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BOOK REVIEW

Like No Other: Exceptionalism and Nativism in Early Modern Japan

By Mark Thomas McNally

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Reviewed by Michael WACHUTKA



Kokugaku may be narrowly understood as a philological examination of Japan's oldest mytho-historical sources, whose exponents endeavored to uncover an indigenous ancient way, and elevate its precepts to the idealized status of a contemporary creed. The subtleties of kokugaku's formative discourse, especially the complex nature of its emergence as ideological alternative to Confucian studies, are often ignored. In its broadest sense, kokugaku encompasses all forms of learning, poetry creation, and antiquarian scholarship that focused on Japan. Throughout its history, kokugaku demonstrated a surprising breadth of subject matter and diversity of approaches in sociopolitical, intellectual, and literary contexts. It was neither a coherent movement nor a monolithic school and, indeed, only since the Meiji period was it uniformly self-identified as kokugaku.¹ The term's ambiguity itself has long been a vexing problem.

Ever since seminal studies by Harootunian and Nosco, kokugaku has commonly been described in English as a form of nativism.² Mark McNally considers this to be a case of "mistaken conceptual categorization" (p. xiv), because both kokugaku and nativism "exhibit affinities with another conceptual category, rather than directly connecting to each other" (p. 17). *Like No Other* is McNally's attempt to establish a new paradigm. He argues that the critical concept that best resonates "with both nativism in the American case and Kokugaku in the Japanese case is exceptionalism" (p. 17).

The key phrase is "the American case." For, despite the book's subtitle, the two longest chapters are devoted to expounding the meanings in the U.S. of "nativism" (chapter 1) and "exceptionalism" (chapter 3). McNally points to two major forms of nativism, "anthropological" and "historical," as represented in influential studies by Ralph Linton and John Higham respectively. McNally, who sees these concepts as mutually undermining and contradictory (p. 55), nevertheless identifies in them "one important commonality, namely, antifoignism" (p. 26). Moreover, "[n]ativism is not merely another form of antifoignism; it is essentially antifoignier" (p. 22). As foreigners for much of the Tokugawa period were confined to specific areas and forbidden to intermingle with the broader population, he

1 Wachutka 2013.

2 Harootunian 1988 and Nosco 1990.

affirms that “Kokugaku scholars directed their antforeignism against cultural abstracts, represented by Confucianism, Buddhism, and later, Rangaku/Yōgaku” (p. 63). Hence, “nativism is antipeople” (p. 67), and “Kokugaku cannot qualify as nativism, since its development did not involve the arrivals of foreigners [... and its hostility] was not directed at a foreign presence in Japan” (p. 199).

A major shortcoming in this line of argument, however, is McNally’s reliance on “the American historical context” (p. 101), especially as espoused by Higham. Higham’s findings, first published in 1955, drew on American nativist sentiments towards European immigration and so towards the physical presence of foreigners. In later studies, however, as Bergquist (not cited by McNally) proposes, the misleading old habit of positing a clear contrast between “native” and “foreigner” shifted to a view of nativism in which natives can also be divided among *themselves* on cultural or religious grounds.³ This is akin to the ideological struggle of “Shintoist” kokugaku scholars with “Buddhist” interpretations of the otherworld, or with the intellectual predominance of “Confucianist” scholars in the public sphere. The concept of nativism emerging from the analysis of later historians is not merely hatred for foreigners or a weapon for dealing with their competition; rather, it represents a mindset wherein the nativist believes that society should be organized on the basis of conformity to older cultural values. After Higham, the study of nativism was increasingly seen within a broader context of *cultural* conflict.⁴ In fact, there are many different nativisms, “according to the context of the particular conflict of cultures in which they arise.”⁵ Arguments can surely be made that kokugaku fits Bergquist’s definition of nativism.

My main disaccord with *Like No Other* is its heavily U.S.-centric (politico-historical) view, a view that is challenged by comparative studies such as those of Mühlmann (1961), who examined nativist outbreaks in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Mühlmann generalizes the different forms nativism may take from a religio-psychological and sociopolitical point of view, defining it “as a collective course of action driven by the urge to restore a community’s sense-of-self, shaken by superior foreign culture, via massive demonstration of an ‘own contribution.’”⁶ Again, the affirmative case can be made that this definition quite neatly resembles kokugaku’s main intellectual endeavors. Furthermore, as Paranjape (not cited by McNally) argues in the case of India, for instance, “the issue is not native vs. non-native so much as freedom vs. slavery, selfhood vs. subjection, *svaraj* vs. subordination.”⁷ He applies the concept of nativism to Ghandi’s explicitly *non-violent* activism.⁸ Yet for McNally, who largely follows Linton’s and Higham’s concepts, hostility and violence are essential components of nativism. Since they are absent in kokugaku (p. 62), the equivalence, he argues, should instead be *sonnō-jōi* (pp. 18, 22; chapter 2), the post-1853 movement to expel the foreign barbarians: for the “acts of terror and murder against Westerners, nativism is clearly an appropriate categorization” (p. 83). Nonetheless, McNally also argues “against equating *sonnō-jō’i* [sic] with nativism” (p. 235, n. 3), since it “is better to think of *sonnō-jō’i* [sic] as exhibiting a range of ideas, and that nativism is an important part of this intellectual

3 Bergquist 1986, p. 131.

4 Bergquist 1986, p. 138.

5 Bergquist 1986, p. 140.

6 Mühlmann 1961, pp. 11–12.

7 Paranjape 1997, p. xiv.

8 Paranjape 1997, p. 127, n. 19.

range” (p. 99). This is, indeed, the crux of the matter: the exact same argument can be made for the range of ideas and multivocality exhibited by kokugaku.

McNally stresses that nativism is incorrectly connected to Tokugawa kokugaku, which restricted its study while ignoring other correlations. He dislocates kokugaku from nativism, ascribing to it the new analytical category of exceptionalism. As roots of this exceptionalism, McNally points to early Tokugawa Confucianists who argued that Japan had displaced China as the world’s “central realm,” and sought universal truths in ancient Shinto texts (chapter 4). He then focuses on late Tokugawa Confucianism, namely Mitogaku and its role in the transition to the Meiji period (chapter 5). Here the argument is that Mito scholars were as exceptionalist as their kokugaku counterparts, and that post-1853 nativism equally reflected the influence of Mitogaku, which “served as the ideological arm of the *jō’i* [sic] movement” (p. 80). McNally is right to reconsider the artificial boundaries between categories of early modern scholarship. Yet he blurs the picture by indiscriminately applying the term “exceptionalism” to all Tokugawa intellectuals who promoted a view of Japan as equal or superior to China, despite varying ideological persuasions.

In the prologue, McNally explains “that more needed to be done to explain Kokugaku’s status during the eighteenth century” (p. xiii). Hence, it is perplexing that he omits all discussion of kokugaku itself during this period in question. The narrative jumps back and forth geographically between the U.S. (chapters 1, 3) and Japan (chapters 2, 4, 5) and chronologically, in the case of Japan, between the early seventeenth century (chapter 4) and the late nineteenth century (chapters 2, 5). McNally omits completely the long eighteenth century until Hirata Atsutane’s death in 1843, in which kokugaku thought and scholarship emerged and is traditionally seen as most dominant, and does not engage critically with major proponents and their ideas, writings, and activism. Consequently, the reader is left to wonder whether statements that kokugaku is equal to “this” (exceptionalism) but not to “that” (nativism) are indeed valid, and whether such terminological hair-splitting is at all productive. The exchange of one multifarious term for another equally elusive one does not of itself enhance understanding. To facilitate a better appreciation of what kokugaku was and enable an assessment of the claim that exceptionalism accommodates its salient aspects more effectively necessitates tangible representation. McNally’s arguments would have gained coherency had they been supported by concrete examples based on the study of firsthand accounts. This neglect is all the more regrettable, because his earlier works prove he is in command of relevant primary sources.

Like No Other is no-doubt thought-provoking. By trying to untangle the complex web of Tokugawa intellectual history and to relink its proponents via alternative categories, McNally presents valuable new perspectives. His call to consider Japan more often as a case study to verify the broader applicability of general academic theories is most welcome, but would have been better directed at colleagues in other disciplines instead of “Japanologists” (pp. 103, 225). His comparative approach helps sharpen our analytical tools. Utilizing precise terminology is indeed essential, and fostering better understanding often necessitates comparison to more familiar phenomena. However, one should never force one’s subject of study into any Procrustean bed of perceived equivalents. McNally strives for the most appropriate terminology, but unfortunately falls short in substantiating his assertions with actual content. Still, *Like No Other* is a welcome contribution to the study of early modern Japan.

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