

The evolution and characteristics of modern Japanese area and country studies

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Abstract. This article traces the historical evolution of area and country studies in modern Japan, arguing that their development has been deeply shaped by national strategic considerations. The trajectory moved from traditional Kangaku (Sinology) and Rangaku (Dutch Studies) to Seiyōgaku (Western Studies) in the Meiji period, and subsequently to Tōyōgaku (Oriental Studies), which increasingly served Japan's expansionist agenda. The core characteristics of this evolution reveal a persistent tension between academic autonomy and political instrumentalization. This tension serves as a reminder that contemporary area and country studies must uphold the principles of scholarly independence and mutual learning on an equal and reciprocal basis.

Keywords: area and country studies, modern Japan, Western Studies, Oriental Studies

1. Introduction: area and country studies as a mirror of “self-understanding”

Any nation's production of knowledge about the “Other” is, in essence, a projection of its own self-understanding. Research on the outside world—its motivations, perspectives, theories, methods, and even conclusions—inevitably bears the imprint of the researcher's historical circumstances, cultural background, and contemporary concerns. In this sense, the historical trajectory of Japan's area and country studies (often categorized in Japanese scholarship into fields such as “Western Studies,” “Oriental Studies,” “China Studies,” and “Southeast Asian Studies”) offers a highly revealing and tension-filled example. As an island nation within the East Asian Confucian cultural sphere, Japan underwent the dramatic modern transformation of “leaving Asia and entering Europe,” then embarked on an imperialist path of external expansion, and ultimately rebuilt itself after defeat into an economic power. Throughout these shifts, its gaze toward the external world consistently carried a strong sense of purposiveness and historical specificity.

At key turning points, Japanese area and country studies were often directly driven by national strategy. From the Meiji period translation of European and American world histories for use as textbooks in Western history [1], to the flourishing of Oriental Studies in service of continental policy and the imagined “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” and later to the rise of Southeast Asian Studies after the war in response to overseas investment, the alignment between its academic agenda and the nation's geopolitical trajectory is striking.

However, reducing Japan's area and country studies simply to state orchestration would obscure its internal richness and depth. The history of this field in Japan has produced scholars of significant international influence and pioneering theoretical frameworks. Naitō Konan, for example, proposed that the Song dynasty marked the beginning of China's “early modern period,” a thesis that later generated the influential “Tang-Song Transition” paradigm. His ideas not only shaped subsequent Chinese historical studies but also contained a distinctive reflection on the origins of “modernity” [2]. Similarly, the interdisciplinary and fieldwork-based approach developed by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University—established in 1963 and later reorganized as the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS)—achieved remarkable results and set important methodological precedents [3].

This article situates modern Japanese area and country studies within a dynamic historical framework, examining the evolution of its intellectual genealogy, the development of its academic paradigms, and its complex, multi-dimensional interactions with political, economic, and cultural forces. The discussion follows a broadly historical periodization and is divided into three parts: First, tracing premodern knowledge foundations centered on Sinology and Dutch Studies; Second, analyzing how Western Studies emerged after the Meiji Restoration as part of Japan's blueprint for modernization; and third, exploring how, under imperial expansion, Oriental Studies was constructed into a vast knowledge system serving continental policy.

2. Intellectual foundations of pre-modern Japan

Before the arrival of the “Black Ships” in 1853, Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate was not a completely closed “sakoku” society. Through limited and specific channels of information, Japan developed a distinctive intellectual repertoire concerning the outside world, particularly China and Europe. Although fragmented and uneven, this repertoire provided crucial knowledge and human resources for the emergence of modern Japanese area and country studies.

2.1. Kangaku as the master’s way

For over a millennium, China served as Japan’s most important “Other” and primary source of knowledge. Japanese engagement with Chinese learning and research—known as Kangaku (漢学, Kangaku)—reached its zenith during the Tokugawa period, marking a particularly vibrant phase in Japanese Sinology [4]. However, Kangaku differs fundamentally from modern “China Studies.” It did not treat China as an equal or objective external research subject; rather, it held an orthodox ideological status. Ancient Japanese rulers employed Confucian ethics to educate their subjects and maintain governance. Japanese intellectuals studied Confucian classics and histories not merely to acquire knowledge, but to internalize the sages’ teachings, follow the “Way” of the virtuous, and become morally cultivated “gentlemen.”

During the Tokugawa era, Kangaku developed along several strands: Neo-Confucianism (Shushigaku), officially endorsed, emphasizing li (principle) and social order [5]; Kobun Jishigaku, represented by Ogyū Sorai, advocating a return to the pre-Qin Confucian classics to uncover the original meaning of the “Way of the Former Kings” [5]; National Learning (Kokugaku), which critiqued Confucianism and promoted ancient Shinto traditions [5]. The core concerns of these studies were the classics, historiography, and literature, focusing on textual analysis, ethical reasoning, and moral practice. Within this context, Chinese dynastic changes and institutional developments were viewed as universal patterns from which Japan might draw lessons. This “internalization” of China as a civilizational foundation created complex attitudes: on one hand, China was the cultural progenitor; on the other, with the rise of late-Tokugawa Kokugaku emphasizing Japan’s uniqueness as a “divine nation,” a new sense of cultural exceptionalism began to emerge. This duality foreshadowed the Meiji-era shift in which Japanese scholars “demystified” Chinese civilization, sometimes with condescension, and treated it as an object of study.

2.2. Rangaku as the technology of the exotic

If Kangaku represented Japan’s pursuit of the “Way,” Rangaku (蘭学, Rangaku) represented its exploration of “instrumentality.” Following the Tokugawa implementation of the sakoku policy in the seventeenth century, only the Dutch and Chinese were permitted to trade with Japan, with Nagasaki’s Dejima serving as the sole point of foreign contact. Rangaku encompassed Western scientific knowledge introduced to Japan through Dutch-language texts, as well as some Western works written in Chinese. Its emergence is commonly marked by translations such as *Kaitai Shinsho* by Maeno Ryōtaku and Sugita Genpaku [6].

Unlike the speculative focus of Kangaku, Rangaku was highly utilitarian and pragmatic. Its studies concentrated on disciplines with immediate practical applications, including medicine, astronomy, geography, navigation, and military science. For instance, geographic texts such as *Kunyū Zusesu* enabled Japanese scholars to systematically understand Europe, the Americas, and Africa. Rangaku scholars such as Takano Chōei and Watanabe Kazan not only mastered Western science and technology, but also began to study Western history, philosophy, and social institutions, becoming among the first Japanese intellectuals to “look outward” globally. In an era of increasing friction with Western powers, these scholars often criticized the shogunate’s isolationist policies and were sometimes politically persecuted, as in the Bansha no goku incident [7].

The intellectual lineage of Rangaku introduced a different genetic code into Japanese modern area and country studies. It established a highly practical, results-oriented research paradigm that treated the outside world as an analyzable and utilizable “object.” The sense of crisis linking knowledge directly to national survival, coupled with the quest to understand Western power, quickly became the core driver of Western Studies (Seiyōgaku) in the Meiji era after the Black Ships’ arrival. Together, the moral-ethical emphasis of Kangaku and the empirical-pragmatic focus of Rangaku constituted the dual foundations of modern Japanese area and country studies.

3. Research transformation during the Meiji era

The arrival of the “Black Ships” in 1853 brought a profound shock to Japan, and the subsequent signing of a series of unequal treaties plunged the country into an unprecedented crisis, with the looming threat of semi-colonial subjugation. The study of the West, once a niche academic interest for a few Edo-period intellectuals, transformed into a strategic project crucial for national survival and development. As Japanese society underwent dramatic change during the Meiji era, area and country studies also entered a period of significant transformation.

Following the Meiji Restoration, under the slogans of “rich country, strong army,” “industrial and commercial development,” and “civilization and enlightenment,” Seiyōgaku (Western Studies) became a prominent field. Its central function was to provide a mirror for Japan’s modernization. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a leading enlightenment thinker of the Meiji era, argued in *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* that the contemporary world consisted of three states: “civilized” (the West), “semi-civilized” (Japan, China, etc.), and “barbarous” (Africa, etc.). He maintained that Japan’s only path was to “leave Asia and enter Europe,” escaping its “semi-civilized” status and striving to join the ranks of “civilized nations” [8]. This perspective illuminates a defining feature of Meiji-era Western Studies: the study of the West was instrumental, aimed at understanding the secrets of its strength and wealth to transform Japan rapidly into a modern nation-state on par with Western powers.

3.1. Technological dimension

During the Meiji era, the study and assimilation of Western technology often reflected a top-down, planned approach, focusing on key sectors critical to Japan’s modernization, such as railways and shipbuilding. The Meiji government promoted technological development by sending students abroad, hiring foreign experts, and establishing modern educational institutions. Sending students to Western countries was the most direct way to acquire first-hand knowledge and technical skills. The government dispatched large numbers of outstanding young Japanese to universities, technical colleges, and factories across Europe and America, covering fields such as engineering, military science, law, and medicine. In the early stages, when domestic expertise was scarce, the government invested heavily in hiring foreign specialists and advisors to guide Japan’s modernization. For instance, the British engineer Henry Dyer was appointed the first director of the Institute of Technology established in 1871. To ensure systematic knowledge transfer and large-scale cultivation of talent, the Meiji government established a range of modern schools, such as the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal School in 1870. From their inception, imperial universities, with the University of Tokyo as a representative example, established engineering faculties that introduced Western engineering knowledge [9].

3.2. Institutional dimension

3.2.1. Constitutional system

To draft a constitution suited to Japanese circumstances, elder statesmen such as Itō Hirobumi and Saionji Kinmochi conducted thorough studies of Western constitutional systems, particularly the recently ascendant Prussia. Itō Hirobumi studied the teachings of legal scholars such as Mosse and von Stein and highly admired von Stein’s constitutional thought. With the dual aims of suppressing the liberal civil rights movement and consolidating the authority of the domain-based government, Itō rejected the liberal constitutional models of Britain and France, instead using the Prussian constitution as a blueprint for the Meiji Japanese constitution. Under Itō’s leadership, the Constitution Drafting Committee underwent several revisions before promulgating the *Constitution of the Empire of Japan* in 1889, embedding von Stein’s constitutional ideas as its foundational principles. *Article One* declared that the Empire of Japan was ruled by the Emperor, a sovereign of unbroken imperial lineage, establishing a monarchical constitutional system centered on the emperor. Within this framework, the emperor held supreme authority, while the Diet, Cabinet, and judiciary functioned as institutions assisting or representing the emperor’s powers. A House of Peers, modeled on the British House of Lords, was also established, with members appointed by the emperor or by hereditary succession, providing a counterbalance to the popularly elected House of Representatives. The 1889 constitution marked the formal establishment of Japan’s modern constitutional system. Yet, it was essentially a hybrid, combining separation-of-powers principles with supreme imperial authority, weakening the role of the Diet, restricting citizens’ rights and freedoms, and reflecting a distinctly conservative character [10, 11].

3.2.2. Educational system

In the early Meiji period, to rapidly establish a unified national education system, the Japanese government primarily referenced the centralized French education model and promulgated the *Gakusei* (Education System) in 1872. The *Gakusei* divided the country into eight university districts, each comprising thirty-two secondary districts, with each secondary district containing 210 primary school districts. Primary schools were further categorized into kindergarten-level schools and ordinary elementary schools, the latter subdivided into lower and upper stages. Additional types included girls’ schools, youth schools, and rural schools. Secondary education was divided into lower and upper levels, linked to universities to meet diversified and advanced educational needs. The Meiji government recruited a large number of foreign educational advisors, including the American educator David Murray, who served as an advisor to the Ministry of Education and significantly influenced Japan’s educational reforms. Japan’s modern education system originated with the 1872 *Gakusei*, whose preface, “Bei kō shutsu sho,” clearly proclaimed the motto: “Every village has a household of learning; every family has a person who learns.” Its aim was to break

the Edo-period status-based education system and establish equal, nationwide education. The *Gakusei* championed individualism and practical learning, discarding Confucian moral supremacy, and sought to provide foundational education to all while comprehensively introducing Western subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and geography [12]. However, the idealistic and rigid system encountered considerable obstacles in practice. In the early Meiji period, both central and local governments faced severe fiscal constraints and were unable to subsidize education on a large scale; funding largely depended on private contributions. High tuition fees imposed a heavy burden on families, and teacher availability and educational facilities were severely limited. These factors combined to keep enrollment rates below expectations. Moreover, the administrative structure designed by the *Gakusei* was large and complex, with multiple tiers responsible for managing numerous schools of varying levels, and it did not account for regional differences in economic development and cultural traditions, causing social dissatisfaction.

Faced with these challenges, under the leadership of Tanaka Fujimaro—then Minister of Education and a member of the Iwakura Mission—Japan carried out education liberalization reforms modeled on the American system. In 1877, Tanaka ordered the merger of Tokyo Technical College and Tokyo Medical School into the University of Tokyo, forming a four-year higher education institution similar in structure to American universities [13]. In 1879, the government promulgated the *Kyōiku-rei* (*Education Order*), aimed at reducing the compulsory nature of the *Gakusei*. It decentralized the authority to establish and maintain primary schools to municipalities, towns, and villages, allowing local governments to decide freely on school establishment, academic terms, and other administrative matters based on local needs [14]. Although decentralization was well-intentioned, in practice it quickly exposed problems. Excessive freedom led to rising dropout rates and uneven teaching quality. Local governments, seeking to minimize educational expenditure, sometimes shortened school terms or lowered standards, undermining the goal of widespread education. In addition, Tanaka's de-emphasis on moral education sparked controversy, even drawing the emperor into debates, highlighting the tensions between radical Westernizers and traditional conservatives during Japan's rapid societal transformation. In response, the government issued the *Kaisei Kyōiku-rei* (*Revised Education Order*) in 1880, reasserting Ministry of Education control and elevating moral education grounded in Confucian values [15]. With the rise of Prussia, the German educational model became Japan's new benchmark. Education shifted toward centralization and nationalism, emphasizing the primacy of state interests. Mori Arinori, the first Minister of Education, was key to this transformation [15]. Influenced by German nationalism, Mori argued that education's primary purpose was to serve the state. His nationalist educational philosophy encompassed three principles: education should prioritize state interests; it should cultivate loyalty to the emperor and patriotism to safeguard the national polity; and the government should oversee education to ensure uniformity and implementation of national policy. Mori's most notable achievement was leading the promulgation of the *Gakkōrei* series, including the *Imperial University Ordinance*, *Normal School Ordinance*, *Secondary School Ordinance*, and *Primary School Ordinance*. These laws systematized education from elementary through university levels, laying the legal foundation for Japan's modern educational system. Notably, the *Primary School Ordinance* legally introduced the concept of "compulsory" education, mandating that parents and guardians ensure children aged six to fourteen receive basic education—a milestone in Japanese educational history [16, 17]. In 1890, the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, issued in the emperor's name, established loyalty to the emperor and patriotism as the moral core of education, embedding Confucian thought at the heart of the nationalist educational system [18]. Combining Western knowledge frameworks with Japanese ethics, it embodied the principle of *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit, Western learning) and completed the Meiji-era educational reforms, solidifying a nationalist education system. These reforms reflect pragmatic adaptation: Japanese policymakers did not blindly imitate foreign models but explored approaches suited to national circumstances, ultimately anchoring the spiritual core of education in nationalism and Confucian ethics.

3.2.3. Military system

Following the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese army initially emulated the French model, as France had provided military instructors during the Tokugawa era. Until 1877, the Japanese army relied entirely on French advisors for training and guidance. In 1873, Japan enacted a conscription law modeled on the French system of universal military service, adopting French tactical doctrines [19, 20]. However, the Franco-Prussian War revealed the superiority of the Prussian military system, with its efficient General Staff, rigorous mobilization, and overwhelming combat effectiveness, delivering a shock to Japan, which was still exploring how to build a strong army. In addition, command problems exposed during the Satsuma Rebellion were attributed to French military guidance. With the support of figures like Katsura Taro, who studied the German military, the Japanese army began transitioning toward the Prussian model. In December 1878, the Dajō-kan ordered the abolition of the existing General Staff and established a new General Staff reporting directly to the emperor. The Chief of Staff, appointed by the emperor, issued operational orders in the emperor's name, ensuring independence of command. The government also hired German military advisors, such as Merkel, a protégé of the famous field marshal Moltke. Under Merkel's influence, the Japanese army reorganized from a defensive-oriented garrison structure into an offensive corps-based system. Nevertheless, French military assistance was not entirely discarded, generating a deliberate competition and tension between German and French influences to maximize benefits for Japan [21, 22].

In contrast, the newly established Imperial Navy modeled itself largely on the British Royal Navy, reflecting Britain's naval supremacy. From the inception of the Imperial Navy, the Meiji government sought British guidance. Between 1870 and 1890, the Navy employed foreign instructors—mostly British—to teach foreign languages, navigation, astronomy, artillery, and torpedo operations. In 1873, the government invited the British naval Douglas instructor team to supervise the Naval Academy's revision of regulations, gradually putting Japanese naval education on a professional footing [23, 24].

3.3. Intellectual and cultural dimension

In the late Tokugawa period, the shogunate established the official scholarly institution Bansho Shirabesho (Office for the Investigation of Barbarian Books), primarily tasked with translating and studying Western books. This laid the groundwork for the study and dissemination of Western thought and culture in Meiji-era Japan [25]. During the Meiji period, Japan experienced a surge of *bunmei kaika* ("civilization and enlightenment"), and translation activities reached unprecedented levels, giving rise to what has been termed a "translation culture" [26]. Works translated from English, French, German, and other languages spanned science, philosophy, politics, law, literature, and the arts, facilitating the rapid diffusion of Western thought and culture across Japan. Nakamura Masanao's translations of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* became bestsellers, inspiring Japanese readers toward personal independence and industriousness. Nakae Chomin's translation and introduction of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* provided theoretical tools directly utilized in the later Freedom and People's Rights Movement. Facing linguistic barriers posed by abstract Western concepts, Japanese scholars engaged in sophisticated cross-cultural coding by reorganizing and interpreting existing kanji to convey the essence of Western ideas, creating numerous neologisms such as "tetsugaku" (philosophy), "keijijōgaku" (metaphysics), and "keizaigaku" (economics) [27-29]. These terms subsequently entered Chinese and became part of modern Chinese vocabulary, reflecting the depth and creativity of Meiji Japan in absorbing Western culture.

The Meiji period also saw the emergence of a cohort of Enlightenment thinkers, among whom Fukuzawa Yukichi was preeminent. In works such as *Seiyō Jijō* ("Things Western"), *Gakumon no Susume* ("Encouragement of Learning"), and *Bunmei Ron no Gairyaku* ("An Outline of a Theory of Civilization"), Fukuzawa systematically introduced Western civilization and was hailed as "Japan's Voltaire," influencing generations of Japanese.

Some intellectuals formed scholarly societies, which, through publications, debates, and lectures, became important platforms for studying and disseminating Western thought and culture. The most representative was the Meirokusha, whose core members included Fukuzawa Yukichi, Mori Arinori, Nishi Amane, and Nakamura Masanao. The organizational model of these societies was inspired by Western academic associations, featuring regular lectures, debates, and publications. Its journal, *Meiropu Zasshi*, served as a major venue for propagating new ideas. The Meirokusha systematically translated and introduced Western doctrines such as utilitarianism, positivism, and evolution, creatively adapting them to a domestic intellectual context [30-32].

The rapid, large-scale Westernization of Meiji Japan inevitably triggered a profound cultural identity crisis. Some intellectuals idealized Western culture, at times advocating wholesale rejection of Japanese traditions. This radical stance provoked a strong conservative backlash. The tension between "complete Westernization" and "preservation of national essence" reflected the collective anxiety of Japan during its modernization process. In response to this contradiction, some scholars proposed a reconciliatory approach known as *wakon yōsai* ("Japanese spirit, Western learning"), advocating that while actively importing Western science, technology, and culture (*yōsai*), Japan must preserve its intrinsic spiritual and cultural core (*wakon*), including loyalty to the emperor and traditional ethics. How to absorb Western culture while maintaining cultural sovereignty became a common dilemma faced by Japan and other later-developing nations.

4. Oriental Studies: the interweaving of scholarship and national policy

Oriental Studies (*Tōyōgaku*) was not only a modernization of traditional Sinology but also a crucial component for providing academic support and cultural legitimacy under the framework of nationalism and external expansion. It represented both a continuation of Chinese-centered scholarship and an adaptation of Western Orientalist methods to a Japanese context. Heavily influenced by Western dualistic conceptions of "East vs. West," hierarchical cultural value judgments such as "backward vs. advanced" or "barbaric vs. civilized," and "center-periphery" notions of civilization, Oriental Studies closely served the objectives of modern Japanese national policy [33].

4.1. Foundations and institutionalization of Oriental Studies

Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan urgently needed to redefine its position in the region. The decline of China, the historical cultural motherland, presented an opportunity for Japan to supplant it as the interpreter and leader of "Eastern" civilization. In this context, *Tōyōgaku* emerged, focusing on applying modern Western scientific methods to the study of Asia, particularly the history, culture, and geography of China. Japanese historian Naka Michiyo proposed establishing a discipline of "Oriental

History” centered on East Asian countries with China as the principal focus. Subsequently, the inclusion of Oriental history in secondary schools became gradually independent, marking a significant milestone in the rise of Oriental Studies [34]. Institutionalization of the discipline primarily occurred within two academic hubs: the Tokyo School and the Kyoto School.

4.1.1. Tokyo School: positivist research and service to national policy

Shiratori Kurakichi led the Tokyo School, known for its rigorous and meticulous methodology, heavily influenced by the German Rankean school of positivist historiography. Shiratori advocated moving beyond the limitations of traditional Sinology, employing interdisciplinary approaches such as geography, linguistics, ethnology, and archaeology to rigorously reassess historical sources from Northeast Asia [35]. He adopted a highly skeptical view of early Chinese history, exemplified by his controversial “Yao-Shun-Yu Erasure Theory,” which argued that the legendary figures Yao, Shun, and Yu were not historical individuals but Confucian inventions of later generations. This radical perspective profoundly challenged traditional Japanese Sinology [36, 37].

A key motivation for Shiratori’s revitalization of Japanese Oriental Studies was to compete with Western Orientalist scholarship and enhance Japan’s international academic influence. He argued that Japan’s research on East Asia lagged far behind the West, lacking dedicated academic societies, libraries, and relevant publications. Shiratori called for understanding and learning from Western Orientalist methods while supplementing and correcting them with Japanese advantages to surpass Western scholarship. Another motivation was to use Western standards to critique Chinese culture, reducing its veneration. The underlying logic and core objective of Shiratori’s Oriental Studies was to employ comparative research across East Asian peoples to demonstrate Japanese superiority and the uniqueness of the Japanese polity [38].

Shiratori’s research was closely linked to Japan’s continental policies. In 1908, with the support of Gotō Shinpei, president of the South Manchuria Railway Company, he established the “Manchuria-Korea Historical and Geographical Research Department” to systematically study the history, geography, and ethnography of Manchuria and Korea. Although Shiratori himself claimed that “scholars should devote themselves to pure academic pursuits, leaving the application of knowledge to industrialists,” the outcomes of his research inevitably provided an academic foundation for Japan’s colonial expansion [39].

4.1.2. Kyoto School: cultural history and grand narratives

The Kyoto School, represented by Naitō Konan, emphasized a macro-level understanding of historical development through culture and thought. Naitō was the intellectual core of the Kyoto School and a leading figure in Japanese Oriental historiography. His research on China focused on uncovering the internal logic of historical development, distinguishing him from scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi and Tsuda Sokichi, who evaluated China through Western cultural value frameworks [40]. Naitō creatively proposed the “Tang-Song Transformation Theory” (or the “Song Early Modernity Theory”), dividing Chinese history into “Ancient,” “Medieval,” and “Early Modern” stages. He argued that China experienced profound social transformations during the Tang-Song transition: aristocratic power declined, autocratic monarchies strengthened, and commoners’ status rose, marking the advent of the “Early Modern” period [41].

Another major theory of Naitō’s was the “Shift of Cultural Centers.” He argued that early Chinese civilization centered on Luoyang, which declined by the late Warring States period due to environmental and demographic factors, shifting the center to Chang’an in the Western Han. The late Tang decline resulted from the waning vitality of Chang’an. From the Song period onward, political and cultural centers shifted to Yanjing and the Jiangnan region, respectively. Naitō noted that cultural centers, while prone to stagnation, radiated influence to surrounding peripheral regions, awakening local peoples who, in turn, revitalized Chinese civilization. This perspective, formulated against the backdrop of the First Sino-Japanese War and rising anti-Japanese sentiment in China during the early twentieth century, implicitly justified Japan’s emergence as a new center of Eastern civilization, morally obligated to “benefit” China and facilitate its modernization [42].

Beyond these two schools, the establishment of specialized research institutions further supported the development of Oriental Studies. The Toyo Bunko, founded by Iwasaki Hisaya, third-generation president of the Mitsubishi conglomerate, became Japan’s largest and the world’s fifth-largest Asian studies library. Its initial collection was acquired at great cost from Western-language Chinese works owned by advisors to the Republic of China presidency. The Toyo Bunko continuously collected books on Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, India, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, many of which are rare treasures. As a premier center for Oriental Studies, the Toyo Bunko maintained long-term collaborations with international research institutions and scholars. Its publications, such as *Toyo Bunko Ronso* and *Toyo Bunko Sōkan*, made significant contributions to organizing, interpreting, and preserving Chinese historical documents [43].

4.2. The expansion and distortion of Oriental Studies

As Japanese militarism gained momentum, Oriental Studies gradually lost its scholarly independence, becoming increasingly subordinated to the ideological needs of imperial expansion. It morphed into a form of “policy-driven scholarship” (kokusaku-

gakujuetsu), bearing the clear imprint of its era.

At Kyoto Imperial University, Orientalist Yano Jinichi propagated extreme theories such as the “Manchuria-Mongolia-Tibet-Non-Chinese Territorial Thesis,” attempting to argue, from historical and ethnological perspectives, that Manchuria, Mongolia, and even Tibet were not inherent Chinese territories. This provided a veneer of legitimacy for Japan’s separation and occupation of Manchuria and Mongolia [44]. The construction of such negative imagery aimed to fundamentally undermine China’s legal claims to these regions in the international arena, including before the League of Nations, and to whitewash Japan’s aggression. In response, Chinese scholars swiftly launched a “scholarly defense of the borders.” Historian Fu Sinian, together with other academics, urgently compiled *A History of Northeast China*, meticulously reviewing historical sources to demonstrate that the region had been an inseparable part of China since ancient times. This work effectively refuted Japanese falsehoods and served as a critical reference for the Lytton Commission investigating Manchuria after the Mukden Incident [45, 46].

Amid this fervent expansionist climate, many masters of Oriental Studies aligned themselves with Japanese imperialist ambitions. Shiratori Kurakichi, while asserting a purely academic motivation, displayed evident disdain toward China, epitomized by his “Chinese Civilizational Stagnation” theory. Shiratori argued that Chinese civilization remained at an elementary stage, stagnant over four millennia, while modern China was backward and decadent. Japan, as the leader of Asia, bore the “responsibility” of “saving” China and the continent. To justify Japanese claims on Manchuria, Shiratori differentiated “Manchurians” from “Chinese,” claiming that China did not truly control Manchuria, which he labeled an “intermediate zone,” and based on this formulated the “Neutral Manchuria Theory.” In tracing Mongolian history, he deliberately emphasized the bravery and glory of the Mongols, attributing their decline to the influence of Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism, while claiming that only Japan could revive Mongolia—revealing his overt imperialist ambitions [47].

Naitō Konan, a preeminent Orientalist and Sinologist, also advanced numerous aggressive claims regarding China. In his writings such as *On China* and *New China*, he argued that the Han Chinese could not unite with frontier ethnic groups—Manchu, Mongols, Hui, and Tibetans—rendering China’s vast territories ungovernable. Consequently, these borderlands should be separated from China. Naitō contended that Chinese society was fragmented, with citizens lacking a sense of statehood. He asserted that even with forty or fifty military divisions, China could not resist Japan or Russia, advocating the “uselessness of Chinese national defense.” For China’s future, he promoted “international trusteeship,” claiming that China’s decline made foreign intervention—particularly by Japan—the most practical and efficient means of governance. Based on these arguments, Naitō concluded that the Chinese lacked the capacity for political or military self-renewal, and that the new center of Eastern civilization—Japan—was uniquely positioned to “revive” China, a task justifying the use of force [48, 49].

Expansionist theories also extended into the arts. Japanese artist Okakura Tenshin, who had studied Indian culture, proposed an “Asian Unity” in his seminal work *The Ideals of the East*. He argued that the universal love rooted in Asian art, religion, and intellectual traditions could unify the peoples of Asia. According to him, the declining civilizations of China and India could not fulfill this role; only Japan was qualified. The counterpart to this unity was the materially advanced Western civilization. In *The Awakening of the East*, Okakura vehemently criticized Western aggression and plunder, calling for Asian nations to awaken, unite, and resist the West by force. This “awakening” presupposed that Asian peoples recognize the superiority of their own civilizations and seek solutions from within. However, his rhetoric ignored significant differences among Asian countries and absurdly claimed that inter-Asian conflicts, such as the First Sino-Japanese War, strengthened ties among Asian nations. Even more brazenly, he asserted that Korea had historically been a Japanese vassal, justifying Japan’s wars with China and Russia as efforts to “protect” Korean sovereignty and thereby safeguard Japan [50].

Beyond scholars advocating aggression under the guise of Oriental Studies, Japan directly established think tanks serving imperial colonial governance. The most notorious of these was the South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu). Mantetsu was not a private enterprise but a state-directed corporation established in 1906 under Imperial Ordinance No. 142 of the 39th year of Meiji, funded by the Japanese government, with senior management appointed and supervised by the state. Mantetsu controlled Manchuria’s transportation and mineral resources while also conducting comprehensive intelligence on Chinese politics, economy, and culture. Its “railway as axis, survey as wings” model made it a central institution implementing Japan’s national will, supporting colonial administration and military operations [51]. Mantetsu conducted large-scale field surveys, including studies on “Chinese Customs,” “China’s War Capacity,” “Inflation,” and “Wartime Economy,” covering natural resources, economic structures, agriculture, industry, folk culture, military deployment, and even micro-level data such as rural land ownership. Notably, the China’s War Capacity Survey was led by Japanese communist Nakaniishi Isao, whose reports highly praised the Chinese Communist Party’s mass mobilization strategies, explicitly noting that “the base of Chinese war resistance lies in the countryside, and the primary mobilized class is the peasantry.” A small group of left-leaning investigators like Nakaniishi, drawing on their strong theoretical knowledge and political insight, provided comprehensive analyses of Chinese political, economic, and military capacities [52, 53]. Based on these investigations, Mantetsu compiled vast archives, such as the *Mantetsu Monthly Survey Reports*, constructing an exceptionally detailed social map of China. These archives, due to their systematic, granular, and primary nature, remain an invaluable resource for modern Chinese studies. They cover a wide range of topics—from late Qing to Republican China—including politics, economy, culture, society, and local histories, especially rural land systems, tenancy contracts, and taxation. American scholar Huang Zongzhi, in *Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, utilized Mantetsu’s rural survey data from Hebei and Shandong alongside Chinese sources to reveal features of

modern Chinese peasant economies, demonstrating the scholarly value of these materials [54]. While Mantetsu's materials provide rich, first-hand empirical data that fill numerous gaps in the study of modern Chinese society, their production within a colonial and imperialist context necessitates critical scholarly engagement. Their use requires balancing historical insight with ethical caution: researchers must exploit the sources' full potential while remaining aware of the inherent biases of colonial archives. The collection, organization, and utilization of Mantetsu data constitute a massive academic endeavor, with Chinese scholarship producing significant works such as the multi-volume *Mantetsu Archive Compilation* (Social Sciences Academic Press), the multi-volume *Mantetsu Rural Surveys* (China Social Sciences Press), and Xie Xueshi's *Evaluation of Mantetsu Surveys*.

5. Conclusion

From a historical perspective, the development of modern Japanese area and country studies reveals the complexity of knowledge production in this field, characterized by the close entanglement of academic agendas with state strategy. During the Meiji period, research on the West primarily served national policy objectives aimed at modernization. In the imperial expansion phase, Oriental Studies became deeply embedded within the colonial governance apparatus, operating under a model of "scholarship as essence, state policy as function." This alignment generated a persistent tension between academic autonomy and political instrumentalization. On one hand, it produced original, internationally influential scholarship, such as Naitō Konan's Tang-Song Reform Theory. On the other hand, the pursuit of political favor and expansionist agendas led to breaches of academic ethics—for instance, the South Manchuria Railway Company conducted colonial intelligence gathering under the guise of "academic research." Modern Japanese area and country studies have historically been inseparable from the power-laden nature of knowledge production and, at times, were distorted into tools of territorial and political expansion. The historical lesson underscores the importance of safeguarding scholarly independence and remaining vigilant against the cognitive tendency to "objectify" research subjects. The healthy development of contemporary area and country studies should be grounded in an ethical framework of equality and mutual respect, fostering a paradigm shift from merely "understanding the other" to engaging in truly reciprocal civilizational dialogue.

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