europe were matters of degree, not of kind. Too much Japanese (and American) writing, has idealized Western culture, even fascism, and used this idealized vision as a basis for judging Japan as "peculiar," "unique," or even "pathological." At most points, comparison with Europe (and the US) brings Japan more into the mainstream of 1920s-1940s experience than in previous accounts.

Indeed, comparison brings to light features of the Anglo-American experience that have faded from memory. When Japanese technocrats and academics professed admiration for Mussolini, Hitler, FDR, and Stalin in a single breath, they recall an era when "technocracy" was thought to be the cure for American ills, "brain trusters" professed open admiration of Mussolini, and "progressive intellectuals" celebrated Stalinism. While this monograph is at one level a social history of the urban middle classes in Japan, it is also intellectual (or perhaps more properly intelligentsia) history, for it examines the role of relative class standing in determining which ideas capture the imagination of the intellectual elite.

Tentative Chapter Outline

This is a very tentative outline and thematic statement for my intended monograph on "Militarism and the Middle Classes in Modern Japan." The subjects listed here are those that appeared important with the project was first conceived. Some may be trimmed and others added during the course of writing and revision. The balance and grouping of subjects can be expected to change.

In as much as this outline is intended primarily for personal use, it has been subjected only to minimal electronic proofreading.

Certain of the themes discussed below have been developed in more detail in previously published papers .

"The Mouse that Roared: Saitô Takao, Conservative Critic of Japan's 'Holy War' in China." Journal of Japanese Studies 25:2 (Summer, 1999): 331-360.

"The Impact of Military Procurements on the Old Middle Classes in Japan, 1931-1941." Japan Forum . (October, 1992): 247-265.

See also Transformation and Expansion , a chapter on modern Japanese history for the Sheffield MA in Japanese Studies.

Introduction: The Middle Class(es) as an Historical Problem

This section will deal with the points made in the introduction to this outline.

A New Century and a New Middle Class: 1900s-1910s

From the Russo-Japanese War (1894-1895) to World War I, Japan came of age in terms of the middle class(es). To the large old middle class of shopkeepers, artisans, and petty manufacturers, was added a new middle class of white-collar workers who performed the clerical and lower level managerial functions of an increasingly complex economy.

Recognition and self-consciousness came in the World War I period as this new class was deprived of economic stability, one of the key attractions of the white-collar life style. Yearly inflation rates exceeding 100 percent produced misery for those on salary even as they produced narikin (parvenu) among both merchants and skilled blue-collar workers.

This chapter explores the size, structure, and life-style of various elements of the middle class in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Some of the topics include:

+ the pre-twentieth century middle class(es) in Japan;

+ demographic changes and the rise of the new middle class;

+ urbanization in the first decades of the twentieth century;

+ narikin , the rise and fall of Suzuki sh&ocircten (Suzuki trading);

+ inflation and petty white-collar workers;

+ skilled labor during the armaments boom;

+ the job market for graduates of elite higher education;

The Crisis of the Middle Class(es): 1920s

As in Europe and the United States the various elements of the new and old middle class(es) were whipsawed by economic and political developments in the 1920s. During these years university educated youth experienced not merely a difficulty in finding

employment but unemployment of the variety previously only known by blue-collar workers. Contemporary accounts saw the difficulty increasing with educational level. Those coming from the most elite institutions were, in the short run, the hardest hit.

Skilled blue-collar workers were hurt by the end of war procurements contracts and by the cut backs stemming from the naval arms reduction agreements of the early 1920s. Firms discharged workers without even lip service to the alleged Japanese practice of "lifetime employment." The old lower middle class suffered from the general economic decline, bank failures, department stores, the coop movement, and a swelling of the ranks as discharged blue and white-collar workers sought to hang on in the urban environment by entering petty retailing.

Subjects for this chapter include:

+ demographics and the employment difficulty;

+ disarmament and its contribution to unemployment;

+ industrial rationalization and unemployment;

+ party politics and instability in the civil service;

+ women as competitors in the white-collar labor market;

+ the personality of the successful applicant for white-collar employment in a period when there was a surplus of educated youth;

+ the employment difficulty and the appeal of Marxism;

+ the movement of elite graduates to teaching and the police in lieu of more desirable jobs;

+ unemployment statistics and the disguising of the crisis;

+ the life of unemployed white-collar workers;

+ blue- versus white-collar unemployment;

+ pay cuts for employed white-collar workers;

+ white-collar political and union activities in response to the depression;

+ relief measures for the unemployed;

+ decadence and diversions during the depression years;

+ the rise of cafe society, "modern boys" and "modern girls";

+ the old lower middle class and petty retailing as unemployment buffers;

+ the old lower middle class and the anti-department store, anti-cooperative movement;

+ popular religious movements and the old lower middle class;

+ Marxist writers and the crisis of the middle class(es);

The Manchurian Solution: 1931-1937

+ Two or more chapters may be appropriate for this general subject.

Late in 1931 elements in the Kwantung Army used a staged "provocation" as a pretext for a military takeover of Manchuria. In 1932 Manchurian independence under Japanese tutelage was proclaimed. Conventionally the proclamation of Manchurian independence under the control of the Kwantung Army is seen as the one of the most significant elements in the development of militarism and fascism in Japan. The domestic economic impact has essentially been ignored.

Manchuria proved a godsend to unemployed college students and low level bureaucrats struggling through the seniority system of a stagnant domestic civil service. A whole new bureaucratic order was created offering not just government employment but wages and perks at two to three times domestic levels. With the backing of an army that was hostile to proprietary capitalism and a cowed Manchurian populace to serve them, young technocrats were free to experiment with all elements of a centrally planned society.

Skilled blue collar workers benefited from extensive hiring by the South Manchurian Railroad, Kwantung Army fostered enterprises in Manchuria, and by the work created through massive orders to domestic industry for the building of the new Manchuria.

Small business was largely frozen out of Manchuria except in the so-called water trades. Small retailers could not compete with the Manchurians. Small manufacturers had little to offer the planned Manchurian economy with its emphasis on high technology and gigantic enterprises.

Old-line capitalism was frozen out of Manchuria by Marxist influenced Kwantung Army types and their academic and technocratic supporters. Nissan, the largest of the so-called new zaibatsu (shinkô zaibatsu) line firms was invited to Manchuria by the military in a sweetheart deal far beyond that associated with the old line zaibatsu. Its attractiveness to the military stemming from its technology and its diversified ownership, the latter a pattern that the American occupation would later force on the old line zaibatsu as part of its program to demilitarize Japan!

Farmers, who loomed large in ideological pronouncements about the new Manchurian society, could not compete with Manchurians and Korean immigrants. Held out as a promised land for Japanese farmers suffering under the exactions of landlords and the pressures of their own numbers, Manchuria became a paradise for bureaucrats. Leading technocrats who later sought to create a new order in Japan almost invariably practiced first on the hapless Manchurians.

Comparative analysis of the impact of Manchuria and domestic response to it includes the following points among others:

+ the student job market and Manchuria;

+ academics as advisors in Manchuria;

+ the life style of Japanese technocrats in Manchuria;

+ the South Manchurian Railroad and its manifold activities;

+ the South Manchurian Railroad as an employer of intellectuals: the Mantetsu ch&ocircsabu;

+ anti-capitalism in the Kwantung Army;

+ the economic basis of zaibatsu hostility to Manchurian development and to Kwantung Army control;

+ the possibilities for opposition to militarism seen in disputes between Japanese technocrats and the Kwantung Army;

+ Nissan and the Kwantung Army;

+ the new zaibatsu (shinkô zaibatsu) compared to the old line zaibatsu;

+ zaibatsu and other business holdings in Manchuria prior to "independence";

+ responses to Manchuria in business magazines versus those in publications aimed at the intelligentsia;

+ regional differences in business responses to military adventurism in Manchuria and China;

+ competition between Manchurian and Japanese firms for funds and markets;

+ Japanese journalism and the selling of Manchuria to the Japanese public;

+ skilled blue-collar workers and the Manchurian job market;

+ proletarian political parties and the promise of Manchuria;

+ the exclusion of the old lower middle class from the Manchurian market;

+ the rhetoric of emigration versus the reality;

A New Order: Technocrats versus Plutocrats: 1934-1941

Journalism of the late 1930s identified three major groups as supporting fascism in Japan. Most prominent were several strains of "new-bureaucrats" (shin-kanryô) or "renovation bureaucrats" (kakushin kanryô) who looked to a controlled economy (tôsei keizai) and economic blocs for domestic reform, which was linked to the prosecution of Japan's overseas military adventures.

Theoretical backing came from academic specialists who had long lamented that their expertise was ignored in an order dominated by corrupt politicians representing

specialized interests. Especially after the outbreak of large-scale warfare in China, these academics found that militarism produced a demand for their services and offered an entree to power. Militarism in effect handed academics and bureaucrats power that Marxism said had to be taken by revolution. Anti-capitalism in the Kwantung Army, the apparent success of Manchuria under state planning, and the rise of what were seen as technocratic regimes in Europe and the United States inspired Marxist influenced bureaucrats and academics to feel that history was on their side.

Big business was mixed in its reaction. Old-line big business preferred the status quo and disliked bureaucratic intervention. New high technology firms (shinkô zaibatsu) led by founders trained in science or engineering were positive advocates of restructuring and greater government intervention. The product mix of their firms was such that they profited directly from militarism or even required subsidies to survive.

The bureaucratic and academic thrust for a technocratic state culminated in the New Order movement and the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (IRAA) under Prince Konoe in 1940-1941. The principal opposition to the New Order came from big business which disliked the clear technocratic threat to its dominance and from the "religious" right (kannen uyoku) which saw the explicit foreign inspiration in the New Order and the IRAA. Opposition groups saw the New Order as both "red" and fascist.

+ Although the New Order was strictly speaking a movement of 1940-1941, the term here, in lower case, is used as a synonym for bureaucratic and intellectual support of widespread technocratic control and intervention in the economy, and the weakening of the Diet.

Other, related themes to be dealt with in this chapter:

+ intellectuals as ghost writers for the military;

+ the training of military technocrats in the Imperial Universities, especially Tôdai;

+ the fight for technocratic control (tôsei) over the economy in electric power, through war mobilization measures, etc;

+ cartels as a prelude to state socialism;

+ the mixing of public and private economic activities through operating entities (eidan), trade associations, etc;

+ the movement of bureaucrats to corporate boards (amakudari);

+ brain trusts, think tanks and the increasing promise of power for academic advisors under the New Order;

+ the professionalization of corporate management;

+ the conversion of the zaibatsu (zaibatsu tenkô), modernization of management under fascist pressure;

+ business enthusiasm for the New Order as a function of technology level and scale;

+ regional differences in business enthusiasm, Kansai free trade versus Kantô control (tôsei);

+ left wing attacks on Saitô Takao, the last "liberal" to challenge militarism;

+ liberalism as laissez faire and its attack from the left and from the right;

+ the "religious right" and the attack on the IRAA as a "new bakufu";

+ Pan-Asianism as an ideology for continued war and an increasing role for technocrats and academics;

+ the need for continued war to justify technocratic and academic intervention;

+ the New Order as an attempt to complete the Meiji Restoration, the incomplete technocratic revolution;

+ geographers and the rationalization of fascism in Japan;

+ the "decline of the West" and other intellectual justifications for fascism;

+ Konoe and the quest for a charismatic leader ala Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, or FDR;

+ the new order and its appeal to "youth";

+ anti-Semitism and New Order intellectuals;

+ economic blocs: intellectual enthusiasm, business hostility;

+ academic and popular proponents of state socialism;

+ the Manchurian state socialists: Kishi Nobusuke, Yoshino Shinji, etc.

+ "reds" and the effort to establish fascism in Japan: the Kikaku'in (Cabinet Planning Board) incident and related purges;

+ Konoe and the "red plot" thesis, the idea that Japan had been maneuvered into war by "reds" who expected to use the chaos of defeat as a chance for a communist revolution.

A Dark Valley? 1931-1945

Conventional Japanese treatments and derivative American works describe the period from 1931-1945, and especially the years from 1937-1945, as a "dark valley" (kurai tanima) in terms of civil liberties and living standards. The Japanese people appear as the helpless victims of militarism.

This chapter argues that the "dark valley" view is applicable only to a small portion of the period, primarily from 1943 on. While it is doubtless psychologically comforting to Japanese of this period to believe that they endured fifteen years of victimization, the

contemporary journalistic and statistical record testifies to the contrary. For most of the period militarism brought increasing employment, greater real income, and overall prosperity. If any group experienced a prolonged "dark valley," it was small business. Other groups, particularly college graduates, academics, rank and file white-collar workers (sarariiman), skilled blue-collar workers, and high-technology industry all enjoyed increasing prosperity at least through 1941.

Themes dealt with in this chapter will include:

+ the appearance of blue-collar narikin (parvenu) in the munitions industry;

+ the role of militarism in raising the status of skilled blue-collar workers;

+ the role of military production priorities in producing labor and agrarian reforms that had been prevented by elite opposition during peace time;

+ shortages of consumer goods as evidence of increased purchasing power and broadened markets rather than as proof of deprivation;

+ the conscription system and the avoidance of the costs of militarism by students and academics;

+ increases in the status and funding of science and scientists under militarism;

+ the enthusiasm of high technology industry and its engineering and scientific managers for national socialist economic systems;

+ the proliferation of think tanks and the introduction of academic specialists into government planning;

+ military production priorities and the suffering of the old lower middle class;

+ the need for and ineffectiveness of relief measures for the old lower middle class under militarism;

+ bureaucratic and military hostility to the old lower middle class;

+ the Japanese wartime experience compared to that of the European and Asian combatants;

+ the misuse of statistics from this period in postwar writing;

Who Were the Militarists and Fascists in Japan? 1950s-1960s

Structured comparison of data produced by this study with the analyses of militarism and fascism found in post-surrender Japanese and American writing reveals that academic works, journalism, and government reports (SCAP) were sometimes overtly mendacious, often marked by selective memory, and commonly substituted comfortable impressions for careful research that might contradict ideologically pleasing conclusions.

Most analyses from this period fail to distinguish between extreme nationalism that would preserve the status quo and extreme nationalism coupled to a revolutionary political vision. Fascism and militarism are almost never discussed in terms of their affinity for National Socialism and economic planning. The effect is to understate intellectual and bureaucratic enthusiasm for fascism at large.

Most analyses ignore the late 1930s and early 1940s, and on the Japanese side, studiously avoid the naming of names. Much allegedly analytical writing is little more than exercises in asserting, "I was okay. You were okay." Cuts and euphemistic phrasing were the norm in institutional histories and personal biographies.

Specific themes to be considered in this chapter include:

+ the tendency to concentrate on the "period of preparation" (1931-1936) while ignoring the "period of consummation" (1937-1945);

+ the failure to demonstrate a connection between "precursors to fascism" from the early 1930s and the regime that actually resulted in the late 1930s and early 1940s;

+ failure to make use of late 1930s-1940s journalistic sources in post-surrender scholarship;

+ the failure to consider the bureaucracy as a political actor despite prewar accounts of the role of "reform" and "renovation" bureaucrats in pushing fascism;

+ the confusion of symptoms of militarism and fascism (military training in schools, the growth of the armaments industry) with causes;

+ deleting without notice embarrassing wartime writings from post-surrender compilations;

+ vita and biographical reference works that delete or disguise wartime activities;

+ a more forgiving standard for reporting the wartime activities of those who claimed post-surrender status as "progressive" than the unrepentant;

+ the tendency to exclude right wing academics from the discussion of intellectual responses to militarism;

+ the tendency to exclude elite, university trained technocrats from the discussion of the intelligentsia (interi) and its responses to militarism;

+ comparisons of Japan with Germany (or Italy) using selective or unrepresentative data from the European experience;

+ the acceptance and praise by American academics of Japanese writing based on patently false comparisons with the European experience;

+ the acceptance of explanatory formulas (E. H. Norman, for example) that ignored the whole of twentieth century development;

+ treating the "fifteen years war" as a unit, using examples drawn only from the last and most repressive phase;

+ asserting the role of terror in Japan without explicit comparison to other authoritarian regimes such as the USSR under Stalin;

+ the exclusion of non-Japanese opposition, especially Korean, from discussions of the possibility of protest;

+ generalizing about big business as a whole from limited examples drawn primarily from high technology firms least fitting the zaibatsu model;

+ treating the behavior of large, complex business and bureaucratic entities in the abstract rather than in terms of the individuals in control;

+ the failure to study individual career patterns and individual wartime activities, particularly of academics;

+ the exclusion of economic factors from studies of ideological conversion (tenkô);

Militarism and the Japanese Miracle: 1950s-1970s

It is common in Japanese speech and writing to make a sharp distinction between prewar (senzen) and postwar (sengo) social, political, and economic relations. A similar stress is found in the writings of those involved in the American occupation of Japan (SCAP). This chapter argues that many of the social, political, economic, and intellectual aspects that characterized Japan during the high growth years of the 1950s-1970s were linear extensions of patterns that developed during the war years. More often than not SCAP is shown to have strengthened patterns associated with militarism rather than destroying these. Major elements of Japanese wartime ideology appear to have a prominent place in contemporary Japanese popular culture, transcending conventional left-right dichotomies.

Some of the elements to be covered in this chapter include:

+ the "entrance examination hell" (shiken jigoku) and university pecking order;

+ the "squad" (sh&ucircdan) as an unit of instruction in elementary and secondary education;

+ the emphasis on efficiency and rationalization in industry;

+ the prevalence of quasi-military styles in corporate and educational ceremonies;

+ the continuity in organizational forms between the wartime umbrella labor organization (Sanpô) and post-surrender enterprise unions;

+ the prevalence of payment schemes for both blue- and white-collar workers that stress life cycle needs rather than output in wage determination;

+ the position of small business (the old middle class) as subcontractors to large

industrial groups;

+ the prevalence of operating entities (eidan) combining public and private functions;

+ the linkage of the public and private sectors through directors chosen from former bureaucrats (amakudari);

+ the use of "administrative guidance" rather than codified rules and procedures;

+ the role of wartime technocrats, especially those with Manchurian experience, in postwar planning;

+ the creation in the armaments industry of a large pool of scientific, engineering, and skilled blue-collar labor that was freed by defeat for postwar civilian industry;

+ SCAP (Occupation) policies for "democratization" that echoed those of 1930s-1940s Japanese militarists;

+ the wartime rhetoric of the folk , the denial of class divisions, the emphasis on the Japanese as "unique," the emphasis on corporatist (ky&ocircd&ocircteki) forms for analysis, etc. in the contemporary Japanese self image (as in Nihonjinron and Nihon bunkaron).

Conclusion

The conclusion will focus not just on the direct historical points raised by this study but also on the issue of why historians in general and Japanese historians in particular have largely ignored the "middle classes."

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