Benevolence and Aggression in Modern Japanese Asianism:

Hua–Yi Distinction, International Law, and the Paradox of Moral Legitimacy

Abstract: This paper examines how "benevolence," "the kingly way," and "aggression" coexisted within modern Japanese Asianism. Previous studies often explain the aggressive aspect through the theory of Hua–Yi distinction, claiming that its hierarchical worldview drove Japan toward imperial expansion. I argue that such interpretations essentialize East Asian thought and reproduce a Eurocentric narrative of progress. By reinterpreting Hua–Yi as a flexible cultural logic rather than a fixed hierarchy, this paper shows how it functioned as a conceptual intermediary that enabled Japanese intellectuals to translate the European law of nations into an Asian context.

Modern international law claimed universal equality of sovereigns, yet its "civilization" standard sustained a global hierarchy between Europe and non-Europe. Japanese elites recognized this contradiction: while formally adhering to international law, they also instrumentalized it under a "survival of the fittest" worldview. Within this framework, armed interventions that fell outside the legal definition of war were tolerated as "peace," legitimizing the coexistence of moral rhetoric ("benevolence") and imperial violence.

By tracing the interaction between Hua–Yi discourse and the European international legal order, this paper situates Japanese Asianism as a failed antithesis to Eurocentric universalism. Its moral vocabulary offered a potential critique of Western domination but was ultimately absorbed into imperial ideology. The analysis contributes to broader debates in global intellectual history and postcolonial political theory on how non-European traditions negotiated modern sovereignty and legitimacy.

Keywords: Asianism; Hua–Yi distinction; international law; moral legitimacy

1. Introduction

The concepts of "East Asia" and "Asia" were not created by Asians. They were constructed by Western states as markers of their own civilization and modernity.[1] In Japan's encounter

[1] When the concepts "Asia" or "Asiya" were first widely adopted in Japan, debates already emerged over whether "Asia" existed as a meaningful category. Scholars have long discussed whether "Asia" should be understood as a community that still needs to be imagined and constructed, or one that has already been recognized. In Chinese-language scholarship, many works examine "Asia" from a postcolonial perspective that critiques Western-centrism, focusing on how "Asia" is conceptualized and understood. This body of literature emphasizes the meta-conceptual and normative clarification of "Asia," along with the history of its circulation and reception. For discussions of the conceptual history of "Asia" and debates about

with the West, "Asia" emerged as both a regional identity and a political idea, and "Asianism" developed as an intellectual current. In simple terms, Asianism began in Japan from the late Edo to the Meiji period. It called for solidarity with China and other Asian countries and for resistance to Western power.

Asianism carried some positive aspirations, but from the 1930s on it was also used to justify Japan's wars in Asia. As a result, it is often treated as synonymous with Japanese imperialism. Takeuchi Yoshimi was one of the first to examine this legacy seriously. He tried to recover ideals within Asianism that were worth preserving. His framework—centered on the tension between solidarity and aggression—still shapes much of the scholarship today.[2]

Chinese-language research often divides modern Japanese Asianism into positive and negative elements and explains how it "went astray." Yet several questions remain. If Asians first learned the idea of "Asia" from Western geography, why did Japanese thinkers imagine Asia mainly in relation to China and Korea? If modern Japanese thought was dominated by ideas of power politics and survival, why were notions such as "benevolence" and "the kingly way" included in Asianist discourse, and even used as slogans for expansion?

Asianism in Japan arose in the private sphere. Before 1931 it had little influence on state policy, so its moral language cannot be dismissed simply as a cover for imperial aggression. Masao Maruyama noted that views of "barbarians" formed a shared background of late-Tokugawa thought. Revivalist Shinto and the image of Japan as a divine nation also adopted Hua–Yi distinctions, and Maruyama argued that this worldview obstructed Japan's full entry into the modern international order.[3]

Oguma Eiji showed that Japanese officials constantly imagined the gaze of Western observers and adjusted their behavior to avoid ridicule.[4] These insights suggest that both the inherited Hua–Yi worldview and Japan's understanding of the international order shaped modern Japanese political thought. To understand why moral terms like "kingly way" and "benevolence" could coexist with aggression in Asianism, this paper examines two dimensions: the Hua–Yi discourse formed before Japan's contact with the West, and the ideas of international law and world order that Japan encountered afterward.

2. Literature Review

Prewar Japanese Asianism was complex and internally uneven. Scholars even disagree on whether it was a coherent theory or merely a mood or atmosphere.[5] Studies define Asianism in different ways, debate when it emerged, how it evolved, and whether it contained progressive elements. Most agree that it combined diverse and sometimes contradictory positions—"Promote Asia," "Unite with Asia," "Preserve Asia"—and that its meaning

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its existence as an imagined or recognized community, see Nianshen Song, *Discovering East Asia* (Beijing: New Star Press, 2018), 9–14; Ge Sun, *Searching for Asia: Creating Another Way of Understanding the World* (Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House, 2019); Youting Li, "A Review of Intellectual History and a Methodological Reflection on Studies of 'Asianism': Focusing on Japanese, Chinese, and English-Language Scholarship," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015).

[2] Ge Sun, *Searching for Asia*, 27–28, 334–35.

[3] Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*, trans. Jianying Ou (Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 1992), 141–42.

[4] Eiji Oguma, *The Boundaries of "the Japanese": Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Korea—from Colonial Rule to Reversion Movements*, trans. Yaojin Huang and Tianen Zheng (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2020), 234–51.

[5] Ge Sun, "Takeuchi Yoshimi's Studies of Asianism," *Open Times* 5 (2019).

shifted across periods and actors. Still, under the pressure of Western expansion, many works take resistance to the West and calls for Asian revival as its shared core.[6]

Most studies classify modern Japanese Asianism into stages and types, often using the "solidarity and aggression" framework. The dominant view is that early Asianism contained positive elements, but later "degenerated" or "went astray." Early Asianists urged cooperation with China and other Asian countries, while by the 1930s rhetoric of "solidarity" and "liberation" had become a cover for aggression.[7] A common criterion for "degeneration" is whether Japan respected equality—especially with China. When relations were conceived as equal, Asianism is seen as genuine; when Japan placed itself at the center and pursued unilateral interests, it is seen as having lost its essence.[8] The 1931 Manchurian Incident is often treated as the turning point, leading to the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" and the institutionalization of domination.[9]

Chinese-language scholarship similarly uses periodization and typologies. Wang Ping identifies three forms: a "classical" Asianism before the Sino-Japanese War based on equality; an "expansionist" Asianism after the war centered on the emperor system; and an "aggressive" Asianism aimed at conquest.[10] Other authors argue that Asianism contained both positive and negative dimensions and underwent a "mutation" that turned it into an ideological mask for expansion.[11] Some distinguish three early strands: a normative strand stressing Asian values and equality; a strategic strand using "solidarity" as a tactic; and a conquest-oriented strand linking imperial ideology with Social Darwinism. They argue that after the Sino-Japanese War, the first strand shrank, the second mutated into expansionism, and the third grew dominant.[12]

Across both popular and state Asianism, the discourse consistently highlighted "solidarity," "benevolence," and the "kingly way," at least as slogans. Existing studies on these "benevolent" elements fall into five main approaches.

First, the affirmative view sees progressive elements: opposition to Western domination, ethical concern for fellow Asians, and a critique of Western civilization as hypocritical. Some Asianists drew on Confucian ideas of moral governance[13] and even supported Chinese revolutionary movements.[14] Asianism here appears as a genuine aspiration for Asian unity and independence and as a space for reflecting on modernity and Eurocentrism.[15]

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[6] Koichi Nomura, *Modern Japan's Understanding of China* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1999), 13; Feng Liu, "The Policy Formation of Japanese 'Asianism' Ideology after the September 18 Incident," *Journal of Historical Studies 1* (2020); Feng Liu and Bo Tian, "The Wave of 'Asianism' in Late Taishō Japan and China's Response: With a Discussion of Sun Yat-sen's Thought and Chinese Nationalism," *World History Review* 7, no. 2 (2020).

[7] Takashi Saga, *A Complete History of Asianism* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2020), introduction;
and Rustin B. Gates, "Pan-Asianism in Prewar Japanese Foreign Affairs: The Curious Case of Uchida Yasuya," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011): 1–27.

[8] Naoki Hazama, *Early Japanese Asianism*, trans. Wen Zhang (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017), 4.

[9] Naoki Hazama, *Early Japanese Asianism*, 147.

[10] Ping Wang, *Modern Japan's Asianism* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2004), 10–12, 34–36.

[11] Banghe Sheng, "Japanese Asianism at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Historical Research* 3 (2000); Banghe Sheng, "Japanese Asianism and the Origins of Right-Wing Thought: A Response to Professor Qizhang Qi," *Historical Research* 3 (2005).

[12] Dongliang Yang and Meiping Wang, "An Analysis of Japan's 'Early Asianism': A Discussion with Professors Banghe Sheng and Qizhang Qi," *Japanese Studies* 3 (2009).

[13] Naoki Hazama, *Early Japanese Asianism*, 20–24.

[14] Banghe Sheng, "Japanese Asianism and the Origins of Right-Wing Thought: A Response to Professor Qizhang Qi."

[15] Koichi Nomura, *Modern Japan's Understanding of China: Traces of a Voyage Toward Asia*, trans. Xuefeng Zhang (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1999), 138;
and Prasenjit Duara, "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 (2001): 99–130.

Second, the "disconnected from reality" view argues that idealistic Asianism had little influence on foreign policy. Idealistic calls for Asian cooperation clashed with the state's realist continental strategy.[16] Popular Asianism was commentary rather than policy, and Japan's diplomacy remained oriented toward good relations with Western powers. Even when Asianism circulated widely in public discourse, officials repeatedly denied any pro-Asian diplomatic shift.[17] Only on the eve of war with the United States, when coexistence with the West seemed impossible, did the government adopt the ideology of the "Co-Prosperity Sphere."[18]

Third, the "situational" view treats Asianism as pragmatic and interest-driven. Officials and intellectuals adjusted Asianist rhetoric according to China's situation and the balance of power among Japan, the West, and Asia.[19] Asianism was primarily a discourse about Europe and America, rooted more in domestic struggles—Westernization vs. cultural nationalism, people's rights vs. state authority—than in shared Asian values. "Benevolence" here was one rhetorical option among others.[20] Slogans such as "cooperation" with China served strategic goals: countering the Soviet Union, preventing Sino-Soviet cooperation, and exploiting Chinese resources.[21]

Fourth, the "deception and cover-up" view regards "benevolence" and the "kingly way" as ideological tools used to mask colonial violence. Asianism equated Japan's interests with Asia's, thereby hiding doctrines of Japanese superiority and justifying expansion.[22] Early civilizational or racial Asianism once appealed to some Chinese thinkers, but after 1931 Japan's use of "kingly way" rhetoric in Manchukuo destroyed its legitimacy.[23] In Southeast Asia too, Japanese occupation undermined its appeal; only in India, which Japan never ruled, was its legacy less negative.[24]

Fifth, the "wishful thinking" view holds that China never had a firm basis for identifying with Asianism, and that visions of Asian unity were mainly Japanese projections. Sun Yat-sen's "Greater Asianism" speech is often cited as evidence of shared ideals,[25] but many scholars argue that his remarks reflected personal gratitude, diplomatic etiquette, or admiration for Japan's modernization rather than genuine endorsement.[26] Japanese scholars,

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[16] Ping Wang, *Modern Japan's Asianism*, 213.

[17] Christopher W. A. Szpilman and Sven Saaler, "Pan-Asianism as an Ideal of Asian Identity and Solidarity, 1850–Present," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 1–28.

[18] Xin Zhai, "Japan's Greater Asianism Before and After World War I," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 5 (2010).

[19] Junji Sakano, *Modern Japan and Asia: The Real Image of Meiji Thought* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2013), chap. 4, conclusion.

[20] Jiling Pan, "The Logic and Ethics of Asianism: Reflections on Modern Japanese Culture," *Japanese Studies* 4 (2005).

[21] Feng Liu, "The Policy Formation of Japanese 'Asianism' Ideology after the September 18 Incident."

[22] Jinghua Zhao, "From Late Qing to May Fourth: The Decline of Asianism in China and Its Consequences," *Academic Monthly* 48, no. 5 (2016).

[23] Jiang Sun, "Asianism Discourse in Modern China," *Journal of Hainan Normal University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences) 3 (2004).

[24] Christopher W. A. Szpilman and Sven Saaler, "Pan-Asianism as an Ideal of Asian Identity and Solidarity, 1850–Present;" and Mikiya Koyagi, "The Hajj by Japanese Muslims in the Interwar Period: Japan's Pan-Asianism and Economic Interests in the Islamic World," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 4 (2013): 849–76.

[25] Naoki Hazama, *Early Japanese Asianism*, 103.

[26] For interpretations of Sun Yat-sen's Greater Asianism speech—whether it expressed admiration for Japan's modernization, its reception in Japan, and its long-term meaning—see Jun Zhao, "Sun Yat-sen and Greater Asianism," *Social Science Front* 4 (1988); Bing Sang, "Interpreting the True Meaning of Sun Yat-sen's Greater Asianism Speech," *Social Science Front 1* (2015). For Hui Wang's argument that Sun Yat-sen's conception of Asia retained the ideals of *wangdao* (the "kingly way") and *renyi* ("benevolence and righteousness") but envisioned Asia not as a culturally homogeneous bloc but as a community of equal nation-states whose unity lay in political inclusiveness and heterogeneity, see Hui Wang, *Depoliticized Politics: The End of the Short Twentieth Century and the 1990s* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2008). For discussions of Republican-era Chinese intellectuals' attitudes toward Japanese Asianism and debates on Asian

influenced by Western theories of "Oriental despotism," tried to redefine "the East" to legitimize Japan's position.[27] Chinese intellectuals, shaped by both lingering Sinocentrism and awareness of Japanese imperial behavior, found it hard to accept "Asia" as a political identity.[28] Appeals to common Confucian or "kingly way" values lacked a true shared foundation.[29] Thus, modern projects of Asian unity were largely Japanese constructions.

Yet these studies leave several questions unresolved. If "Asia" was a borrowed term, why did Japanese visions of solidarity focus specifically on China and Korea rather than West or Southeast Asia? If, as Maruyama, Koyasu, and others argue, modern Japanese thought was shaped by a harsh international order of power politics and national survival, why did "benevolence" and the "kingly way" occupy such a prominent place? And if violent competition provided the basis for Japan's expansion, how do we reconcile this with the claim—made by Maruyama, Jiang Wenhan, and others—that Japan failed to internalize sovereign equality in international law?[30]

Japanese imaginings of Asia that centered on China and Korea presupposed a specific boundary-drawing logic rooted in the long history of the Hua–Yi distinction. For this reason, Hua–Yi thought must be included in the analysis.

At the same time, any discussion of Japan's reception of the modern international order must be grounded in the history of international law itself. Simply invoking a "law of the jungle," anxiety about survival, or a failure to grasp sovereign equality reduces the complexity of Japan's encounter with international law. To address these gaps, this paper analyzes Japanese Asianism from two angles—the legacy of Hua–Yi discourse and the structure of the modern international order—and asks what "benevolence" meant within this configuration.

3. Early Modern Japanese Hua–Yi Thought and the Logic of Asianism

Masao Maruyama links the deep influence of Hua–Yi thought to a mistaken understanding of "national reason" in modern Japan. He uses this to explain how phrases such as "the proclamation of the imperial way," "bestowing imperial favor on the peoples of East Asia," and "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" could intoxicate Japanese rulers themselves. In his reading, they forgot that such language was only a means, took power politics as the realization of moral order, and expressed it in moral terms. In the end, "morality" helped to legitimize seizure and aggression.[31] This is a powerful account of how "solidarity" and "aggression" could coexist within Asianism.

Many other scholars have studied Hua–Yi thought in early modern Japan. They analyze the "Japanese-style Hua–Yi order" in historical writing, empirical practice, and ideas, and compare it with Chinese Hua–Yi thought. In summary, Chinese and Japanese versions of Hua–Yi thought are both seen as "honor the center, despise the outside" and as forms of

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unity, see Qiaorui Wang, "Studies on 'Asia' Discourse during the Nationalist Government Period," PhD diss., Central China Normal University, 2018.

[27] Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, trans. Jinghua Zhao (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2019), 33–42.

[28] Zhaoguang Ge, *Dwelling in China: Reconstructing Historical Narratives about "China"* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), 179–83.

[29] Feng Liu, *Modern Japanese Asianism* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2024), 293–304.

[30] For Wenhan Jiang's view, see Gerrit W. Gong, The Standard of "Civilization" in *International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 166–67.

[31] Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*, 157–59.

ethnocentrism.[32] Modern Japanese Asianism—especially its elements that ignored the independence of other nations and claimed Japanese leadership over Asia—is often interpreted as a revival of Japanese Hua–Yi thought. In this view, "martial power" replaced ritual as the core, and the old hierarchical logic reappeared in the new language of "regionalism" or "Monroe Doctrine."

This view is suggestive but also problematic. The distinction between Chinese and Japanese Hua–Yi thought, the specific features of Hua–Yi discourse, and the moral content within Asianism still need further clarification. When we find elements in Asianist visions of an "Asian order" that resemble Hua–Yi thinking, it may be more precise to treat them not as a fixed "essence" but as cultural, symbolic, and emotional resources that actors could mobilize when needed.

3.1 Hua–Yi Thought and the "Japanese-Style Hua–Yi Order"

Hua–Yi thought in China was part of traditional political culture and was closely linked to ideas of "Heaven's mandate" and "rule by virtue." Early agricultural civilization gave the Huaxia people a sense of superiority and a worldview that divided the world into "China" and various "barbarian" peoples. The Huaxia rulers saw themselves as the center and designated surrounding groups as yi, rong, man, and di, drawing hierarchies by culture and lineage. Ideally, the ruler who received Heaven's mandate should be virtuous and rule "all under Heaven" through virtue. Not only the common people but also formerly "barbarian" tribes would be moved by this virtue, come to the center of their own accord, and enter the ritual order.[33]

In this model, the Huaxia ruler governed the realm and granted titles to subordinate lords. These lords acknowledged the Son of Heaven and paid tribute. Historically, central rulers used this to strengthen domestic rule and display orthodoxy to the outside world. At the same time, conflicts and insecurity among neighboring polities pushed them to seek protection or advantage by aligning with "great states." Over time, this produced a pattern in which surrounding regimes regularly accepted titles and sent tribute to the central dynasty, forming what is called the "Hua–Yi order."[34]

Neighboring peoples and regions who admired "China" but lagged behind its level of development often tried to narrow the gap. To pursue advanced civilization and raise their own status, many copied, re-created, or imagined smaller "Hua–Yi orders" with themselves at the center. Compared to Korea and other polities that remained within the Chinese "imperial web," Japan—because of its geography—could stay offshore and avoid formal investiture, thus maintaining more autonomy.[35] After repelling the Mongol invasions in the late 13th century, Japanese elites developed a "divine country" consciousness: Japan had

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[32] Dongyu Han, "The 'Gap' and 'Power' in the East Asian World: From the 'Sino-Barbarian Order' to the Treaty System," *Review of Economic and Social History* 2 (2016);
and Masao Maruyama, *Lectures by Masao Maruyama*, vol. 6, trans. Yongliang Tang (Chengdu: Sichuan Education Press, 2017), 256–57.

[33] Toshio Mogi, "The Center-Periphery Structure of East Asia and Changes in Worldviews," trans. Lei He, in *The Twists and Development of East Asian Modernity*, ed. Zhaotian He (Changchun: Jilin People's Publishing House, 2002), 318–20; Masao Maruyama, *Lectures by Masao Maruyama*, 257–58.

[34] Dongyu Han, "The 'Gap' and 'Power' in the East Asian World: From the 'Sino-Barbarian Order' to the Treaty System."

[35] Wenqing Jin, *Classical Chinese and the East Asian World* (Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing, 2022), 131.

never bowed to foreign powers. Starting from the idea of an unbroken imperial line, they came to believe that, as a borderland, Japan could nevertheless preserve the correct values.

Even when the Muromachi regime once requested investiture, this did not mean that Japan recognized the Chinese emperor as legitimate ruler in a political sense. Rather, it was a way to gain entry into a trade network centered on the Chinese court.[36] After national unification at the end of the 16th century, the warrior government celebrated "martial power" as Japan's unique virtue, in contrast to the "civil" values of Korea and China. Based on this contrast, it constructed a "Japanese-style Hua–Yi order" that rivaled the Chinese model.[37]

The dynastic change from Ming to Qing further strengthened this self-centered view. Many Japanese thinkers drew a sharp line between "real China" and "China as an ideal." They argued that "real China" (now under the Manchus) had degenerated into a barbarian land, and that Japan should replace the Qing in leading the Hua–Yi order, perhaps even becoming the center of the world.[38]

Of course, historians have shown that Japan's actual foreign relations network was only a small, partial subsystem on the margins of a China-centered order. The so-called "Japanese-style Hua–Yi order" was less a concrete historical structure than a product of Japanese historiography and intellectual imagination.[39] Yet this imagined order did help Japan move away from the "King of Japan" status that Ashikaga Yoshimitsu had once acknowledged and encouraged the belief that Japan itself had become the new "Hua" standing above "barbarians."[40]

Compared with Chinese Hua–Yi thought, Japanese Hua–Yi discourse is usually said to have two main features. First, it replaced ritual (li) with "martial power" (bui / bu'i) as the main source of legitimacy and the core of order. Second, it treated "China" as a movable sign, even allowing for the possibility of "Sinicizing" the West.

From the late Muromachi period, Japan had in practice withdrawn from the Chinese investiture-tribute system and made its own rules. Whereas Chinese-style Hua–Yi order relied on ritual and music as its connective tissue, early modern Japan defined itself as a "land of war" governed by a warrior regime. There, the highest value was "martial power," which meant not only military strength but also the authority that enabled and justified rule.[41] The "Japanese-style Hua–Yi thought" judged rank and legitimacy according to the degree of martial power[42] and inclined toward forcing neighboring regions into submission by arms rather than winning their admiration through culture.[43] The aggressive strand of modern Japanese Asianism can be seen as a later expression of this inflated "martial power."

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[36] Nianshen Song, *Discovering East Asia* (Beijing: New Star Press, 2018), 30.
[37] Toshio Mogi, "The Center-Periphery Structure of East Asia and Changes in Worldviews," trans. Lei He, in *The Twists and Development of East Asian Modernity*, ed. Zhaotian He (Changchun: Jilin People's Publishing House, 2002), 321.
[38] Yiguo Zhang, "The Modern Transformation of Japan's View of Asia: From 'Sino-Barbarian Transformation' to Asian Imperialism," *Social Scientist* 2 (2006).
[39] Xiuwu Chen, "On the 'Imagined' Japan-Style Sino-Barbarian Order," *Journal of Northeast Normal University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences) 1 (2008).
[40] Liying Yang and Deyu Zhao, "'Japan-Style Sino-Barbarian Order': A Clarification," *Ancient Civilizations* 15, no. 1 (2021).
[41] Dongyu Han, "The Hidden Logic of Japan's External Wars (1592–1945)," *Social Sciences in China* 4 (2013).
[42] Naohiro Asao, *Early Modern Japan, vol. 1: Early Modernity in World History* (Tokyo: Chūōkōron Shinsha, 1991), cited in Yehong Fan, "Who Counts as 'China'? A Brief Discussion of the Japan-Style Hua-Yi Ideology in Early Modern Japan," *Journal of Jiamusi University* (Social Sciences) 29, no. 6 (2011).
[43] Ke Wang, *Nationalism and Modern Sino-Japanese Relations: "Nation-State," "Frontier," and Historical Understanding* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015), 335.

A second feature is the tendency to "de-Sinicize" China and redefine "China" as a movable cultural sign. To reduce their sense of inferiority, some Japanese thinkers claimed that "China" could designate entities other than the historical Chinese state, and that Hua–Yi positions could shift. Once they recognized the superiority of the West (and sought to escape the shadow of China by replacing it with the West), they came to see the West as the true "China." Compared to contemporary China, the West was more advanced and thus more "Chinese" in the sense of being civilized. In this logic, "civilization and enlightenment" in modern Japan could be interpreted as a new kind of "becoming China."[44]

3.2 Japanese Hua–Yi Thought and Its Affinity with Asianism

If we bring this research on early modern Hua–Yi thought into dialogue with modern history, Japanese Asianism can be seen, in part, as a continuation of Hua–Yi discourse. The idea of Japan as leader of Asia against the West echoes the long-standing desire to replace the Chinese dynasty as the "center." Arguments that justify Japanese leadership in terms of civilizational advancement invert the direction of attraction in the old Hua–Yi order: it is now Asia that should "look up" to Japan. The regionalist or quasi-cosmopolitan flavor of Asianism also rests on a "radiating from the center" model of international relations, similar to earlier Hua–Yi schemes. And the use of "kingly way" rhetoric in Asianism recalls the vocabulary of traditional Hua–Yi thought.

Almost all modern Japanese theories of Asianism claim that Japan was the first Asian country to achieve "civilization and enlightenment" and thus deserved to be "leader of Asia." After the 1890s in particular, the idea of "Asian solidarity" based on equality and cooperation between Japan and China gave way to theories of "Japanese leadership," which portrayed Japan as pioneer, protector, and guide of other Asian nations.[45] This was not peculiar to Asianism alone. It reflected a broader "spirit of the age." From the Meiji Restoration onward, Japanese elites, local power-holders, and many ordinary people shared a proud self-image of "civilized Japan" and a contemptuous view of "backward Asia." They came to see Japan as the natural hegemon of East Asia.[46]

The shift of regional leadership from the Chinese to the Japanese empire in modern East Asian history was then justified in civilizational terms. Japan, as the self-proclaimed "legitimate heir of European civilization," adopted the Western gaze on the East. It set itself apart from the rest of Asia and labeled other Asian societies as a stagnant "Orient," thereby proving its own superiority and uniqueness by showing how quickly and thoroughly it had absorbed European civilization.[47]

After World War I undermined the taken-for-granted superiority of Western modern civilization, Asian intellectuals began to reflect on its flaws and to speak of "Asian values" and "Asian principles."[48] Japanese Asianists responded by claiming that Japan had already integrated the best elements of each Asian civilization. In this way, Japan alone could

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[44] Hiroshi Watanabe, *Kingship and Thought in East Asia*, trans. Jianying Ou (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2020), 186–87.
[45] Ping Wang, *Modern Japan's Asianism*, 8–12; Koichi Nomura, *Modern Japan's Understanding of China: Traces of a Voyage Toward Asia*, trans. Xuefeng Zhang (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1999), 36.
[46] Zhaoguang Ge, *Dwelling in China: Reconstructing Historical Narratives about "China"*, 173–76.
[47] Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, 35–42.
[48] Hui Wang, *Variations of Culture and Politics: World War I and China's "War of Ideas"* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2014), 5.

represent Asia as a whole, and "Eastern civilization" could stand as a counterpart to Western civilization through Japan.[49] This understanding of international relations centered Japan and resisted the idea of equal coexistence among sovereign nation-states. In this respect, it resembled Hua–Yi thinking.

Japan's reception of international law and other Western doctrines was mediated from the start by Neo-Confucian cosmology, and ideas such as the "kingly way" remained close at hand. These themes appear both in the sincere aspirations of Asianist thinkers and in official propaganda that used Asianism as a banner.[50] Saigō Takamori, often honored by Asianists such as Tōyama Mitsuru, became a symbol and starting point of modern Japanese Asianism precisely because of his commitment to "Eastern ethics" and the "Eastern kingly way."[51]

Even when solidarity was entirely replaced by aggression in practice, some Asianists kept insisting that Asianism meant implementing a future "national kingly way" for all peoples of the East. For them, the ideal of "leading unopened lands and supporting unfortunate nations" would allow Asianism to regain its original radiance.[52] This continuity shows how modern Asianism inherited the traditional Chinese ideal of a political and cultural order based on the kingly way and rule by virtue, even as it profoundly distorted it.

For these reasons, Asianism grounded in "Japanese leadership" may have used the language of "Monroe Doctrine" and "regionalism," and it may have appealed to the advanced character of European civilization. But in its structure, it resembled early modern Japan's self-"Sinicization."[53] Arguments that proved Japanese superiority with new vocabularies of civilization and race were, at their core, close in logic to earlier Hua–Yi discourse.[54] Some scholars even argue that Japanese theories of East Asian order were less a product of modern Western value systems than a continuation of older East Asian problems: how to cope with feelings of cultural inferiority and moral pressure under a China-centered order, and how to claim the name of "China" for Japan.[55]

3.3 Limits of Explaining Modern Japanese Asianism through Hua–Yi Order

When we use Hua–Yi thought to interpret modern Japanese Asianism, several issues remain unclear: how to distinguish Chinese and Japanese versions of Hua–Yi discourse, how to understand its specific features, and how to assess the ethical and moral elements within Asianism that are linked to it.

As noted above, many works connect Japanese Hua–Yi thought to Asianism and use it to explain the "aggressive" side of Asianism. One line of argument claims that Hua–Yi thinking presupposes a premodern, unequal world order that recognizes no center outside itself.

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[49] Feng Liu, "The Dual Character of Modern Japanese Nationalism and 'Asianism': A Study Centered on the Taishō Period," *Journal of Shanghai Normal University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences) 48, no. 5 (2019).

[50] Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*, 141–44.

[51] Takashi Saga, *A Complete History of Asianism* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2020), chap. 1, "Origins of Asianism"; Ge Sun, "Takeuchi Yoshimi's Studies of Asianism."

[52] Naoki Hazama, *Early Japanese Asianism*, 79–81.

[53] Dongyu Han, "The Hidden Logic of Japan's External Wars (1592–1945);" Dongyu Han, "The 'Gap' and 'Power' in the East Asian World: From the 'Sino-Barbarian Order' to the Treaty System;" Ming Wang, "The Logic of Transformation in the Modern 'Japan-Style Sino-Barbarian Order,'" *International Political Science* 1, no. 1 (2016); Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of 'International Law' and the Construction of a 'Hegemonic System'* (Changchun: Northeast Normal University Press, 2015), preface, 6.

[54] Wei Gao, *Japanese Kokugaku Scholars' Sino-Barbarian Theories and the Recognition of Self and Other in Early Modern Japan* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2018), 278–79.

[55] Dongyu Han, "Fukuzawa Yukichi and the Theory and Practice of 'Datsu-A Ron,'" *Ancient Civilizations* 4 (2008).

Another stresses that the "Japanese-style Hua–Yi order," grounded in bui (martial power) rather than "kingly transformation" and ritual, naturally led to expansion and aggression.[56] The first position rejects Hua–Yi discourse as a whole; the second tries to recover its "good" elements. Both, however, treat Hua–Yi thought as essentially self-centered and hierarchical. On this view, "kingly way" and "Eastern ethics" are inherently at odds with modern international order and contain an inbuilt tendency to undermine sovereignty and equality; Asianism built on this base thus serves expansion.

This perspective has several problems. First, it simplifies Japanese Hua–Yi thought. There are competing views on whether "China" names a universal value beyond place, and whether "China" is fixed or movable. Second, it overlooks the fact that the same conceptual resources can be activated differently across situations. The work of Hua–Yi discourse in redefining "Chinese" and "barbarian" identities cannot be understood apart from the wider international order. Third, it treats Confucian-based Hua–Yi thought as the root of nationalism, xenophobia, and hierarchy, and then uses a reified "Hua–Yi order" to explain why East Asian states were "insufficiently modern" and why Japan turned to expansion. This repeats a modernist story: it freezes a conflict-ridden discourse into a single, timeless essence and takes it as a decisive causal factor.

Masao Maruyama famously argued that the main obstacle to Japan's smooth integration into modern international society was jōi (expel the barbarians), that is, a Hua–Yi-style, center–periphery way of seeing international relations. Because Japan failed to break out of this pattern, it came to treat power politics as the realization of morality itself and to express power in moral language. Once "morality" is imagined as boundless, he suggests, the use of power and pursuit of interest also lose limits and expand without restraint.[57] As Sun notes, Maruyama's project tries to locate the sources of Japan's expansion in its own intellectual history, rather than treating modern Japan as simply Westernized.[58]

Yet this kind of self-centered stance is not unique to Hua–Yi thought; it is a general feature of many civilizations. Instead of saying that it must lead to unlimited external expansion, we might see it as a mechanism of self-definition: constructing the self through contrast with an "other" and drawing boundaries.[59] Even without Confucian Hua–Yi discourse, similar patterns would appear in other forms. The "radiating from the center" formula is not essentially different from modern European images of colonized peoples as subhuman. Both contain elements that treat the "non-us" as less than fully human on the basis of "civilization."

This does not mean that traditional Hua–Yi thought had no impact on modern Japan. Rather, it suggests that it is misleading to claim that expansionist Asianism with moral language arose from a special cultural defect. The problem is not any unique flaw in Hua–Yi thought itself, but an international system that rewarded projects of becoming the center and standing above others. Positive feedback from that system reinforced such visions, making it easier to convert them into policy and action. Hua–Yi discourse provided fragments of

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[56] See, for example, Dongyu Han, "The 'Gap' and 'Power' in the East Asian World: From the 'Sino-Barbarian Order' to the Treaty System;" and Dongyu Han, "The Hidden Logic of Japan's External Wars (1592–1945)."

[57] Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*, 141–42, 157–59.

[58] Ge Sun, "Masao Maruyama's Dilemma (Preface to the Translation)," in *Masao Maruyama, Studies in the History of Japanese Political Thought*, trans. Zhongjiang Wang (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2000), 4–5.

[59] He Liu, *The Politics of Imperial Discourse: Modern World Order through the Lens of Modern Sino-Western Conflict*, trans. Lihua Yang et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2009), 92–93.

vocabulary, concepts, and emotions that could be mobilized within this environment and offered a sense of cultural familiarity.[60] Maruyama himself later acknowledged that jōi was not a peculiarly Japanese pathology but shared the same ethnocentric roots as many nationalisms.[61]

The limitation of his theory lies elsewhere. He posits an ideal "European nationalism" grounded in a shared normative consciousness and then casts Japanese aggressive nationalism as an "Eastern problem." Compared with this European model, he argues, Asian nationalisms can only be justified if they overcome great obstacles, and Japan failed to do so and never internalized sovereign equality.[62] This framing does not seriously examine how European international law drew boundaries and excluded others, nor how Japan's own unequal experience within a China-centered order shaped its reception of modern international order. I address this point in the next section.

A second line of argument claims that Japanese Hua–Yi thought caused harm because it abandoned "virtue" and thus differed from the Chinese version. This is also unconvincing. Historically, the Chinese Hua–Yi order was a way to construct identity and regulate contact in contexts where effective control was limited; "barbarian" regions were often precisely those that could not be fully conquered or integrated. "Virtue" in this context marks the limits of power rather than a pure restraint on violence. To say that Japan's emphasis on bui uniquely explains its imperial expansion implies that more "virtue" in traditional thought would have meant less aggression, which reverses cause and effect.

Existing literature also contains a striking tension. Works that explain Japan's expansion often claim that Japan never escaped Hua–Yi thinking and continued to implement a Hua–Yi order abroad. Works that explain why Japan modernized earlier than China and Korea often claim the opposite: that Japan was the first to break with the Hua–Yi worldview and move from "empty talk" to "practical affairs."[63] These opposing conclusions share a common logic: Hua–Yi thought is equated with a "backward East Asian tradition" that prevented modernization. Hua–Yi discourse and "Sinocentrism" are then labeled as hierarchical, xenophobic, and discriminatory, and this label is used to explain why Asianism ignored sovereignty and equality.

Such accounts fix a shifting discourse in place and detach it from context. In Chinese history, debates over "Chinese" and "barbarian" intensified in times of dynastic change, conquest, and resource struggles. Hua–Yi distinctions were used to renegotiate cultural identities, redraw boundaries, and define who could legitimately rule and share in resources.[64]

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[60] For example, Masao Maruyama proposes the idea of "goodness in the sense of dynamism" (dōtoku-teki na zen) in Japanese prototypical modes of thought; see Masao Maruyama, *Lectures by Masao Maruyama*, 25–27.
Maruyama argues that Japanese thought often sacralizes energy or action: Emperor Yūryaku may be ethically evil but is praised for outstanding "action power," described using the term *de* ("virtue"). Figures such as Akugen Taihei and Aku Shichibei are similarly valorized. However, this argument only explains why *de* ("virtue"), *shan* ("kindness"), and *e* ("evil") can coexist and transform in Japanese conceptualization—why Asianist discourse could mix "invasion" with "affiliation" or *renyi* ("benevolence and righteousness") without appearing contradictory. It does not imply that this "prototype" mode of thinking inherently leads to supporting violent aggression, nor that lacking it prevents such support.

[61] Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Action in Modern Politics*, trans. Liwei Chen (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2018), 154.

[62] Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Action in Modern Politics*, 152–53.

[63] On the former, see Dongyu Han, "The 'Gap' and 'Power' in the East Asian World: From the 'Sino-Barbarian Order' to the Treaty System;" on the latter, see Xiaogang Zhang and Yu Guo, "Reconstructing the Modern East Asian International Order: Japan's Diplomacy with Korea and the Qing in the 1870s," *Journal of Shenzhen University* (Humanities and Social Sciences) 29, no. 4 (2012).

[64] He Liu, *The Politics of Imperial Discourse*, 101, 105; Mingke Wang, *The Periphery of Hua-Xia: Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2020), 79, 460.

In this sense, Hua–Yi language is less an eternal doctrine of exclusion than a flexible conceptual tool for marking sovereignty and inclusion. It only takes effect within concrete political speech and practice.[65]

The same holds in Japan. Japanese Hua–Yi discourse includes both the idea that "China" names a universal, transcendent value not tied to geography (and thus the world center can move), and the idea that Hua–Yi positions are fixed and reducible to relations of conquest and subordination. The first position was used, when Japan was weaker, to argue that it was not inferior to the Chinese dynasty and that "China" could shift to Japan; it later justified learning from the West.[66] The second gained strength when "Sinocentrism" was reinterpreted as proof of Chinese arrogance and cruelty, helping to produce the image that "violent China must be punished" and thus legitimizing Japanese war.[67]

We can see here that negative labels on Hua–Yi thought are often crude simplifications. They also ignore who is doing the labeling, in what context, and for what purpose. European scholars wrote about Asian Hua–Yi discourse, and Japanese scholars about Chinese "Sinocentrism," in ways that obscured or justified their own imperial projects.[68]

To trace the ambivalence and "mutation" of Japanese Asianism back to an essential flaw in Hua–Yi thought is therefore problematic. It follows the same logic as narratives that explain colonial suffering by blaming the "sins" of local traditions or the "defects" of national character under a linear view of progress. This logic is neither analytically adequate nor normatively acceptable.

4 International Law and Modern Japanese Asianism

Existing studies on how modern Japan understood international law and international order usually stress three effects: it sharpened a sense of existential crisis, fueled expansionist ambitions, and supplied legal tools. From Tokugawa to Meiji, political leaders saw the external environment as extremely insecure; this justified military build-up.[69] The search for "keys" to self-protection was closely tied to concern with strategic bases and territorial expansion.[70] Western "gunboat diplomacy" and great-power domination of weaker states encouraged Japan to imitate them and expand into Asia.[71] In this process, the Law of Nations

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[65] He Liu, *The Politics of Imperial Discourse*, 144–45; He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity* (China: 1900–1937), trans. Weijie Song et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2014), 273.

[66] Hiroshi Watanabe, *Kingship and Thought in East Asia*, trans. Jianying Ou (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2020), 186.

[67] Ke Wang, *Nationalism and Modern Sino-Japanese Relations*, 295.

[68] For example, He Liu's *The Politics of Imperial Discourse and Translingual Practice* analyze how Western intellectuals used terms such as "yi" ("barbarian") or "guizi" ("devil") to argue that China itself held racial prejudice—an argument that excuses colonial violence and ignores the suffering caused by unequal treaties, which in fact contributed to the popular spread of labels like "guizi." Hongzhi Wang shows how Western translators mistranslated Qing diplomatic letters by projecting "Sinocentric arrogance" onto them, thereby manufacturing the image of Qing haughtiness as justification for punishment; see Hongzhi Wang, *Translation and Modern China* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2014), 107–23. Ke Wang's *Nationalism and Modern Sino-Japanese Relations* demonstrates how notions of "Sinocentrism" were produced and refined in Japanese research on China to attack Chinese national character and legitimize Japanese expansion, as if Japan were "carrying out heavenly justice" on behalf of other peoples oppressed by China. Naoki Hazama, in *Early Japanese Asianism*, likewise notes that the popularity of the "Yellow Peril" theory strongly fueled racial antagonism in Japanese society.

[69] Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 66–67.

[70] Eiji Oguma, *The Boundaries of "the Japanese": Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Korea—from Colonial Rule to Reversion Movements*, trans. Yaojin Huang and Tianen Zheng (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2020), 24–26, 51–52.

[71] Feng Liu, "The Policy Formation of Japanese 'Asianism' Ideology after the September 18 Incident."

and treaties became a new language of power that legalized Japanese actions abroad and undermined China's earlier intellectual authority in Asia.[72]

These works note the instrumental use of international law but rarely examine its own history in depth. They say that international law "allowed" Japanese expansion, yet seldom ask what kind of legal thinking made such obvious distortions possible. Simply invoking a "law of the jungle" risks simplification or even excuse. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's analysis of nineteenth-century international law, we can say more precisely: the pursuit of peace within that legal order, combined with formalism and positivism, created a framework that tolerated Japanese expansion. It was not only the general international environment but also a specific way of drawing legal and spatial boundaries that mattered. In this sense, traditional Hua–Yi ideas were less an obstacle than a set of concepts that could be translated into the new spatial logic of international law.

4.1 Standards of Civilization, Formal Peace, and the Toleration of Expansion

Nineteenth-century international law rested on a "standard of civilization" and a positivist emphasis on formal legality. This combination helped make it possible for "benevolence" in political discourse and violence abroad to coexist without legal contradiction. "Civilized" states were said to have not only the right but also the moral duty to "civilize" so-called barbaric lands. At the same time, the legal definition of "war" left a wide grey zone between formal war and factual peace, so that many forms of violence could be treated as occurring in a state of "peace."

Originally, European theories of jus publicum Europaeum were meant to prevent war among Christian states after the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, however, this European universalism was projected onto the world. International law of European origin claimed global authority, but non-European peoples first had to reach a civilizational threshold before being admitted as equal members.[73] A state counted as "civilized" only if it could guarantee foreigners' rights to residence, property, and trade. Only then could it be a full subject of international law.

"Half-civilized" states, lacking such guarantees, received only partial recognition. Civilized states retained extraterritorial rights there in order to protect trade. Peoples in "uncivilized" regions were often treated as close to animals, without fixed homes, territorial claims, or concepts of sovereignty and property. Their lands were construed as terra nullius and could be annexed or colonized by civilized powers.[74] The same logic appeared in Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, which spoke of colonies and territories whose peoples were "not yet able to stand by themselves" and framed their tutelage as a "sacred trust of civilization," to be entrusted to advanced states.[75]

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[72] Alexis Dudden, "Japan's Engagement with International Terms," in Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 165–91.

[73] Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 6–11, 25.

[74] Ralph Wilde, "From Trusteeship to Self-Determination and Back Again: The Role of the Hague Regulations in the Evolution of International Trusteeship, and the Framework of Rights and Duties of Occupying Powers," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 31, no. 1 (2009): 85.

[75] Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law," trans. Matthew Hannah, in *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, ed. Stephen Legg (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 30. For the text of the League of Nations Covenant, see United Nations, "League of Nations Covenant—Peace Treaty of Versailles, Peace Conference Text / Non-UN Document," accessed May 10, 2024,

"Civilization" and "sovereignty" thus worked as tools of exclusion and discrimination. The notion of "Oriental despotism," which left a deep mark on modern Japanese thinkers and encouraged them to cut ties with "Asia" and with China, was part of this same logic. It labeled complex non-European polities with hierarchical cultures as "despotic," thereby denying them the possibility of equality with Europe.[76]

Japan's annexation of Taiwan illustrates how these principles were applied. In 1872, the American diplomat Charles LeGendre, on his way to Washington, met the Japanese foreign minister Soejima Taneomi. The U.S. minister to Japan, Charles DeLong, described Taiwan as rich in climate and resources and said many foreigners were watching the island. Although China claimed sovereignty, he argued, if it could not enforce its authority there, then the island should be treated as effectively unoccupied. LeGendre added that, under international law, unless China exercised continuous jurisdiction and "civilized" the Indigenous population, it could not claim true sovereignty. After Japan hired him as an adviser, LeGendre submitted memoranda outlining a plan to colonize Taiwan, justifying Japanese intervention by the need to civilize a barbarian land.[77] Japanese planning and propaganda for the Taiwan expedition followed this "civilizing" logic.[78]

In the same year, Japan also abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom ("Ryukyu Shobun") and issued an imperial rescript installing the Ryukyu king as a local lord. Some scholars see this as proof that Japanese expansion still followed a Hua–Yi pattern, merely replacing Chinese "rites and music" with Japanese bui.[79] Yet the key term used to justify this step was "empire" (teikoku), a concept imported through Dutch learning and later through English.[80] The very need to justify "investiture" in Western terms suggests how deeply European concepts had reshaped Japanese practice. Hua–Yi categories were no longer self-evident; they required explanation.

In discussing Sino–Japanese conflicts and the failure of the League of Nations to mediate, Schmitt pointed out a legal gap: who decides what counts as war and what counts as peace?[81] He cited Hans Wehberg's 1932 article in Friedenswarte, which observed that, under existing law, the Sino–Japanese conflict could be described only as "military occupation," not as war, even when bombing and battles were taking place.[82] The 1907 Hague Convention required a formal declaration of war or ultimatum before hostilities.[83] It was therefore easy to avoid the legal category of war: a state simply denied any intention to wage war. Whatever was not war became "peace," so military action could proceed under the legal label of peace.[84]

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https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-199451/.

[76] The concept of "Oriental Despotism" influenced modern Japanese intellectuals who argued that China and Korea were despotic while Japan was not; see Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, 35–42. On how the concept itself was created, see Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International*, 65–67.

[77] Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*, 148–49.

[78] Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of "International Law" and the Construction of a "Hegemonic System"*, 103–6.

[79] Dongyu Han, "East Asian Constructivism," in Lixin Wang et al., "Review and Prospects of World History Research (Roundtable)," *Journal of Central China Normal University* (Humanities and Social Sciences) 63, no. 2 (2024): 37.

[80] Tsuneo Namihei, "Rethinking Modern Okinawa: Issues of Japanese Empire and Assimilationism," trans. Wanhan Wang, in Xiaodong Li and Zhengji Li, eds., *Formation of the Modern Northeast Asian Space and Its Influences* (Taipei: Showwe Information Co., 2022), 383, 387.

[81] Carl Schmitt, "Der Status quo und der Friede" (1925), in *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar–Genf–Versailles 1923–1939*, 4th corr. ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 42.

[82] Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law," 43.

[83] "Convention Relative to the Opening of Hostilities (Hague Convention III, 18 October 1907)," International Committee of the Red Cross, accessed May 10, 2024, https://www.icrc.org/zh/doc/resources/documents/misc/hagueconvention3-18101907.htm.

[84] Carl Schmitt, "Synoptische Darstellung der Texte von 1927, 1963 (1932) und 1933," in *Der Begriff des Politischen:*

For Schmitt, this absurdity stemmed from the rise of legal positivism and the criminalization of war. Nineteenth-century positivism replaced natural law with state practice as the sole source of international law, encouraging uncritical acceptance of the status quo.[85] The pursuit of peace became a defense of the existing order; defending the order slid into legitimizing it.[86] As war was first restricted and then banned in the League Covenant and the Kellogg–Briand Pact, "war" itself became a forbidden word. Enemies were redefined as "criminals," and a new, ostensibly pacifist vocabulary emerged: enforcement, sanctions, police actions, protection of treaties, and "measures to secure peace."[87] Violence did not disappear, but the legal category of war did.

This background helps us understand a change noted earlier. Early modern Japanese thinkers praised bui as a mark of national superiority. By the early twentieth century, however, theorists spoke less of bui and more of "benevolence," "morality," and "just war." Japanese forces invaded China repeatedly without formal declarations of war. Philosophers like Miki Kiyoshi later called for recognizing that a "national emergency" had effectively become a state of war, precisely because the legal vocabulary obscured the reality of conflict.[88]

Within such a legal framework, there is no inherent contradiction between "aggression" and "benevolence." Aggression is defined in strictly formal terms; benevolence belongs to the sphere of substantive justification. They can be combined because formal legality tends to overshadow, or even replace, questions of justice. Acts that are not formally "war" can be treated as peace; appeals to "benevolence" or "civilization" then attach to these acts as moral gloss.[89]

A good example is Takahashi Sakue's 1899 doctoral thesis, International Legal Incidents of the Sino–Japanese War, published first in London and then in Germany. European jurists praised it as fully grasping the spirit of European scholarship. The thesis portrayed the Sino–Japanese War as a "civilized" conflict conducted by Japan in strict conformity with Western international law and in accordance with both "law and benevolence."[90] Here "law," "civilization," and "benevolence" reinforce one another. They demonstrate how, under the nineteenth-century international legal order, the two sides of the same coin—legality and violence—could be presented as mutually supporting.

4.2 Modern Japan's Instrumental View of International Law and a Darwinian Worldview

Studies of Japan's view of international order often start from Fukuzawa Yukichi. He depicted international society as a jungle in which the strong devour the weak and force is the ultimate principle. In this world, international law is only a façade that great powers can

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Synoptische Darstellung der Texte, ed. Marco Walter (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2018), 271.

[85] Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International*, 121.

[86] Carl Schmitt, "Synoptische Darstellung der Texte von 1927, 1963 (1932) und 1933," 246.

[87] Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law," 44.

[88] Nobukuni Koyasu, *What Is "Overcoming Modernity"?*, trans. Bingyue Dong (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2018), 42.

[89] Leo Strauss offers a penetrating interpretation of why Schmitt focused on "the concept of the political": that resolving disputes about justice or the good is impossible, attempts at perpetual peace require abandoning the question of justice and turning toward technique, and such technocratic faith erodes culture. See Leo Strauss, *Commentary on The Concept of the Political*, trans. Zongkun Liu, in Xiaofeng Liu, ed., Schmitt and the Political-Legal Tradition (Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing, 2002), 20–21.

[90] Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of "International Law" and the Construction of a "Hegemonic System"*, 51–52.

interpret at will. Japan, he argued, only truly "learned" the international order after it had built its military and begun to expand.[91]

Masao Maruyama explains this by the urgent logic of "eat or be eaten": under such conditions, the primary rule of action had to be preserving the state's existence.[92] He points out that Japan was largely unknown in Europe, that European empires were turning toward East Asia, and that the Qing empire, the only remaining large power in the region, was politically stagnant. In this context, Fukuzawa's stark language is understandable.[93]

In An Outline of a Theory of Civilization and Popular Discourse on National Sovereignty, Fukuzawa describes at length the unequal treatment that Japan and other weak states received in diplomacy. In the chapter "Foreign Wars as a Last Resort," he sums up his judgment of international law and international society as follows:

> In today's bestial world, the only effective means in the end is a beast-like power that risks death. As the saying goes, there are only two roads: kill or be killed. …
>
> So it is with dealings among nations. Friendly treaties and international law look fine on the surface, but they are merely for show. The real substance of intercourse is the struggle for power and profit. … There is no example, in all of history, of a poor, weak, foolish state preserving its independence and honor by relying solely on treaties and public law. … The reason strong states have not yet moved is only the relative balance of force. A hundred volumes of international law will not equal the power of a single cannon; several volumes of friendship treaties are worth less than a box of shells. Cannons and shells are not made for arguing reasonably but for having no need to argue at all.[94]

The sentence "A hundred volumes of international law will not equal the power of a single cannon" became famous. Scholars cite it as evidence that Japanese intellectuals were among the first in Asia to adopt a utilitarian, Social Darwinist view of world politics, and that this view influenced Japan's Asian policy.[95] It is also often quoted as a classic realist statement: international law may defend state rights in name, but when it conflicts with great-power interests, force prevails. International law is therefore "something that cannot be dispensed with, but also cannot be taken seriously."[96]

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[91] Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Popular Discourse on People's Rights and the State*, trans. Ning Gu (Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015), 127–28; Nobukuni Koyasu, *A Close Reading of Fukuzawa Yukichi's Outline of Civilization*, trans. Weifen Chen (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2010), 142–49.

[92] Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*, 95–96.

[93] Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the History of Japanese Political Thought*, 214–15.

[94] Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Popular Discourse on People's Rights and the State*, 127–28.

[95] Korean politician Yu Jijun studied in Japan under Fukuzawa Yukichi in 1881. In the preface to his 1908 translation *A Seven-Year History of the Prussian King Frederick the Great's War*, he wrote: "In relations between states, power alone is justice, and capability is true virtue. Treaties of friendship are nothing more than idle word games in peaceful times, and international law is only empty words on paper… People with insight in modern times say that a thousand clauses of international law are not worth a single cannon." Such skepticism was common among Korean and Chinese intellectuals after the Sino-Japanese War. See Rongjiu Jin, *International Politics of Conflicting Worldviews: Eastern Rites and Western International Law*, trans. Huxiu Quan (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2013), 118–20. For readings that use Fukuzawa's remarks to illustrate a utilitarian outlook, see Yongliang Tang, *The International Political Thought of Nakae Chōmin* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010), 145–46, 367; Ping Wang, *Studies on Modern Japanese Asianism* (PhD diss., Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Department of Foreign Philosophy, 2001), 94.

[96] Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of "International Law" and the Construction of a "Hegemonic System"*, 85–86; Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*, 82–83.

This instrumental view was not limited to Fukuzawa. Many Japanese officials used international law as a strategic tool. They carefully sought legal bases for foreign policy, and used international law both to enhance the moral authority of their claims and to present Japan as a "civilized" and legitimate member of international society.[97] In this setting, the gap between the ideal of law and its practice created space for a discourse in which "benevolence" in political rhetoric and violence in actual behavior could coexist.

Changes in Asianist arguments are also often explained against this background. In a world of "survival of the fittest," some writers argue, Japan had only one path if it wished to be a pioneer or ally of Asian nationalism: it had to follow Western imperialism in order to remain independent. If Japan did not emulate Western imperialism, it could neither lead Asia nor even survive as a sovereign state. Modernization therefore meant not only adopting Western institutions but also internalizing imperialist logic and expanding into Asia.[98] Whether one accepts this as explanation or excuse, it points to the deep impact of a "law of the jungle" view of international society on Japanese thinking.

From a broader perspective, the "discovery of the world" that followed the opening of sea routes led Europeans to redraw the map. In this process of "geographical discovery" (which was in fact state-led territorial seizure), they invented the notions of "free land" (the Americas) and "free seas" (the newly "discovered" oceans). These were zones where European states claimed the right to seize territory and resources without legal restraint. Justice and morality were understood as applying fully only within Europe; beyond it, European actors could ignore legal and moral limits and treat non-European spaces as ownerless.[99]

For non-European regions to escape this status, they had to become sovereign nation-states. But it was not enough to adopt the nation-state form. They also needed sufficient military power to secure their borders and recognition by an existing great power as a "great power" themselves. From the standpoint of nineteenth-century international lawyers, Japan achieved this through victory in the Sino–Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo–Japanese War (1904–05), proving both its willingness to comply with European laws of war and its capacity to draw its own boundaries.[100]

Okakura Tenshin captured the irony in a famous line: "When Japan was immersed in gentle, peaceful art, they called it a barbarous country; when Japan began slaughtering on the battlefields of Manchuria, they called it a civilized nation."[101]

4.3 Asianism as Spatial Order: Translation and Failed Antithesis

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[97] For Japan's use of international law to "urge" Korea to sever its tributary relationship with the Qing so that Japan could "legally" annex Korea—conducting diplomacy with China, Korea, and Western powers strictly according to international legal procedures—see Takashi Okamoto, *Between Tribute and Sovereignty: Modern Sino-Korean Relations and the Fate of East Asia*, trans. Rongguang Huang (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2012), 90–91, 336. On how Japanese international law arguments were used to legitimize the occupation of Taiwan and the Sino-Japanese War, see Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of "International Law" and the Construction of a "Hegemonic System"*, 51–56.

[98] Koichi Nomura, *Modern Japan's Understanding of China: Traces of a Voyage Toward Asia*, trans. Xuefeng Zhang (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1999), 5.

[99] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. and annot. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 64–65, 86–87, 170.

[100] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, 212.

[101] Kakuzō Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, trans. Hengjia Xu (Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House, 2015), 6–7.

Using "civilization" or military power as principles is exclusionary but still potentially universal since any state could, in theory, attain them. However, the history of international law shows that this seemingly universal "civilization" principle in fact drew a boundary between Europe and non-Europe. The hierarchical order in the historical Hua–Yi system were not necessarily obstacles to Japan's acceptance of international law, but a medium of translation for the international order.

4.3.1 From European Law of Nations to a Global Spatial Order

Foucault's analysis of power–knowledge reminds us that power operates through the production, circulation, and control of discourse. Those who define legitimate knowledge also shape the field of political possibility.[102] Nineteenth-century European international law fixed concepts such as "civilization," "sovereignty," and "Oriental despotism" as standards. In doing so, it elevated a specifically European experience to the level of universality and authorized Europe to exercise power over others.

Postcolonial scholarship has shown how these concepts naturalized European superiority. Yet it is not enough to say that the particular was disguised as universal. Even if one imagines a space that includes all states, the concrete structure of nineteenth-century international law still centered on Europe. The "civilization" standard functioned less as a neutral analytic category than as a line between Europe and non-Europe.

Schmitt criticized this shift from a concrete European jus publicum to an abstract global "international law." In his view, the old order had been a genuine community of European states, bound together in a spatially defined legal framework. When non-European states were admitted as formal equals, the old criteria of sameness and community were quietly dropped, leaving a heap of "equal" sovereigns without shared substance or spatial structure.[103] The formal language of equality masked a deeper pattern of exclusion and hierarchy.

The replacement of religious distinctions by "civilization" did not actually eliminate boundary-drawing. Early theorists like Gentili still treated alliances with non-Christians as problematic.[104] As late as the mid-nineteenth century, international law textbooks described the law of nations as the law of Christian peoples, and the admission of the Ottoman Empire to the "family of civilized nations" in 1856 was described as a novel and exceptional event.[105]

Karuna Mantena and others have argued that nineteenth-century theories did not in practice imagine a single ladder of "civilization," but rather adjacent social spaces separated by borders.[106] Even universalist thinkers who tried to include non-Europeans often did so by assimilating them into European frames, not by acknowledging genuine difference.[107]

Seen this way, Okakura's line about Japan being called "civilized" when it killed in Manchuria is only partly correct. "Civilization" in international law was not reducible to military power. War-making capacity mattered, but it had to be embedded in a European-centered spatial order. That is why, even after Japan was recognized as an Asian

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[102] Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 83–84; 92–93.
[103] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, 214–15.
[104] Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire*, 19.
[105] Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law," 30.
[106] Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 83; Onuma Yasuaki, "When Was the Law of International Society Born? An Inquiry into the History of International Law from an Intercivilizational Perspective," *Journal of the History of International Law* 2, no. 1 (2000): 1–66.
[107] Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International*, 24–25, 94–117.

great power, racial doctrines hardened and international lawyers were willing to accept the Monroe Doctrine in the Americas but not an "Asian Monroe Doctrine" proposed by Japan.[108] The problem was not power alone but the spatial logic of an order built around Europe.

4.3.2 Asian Intellectuals' Perceptions and "Translation"

Asian intellectuals were not blind to this structure. A lesser-known passage by Fukuzawa may be more revealing than his famous "cannons and treaties" line. When he explains the European "balance of power," he notes that small states are sometimes protected by other states and that this balancing depends on a sense of sympathy among "similar" nations. In Asia, by contrast, Europeans stand by and let other Europeans act freely; no one intervenes.[109] Fukuzawa thus already intuited that international law, which outwardly uses "civilization" as a universal guide, in fact protects a limited European community.

Anthony Anghie later makes a structurally similar point: although nineteenth-century international law formally centered on sovereignty, the concept of "society" or the "family of nations" was just as important. The doctrine of recognition presented society as an effect of sovereignty, but in practice, membership in this "family" determined who possessed sovereignty at all. Non-European states lacked sovereignty because they were excluded from the family.[110]

Narratives that praise Japan for "learning" sovereignty and international law better than China and thus modernizing faster also rest on an assumption: that international society was an even playing field governed by neutral rules, and that non-European states only had to meet certain standards to be admitted.[111]Recent work on European international law challenges this assumption. The "universal" law of nations was built on a European spatial

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[108] Xiuwu Chen explains Japan's position as resulting from its failure to obtain a legal guarantee equivalent to the U.S. Monroe Doctrine; in his reading, Article 21 of the League of Nations Covenant gave the Doctrine international legal recognition by treating it as a form of regional arrangement. See Xiuwu Chen, *Japan's Reception of "International Law" and the Construction of a "Hegemonic System"* (Changchun: Northeast Normal University Press, 2015), 203. This interpretation not only oversimplifies the nature of the Monroe Doctrine, but is also circular. The Doctrine was a unilateral U.S. government declaration rather than a treaty or agreement; its meaning has always been defined by the United States itself. Whether the Doctrine is a legal principle of international law or a purely political principle cannot be settled within international law alone, since international law and constitutional law are themselves political. Many have argued that the Monroe Doctrine is political and thus outside international law, yet international law nonetheless "recognizes" it—precisely because legal concepts in international law also function as political tools. See Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law," 33–5. To treat this as a legal guarantee risks the circular claim that political instruments gain authority from legal recognition and that such legal authority is, in turn, justified by their political efficacy.

[109] Ryuhei Hatsuse, "Rethinking 'Datsu-A Ron,'" in Kenichirō Hirano, ed., *Modern Japan and Asia: Cultural Exchange and Friction* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), 27.

[110] Antony Anghie, "Finding the Peripheries: Sovereignty and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century International Law," in Gerry Simpson, ed., *The Nature of International Law* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 437–516.

[111] For example, Chen Xiuwu argues that Japan's reception of international law should be understood in relation to how the country used it to dismantle the traditional East Asian international order—the tributary system—and to construct a new hegemonic structure in its place. He further contrasts this with the late Qing government's attitude toward international law, contending that the Qing confined the teaching of Wanguo gongfa (the "law of nations") to diplomatic officials and a small group of intellectuals, failing to popularize it among the broader populace. As a result, China's ability to absorb and apply international law lagged behind Japan, enabling Japan to gain repeated advantages in diplomatic interactions within East Asia. See Chen Xiuwu, Riben de "Wanguo gongfa" shourong yu "baquan tixi" gouxiang (Japan's Reception of the "Law of Nations" and Its Conception of a "Hegemonic System") (Changchun: Northeast Normal University Press, 2015), preface, 6–8; 80–86.

Lydia Liu, taking the Macartney Embassy to China as an example, demonstrates how the question of "why" and "in what way" the Macartney mission became a major event in modern historical narratives reveals the colonialist undertones in much scholarship on China's decline in the nineteenth century. The Macartney mission acquired its significance retrospectively—after Britain defeated the Qing—when it was reinterpreted and linked with other events as a supposed cause of China's later decline. See Lydia H. Liu, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making, trans. Yang Lihua et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009), 149–51.

order whose core function was to mark and defend the boundary between Europe and non-Europe.

For Asian thinkers, international law was therefore always a matter of translation. As Liu He's work on Wan'guo gongfa suggests, translators had to create some common conceptual ground between European doctrines and local traditions; otherwise the text would be unintelligible.[112] In Japan, many scholars have noted that international law was first understood through Confucian categories, such as Heaven's way and the equality of persons before Heaven, then extended analogically to equality of states. [113]

In this sense, Hua–Yi discourse and the "civilization" standard of international law operated on similar concentric, hierarchical models. Far from being an obstacle, the legacy of Hua–Yi thought may have made it easier for Japanese elites to grasp and accept the graded, exclusionary logic of nineteenth-century international law.

4.3.3 Asianism as a Failed Antithesis

Against this background, Asianism can be seen as a failed antithesis to international law's boundary-making and formalism. In theory, its regionalism and emphasis on "benevolence," "kingly way," and "moral principles" were meant to counter a discriminatory order. In practice, Asianism accepted the East–West binary and the modernization narrative defined by Europe. It simply recentered the axis: Japan became the spatial center and temporal pinnacle of Asia.[114]

Only a few figures, such as Miyazaki Tōten, approached a genuinely cosmopolitan stance that questioned "civilization" discourse itself. Most "leave Asia" or "revive Asia" positions, whether critical or supportive of Western expansion, remained within a nineteenth-century Eurocentric philosophy of world history.[115] Discussions of "overcoming modernity" before 1945 likewise presupposed that "modernity" was something external to Japan, rather than recognizing that Japan's own path was already inscribed in the same logic.[116]

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[112] He Liu, *The Politics of Imperial Discourse*, 180–81.

[113] Hazama Naoki, *Early Japanese Asianism*, 20;
and Maruyama Masao, *Lectures by Masao Maruyama*, 283.

[114] Hui Wang argues that modern Japan's notion of "the Orient" (Tōyō) is a derivative proposition: the choice of whether to "leave Asia" (datsu-A) arose through a process of differentiating Japan from Asia. Into the twentieth century, European histories and philosophies continued to present "Asia" as a civilization antithetical to Europe, allowing Europe to define itself by cutting itself off from Asia. Japanese exceptionalism can thus be seen as a product of accepting this representation. See Hui Wang, *Depoliticized Politics*, 407–14.

[115] Miyazaki Tōten engaged in "world revolution" out of his belief in the unity of humankind and the ideal of "one world family." Some scholars argue he should be seen less as a "Chinese revolutionary" working for China and more as someone who regarded China as a base for world revolution. For him, moving toward this cosmopolitan ideal itself constituted civilizational progress, and he therefore questioned a modern "civilization" that waged aggression in the name of progress. In this cosmopolitan orientation, Miyazaki's position was closer to that of Sun Yat-sen and Li Dazhao, standing with the invaded rather than arguing for Japan as Asia's center or leader. Miyazaki was not the only Asianist to doubt "civilization," but he was almost alone in openly opposing Japanese state policy and supporting other nations' revolutions in order to uphold his ideals. Fukuzawa Yukichi sharply exposed the exclusion built into a seemingly "equal" international order and acknowledged the irrational elements of Japan's path to self-strengthening, insisting that such irrationality could not be beautified. Yet under the urgent pressures of the international power configuration, national survival increasingly took precedence: Fukuzawa gradually abandoned his earlier view that the norms governing interpersonal and interstate relations should be equivalent and turned instead toward emphasizing the "reason for the state's existence." See Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Popular Discourse on People's Rights and the State*, trans. Ning Gu (Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015); Masao Maruyama, *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Japan's Modernization*. Ozaki Hotsumi's thought seems to echo Miyazaki's cosmopolitanism, but his actions and views are more controversial. For a comparative analysis of the Asianism of Miyazaki Tōten and Ozaki Hotsumi, see Koichi Nomura, *Modern Japan's Understanding of China: Traces of a Voyage Toward Asia*, trans. Xuefeng Zhang (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1999), esp. 132–38 and 194–99.

[116] Nobukuni Koyasu, *Archaeology of Modern Knowledge: State, War, and Intellectuals*, trans. Jinghua Zhao (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2022), 91–92.

As Koyasu Nobukuni has argued, projects like the Kyoto School's "philosophy of world history," which aimed to oppose the European order while providing an ideological foundation for the Greater East Asia War, were bound to fail. A stance defined primarily by opposition cannot generate genuine transcendence; calls for a "plural" world history were tied to the idea of East Asia as a single substantive unit, which in turn erased internal plurality.[117] Maruyama similarly noted that "progress" defined only as temporal succession or as the synthesis of "East" and "West" easily degenerates into a flat, self-affirming narrative.[118]

In practice, the "moral principles" of Asianism served to mask crimes similar to those committed by the Western empires it criticized. Japan portrayed its war against the Anglo-American powers as a struggle against a European-centered world order and as a turning point in world history. Yet the war was also a war for Japanese interests. Many postwar intellectuals came to see such justifications as attempts to ease their own consciences.[119] The imperial spatial order that Asianism tried to construct collapsed under the same unsustainable tensions that doomed other empires: it created a shared space in order to extend its own interests, but did so in an unequal way; within that space, enduring nationalisms and new nation-states made any stable, collaborative regional order impossible.[120]

Even postwar efforts to "salvage" a "healthy prototype" of Asianism, especially those inspired by Takeuchi Yoshimi, may still be marked by a Japan-centered perspective. Takeuchi's influential claim that Asianism is not a doctrine but a "tendency," that "solidarity" and "aggression" are inseparable, and the many later attempts to classify Asianism into "good" and "deviant" phases, all suggest that there is something worth rescuing. But if aggression and solidarity were inseparable from the beginning, it is fair to ask whether a "healthy prototype" ever existed. Was Asianism corrupted later, or was it never fully "healthy" at all? And if it was flawed from the start, why must we overcome modernity by rehabilitating Asianism, rather than by more directly confronting both imperialism and the Eurocentric concept of modernity itself?[121]

5 Conclusion

Most studies of modern Japanese Asianism divide it into "positive" and "negative" elements and then explain how "aggression" could coexist with claims of "benevolence" and the "kingly way." Building on these works, this article starts from questions they cannot answer and approaches the problem from two angles: Hua–Yi discourse and international law (international order).

In short, I argue: (1)Using Hua–Yi thought as a premodern, unequal understanding of order to explain only the "aggressive" side of Asianism is too simple. It ignores the internal complexity of Hua–Yi discourse, and often falls into essentialism and a linear idea of progress.

(2)For an international law that proclaims universalism at the level of doctrine but in

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[117] Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, 14, 20–21, 125–26.
[118] Masao Maruyama, *Japanese Thought*, trans. Jianying Ou et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2009), 22–23, 28–29.
[119] Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, 26; Nobukuni Koyasu, *What Is "Overcoming Modernity"?*, 9–12.
[120] Prasenjit Duara, "Asia's Return: Constructing Regional Concepts in Our Time (Part 1)," *Dushu* 2010, no. 5.
[121] Feng Liu, *Modern Japanese Asianism*, 25–27.

practice draws boundaries and excludes, Hua–Yi thought may have worked as a medium of translation rather than an obstacle.

(3)The positivist, formalist character of modern international law, and its project of "securing peace," helped twist together "aggression" and "benevolence" in Japanese Asianism.

(4)Seen from the perspective of spatial order, Asianism and its "benevolence" can be read as an antithesis to international law. But this antithesis failed: "benevolence" mainly served to cover up Japan's imperial self-interest and did not achieve real theoretical transcendence.

Thinking about Asianism should not stop here. Many works divide Asianism into phases and types, but if Asianism was from the start a loose cluster of opinions, can it really be split cleanly into "good" and "bad"? If its healthy elements are so scarce, is it appropriate to treat it as a full-fledged school or a pole of debate? Can the shared principles and sensibilities that once expressed "reviving Asia" really be converted overnight into tools of imperial conquest?

Takeuchi Yoshimi's insistence that modern Japanese Asianism slid into aggression by "a single step" was based on his refusal to reduce it to a simple "right-wing" position. He thought it was necessary to cultivate self-negating elements inside the tradition so that critique and construction could be linked.[122] In this sense, Masao Maruyama's search for the roots of modern aggression in indigenous Japanese thought, and his shift from a "reflexive narrative of Japanese modernity" to a diagnosis of "structural pathologies" in Japanese society, can be partly defended.[123] But as argued above, this line of reasoning can also reproduce something like the Western fear of "falling back into Asia" in reverse form—modernization must avoid "falling back into Japan."[124]

Historically, only when Japan had not yet joined the ranks of great powers, and shared with China the position of being threatened and semi-colonized, could Japanese Asianists seriously advocate an equal Japan–China alliance against the West. The Japanese Asianists whom later scholars label as "positive" mostly spoke from the standpoint of the oppressed. Yet that common position was temporary, and even their calls for "equal alliance" were shaped by strategic needs. This raises a harder question: what could become the enduring basis of an "Asian" community?

Existing research on Asianism has been very effective in dismantling myths, but much less successful in building new frameworks. Still, these works highlight several dangers that future thinking must avoid: the obsession with imagining a "center" (especially making one's own nation the regional center); the obsession with claiming specialness only for the sake of opposition; and the obsession with homogenizing the region. Modern Japanese Asianism failed to "overcome modernity" for precisely these reasons. It never clarified what it opposed in "the West" and "modernity," or with what it hoped to oppose them.

For the potential of "Asia" as an object of study, Prasenjit Duara has suggested that pre-national societies—empires, feudal polities—had soft borders, where differences in diet,

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[122] Ge Sun, *What Does Asia Mean?* "Japan" Between Cultures (Taipei: Chuliu Press, 2001), 17.

[123] Nobukuni Koyasu argues that in his critique of the "philosophy of world history," Masao Maruyama replaced the term "modernity" itself with "modernist thinking" and characterized Japanese society as a "system without responsibility," thereby bypassing interrogation of "modernity" as such and translating reflection on Japanese modern history into a pathology of Japanese social psychology and social structure. See Nobukuni Koyasu, *Modern Japan's Conception of Asia*, trans. Jinghua Zhao (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 2019), 111–27.

[124] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Xuetao Li (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2016), 82.

gods, or ritual did not prevent extensive, often unconscious borrowing. Modern nationalism created hard boundaries by elevating one selected feature (such as language) into a self-conscious marker of identity, often combined with intolerance of others. He does not argue that we can or should return to a pre-national mode of identity. Rather, he sees in earlier Asian networks—maritime circuits that linked Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam—a historical resource for thinking about cultural fields that were not yet dominated by nation-state control.[125]

Duara's "bifurcated history" perspective calls for tracing how the past has been used, suppressed, and reconstructed, so as to recover lost meanings and show how the past can provide reasons, conditions, and connections for transformation. He therefore pays special attention to local, alternative narratives that have been submerged or delegitimized by nationalist histories.[126] For him, intra-Asian histories of exchange offer a field of culture not yet fully captured by sovereign state control, and thus a resource for imagining new possibilities.

In a similar spirit, from Takeuchi's "Asia as method" to Yamamuro Shin'ichi's "Asia as an intellectual problem," many theoretical reflections on Asianism concern methods of thinking and questions of epistemology. "Asian principles" here do not mean a fixed cultural essence. They point instead to the rich potential of plural narratives and imaginations. On this view, the future of Asianism—if it has one—lies not in a new doctrine of regional hegemony, but in using "Asia" as a mediating space to pursue openness, peace, and respect for difference, and to reconnect multiple histories and horizons on that basis.

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[125] Prasenjit Duara, "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 963–83.

[126] Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 233–34.