The Japanese National Character

The 1930s marked a professional turning point for Nyozekan. When government repression curtailed free expression in the middle of the decade, Nyozekan turned his attention away from overt political and social criticism and focused on the study of the Japanese national character. His first essay on the subject, "Nihon-tekiseikaku no saikento" ("A Re-examination of the Japanese Character"), was published in Kaizo in 1935 when he was sixty years old. Even prior to the publication of this article, however, Nyozekan relied on his ideas on the national character to illustrate his beliefs and opinions on politics, society and culture.

Nyozekan continued writing about the national character throughout the war and postwar years, using his assessment of the Japanese national character to critique Japanese politics and social developments. Writing about the very political and social dynamic that would ultimately severely limit his freedom of expression, in 1932 he published Nihon fuashizumu hihan ("Critique of Japanese Fascism"). In this book, he leveled an attack against the growth of what he clearly saw as a Japanese brand of fascism encompassing the intertwined elements of political repression at home and military aggression abroad. The book, initially banned and later released in a highly censored form, attacked the trend toward chauvinistic nationalism, violent and reactionary politics, military aggression, and territorial expansion. In Nyozekan’s estimation, these trends had come to fruition in the 1931 Manchurian Incident and the government’s submission to the military fait accompli. Motivated to pursue national character studies by his opposition to these trends, he focused his critical efforts against them. But because open criticism of the government was no longer tolerated, he expressed his criticism subtly, via his national character studies. While Japanese fascism was his immediate focus, the more fundamental aim in his character studies was to demonstrate to the Japanese people their
national legacy of a liberal spirit. With this underlying goal, the
message in his writing on the national character changed little from
prewar to postwar, despite the drastic change in Japan’s objective cir-
cumstances. Nyozekan’s character studies form the core of his
thought, and just as he used his study of the national character to
adjudge his society, a review of his work in this area provides a
means of understanding his views on Japan’s course through the
Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras.

The roots of Nyozekan’s character studies lay in the atmosphere
of change that surrounded him in his youth. The enormous social,
cultural and political change heralded by the Meiji Restoration’s
disbanding the military government and adopting a constitutional
monarchy created an intense pressure to understand the real Japan
that lay beneath these myriad changes. The answer to the question
of identity was of utmost importance to Japan, the answer was key
to the nation’s future. Thus began the quest to define the Japanese
national character. The Seikyosha, Nyozekan’s intellectual forbears,
and its rival group, the Minyusha, were among the first to embark
on this search. Later, firmly established in his own career,
Nyozekan also focused his attention on the meaning of the
Japanese national character and used these studies as a way to
analyze, evaluate, and critique the changes Japan was undergoing
during his own lifetime.

Members of both the Seikyosha and the Minyusha felt compelled
to define the national character, or kokusui, a phrase coined by Shiga
Shigetaka of the Seikyosha, to mean “national essence” or “nation-
ality.” None questioned that Japan possessed a unique national
character: the problem was to define it. In the face of Western impe-
rrialism in East Asia, defining the Japanese character was considered
necessary to preserving national autonomy. Kokumin no tomo, the
Minyusha magazine, editorialized, “If a nation knows itself – its
strong points, its shortcomings, its goals, its means – then it will be
able to act independently.” Likewise, Kuga Katsunan of the
Seikyosha claimed, “The best defense for the Japanese is ‘national
self-knowledge.’”

While both groups agreed that understanding the Japanese char-
acter was crucial to preserving the state, they disagreed on the exact
nature of the national character and how the information should be
acted upon. Tokutomi Soho and his colleagues in the Minyusha
(founded in 1886) believed self-knowledge was a necessary first step
toward eradicating all traces of the national character and that only
by eliminating all vestiges of this character, which he said was “. . .
unprogressive . . . acquiescent . . . irrational,” could Japan hope to
survive as an independent nation in the modern world. The