

Repoliticization of Confucianism in Early Meiji Japan: Moral Education and the Construction of Imperial Sovereignty Consciousness

Boyang Zhang*

Chonnam National University, Gwangju, 61186, Korea

**Corresponding Author: boyang618@qq.com*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the "repoliticization of Confucianism" to explore the mechanisms through which Confucian thought was transformed in the construction of the modern Japanese state. It argues that under the pretext of "moral education", Confucianism was reconstructed and embedded as a political ideological system. From the late Tokugawa period to the early Meiji era, Confucianism evolved from an ethical framework centered on individual self-cultivation into a moral pillar of national ideology. Its repoliticization was not only a revival of thought but also the product of the joint shaping by political power structures and the educational system. This study posits that moral education served as the institutional channel for Confucian repoliticization, while the "baptism" of political thought represented its ultimate modern transformation. Far from declining, Confucianism in modern Japan was reconstructed as a core resource of political thought. This phenomenon reflects the intellectual logic of a "morally grounded state" in modern Japan and offers a new perspective for understanding the modern fate of Confucianism in East Asia.

1. Introduction

Following the Meiji Restoration, the new government introduced a Western-style educational system while simultaneously reinforcing teachings of loyalty to the emperor, patriotism, and civic morality. This combination of Western and traditional elements reflects the establishment of a new ideological order but also entails tensions between tradition and modernity. Although the Meiji state rapidly pursued modernization, it was difficult to immediately establish a stable new value system at the level of knowledge and culture. Consequently, the rupture and reconstruction of ideological frameworks became a critical yet often overlooked aspect underlying the process of "modernization". [1]

In the early years of the Meiji Restoration, reformist thinkers represented by Fukuzawa Yukichi criticized Confucianism, arguing that it impeded individual autonomy and national prosperity, and advocated replacing traditional ethics with Western civilization and scientific rationality. Fukuzawa condemned "Confucian-style education" as "hollow morality" and called for the promotion of knowledge that is practically useful for social life.[2]

Fukuzawa Yukichi admired the political development and order of Western modernization and advocated for Japan to "leave Asia and enter Europe", aiming for Japan to break away from its traditional social order and learn from the West.[3]

However, in the early years of the Meiji Restoration, Confucianism did not immediately disappear. On the contrary, many political elites involved in the Restoration and the construction of new institutions still drew on Confucian discourse in practice to articulate order and hierarchy, emphasizing ethical education and loyalty to the emperor, thereby finding a new place for traditional thought within the emerging national context.

The "depoliticization" and "repoliticization" of Confucianism serve as two crucial analytical threads for understanding ideological changes during the Restoration. The former refers to the marginalization of Confucianism within certain modern discourses, reducing it to private morality or cultural heritage, whereas the latter denotes the reintegration of Confucian elements to serve state governance and identity construction under the demands of nation-building and ideological consolidation.

2. Prelude to the Issuance of the Imperial Rescript on Education

The Tokugawa shogunate's power structure was based on the Confucian ideological order. By the late Tokugawa period, social problems became increasingly prominent, the shogunal order was on the verge of collapse, and Confucianism faced the intellectual challenge posed by Western Enlightenment thought.

2.1 Changes in Late Tokugawa Educational Philosophy Provided an Ideological Basis for the Imperial Rescript on Education

First, there was the destabilization of Confucianism's official status and the rise of pluralistic Confucianism. Since the mid-Tokugawa period, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism had been established as the "official learning" recognized by the shogunate, dominating the intellectual landscape and serving as an important ideological support for maintaining the ethical framework of the samurai class and the loyalty structure of the bakufu system. However, by the late Tokugawa period, a diversification tendency emerged within Confucianism, represented by Sato Issai and his disciples.

Second, there was a shift from order-oriented ethics to action-oriented ethics. In the traditional Zhu Xi framework, Confucianism emphasized "principle", "ritual", "loyalty", and "filial piety", focusing on the continuity and stability of hierarchical relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger. Yet in the late Tokugawa period, as social contradictions intensified and shogunal authority waned, Confucianism, while retaining its role in upholding traditional moral order, gradually incorporated elements of reform, justice, and practical action, thereby altering its social function.

Third, there was a transition from inward-looking and closed perspectives to responsiveness to international and contemporary contexts. During the late Tokugawa period, Japan faced pressures from Western powers, including the arrival of the "Black Ships" and the signing of unequal treaties, forcing a reevaluation of its institutional and cultural systems.

Thus, late Tokugawa Confucianism exhibited signs of transformation in terms of intellectual content, social function, and political status. While it provided certain ideological resources for modernization, its traditional structures and core values also posed significant obstacles. First, the political structure, with its hierarchical order and morality-based governance, conflicted with the foundational principles of the modern state. Second, social ethics, especially familism, suppressed individual subjectivity. Third, in terms of knowledge systems, there was a lack of empirical thinking. Traditional Confucianism emphasized classical study, scholarly transmission, and moral cultivation,

rather than empirical investigation, experimental methods, or scientific rationality. Finally, changes in the global order highlighted the incompatibility of Confucian adherence to the "Sino-barbarian order" with the openness, international vision, and institutional learning capacity required for a modern state.

In sum, late Tokugawa Confucianism existed in a state of "transformation and resistance" simultaneously. On one hand, it provided ethical and ideological cushioning for modernization through adjustments in intellectual content, social function, and political positioning. On the other hand, its traditional order, family ethics, classical authority, and cultural horizon constituted formidable obstacles to the construction of modern institutions.

2.2 The Introduction of Western Educational Thought in Early Meiji Japan Provided Intellectual Materials for the Imperial Rescript on Education

In August 1873, Japan's first intellectual society, the Meirokusha, was established, represented by Enlightenment thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Mori Arinori. They studied and disseminated Western democratic thought and published the fortnightly periodical Meiroku Zasshi, providing educational enlightenment to the public.

2.3 The Rejection of the Traditional Education System in the Gakusei (Education System Order) Laid the Groundwork for the Implementation of the Imperial Rescript on Education

The guiding spirit of the Meiji Restoration was a combination of "return to the past" and "progress." The government's initial education policy focused on higher education rather than elementary education, beginning on February 22, 1868, with the establishment of universities. About a month later, the President's Office distributed the proposed school plans drafted by the above-mentioned scholars and schools—known as the Gakusei—to local authorities. The core content stipulated: "Its form shall follow Confucian principles, incorporating Western learning as part of the curriculum, while the fundamental guiding spirit throughout shall be derived from national learning. In short, the curriculum centers on the imperial way, supplemented by Chinese and Western studies, which constitutes the foundational spirit permeating the entire system." [1]

The curriculum centered on national studies (kokugaku), including Shinto classics and imperial studies, which gradually replaced Confucianism. Western learning (yogaku) and other disciplines were offered concurrently. The deity of learning was changed from Confucius to the imperial ancestors and heavenly gods. The fundamental spirit of educational policy during the Meiji Restoration was that both Confucian and Western learning served the emperor. As social conditions evolved, from around 1877, the government gradually shifted toward a more conservative and assertive educational policy, which culminated in the Imperial Rescript on Education (Kyoiku Chokugo).

3. The Imperial Rescript on Education as a Concentrated Manifestation of Confucian Politicization

In the early stage of the Meiji government, Japan, newly opened to the world, was exposed to a variety of Western liberal and democratic ideas, while traditional education promoting loyalty and filial piety, particularly in reverence to the emperor, was largely neglected. The Meiji rulers began seeking ways to utilize compulsory moral education to secure popular loyalty to the emperor. On February 11, 1889, the Meiji Constitution was promulgated, formally establishing the emperor's position in institutional and structural terms. Subsequently, on October 30, 1890, the Meiji government issued the Imperial Rescript on Education, a moral constitution intended to educate the

populace.

3.1 Moral Education in the Imperial Rescript Essentially Reinforced Service to the Imperial Household

The content of the Imperial Rescript on Education is divided into three parts. Its narrative traces the emperor's ancestors as the origin of the nation, equating the imperial household with the state, and using this logic to morally instruct the populace.

3.2 Confucian Moral Structure in the Rescript Primarily Served Political Governance

The second part, presented in the form of an imperial edict, outlined the moral norms citizens should observe. It combined Confucian notions of feudal loyalty with Japan's religious tradition of ancestor veneration. Through a patriarchal conceptualization of the state, in which the emperor is regarded as the father and the people as children, the emperor became the object of "loyalty and patriotism", effectively conflating the concepts of emperor and state.

3.3 The Rescript Blurred the Boundaries Between Imperial Authority and National Polity, Transforming "Loyalty and Filial Piety" into Allegiance to the Emperor

The core of the Imperial Rescript emphasized the importance of traditional ethical education and its necessity within the imperial polity. The first section elaborated on the moral instruction of the emperor and the requisite loyalty of subjects. The second section listed specific precepts, integrating traditional Confucian ethics—such as filial piety, fraternal harmony, and marital obedience—with modern ethical values of a capitalist society, including self-discipline and philanthropy. The third section emphasized the universal significance of these precepts, mandating compliance by all. The Rescript thus served as a vehicle for ideological control, cultivating in the Japanese people from the outset of education a mindset of loyalty to the emperor and readiness to sacrifice for the nation, which laid the groundwork for militaristic thought.

3.4 Institutionalization of the Imperial Rescript on Education

In 1890, the Meiji government institutionalized the Imperial Rescript on Education as promulgated by the emperor, incorporating all aspects of popular education into a militaristic educational framework. The state demanded loyalty, filial piety, and unity among its citizens to ensure the continuity of the nation, claiming that the origins of education were embedded within these principles. The Rescript further required all citizens to be willing to sacrifice courageously in times of national crisis, thereby supporting the prosperity of the Japanese imperial line. Once issued, the Rescript was revered as sacred, and the government propagated, interpreted, and enforced its militaristic ideology according to state needs.

4. The Deep Function and Influence of Confucian Repoliticization

4.1 Providing a Moral Foundation for National Polity Theory

During the transitional period from the late Tokugawa to early Meiji, the rise of kokutai (national polity) theory necessitated a framework that could both connect with tradition and provide value justification for the modern state. Japanese scholar Yonemoto Ken, in his paper *The Birth of Modern Kokutai Theory*, notes that the "national polity" was not an ancient, fixed concept in Japan but was created to address national crises. Influenced by Kaisei Shōshi's *Shinron*, it emphasized the

unbroken imperial line (*bansei ikkei tennō*) and the unity of religious and political authority (*sai-sei kyōgōitsu*). By the time of the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), *kokutai* theory had been institutionalized as the core of political ethics. Its vagueness was a source of power: simultaneously sacred and beyond questioning.[4]

Confucianism not only functioned at the level of social moral education but was also politicized and nationalized, providing a moral foundation for *kokutai* (national polity) theory. Furthermore, the use of Confucian expression helped construct a stable internal logic for the concept of *kokutai*: through ethical cognition education, institutionalization of schooling, and the reinforcement of moral instruction, loyalty to the emperor was effectively transformed into service to the state. Within the educational system, the importance of loyalty to the emperor was emphasized and codified as a moral requirement for the functioning of the state. Confucian ethical frameworks were thus repoliticized, shifting from the traditional domains of individual self-cultivation and ruler-subject relations to become a key pillar legitimizing the national political system.

4.2 A "Japanization" Strategy to Resist Western Universal Values

By the mid-19th century, as Western universal values were introduced to Japan, the nation faced dual pressures: one from institutional, technological, and military modernization, and the other from challenges to its value system and political culture. In this context, the repoliticization of Confucianism became a strategy to resist or transform Western values—a process of "Japanization." It not only preserved traditional ethics but also incorporated them into the discourse of the modern state.

During Japan's modernization, Confucian values—emphasizing collectivity, loyalty, filial piety, and hierarchical ethics—served as a cultural barrier against Western individualism. Japan's pursuit of modernization was thus not a complete Westernization; rather, it sought a path of "Japanese-style modernization", with Confucianism providing the ideological resources to achieve this. In education and moral instruction, concepts essential to a modern state—such as loyalty, dedication, and national will—were expressed using Confucian terminology, granting them legitimacy and cultural resonance in the local context. Confucian education was thus packaged as moral education, integrated into the modern educational system, and ensured that traditional ethics permeated the construction of modern institutions.

Confucianism, therefore, was not a passive legacy during Japan's modernization but was actively repoliticized and reintegrated, becoming a crucial component of a "Japanized modernization" strategy and a vehicle for localized values in state-building.

4.3 Supporting Nationalist Identity

As a widely integrated intellectual resource within state and society, Confucianism also became a potential ideological tool for reinforcing nationalism in modern Japan. Its influence was subtle but profound.

Firstly, in the construction of nationalism, Confucianism's core principles—such as "loyalty to the emperor and patriotism", "public-mindedness", and "self-discipline and ritual restoration"—could easily be translated into the ethical demands of a modern nation-state: the sacrifice of citizens for the state, the primacy of the state over the individual, and the subordination of the individual to the national collective. In this sense, Confucian ethics provided a moral template for modern nationalism.

Secondly, by emphasizing historical and cultural superiority, Confucianism helped cultivate national confidence, allowing Japan to embrace modernization and Western institutional practices while maintaining cultural autonomy. Through institutionalization, traditional ethics were

transformed into the conceptual framework of the modern nation-state.

5. Conclusion: Repoliticization of Confucianism as the Political "Baptism" under Moral Education

This paper has examined how Confucianism, under the pretext of moral education, was transformed into a component of national political thought in modern Japan. Confucianism was actively embedded within the political structure of the modern state.

As a "Japanized" cultural resource, Confucianism played a role in resisting Western universal values. Confronted with Western concepts of freedom, equality, contractualism, and individualism, Japan pursued a modernization path that was not fully Westernized but relied on Confucian traditions to reshape values. Collective ethics, loyalty, and hierarchical order embodied in Confucianism were adapted within modern state education and moral instruction, converting traditional ethics into expressions of state will, national identity, and cultural superiority. Consequently, Confucianism was not simply discarded during modernization but became an essential tool for localized modernization, allowing the modern state to incorporate both traditional cultural continuity and imported institutional frameworks.

Thus, in modern Japan, Confucianism was not a passive remnant but an actively integrated, institutionalized, and politicized intellectual resource. Although often criticized as an impediment to modernization, this study emphasizes that Confucianism could also serve as a resource for constructing the modern state. Through repoliticization, Confucianism was not eliminated but embedded in new ways within the modern national system. Rather than viewing Confucianism as a static relic of an old order, it is more insightful to examine how it was reconstructed, transformed, and utilized in the modern state.

Repoliticization represents the interaction between thought and institutions. The politicization of Confucianism was not a unidirectional process of "value imposition" but occurred through multiple intermediary channels, including the educational system, public ceremonies, state rituals, national discourse, and legal institutions. For example, in the 1930s, political leaders publicly promoted the idea of "Confucian guidance of the people's thought", and Confucius ceremonies became state rituals, demonstrating the deep integration of Confucianism with state politics.[5]

Although East Asian countries shared certain commonalities in their paths toward modernization, the reception, transformation, and application of Confucianism varied across nations. The relationship between Confucianism and the modern state should not be understood as a fixed template; rather, attention should be paid to its process of "repoliticization" within specific countries and historical contexts.

For an understanding of modernization, it is necessary to move beyond a binary perspective of tradition versus modernity. In modern Japan, Confucianism did not simply decline; instead, it persisted in a new form after undergoing a "political thought baptism" under the pretext of moral education. Its educational and moral instructional functions were strengthened in the context of state modernization, illustrating that "tradition" and "modernity" are often intertwined and transformed, rather than simply replaced.

The mechanism of moral education played a pivotal role in this ideological transformation. The key to Confucian repoliticization lay in its initial dissemination as moral education, which was subsequently transformed into political thought through the educational system, ritual system, and state institutional framework. The legacy of Confucian repoliticization in contemporary times merits reflection.

In conclusion, this study contends that the repoliticization of Confucianism in modern Japan constitutes a "political thought baptism" achieved under the pretext of moral education. Starting

from individual ethical cultivation, Confucianism was transformed through educational institutions, state rituals, and political discourse into a core component of national political thought. In this process, Confucianism provided the moral foundation for kokutai theory, served as a cultural tool to resist Western universal values, and was embedded in the expansion of state authority and nationalist ideology. Understanding Confucianism should shift from viewing it as a passive remnant of old institutions to examining its institutionalized, politicized, and modernized trajectory, thereby appreciating its complex functions and historical impact in the construction of the modern state.

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