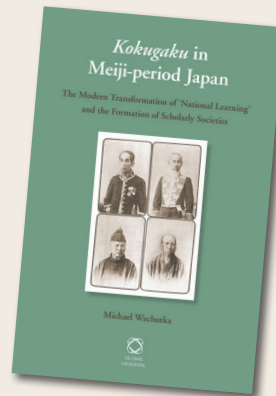


## BOOK REVIEW

*Kokugaku in Meiji-period Japan:  
The Modern Transformation of  
'National Learning' and  
the Formation of Scholarly Societies*

Michael Wachutka

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Michael Wachutka's monograph is the first in English dedicated to tracking and explaining the development of the *kokugaku* movement during the Meiji period. As Dr. Wachutka states, more often than not in Western academics the story of *kokugaku* ends just as modernity is said to begin, until new *kokugaku* arises in the writings of influential twentieth century scholars such as Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu. It is clearly important and necessary to explain this failure by omission of the academic community.

Dr. Wachutka makes a case for the importance of his study based not only on the historical significance but also on the contemporary social relevance his results display. He makes another case for the importance of his work by highlighting his choice of the prosopographical method. He expresses the hope that a study based on collective biography can create the grounds for sound and meaningful generalization, while also preserving appreciation for the unique characteristics of the particular individuals for whom greater historical information is now readily available in English.

The first two chapters examine the influence of *kokugaku* in the fields of politics and academics towards the beginning of the Meiji period. However, Dr. Wachutka is first required to perform the difficult, but I think successful task of summarizing the main currents of bakumatsu era *kokugaku* and introducing the representatives of these main currents who were still politically, academically, and socially relevant in the early years following the Meiji Restoration. Although these various currents are well explained and nuanced, they necessarily become simplified. In their unity, they are characterized as essentially a movement in search of Japanese identity. However, Wachutka explains this Meiji *kokugaku* movement as having divided into two main directions of inquiry. One direction, not absolutely but generally, that of Hirata-school-influenced *kokugaku*, is characterized here as conservative and deeply concerned with theological Shinto beliefs. The second direction, again not absolutely but generally, is that of more philologically-focused *kokugaku*, which the author characterizes as progressive, practical, and deeply concerned with defining essential Japanese cultural production. When expressed politically, this latter inquiry encouraged ideas of an essential and unique Japanese *kokutai* as found in ancient Japanese classics.

Wachutka explains in these first two chapters that the ideal of merging government and religion could not be achieved, as this more dominant conservative direction of early Meiji

*kokugaku* had hoped. Governmental control was not to be the future of Meiji *kokugaku*. The focus of the second half of the book, therefore, falls on the remaining option of a progressive search for nativist studies in support of imperial *kokutai*. Dr. Wachutka's middle chapters concerns *kokugaku* influence on the construction of nativist-inclined curriculums in public and private schools and other types of educational societies and institutions, and show how the more practical and progressive direction of *kokugaku* rose to ascendance in the latter part of the Meiji period. They also show how elements of the more religious and conservative direction transformed and preserved their messages in more moderate and acceptable forms.

The later chapters inform us that, in the second half of the Meiji period, there was a prevailing sentiment, also expressed by the Meiji emperor, which feared the devaluation of Japanese culture and ushered in the pressing need to implement nationwide programs and projects with the sole intent of preserving what was considered to be essentially Japanese in any and all aspects of culture. The nativist expertise of certain schools of Edo *kokugaku*, previously considered by some to be as frivolous as they were antiquarian, suited the educational emphasis on Japanese language, Japanese literature, Japanese history, and even Japanese law.

In the final chapters, Dr. Wachutka reveals that in late Meiji national learning classes were attended by an unexpectedly wide range of the general public in Tokyo. These classes were staffed by volunteer *kokugakusha* who were often qualified, degreed and dedicated professional instructors. The lectures they gave were then transcribed, and offered for mail-order, distance-learning purposes. In late Meiji, tens of thousands of Japanese from all walks of life and from every corner of Japan signed up and purchased these lectures on various Japanese classical literary topics.

Dr. Wachutka's work contains much more information of importance that I have had to omit in this short review. This book displays extraordinary and admirable erudition. Its greatest strength is in its detail. There are times, however, in the execution of his collective biographical method when this reviewer wondered whether very long lists of names and biography might have been relegated to the much appreciated appendices. There are also times in the telling of the trials of these *kokugakusha* when more detail could have been spent describing the Buddhist, Neo-Confucian, or Western Studies opposition, but that might have made for a different book. This book also left me wondering about a meta-narrative that this topic in this era naturally brings to mind. Is the failure of irrational, religious *kokugaku* and the success of rational, progressive, and pragmatic *kokugaku* as identified by the author due to a greater process of Weberian-like secularization, or simply modernization? Or has religion just "taken cover" or "gone underground," as perhaps hinted at by the author when he remarks that Kokugakuin still uses their Hirata school influenced school-song? Furthermore, is the government's recent grant for *kokugaku* studies at the Kokugakuin University Center of Excellence a hint of the coming end of a religious conservative dormancy, or else a portent of imminent changes in Japanese identity politics? These few suggestions and questions aside, this book should not be passed over by any scholar who pretends to study the Meiji period, whatever field they specialize in.

**Reviewed by Wilburn Hansen**