CHAPTER ONE

REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE AS A NATION

Much of what is written about Japanese nationalism is not really about nationalism at all. This is the first paradox that anyone who wishes to understand the past, present and future of Japanese nationalism must confront. It is not only true about academic writing on nationalism in Japan, but a fortiori of journalistic accounts of “rising nationalism” or “neo-nationalism” that plague so many of the contemporary English language media reports on politics in Japan. When narratives of this “neo-nationalism” in Japan today are tied, implicitly or explicitly, to the historical militarism or expansionism of Imperial Japan during World War II, then misunderstanding of Japanese nationalism only deepens. That is not to say that history is irrelevant to nationalism in Japan or elsewhere. It certainly is relevant, and that is one reason that this study takes a historical approach to understanding Japanese nationalism. It is, rather, a question of “getting the history right,” or in this case not only of getting the history right, but of accurately identifying the subject of analysis: nationalism itself. The legacy of World War II, compounded with the institutional bias of postwar modernization theory, has left a strong tendency in works on Japanese nationalism to focus on the role of the state. State indoctrination, state control of the economy and education, state predominance over regional and local governments—all combine to yield the impression that the main story line of Japanese nationalism is how the state emerged to control so much of life in modern Japan. This study does not deny the significant presence of the state in modern Japanese life, and particularly in political life. It simply argues that much of this narrative about the state is not really a narrative about nationalism. In fact, the statist bias in some writings on Japanese nationalism often yields a lesson, not in “seeing like a state,” as James C. Scott put it, but in how trying to see like a state

can result in a blindness to the reality of nationalism. Put succinctly, nationalism is a principle that asserts the people as the privileged principle of political life. But this principle of the people is more than a political one. It makes certain cultural claims that go to the heart of identity, individual and collective, and as such it can place itself as a conflicting relationship with the state. It certainly did so for much of modern Japanese history.

More than twenty years of reading the literature on Japanese nationalism has left me with a strong sense that what is said in English and what is said in Japanese about the subject are often worlds apart. This difference is not so much one of evaluative positions: it is easy enough to find authors in either language who reject nationalism completely or who support it, at least for limited strategic reasons (most commonly, for what is believed to be its value in anti-imperialism). But what has been most striking is the rather casual use of the term “nationalism” in English writing, and the more attentive and discriminating use of terminology to convey the idea of nation or nationalism in Japanese. In part, this is due to a specific linguistic feature of Japanese that needs to be stated at the outset here, and indeed in any study on Japanese nationalism. There are two distinct words in Japanese for “nationalism,” *kokuminshugi* and *minzokushugi*, just as there are two distinct words in Japan for “nation,” *kokumin* and *minzoku*. A third term, *kokkashugi*, is often mis-translated into English as “nationalism,” but it really denotes what the French language captures better as *étatisme*, or “statism.” And, similarly, the root word *kokka* should be translated into English as “state” rather than “nation.” Anyone who speaks or writes on nationalism in Japanese must come to some understanding as to what these different ways of articulating nationalism in Japanese signify, and then sometimes make a choice between these alternative ways of articulating “nation” or “nationalism.” To choose one term over the other is to select, explicitly or implicitly, a particular understanding of what nationalism is.

To fully appreciate the subtle differences that emerge from the choice of terminology requires some understanding of basic political

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2 In recent years, there has been an increasing tendency to use the English word “nationalism” in phonetic form (*nashonarizumu*). This approach has had two effects on Japanese discourse on nationalism: one, an increase in theoretical ambiguity about what exactly is being addressed (i.e., “what is nationalism?”); and two, a tendency to exoticize nationalism as something that comes from, or is characteristic only of, the West.