



**Citation:** Watanabe, H., Oki, S. & Tamada, A. (2025). The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 101-104. doi: 10.36253/ds-15460

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

## The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries\*

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**Abstract.** In 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan, a nationalistic perception of antiquity evolved in direct opposition to the ideal of Confucian antiquity. While Confucianism, which idealized Chinese antiquity as a golden age of virtuous rule, appealed to the warrior class with its emphasis on universal principles and reason, a counter-movement emerged in the form of *kokugaku* (national learning). The movement reinterpreted ancient texts such as the *Kojiki* and *The Tale of Genji* as expressions of a distinctly Japanese mentality and culture, elevating the feminine aristocratic court culture of the *Heian* period (from the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) as an ideal. Its leading figure, MOTOORI Norinaga, drew a sharp distinction between the *karagokoro*, the Chinese way of thinking, and the 'Upright Heart' of ancient Japanese people, which he saw as rooted in poetic sensibility and an emotional, aesthetic understanding of the world. The concept of antiquity formulated by the *kokugaku* played a crucial role in shaping Japanese identity and state ideology, particularly during the Meiji Revolution (1868-), when efforts to restore imperial rule and establish a centralised government ultimately dismantled the ancient regime associated with the warrior caste.

**Keywords:** Japanese antiquity, *Kokugaku* (national learning school), MOTOORI Norinaga, *Heian era*, Confucianism in Japan.

In present-day Japan, the perception of classical antiquities is characterised by a pluralistic nature, incorporating the influence of ancient China and

\* This paper faithfully reproduces the talk by Hiroshi Watanabe, Sayaka Oki, and Atsuko Tamada, titled *The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. This talk was prepared for the Panel on Global Antiquities of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, held on Monday, 3rd July, at Sapienza University of Rome. The content of the talk was primarily prepared by Watanabe, with Oki and Tamada assisting in the initial planning of the structure. The oral presentation was delivered by Oki. We have chosen to publish the talk in its original form because it provides a succinct summary of Watanabe's research achievements accumulated over decades. We believe this approach is preferable, as it directs readers to his comprehensive works rather than presenting another extended summary. The following are the main works on which this paper is based: H. Watanabe, *A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901* (日本政治思想史), Engl. transl. by D. Noble, International House of Japan, Tokyo 2012; Id., *Confucianism and After: Political Thoughts in Early Modern East Asia* (東アジアの王権と思想 増補新装版) [in Japanese], Revised Edit., University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo 2016; Id., *Meiji Revolution, Gender and Civilization* (明治革命・性・文明) [in Japanese], University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo 2021.

Japan. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a notable effort to differentiate between Chinese and Japanese antiquities. In this talk, we explore how classical antiquities were conceptualised during that period.

Let me provide a brief overview of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Japan. This era was characterised by a prolonged period of peace that lasted for more than two centuries under the *Shogun*, who was the leader of the Tokugawa clan belonging to the hereditary warrior class. From 1639 to 1863, virtually no armed conflicts occurred within the country or beyond its borders. The Tokugawa clan effectively governed Japan through a decentralised political system, relying on its military supremacy and the support of approximately three hundred local lords. The clan's ruling did not adhere to any specific political or religious ideologies. Although the Imperial Court existed in Kyoto, the ancient capital city, it had limited symbolic authority<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast to Qing China (1644-1912) and Choson Korea (1392-1910), it was only during the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Confucianism gradually gained acceptance among the ruling warrior class in Japan. This was partly because Confucianism was originally intended for the sovereign and bureaucratic officers, rather than the warrior class in the Chinese imperial system. As a result, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Japanese warrior class dismissed Confucian teachings, viewing them as a culture of cowardly intellectuals.

However, the need to maintain dominance during a prolonged period of peace brought about a shift in perspective among the warriors. They developed an interest in moral education to provide additional justification for their political authority, which until then had been based solely on military power. As a result, local lords increasingly established schools to teach Confucianism to their vassals, recognising its value in fostering moral principles and supporting their leadership.

Confucianism presented the Japanese people with an idealised image of Chinese antiquity as the golden age. This ancient era was believed to have been governed by renowned virtuous emperors, the Sons of Heaven, whom Confucius (552/551-479 BC) admired. According to Confucius, peace and order prevailed at that time because of the honest and beautiful manners practised by both courtiers and the common people. This perception on antiquity served as a model to be emulated by the ruling class, who felt a moral obligation to strive towards re-establishing this ideal state in contemporary society.

It is important to note that this Confucian image of antiquity in Japan was gendered and associated with masculinity, primarily because of the genders of its key figures and intended audience. Confucianist teachings prescribed their norms with the assumption that men were the rightful rulers and condemned the involvement of women in politics as immoral. This perspective did not contradict the values and culture of the Japanese warrior class, as its male members naturally regarded themselves as epitomes of virility within the population.

The acceptance of Confucianism in Japan was not a passive process; it entailed a vigorous reinterpretation of Confucian classics to adapt the teachings to Japanese society. This was necessary because the canon contained elements closely tied to Chinese social systems and customs. While acknowledging the authority of the canon, new interpretations emerged to better understand the model of antiquity in China, with the assumption that the orthodox interpretation was 'incorrect'. These Japanese attempts at interpretation further facilitated the spread of Confucianism throughout Japanese society, extending beyond the confines of the ruling class.

In addition to Chinese antiquity, another distinct and revered period in Japanese history was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Japanese people. This period is known as the *Heian* era, which spanned from the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and marked the flourishing of the Imperial Court in Kyoto. This alternative ideal, the *Heian era*, continued to captivate individuals, particularly women, even after the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the political prestige of the Imperial Court waned.

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, a number of renowned literary works emerged from a small aristocratic circle. These included beautiful waka poems, many of which were romantic poems, and renowned literary works such as *The Tale of Genji*, often considered the world's oldest full-length novel, and *The Pillow Book*, an essay reflecting a keen aesthetic sensitivity. In contrast to the Confucian canon written in classical Chinese, both these works were written by female authors using *onnade*, Japanese phonetic characters widely employed by aristocratic women. These literary figures were highly educated court women, each serving one of the emperor's wives. They showcased cultural and aesthetic refinement and contributed to the prestige of their respective mistresses, who competed against each other to gain favours from their husband, the emperor, thus upholding the honour of their family of origin.

Despite the loss of political power, the Imperial Court's aristocratic culture continued to be admired. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the court and its city, Kyoto, were widely romanticised as symbols of feminine aesthetic refine-

<sup>1</sup> It is said that this situation instilled in people both utilitarianism and moralized obedience to the authority. With this mindset, people prioritized the pursuit of prosperity over transcendental values, without hesitating to marginalize any controversial or rebellious moves against the ruling class.

ment and provided ideals of women. This was because the *samurai*, the warrior class, had established their own male ideals, but had not proposed a specific ideal for women. In fact, many successive shoguns took aristocratic women from the Kyoto court as wives.

In this historical context, a group of male scholars established the 'national learning' school known as *Kokugaku*, which rapidly gained influence during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of its prominent figures was MOTOORI Norinaga (1730-1801), an intellectual from the merchant caste<sup>2</sup>. The proponents of *Kokugaku* opposed the spread of Confucianism in Japanese society by arguing that it was not worthy of promotion and was harmful to the country because of its Chinese-centric cultural perspective.

Confucian scholars believed that the doctrines of Confucianism, expressed in classical Chinese, possessed universal validity, and should naturally be applied in Japan to civilise its 'barbarian' people who were considered culturally inferior. In contrast, the national learning school rejected the notion of situating its homeland on the periphery of Chinese civilisation and instead promoted a nationalist and nativist perspective. Their argument centred on the idea that the Japanese people should preserve their mentality (*mentalité*) and take pride in their country's unique achievements of long-lasting stability and peace. They contrasted this with the political turmoil and frequent dynastic changes experienced by their continental neighbour, China.

In rejecting the ideal of Chinese antiquity, the national learning school turned to the cultural heritage of the Japanese *Heian* period as an alternative norm. As mentioned earlier, the literature and art of the *Heian* period were characterised by being primarily transmitted among women to cultivate feminine sensitivity. This 'feminine' antiquity was reinterpreted as representative of Japanese mentality and culture, positioned in opposition to both Confucianism and its adherents among the *samurai* class.

MOTOORI Norinaga specifically argued that the stern self-discipline advocated by Confucianism and revered by the *samurai* was mere hypocrisy. He believed that the true 'human sentiment' should be 'transient, awkward, and loose' (排蘆小船, *Ashikawake obune*). He devoted himself to the study of *The Tale of Genji* and waka poetry and composed poems throughout his life.

Furthermore, his scholarly endeavours went back even further than the 'old age of *Heian*' to the legendary beginnings of the nation. Drawing on the *Kojiki*, a seminal Japanese chronicle compiled in 712 that blend-

ed mythological tales with semi-historical accounts, he concluded that ancient Japan was an ideal state where humans lived innocently with their natural emotions, which, however, made them voluntarily obedient to the emperor. He embraced the mythical narratives found in the *Kojiki*, including the origins of the imperial dynasty, which recounted the ancestry of the emperors as divine beings descended from a celestial realm under the commission of the sun goddess to rule the Japanese archipelago for eternity. Through his meticulous interpretation and detailed commentary on the *Kojiki* (a laborious work that took him 32 years to complete), he firmly asserted the existence of a distinct Japanese mentality that persisted from prehistoric times up to the *Heian* period.

Norinaga drew a distinction between the *karagokoro*, the Chinese way of thinking, and the 'Upright Heart' and 'Pure Heart' of ancient Japanese people. In his view, Confucianism principally relied on the capacity of human reason to comprehend the fundamental principles that governed the world without depending on supernatural revelations. According to this perspective, Confucian principles stem from the Great Nature (the Heaven, *ten* (ja.), *tian* (ch.)) and its moral and political doctrines are closely linked to nature and reason, bearing some resemblance to the Enlightenment philosophy of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Japanese mentality is rooted in scepticism towards the ability of reason to grasp abstract universal principles, and it does not attempt to explain or understand the world through natural principles (heavenly principle, *tenri* (ja.), *tianli* (ch.)).

Norinaga believed it arrogant for humans to assume that they could fully understand a world filled with mystery and absurdity, where the good suffer and the wicked prosper. Instead, he valued the sincere modesty of the 'Upright Heart' which reverently accepted the realities of life and approached them with a sense of awe. To him, ancient Japanese literary works, such as *waka* poems and *The Tale of Genji* eloquently expressed this perspective, portraying delicate sentiments intertwined with sorrows and love. Therefore, he encouraged people to cultivate an interest in such literary works, particularly *The Tale of Genji* and to express their artistic creativity by composing poems that reflected and embodied their innate 'heart'.

In conclusion, 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan witnessed the emergence of a nationalistic perception of antiquity that stood in opposition to the ideal of Confucian antiquity.

<sup>2</sup> According to him, his ancestors belonged to warrior class but abandoned its status at the beginning of the early Edo period.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Watanabe, *A History of Japanese Political Thought 1600-1901*, *op. cit.* (chap. I. «The Political Thought of the Middle Kingdom: Confucianism»).

This process bears some resemblance to the rise of German Romanticism, which emerged as a 'reaction' to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and rationality.

MOTOORI Norinaga and his school gained substantial following in the country through his prolific publications. His theories influenced people's perceptions and led many to view the imperial court in Kyoto as the true centre of Japan's unity and to hold greater respect for the emperor than for the Shogun, who governed from Edo. A century later, the concept of antiquity presented by the national learning played a crucial role as an ideological element in the Meiji Revolution (1868-), which sought to restore imperial rule and establish a centralised government, ultimately dismantling the ancient regime associated with the warrior caste.