On the Convolutions of Modernity and Confucianism in Japan
Loyalty from Yamaga Sokō’s Shidō to Prewar Kokutai Ideology

Following the Second World War, inquiries into Japanese Confucian philosophy have been grappling with its unfortunate entanglement with the prewar authoritarian regime, leading to its massive disavowal and more recent accounts about its eradication after the war, both in local and Western scholarship. Most such theories view Confucian moral philosophy as one of the primary enablers of Japanese prewar authoritarianism and point to its (presumably) intrinsic incompatibility with liberal and democratic principles (with its accent on formalism and passé conceptualizations of social existence and morality, enforcing obedience and submission) as a primary cause for it. Starting from a comparison between Yamaga Sokō’s conceptualization of chūkō (忠孝) and its later uses (and abuses) in the Meiji period’s kokutai ideology, my paper proposes an alternative interpretation of this relationship by framing it in the broader context of the logic and mechanisms of modernity.

KEYWORDS: Japanese modernity—grammar of modernity—fascism—collective memory distortion—Yamaga Sokō—Shidō—Confucianism—loyalty—chūkō—kokutai
After Japan’s entry into the Meiji period (1868–1912), the Confucian moral vocabulary of the earlier Tokugawa period (1603–1868) provided a core source of inspiration for Meiji elite politicians and intellectuals in establishing the country’s new body politic (kokutai, 国体), in an attempt to counterbalance the swift changes brought about by its newly found international context and to advance an increasingly ultra-nationalistic, imperialistic agenda. Further down the road, following Japan’s increasing slip into militarism in the pre-wwii period, Confucian morality became little more than a synonym for these connected historical developments. Today, while conservative and right-leaning politicians push for the reintroduction of Confucian-based morals in schools, liberal scholars and intellectuals point to Confucianism’s innately anti-democratic, illiberal, and profoundly feudalistic nature.¹

However, while the central stage occupied by the Confucian moral vocabulary in the ultra-nationalistic and fascist rhetoric of the pre-wwii period is beyond doubt,² the label “Confucian” has too often been pasted uncritically onto what can at best only be called a rhetorical use of Confucian-esque moral vocabulary. In the wake of wwi, Confucianism has come to be considered innately illiberal and incompatible with modern democratic values,³ and to be described either as a “distinctive undercurrent in thought and social structure that... sanctioned the advance of Japanese fascism”⁴ or as a direct enabler of Japanese fascism and imperialism,⁵ in an attempt to

2. See Maruyama 1969 for a detailed account.
pinpoint a “historical culprit” of sorts and explain away the complexities of Japanese imperialism and fascism. However, while not entirely inaccurate, this view risks painting over some essential historical and intellectual convolutions of Japanese modernity with too broad a brush, while simultaneously obscuring the broader context and the deeper dynamic underpinning the experience of modernity throughout the world.

In this context, the issue that remains is the nature and depth of this connection between Confucianism and the ultra-nationalistic and fascist movements in pre-wwii Japan. If indeed, like Maruyama 1969 and Paramore 2016 seem to suggest, Confucianism as a philosophical system was among the main catalysts (or causes) of ultra-nationalism and fascist militarism in modern Japan, then it would also mean that its absence would have shielded other modern states from similar developments. However, that is simply not the case—the examples of ultra-nationalistic, imperialistic and fascist regimes outside Confucian cultures have been too numerous and too common around the world (and their dangers still lurking behind the surface) to excuse our indulging in such a simplistic assumption. Analyzing Japan’s modern destiny isolated from the world historical events of the time renders a rather narrow perspective on the emergence of fascism and militarism in Japan. In contrast, seen in the light of other developments, it becomes clearer that the role of Confucianism in this regard is not at all obvious.

By taking the Confucian concept of chūkō and its modern evolution as a case in point, this paper aims to address this common misrepresentation (or, at least, incomplete representation) of Confucian moral philosophy as a main enabler of prewar Japanese fascism and imperialism and propose a more nuanced view of its relationship with modernity. Thus, by focusing on some of the major factors that influenced chūkō’s evolution from a Confucian moral feeling in Yamaga Sokō’s (山鹿素行, 1622–1685) Shidō (士道) into a central tenet of bushidō and kokutai ideologies, and later into a signpost for prewar militarism, I will argue that this process was instead determined by an inherently modern mechanism of reinvention and radicalization common to many modern states, and was in no way unique to Japan. As such, it means that it could not have been significantly caused, accelerated or enabled by some property intrinsic to Confucian ethics. And while I might not be able to address here all the complexities of Confucianism’s relationship with modernity in Japan, I hope that this paper will at least add some
more nuance to the debate. Ultimately, by clarifying some of chūkō’s modern philosophical and ideological distortions and, thus, reframing Confucianism’s relationship to modernity in terms of rhetorical instrumentalization, I aim to offer some further insight not solely into the nature and dynamics of Japanese modernity (during the process of the modern nation-state formation and the gradual slip towards an increasingly authoritarian form of government), but also more broadly into the rhetorical mechanisms of ultranationalist and authoritarian movements at large.

In order to accomplish this, the argument will be structured as follows: The first section will introduce the contemporary debate concerning Confucianism’s innate illiberalism and the central role played by the concept of chūkō in this respect. The next part will discuss some essential historical factors that have made Yamaga Sokō’s moral universe into a key component of modern bushidōron and kokutai rhetoric; I focus here on the appeal of an ideal “samurai morality” amidst a rapidly changing historical context. The third part will attempt a comparative conceptual analysis between Yamaga Sokō’s notion of chūkō and its modern reinterpretations. And finally, the fourth part will analyze this conceptual evolution in the broader context of the logic of modernity and discuss the ensuing implications for the issue of Confucianism in modern Japan.

Confucianism’s controversial legacy in contemporary Japan and the issue with chūkō

As noted previously, discussions of Confucianism and its legacy in contemporary Japan generally become mired in debates on prewar ultranationalism, imperialism, and militarism. And for good reason. From the early Meiji period (1868–1912) and well into the Second World War, Japanese nationalist ideologues drew heavily from the Confucian moral vocabulary of the earlier epoch in order to build a “national spirit.” This, they believed, would legitimize the Japanese state via the heavily enforced narrative of kokutai, a mélange of emperor-centered mysticism derived from Shintō that appeals to a nationally ubiquitous and lofty martial spirit and an anthropomorphized view of the state; what then emerges is the belief in
a “uniquely Japanese” moral feeling of loyalty-and-filial-piety (*chūkō*)—an ideal of complete obedience to the state as personified by the emperor.6

Since Confucian philosophy has been taken to be inseparable from this ultra-nationalistic ideology, its importance in contemporary Japanese history and philosophical debates is considered negligible. Recent research seems to suggest that, following WWII, Japanese Confucianism either became a taboo of sorts, a shameful cultural legacy that was no longer spoken of outside of the academic environment,7 or an unacknowledged aspect of the social and moral fabric.8 “Confucian morality” often surfaces as one of the most common historical culprits for the rise of the ultra-nationalistic mood of the late Meiji period and the later emergence of prewar militarism. The continuous post-war push of right-wing political groups for the reintroduction of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo* 教育勅語)9 in schools, alongside the current Cabinet’s borderline whitewashing of the topic by constantly accentuating the Rescript’s more innocuous-sounding moral aspects—like filial piety, good relations between married couples

6. The 1937 *Kokutai no Hongi* (Fundamentals of Our National Polity, 國體の本義) was a declaration by the Japanese government of the nation’s official ideology. It became required reading for teachers and middle and high school students in the prewar period and sold around two million copies by 1943 (KUBLIN 1950, 365). It reads: “The true characteristics of filial piety in our country are its perfect conformity with our national polity by heightening still further the relationship between morality and nature. Our country is a great family nation, and the imperial household is the head family of the subjects and the nucleus of national life... Filial piety is a characteristic of oriental morals; but it is in its convergence with loyalty that we find a characteristic of our national morals, and this is a factor without parallel in the world [89–91]... The spirit of harmony... is clearly seen also in our nation’s martial spirit.... But this martial spirit is not [a thing that exists] for the sake of itself but for the sake of peace and is what may be called a sacred martial spirit. Our martial spirit does not have for its objective the killing of men but the giving of life to men. This martial spirit tries to give life to all things and not to destroy.... War, in this sense, is not by any means intended for the destruction, overpowering, or subjugation of others; and it should be for bringing about great harmony, that is, peace, doing the work of creation by following the Way” (from de BARY, GLUCK, and Tiedemann 2006, 280–1).

7. PARAMORE 2006.


9. The Meiji government drafted this document to articulate the official principles of education in the country. It marked the beginning of an increasingly conservative government policy; taken aback by the effects of Japan’s rapid modernization, some Meiji conservative politicians pushed for a so-called “revival” of Confucian principles of education and morality.
or the moral character of the nation\textsuperscript{10}—certainly does not help “de-vilify” Confucianism. The conservative rhetoric surrounding the Rescript seems to have changed very little since the prewar period. Its Confucian-sounding moral vocabulary gives it a deceptively innocent appearance, even though liberals cautioned the public about the document being a “tool for thought-control,”\textsuperscript{11} “advocating against democracy, sovereignty of the people, [and] basic human rights.”\textsuperscript{12} At its core, this debate operates on the now commonly held view that Confucianism ultimately failed to modernize on account of its innately feudalistic, authoritarian and anti-individualistic foundation.\textsuperscript{13}

However, as I mentioned earlier, such generalizations tend to oversimplify the matter, mostly by taking the mainly political rhetoric of prewar kokutai ideologues and politicians at face value, thus ignoring the historical and philosophical complexities surrounding Confucianism and its passage into (as well as reaction to) Japanese modernity.

**Historical context: Yamaga Sokō’s *shidō*, *chûkō*, and the modern *bushidō* and *kokutai* narratives**

I suggest that we should understand the conceptual evolution of the Confucian *chûkō*—from a moral feeling in Sokō’s *Shidō* to the Meiji period’s “imperial *bushidō*”\textsuperscript{14} and kokutai’s brand of obedient and self-sacrificing loyalty to the emperor—in terms of a very basic and universal historical mechanism which social psychologists call “collective memory distortion.”\textsuperscript{15} This distortion does not necessarily imply a willful manipulation of ideological content. Rather, it refers both to an organic evolution in social and historical circumstances, as well as the rhetorical manipulation by way of populist and authoritarian discourses. Such distortions of memory are inevitable, both at an individual as well as a collective level. At the individual level, memories themselves represent nothing more than a recon-

---

\textsuperscript{10} Tomomi Inada, LDP Defense Minister, in *Asahi shinbun*, 2017.04.11.

\textsuperscript{11} Hajime Funada, Lower House member of the LDP, in *Asahi shinbun*, 2017.04.11.

\textsuperscript{12} 「政府の教育勅語使用容認答弁に関する声明」, available at http://www.jera.jp (access date: 2017.04.17).

\textsuperscript{13} Khan 1997.

\textsuperscript{14} Benesch 2014.

\textsuperscript{15} Schudson 1995, 346.
structured version of an irrecuperable reality, a mere narrative we retroactively build in our minds. At the collective level, things are even more complicated by multiple factors such as historical distance, changing social contexts, the multitude of perspectives, information dissemination structures, and others, of which ideological manipulation is only one.

Chūkō’s modern metamorphosis is also largely symptomatic of this mechanism that represents one of the defining elements of modern national identity formation. In the case of chūkō, Sokō’s seventeenth-century concept of Confucian loyalty has come to take on a life of its own in modern Japan, becoming part of a cultural fund perpetually accessed, manipulated, and reconstructed by different figures during different contexts. In short, as mechanisms of memory distortion are always at play in historical evolution, we must consider their contribution to chūkō’s modern transformation as well.

During the Tokugawa period, Yōmeigaku and Kogaku Confucians—arguably the most outspoken critics of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in Japan—were probably the most active in popularizing Confucian philosophy among the general public, from ordinary samurai to merchants, artisans, and peasants. During the Pax Tokugawa, the military class was faced with probably the most dramatic change in lifestyle and social relevance, given that its activity had been reduced almost exclusively to either bureaucratic roles or scholarship. Among the most notable Confucians preoccupied with this state of affairs were Nakae Tōjū 中江藤樹 (1608–1648),

16. Ibid., 348.
17. Due in large part to the efforts of bakumatsu loyalist Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰 (1830–1859) and the Meiji ideologue Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1855–1944).
18. Schudson identifies four such mechanisms, namely distanciation, instrumentalization, narrativization, and conventionalization (Schudson 1995, 346).
19. Yōmeigaku Confucianism, first propagated in Japan by Nakae Tōjū (1608–1648), followed the teachings of the fifteenth-century Chinese Confucian Wang-Yang Ming, who emphasized teachings on intuition and action. Kogaku Confucianism (or the Ancient Learning School) was first established in Japan by Yamaga Sokō. He argued that Zhu Xi’s teachings need to be discarded due to lack of real-life application, and emphasized instead the need to return to the Classics. Kogaku Confucianism was categorized as such by Inoue Testujirō, who lumped together the later and more original Confucian thinkers of the Tokugawa period—from Yamaga Sokō to Kaibara Ekken, Itō Jinsai, and Ogyū Sorai—who professed pre-Zhu Xi sources of Confucian philosophy.
Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山 (1619–1691) and Yamaga Sokō (1622–1683), themselves members of the military class turned scholars. They all regarded the practicality of Confucian morality as a viable solution to their shared sense of moral, social, and political stagnation. Out of these three, Yamaga Sokō would become extremely popular during the Meiji period and later recognized as the “father of modern bushido.”20 As a result, many of his ideas on samurai morality and interpretations of Confucian philosophy came to bear a significant influence on the young ideologues of the Meiji period; and chūkō—which indeed combines two central moral feelings in the Confucian moral universe, but does not exist as a compound in the original Confucian Classics—is one such idea. While Sokō did not set out to explain in Shidō how he came to juxtapose chū (忠) and kō (孝) into one single concept, we see that the resulting compound took on a life of its own during the Meiji period.

However, for all his later recognition, it needs mentioning that Sokō’s scholarly shidō did not represent the only strand of so-called samurai morality during the Tokugawa period and, consequently, it was not the only one to influence later discourses of bushido ethics. It coexisted with a range of other discourses, less scholarly and more militaristic in nature (of which Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s Hagakure is a famous example). These two main variations were almost diametrically opposed to each other in terms of philosophy and scope: one, as mentioned previously—Confucian intellectuals and educators who belonged to the military elite—attempted to actively engage the contemporary social and political environment, thereby forging a new road for the military class; the other, more simplistic variation, was mostly aimed at foot soldiers and drew more extensively from the medieval military tradition, with the addition of some basic rules of social etiquette (like Hagakure). While both types of discourse espoused some Confucian-inspired values already popular in the period (like self-cultivation, moderation, filial piety, loyalty, honor, and wisdom), the most significant difference between them is that the purely Confucian take was more intellectual and historically sensitive in nature; it aimed at crafting a Confucian model of social and political leadership for the de-facto rulers of Japan, subordinating the military arts to the ideal of moral and intellectual cultivation. On

the other hand, the more matter-of-fact take on “the way of the samurai” in times of peace focused more on the hierarchical structure of society and military honor, emphasizing a more obedient nuance of loyalty, and the samurai’s preparedness to die. This diversity of approaches to samurai morality shows that, during the Tokugawa period, the future of the military class was much debated, with less consensus than modern bushidōron theorists claim. The debate between the Meiji intellectuals Nitobe Inazō 新渡戸稲造 (1962–1933) and Inoue Tetsujirō on the nature of bushidō is itself a proof of the variety of cultural resources accessed by early Meiji intellectuals in their search for a sense of national identity amidst a swiftly evolving historical context.

In this context, the reason why Sokō’s specific strand of Confucian-imbued shidō became central to the rhetoric of modern bushidō is partly due to his lifelong fascination with seventeenth-century samurai morality, but it is also due to somewhat of a historical whim—a notable instance of the memory distortion mechanisms discussed earlier. While his Confucian interpretation of shidō had not been immensely popular during his own lifetime, his presumed connection to the notorious forty-seven rōnin (masterless samurai) of the Akō Incident (1701–1702) brought Sokō’s work to the attention of bakumatsu loyalist Yoshida Shōin (1830–1859), who incorporated many of Sokō’s ideas into his own philosophy. Although Shōin himself was executed for treason by the bakufu in 1859, many of his disciples acquired central roles in the Meiji government, thus disseminating his

21. Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s Hagakure famously starts with this paragraph: “The Way of the samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death.... If by setting one’s heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he pains freedom in the Way. His whole life will be without blame, and he will succeed in his calling” (YAMAMOTO 2002, 2).


23. It was recognized in modern Japan as one of the greatest symbols of samurai loyalty to their master but had been intensely debated and disavowed among Tokugawa intellectuals (see TUCKER 2002A for further details).

24. Although some of his best disciples died right before the Restoration (Kusaka Genzui, Irie Sugizo, Yoshida Eitaro, Takasugi Shinsaku), the majority of those remaining (30–40 people) received new noble or imperial titles during the early Meiji years. Among Shōin’s disciples were the prime-ministers Itō Hirobumi and Yamagata Aritomo (princes), ministers and ambassadors like Yamada Akiyoshi (count), Shinagawa Yajiro and Nomura Yasushi (viscounts)
ideas. Sokō’s reputation was further strengthened by Inoue Tetsujirō, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the Meiji period, a noted historian of Japanese Confucian philosophy and a pivotal ideologue of “national morality” (国民道徳). By entertaining Sokō’s loosely threaded connection to the forty-seven rōnin, Inoue set about sedimenting his myth as both an ardent advocate of “Japanism” (日本主義,), and the “father of modern bushidō,” describing Yamaga Gorui 山鹿語類 (the collection which includes Shidō) as a systematic expression of “the constitution of bushidō.” Tucker points out that Inoue went so far as to claim that Japan’s swift modernization and Meiji military victories emerged from the philosophical foundations that had inspired the Akō rōnin vendetta—mainly Sokō’s teachings. Moreover, he connected bushidō and Sokō to the notion of kokutai by drawing from Yoshida Shōin’s rather loose interpretation in this regard.²⁵

Most later interpretations that link Yamaga Sokō’s Confucian shidō with imperial bushidō and kokutai follow this line of argument of Inoue’s. Yet much of his own interpretation of Sokō’s work was influenced by the fashionable view of the time, and ultimately represented a very successful exercise in narrativization, the sort of memory-distortion mechanism discussed earlier. From Inoue on, little has changed in the way both intellectuals and politicians have interpreted or (mis)represented the interconnectedness between imperial bushidō and Confucianism.

A CONCEPTUAL COMPARISON OF YAMAGA SOKŌ’S
CONFUCIAN CHŪKŌ AND ITS MODERN COUNTERPART

From this connection, one particular element came to the forefront as an ideological binder of kokutai in the Meiji period: chūkō. As a rhetorical element, chūkō played an essential role in the logic of modern nation-state formation, alongside the emperor-centered mythology: while taking the linguistic form of a familiar moral feeling for the populace, it not only functioned as the individual’s anchor into the recent past and their immediate community, but it also fostered a sense of bonding between the

(MAGAREY 1964, 133). Shōin’s vision combined many of the Confucian, Shintō, and loyalist elements that inspired a large part of the later ultra-nationalist discourses (sonnō jōi, chūkō, which he had borrowed from Sokō, loyalty to the emperor, etc.).

individual and the highly abstract idea of a nation-state, by anthropomorphizing the latter. However, the content of the post-Tokugawa chūkō bears little resemblance to Sokō’s notion, not only because it had been dislocated from the Confucian moral universe and instrumentalized into a national ideology amidst a mélange of other concepts, but also in terms of the relationship it envisaged.

Shidō is not necessarily Yamaga Sokō’s most famous work, but it does represent one of the first home-grown Japanese texts that attempted to make Confucian teachings accessible to the larger public. In it, Sokō addresses the issue of the military’s class historical standstill not by critiquing the existing forms of social organization, but by emphasizing moral and intellectual cultivation. At the heart of this cultivation is a cluster of (perfectible) moral feelings rooted in humaneness and justness (仁), the source of sagehood, among which we also find chū(kō). However, unlike its modern counterparts, this concept of loyalty 忠 (whether in relation to filial piety 孝 or not) represents a complex moral feeling that includes notions of sincerity, big-heartedness, tolerance, mellowness of character, and a fine balance between justness and personal advantage (for a detailed analysis, see Mustățea 2019).

For Sokō, chū(kō) is rather secondary in the hierarchy of virtues, being subordinated to the aforementioned spirit of humaneness and justice, whose ultimate aim is the attainment of moral discernment through self-cultivation. He does not devote too many paragraphs to its definition, which would allow for a certain degree of misinterpretation in the direction of obedience to one’s parents and superiors. However, in the very few passages where he addresses the nature of loyalty, it becomes evident that such a nuance of obedience does not exist. For Sokō, it is honesty (or straightforwardness, 正直) that comes closest to the core of Confucian loyalty:

Confucius said: “In speaking, one thinks of loyalty.” He also said “One should be loyal and trustworthy in what one says.” The classic Manners says “In converse with the crowd, speak of loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, and good prospects....” Whenever you talk to people, you should do so in a way that will benefit them. That is a way to help others. To speak as to profit oneself alone is not the way of a noble man [君子]. To benefit oneself without considering the welfare of others is always the act of a petty person [小人]. This is what is meant by Master Zeng’s saying, “Am I unfaithful in my con-
siderations for others?... Talking all day, wasting words, to make a point of your own cleverness, repeatedly showing off verbally, is something noble men detest; it should be called useless eloquence.... In Zhang Shishu’s maxims it says “All speech must be loyal....” As for loyalty and trustworthiness, loyalty means being completely sincere in consideration for others. Trustworthiness means not fabricating falsehood, being correct and clear.26

Moreover, it is worth noting that, in the (public or private) sphere of Confucian hierarchical relationships, loyalty is part of an intricate social contract that entails both rights and obligations for all social members involved, a nuance often disregarded in its modern embodiments.

In later interpretations—from Yoshida Shōin to modern kokutai ideology—this moral complexity and accent on straightforwardness and a pure heart disappear under the cloak of a much more politically desirable obedience to the authority of the emperor. In the Kyōiku chokugo, which still makes an attempt (albeit only a formal one) to reference a larger Confucian moral universe, loyalty is surreptitiously hijacked and subsumed to a spirit of sacrifice for the state, personified by the emperor:

Know ye, Our subjects: Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; Constitution and observe the law; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers. The way set forth here is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places.

It was not only official documents that obscured or disregarded the complex moral nuances of Confucian sociality and ちく(く) in particular, while pushing for a kokutai-centered moral education of the population; it was also educators like Inoue Kowashi\(^\text{27}\) or reputed intellectuals such as Inoue Tetsujirō and Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919). This is, for example, how Inoue Enryō interprets ちく in 1902 in a commentary on the “hidden and real meaning” of the Imperial Rescript on Education (an “absolute interpretation” of the Rescript as the “morality particular to Japan,” as he described it):

Insofar as we imperial subjects are descendant of the Imperial Household, some loyalty to it is in our families…. Since the Imperial Household is the ancestral household of us imperial subjects, the path to devoting oneself to it is also filial piety. Since the Japanese Empire is a group organized as one family… it is clear that its parent is the Emperor. Filial piety to him is truly the greatest filial piety…. All of Japan’s morality in the end is contained just within the path of loyalty.\(^\text{28}\)

I mentioned earlier that the content of post-Tokugawa ちく bears little resemblance to the Confucian ちく, mostly due to its instrumentalization and dislocation from the Confucian moral universe, as well as in terms of the relationship it envisages. Concerning this last point, I found Hsu’s “psychosociogram of man”\(^\text{29}\) very helpful in tracing some core distinctions between these alternative theories of loyalty. In describing the individual’s existence as “a social and cultural being,” Hsu identifies seven concentric layers that define their interactions, ranging from the individual’s unconscious to the outer world, as follows: unconscious (layer 7), pre-conscious (layer 6), unexpressed conscious (layer 5), expressible conscious (layer 4), intimate

---

\(^{27}\) “The most important thing in education is to build up the character and orient the students by showing them the spiritual way…. Europe has a religion that serves to confirm the spirit of the young. There is no such creed in our country…. Fortunately, in our country we have a beautiful treasure that cannot be compared with that of any other country. This is the kokutai based on the imperial line unbroken for ages eternal. Nothing but the kokutai can be the keynote of education. No other country has a history like ours: our people have been loyal to the emperor of an unbroken line from the beginning of the country, and they will be loyal to all future emperors as long as the national land continues to exist” (DE BARY, GLUCK, and TIEDEMANN 2006, 107).

\(^{28}\) INOUE 1902, 14–16, 26, quoted in NAKAJIMA 2017, 57.

\(^{29}\) HSU 1971, quoted in HWANG 1999.
society and culture (layer 3), operative society and culture (layer 2), wide society and culture (layer 1) and the outer world (layer 0). As much as the limits and characteristics defining these categories can differ according to historical, cultural, or temporal variables, their core significance is a universal aspect of human sociality.

If we take Hsu’s psychosociogram as a point of reference for our own distinction between Sokō’s Confucian notion of chūkō and its modern variation, it becomes clear that the locus of Sokō’s loyalty (as well as the entire Confucian moral system) is situated par excellence in the individual’s immediate community. This is located on the psychosociogram’s third and fourth layers, which represent all the “significant others with whom the individual has intimate relationships, pets, cultural usages, and material collections” and “the feelings and ideas which individuals communicate to fellow human beings: love, hatred, greed, vision, and knowledge of the ways of doing things according to the moral, social and technical standards of the culture.”30 This allows the individual to act as a moral agent in an organic relationship with their superiors/lord, which (ideally) is entirely dependent on the quality of rulership. In contrast, post-Restoration definitions and usages of loyalty broaden their locus well beyond this immediate community with whom the individual can form an organic relationship (layer 4), and—adapting to the new historical and cultural context—expand into all the remaining layers.

Firstly, this shift in focus was most probably determined by the very nature of the modern experience. On the one hand, in feudal Japan (as in Confucius’s agricultural China),31 the possibility of the individual to engage in direct social relationships beyond their closest family members and their superiors was limited. Is it, therefore, natural that the Confucian chū(kō)—as well as all its associated elements of human sociality—would have been restricted to a specific (and almost exclusively interactional) individual experience that was embedded in one’s immediate, tangible community. On the other hand, with Japan’s entry into the modern period, we find the individual inhabiting a significantly different universe. As a result of an increased awareness of a larger world, concepts needed to be redefined and incorporated into an artificially built and increasingly abstract social hierar-

31. Ibid., 174.
chy, in which the individual also lost direct moral agency and the capacity to grasp and assess the quality of governance and leadership. Moreover, acting in the first circle of the wider society came to subject the modern individual’s feelings to a multitude of unknown, abstract determining forces. Society, as well as the nation-state, cannot be empirically experienced and, therefore, all rules of interaction can only be assumed or imposed from outside.

A second significant difference between the two iterations of the concept is that, whereas Sokō’s *chūkō* is rich in nuance—as it is weaved into an intricate texture of moral virtues governed by humaneness, rectitude, introspection and self-cultivation that aim at moral discernment (lit. “freedom in dealing with things”)—the Meiji notion of *chūkō* becomes increasingly impoverished in nuance and almost entirely displaced from the Confucian web of moral feelings. It was later taken to represent a trope of (ultra-)nationalistic and fascist ideologies, hardly more than a linguistic instrument depriving the individual of any trace of moral agency. During the late Meiji and Taishō periods, with the move towards ultra-nationalism and fascism, the Confucianesque loyalty of the *kokutai* discourse had become dramatically different from its Confucian humanistic roots. It had veered much closer in nature to Tierney’s and Arendt’s definition of loyalty, which is rather a “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable,” characteristic of totalitarian movements aimed at social domination through the mass organization of atomized, isolated individuals.  

Throughout this evolution, it seems evident that both the official and public definitions of modern *chūkō* did little else than mirror the continually evolving zeitgeist in the linguistic guise of “tradition.”

Lastly, in a more general sense, Sokō’s notion of loyalty is, first and foremost, philosophical in nature (albeit normative), in that it is not steered by external, political factors, but rather by an intellectual pursuit in the interests of the individual and society. It is an integral part of a moral project aimed at making sense of human sociality at its most basic and, at the same time, educating a sense of individual agency within the cultural norm endorsed at the time; and it is also a part of the grammar of a “morality of freedom” of sorts, in that it functions on the premise of the difficulty of

moral decision-making and the individual’s need to navigate a complex web of competing moral options. In contrast, the modern notion of chūkō that developed towards the end of the Meiji period is almost exclusively ideological in nature, as it gives precedence not to the individual and society at large, but to the political project of the modern nation-state. Unlike Sokō’s project of moral and intellectual cultivation, the modern notion of loyalty and its adjacent moral vocabulary is aimed at building a “morality of reproduction”34 among the citizens of a modern state, that is, nurturing an automated moral compass bereft of any real moral agency. In this sense, the modern notion of loyalty is more reminiscent of its earlier militaristic thread than of its Confucian one.

This evolution from Sokō’s brand of loyalty as an inherently interpersonal social adhesive into a vertically oriented brand of nationalistic loyalty focused on the paternal figure of the emperor cannot be explained solely on the basis of the bakumatsu loyalists’ influence on Meiji intellectuals and political elites, nor by Confucianism’s popularity. Its success as a narrative was also determined by a combination of other internal and international factors that ultimately converged into a favorable context.

During the earlier Meiji period, while the political elite was attempting to forge a “new,” modern nation-state capable of competing with the most developed countries on the international stage, it also needed to keep its political and intellectual dominance intact. Although changed in name, the composition of the political and intellectual elite changed only marginally with the Meiji Restoration: many former feudal lords and military-educated oligarchs continued to serve in the Meiji government, with the only difference that these were members of the formerly ostracized (tozama) domains Chōshū and Satsuma. This continuity of rulership and intellectual dominance of the Tokugawa military class also meant that their Confucian education and military legacy continued to simultaneously inform many of their policies. On the other hand, there was also a sort of historical nostalgia for the past following the abolition of the feudal system, especially among the non-elite military class. While most educated intellectuals and politicians—former members of the abolished military class—found new positions in the Meiji government, a large number of samurai had their privileges

34. Ibid.
stripped away. In 1873, a nationwide conscription and removal of the right to bear arms was enacted, which then led to the 1877–1878 Satsuma Rebellion and Saigō Takamori’s ritual suicide in 1878. This combination of factors naturally contributed to the somewhat idealized image of the samurai, now losing their centuries-old socioeconomic privileges, and to bushidō emerging as a national ethos for the new age, filtered and narrativized via the nostalgic eye of the political and intellectual elite. In this highly volatile context, it is not surprising that chūkō lost most of its Confucian humanistic characteristics and became distorted by the militaristic rhetoric of personal allegiance to a ruler. At the level of culture, this is what the kokutai ideologists were probably hoping for, the shaping of a population in their own image and likeness.

**Chūkō and the Logic of Modernity**

Turning to the question of what made the Confucian moral vocabulary so readily available for ideological manipulation in modern Japan, the answer is probably more complicated than current research seems to suggest.

Ultimately, successful narratives (memories) are those that tell a story of the past and at the same time provide a binding connection to the present, as Schudson 1995 points out. In modern Japan, too, kokutai ideology provided just that, before even having been institutionally enforced: the emperor as a central, parental figure, related to the individual citizens via a mythological bloodline. The Confucian moral vocabulary, bushidōron and old stories reconstructed into examples of national heroism—which represented a familiar moral universe for the population—glued this ideology together into an anthropomorphized view of the modern national state and ultimately a unique national spirit.

This does not mean, however, that these instances of modern collective memory distortion that ultimately morphed into a sense of spiritual unity encompassing the entire Japanese geographical space were exclusively harmful. Japan’s entry into modernity had brought about an intensified contact with the broader international environment and, consequently, the access to increasingly diverse available perspectives, thus reaching a point in history where entropy (understood here as a lack of order and predictability)
became much more readily perceived. During the early nationalistic phase, in modern Japan and elsewhere, these constructed national narratives proved a necessary step towards a more progressive society, “with variable consequences around the world.”\textsuperscript{35} It was only later that the modern experience—in societies where governments proved unsuccessful in containing the effects of rapid social and historical change—gave rise to authoritarian regimes and a gradual radicalization of ideological memory distortion. This culminated in some appalling instances whose primary purpose was to legitimize a regime, or empower a rising social class, or even reduce the historical stigma of war crimes or other atrocities.\textsuperscript{36}

It is not surprising, then, that moral vocabulary—like the Confucian chūkō in Japan—provided (and still provides) such a powerful rhetorical mechanism for ideologists of the modern state, both in its generic or authoritarian embodiments. It is probably its very universality and appurtenance to the community’s “basso ostinato”\textsuperscript{37} that makes it such a relatable and easily recognizable discursive element. The manipulative allusion to a universalistic sense of morality and loyalty to an anthropomorphized state is common among authoritarian discourses. In such movements and regimes, innocuous and ubiquitous moral feelings become, as a rule, empty vessels readily available for ideological manipulation.\textsuperscript{38} On this basis, official narratives alluding to universal moral feelings can foster a sense of belonging in atomized individuals, as well as groups, while simultaneously projecting that feeling onto a personified “state.” In Japan, chūkō functioned in no way differently,\textsuperscript{39} except for of a much stronger accent on the emperor-centered mythology. The Confucian moral vocabulary proved a constant source of narrativization and rhetorical manipulation during Japan’s modern period. Human personal memory is fickle at best, and itself a narrative-constructing machine.\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, repeatedly enforced political propaganda dressed in the appearance of personally relatable narratives—a bonding agent made up

\textsuperscript{35} Schudson 1995, 358.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 358.
\textsuperscript{37} Maruyama 1984.
\textsuperscript{38} Arendt 1998; Fuehrer 2018.
\textsuperscript{39} Ohnuki-Tierney 2002.
\textsuperscript{40} Schudson 1995, 358.
of distortions of collective memory—can be a potent tool of modern nation-states and a psychological weakness that is, to this day, heavily manipulated by fascistic movements everywhere.

However, these personally relatable narratives can also function as a social bonding agent, contributing to the health of the modern nation-state and to achieving progressive goals. Its destructive force does not lie in the sole existence of a nationalistic discourse on the part of ideologists and national authorities; the kokutai ideology—in and by itself—could not have determined the rise of ultra-nationalism and fascism. A rhetoric of this type can only function at best as a “pre-existing condition” that is engaged and polarized by deeper-running factors, such as unstable social or international circumstances, institutional measures meant to exert authoritarian control over individual freedom, or the diversity intrinsic to the modern experience. These factors, in turn, are usually determined by a variety of reasons such as regime legitimation or dominance, accruement of hegemonic power, reducing “national” stigmas, imperialism or other freedom-limiting goals.

In other words, the forces and dynamics underpinning chūkō’s evolution in modern Japan run much deeper than kokutai rhetoric, and it is thus imperative that we frame the discussion in its proper context. More relevant for understanding chūkō’s modern metamorphosis is not as much its Confucian origin, as is the very logic of modernity. As Gluck 2011 points out, there is a core set of commonalities that define this logic (which she calls the “grammar of modernity”) across time and space, irrespective of its local particularities. These include the nation-state, “social shifts in massified urban and disrupted communal life,” the insistence (even if sometimes merely rhetorical) on national political participation, the “subjection to the forces of capitalism and industrialization, as well as incorporation into the reigning geopolitical world order.” All these factors, then, are much more potent in driving change and rifts in the local sociopolitical fabric than any concocted Confucianesque moral rhetoric (in this case, chūkō). Gluck also makes a somewhat similar point on the nature and possibility of historical change (which applies to both Japan’s nation-state formation process and the shift

41. Gluck 2011, 676.
42. Ibid., 676.
43. Ibid., 676–7.
into fascism and authoritarianism): pre-existing conditions in a society are not sufficient to determine change in themselves, but it is rather a particular historical conjecture (both global and local, in the modern world) that both allows for it and also produces a set of available patterns for this change.\textsuperscript{44}

As we have seen, one of the essential characteristics of modernity is the high degree of involvement with the international geopolitical world order, which did indeed inform much of modern Japan’s available patterns for development, be it political, social, or ideological. Much of the institutional, social, and cultural change happening in Meiji Japan was ultimately a matter of trial and error, in which leading intellectual and political figures were looking both abroad and inside Japan for inspiration. Thus, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whenever the international conjecture heavily accentuated “nationalization of everything, from time and space to identity and empire”\textsuperscript{45} or whenever it slipped into fascist movements (in the 1920s), it is not surprising that Japan also followed along the same path.

Despite geographical isolation, the Meiji Restoration opened Japan up to almost limitless possibilities for cultural encounters and (mutual) sources of inspiration. Following this specific historical conjecture, no philosophical system like Tokugawa Confucianism would have survived the entry into modernity “intact.” Philosophy, like any other human activity, is ultimately a living organism, a form of engaging with the surrounding world and making sense of it; as such, it is subjected to both external and internal forces of historical change. Consequently, with the passage into modernity, Confucianism, too, entered a stage of intellectual evolution that involved a multitude of other “Confucianisms” brought about by the larger international context and historical dynamic forces. Among these, the strand of ideologically manipulated Confucianesque rhetoric I have been discussing here

\textsuperscript{44} “The pre-existing conditions in a society (are not)... determining or causal in themselves. It is rather the particular historical formations at the time of allegedly rapid change that set the conditions of the possible in Meiji Japan. And it is the interaction between those formations and the surge of change that explains the transformations that occurred, and also those that did not. These pre-existing conditions are thoroughly historical in nature, not a matter of culture or ‘tradition’ or any such timeless chimera. It is precisely their timeliness—their specific character at the conjunctural moment of the 1850s and 1860s—that affected the direction of events, which in turn influenced the events that came after them” (GLUCK 2011, 680).

\textsuperscript{45} GLUCK 2011, 681.
is only one instance, but one that is central to understanding the dynamics of modernity in Japan. Confucian morality, understood as only one of the “pre-existing conditions” present in Japanese society at the outset of the modern period, was astutely used during the early Meiji period for building a “national spirit” of entrepreneurship, civic and political responsibility, political leadership, and personal and communitarian ethics. Yet it was also turned into an instrument of manipulation and destruction by ultra-nationalists and, ultimately, by the Taishō military government, amidst increased unrest and a volatile external context. Limiting our understanding of its dynamics by exclusive reference to local peculiarities only tells part of the story and ignores its place within this common logic of modernity and its nationalistic and fascist embodiments, while amounting to nothing more than yet another attempt at Orientalizing Japan into a bushido-inspired cultural trope.

Following this analysis of chūkō’s convoluted modern history, I think we can conclude with some degree of certainty that what made the Confucian moral vocabulary particularly vulnerable to ideological manipulation throughout the earlier stages of modern Japan cannot be assigned to a quality intrinsic to Confucianism as a philosophical system. What made it particularly weak to manipulation is rather the same appeal to universality common to all moral and political philosophies, irrespective of place and time.

References

Althusser, Louis

Ames, Roger and Peter Hershock, eds.
2018 Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press).

Arendt, Hannah

Baxter, James.
Benesch, Oleg
2014

Cleary, Thomas
2011

Collcutt, Martin
1991

de Bary, W. T., C. Gluck, and A. Tiedemann, eds
2006

Fuehrer, Bernhard
2018

Gluck, Carol
2011

Hayakawa Tadanori 早川タダノリ
2016
『日本スゴイのディストピア・戦時下自画自賛の系譜』 [The dystopia of “Japan is great”: The genealogy of singing one’s praises in wartime] (Tokyo: Seikyūsha).

Heisig, James W., Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, eds.,
2011

Hofman, Reto
2015

Hwang, Kwang-Kuo
1999

Inoue, Tetsujiro 井上哲次郎
1942
『武士道の本質』 [The essence of bushidō] (Tokyo: Hakkōsha).

Khan, Yoshimitsu
1997
Kublin, Hyman

Lebra, Takie Sugiyama

Magarey, David Earl
1964 Emperor and Nation in Japan: Political Thinkers of the Tokugawa Period (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

Maruyama Masao 丸山真男

Mustățea, Alexandra

Nakae Tōjū 中江藤樹

Nakajima Keisuke 中島敬介
Nakajima Takahiro 中島隆博

Nitobe Inazō 新渡戸稲造

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko

Onishi Hajime 大西祝

Paramore, Kiri

Robbins, Joel

Schudson, Michael

Smith, Henry

Tawara Tsuguo 田原嗣郎

Tucker, John Allen


Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行
1941 「士道」[Shidō], in『山鹿素行全集思想編』[The complete works of Yamaga Sokō: Philosophy] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten), vol. 7.

Tada Akira 多田 顕

Yamamoto Tsunetomo 山本常朝