CHAPTER TWO

THE PRECONDITIONS OF JAPANESE NATIONALISM

Prior to 1853, there was no Japan. This may seem at first a preposterous claim, but it can only be fully understood once we have unpacked what a national concept like “Japan” really means. Certainly the claim is not that the islands which today make up the archipelago of Japan did not exist. And foreigners and even some natives did make occasional reference to a place called “Japan” even if such vague references to Japan rarely were consistent either with each other or with the territory that would later become Japan. Most importantly, “Japan,” as the national signifier we understand it to be today, was for all practical purposes irrelevant to the dominant forms of politics and to everyday life in the archipelago. Throughout the Edo period, and even into the early Meiji period, “Japan” neither referred to a single, clearly demarcated, centralized political authority, nor to a meaningful identity for those whom “Japan” would claim to represent. Without first appreciating what the absence of Japan as a national existence meant prior to the Meiji Restoration, one cannot fully comprehend the historical upheaval, contestation and sense of crisis that accompanied the Restoration and subsequent attempts to construct a modern nation-state in the early Meiji years. Nor is it easy to recognize the diverse forms of nationalism that have continued to inform political and cultural practice in Japan without first realizing that this sense of “Japaneseness” was, and is, a contingent and contested mode of identity.

In order to appreciate what this absence of national identity meant, we must first guard against the temptations of anachronism. It is tempting to extract a concept from premodern texts that resembles a modern sense of nationality and then carry that concept forth into subsequent years, regardless of how well the actual existence of such “national” forms of identity is supported by other kinds of historical evidence. Some scholars have argued that this anachronistic projection backward of national identity is ingrained in the very nature of the modern discipline of history. There is no question that historians of Japan have frequently used their craft to provide
evidence for a continuous sense of Japanese nationhood, and they often favor the “early modern” (Edo) period as the best site for this native sense of Japanese national identity. Indeed, the gradual shift among many historians from seeing the Edo period as a time of “feudalism” to an “early modern” period often relies implicitly on a theoretical and ideological effort to identify elements of an indigenous Japanese identity prior to Perry’s arrival and the cultural compromises believed to have resulted from “Westernization.”

Metanarratives of historical progress, whether Marxist or nationalist, have often argued that nationalism develops only after the collapse of agrarian feudalism and the onset of bourgeois capitalism, the true harbinger of modernity. Consequently, by rejecting the appropriateness of feudalism in describing the Edo period, or by emphasizing capitalist economies prior to the Meiji Restoration, historians have constructed narratives that can easily be appropriated by others who wish to stress the nativist origins of Japanese nationalism. The full range of these dynamics is vast and complicated, involving Marxist agendas that both support nationalism as anti-imperialism and denounce nationalism as capitalist “emperor-system” ideology, as well as non-Marxist agendas that also lionize ethnicity or native cultures as anti-imperialist forces or, from a more post-Marxist perspective, envision an open-ended plurality of identities as a means of countering the supposed baneful effects of citizenship in a constitutional state. This is not the place to unravel the intricacies of these interrelated narrative strategies; to do so would, in any event, require an entirely different book. Instead, it must suffice to survey briefly some of the conceptual sources for national identity prior to the Meiji Restoration, and to simply appeal to the need to always historicize assertions of national identity.

The Bakumatsu Years and the Preconditions of National Identity

Although the nation of Japan is a recent construct, the term by which we signify the Japanese nation today is of ancient origin. The earliest written record of reference to “Japan” appears in a diplomatic exchange between Prince Shōtoku and the Tang Emperor in 645 A.D. Writing on behalf of the emperor, Prince Shōtoku referred to the Japanese court as “the place were the sun rises” in juxtaposition to the Tang court, where “the sun sets.” More than geography influenced Shōtoku’s choice of words, and the diplomatic affront encoded in his language was registered in China and back home,