

The Invention of National Identity  
&  
Facing Historical Atrocities

China & Japan

Some introduction to these topics concerning China and Japan.  
The material from a variety of sources in English and Japanese.

# CHINA

## Identity and Atrocity

In modern China, the government creates a powerful sense of national identity by blending ancient imperial history with modern political ideology. By framing the ruling (current PRC) era as a "national rejuvenation," the state aims to replicate the prestige of past **golden ages**—such as the Han and Tang dynasties—while promoting the "Chinese Dream" for the modern nationality.

### Cultivating the National Narrative

The original communist revolution in China (PRC formed in 1949), like most communist revolutions, began by criticizing traditional society to create a new socialist society. However, like in the Soviet Union (1922-1991), old hierarchies and prejudices eventually became central in politics. In China today (2020s), Chinese nationalism relies on a programmed (coordinated) version of history that emphasizes the following components:

- **The Chinese Nation (*Zhonghua Minzu*):** The original PRC used propaganda to claim its support for ethnic diversity, yet modern Chinese nationalism merely uses this diversity to promote a concept of a multi-ethnic "one-body" Chinese nation. The official rhetoric emphasizes that all of China's officially recognized *minzu* (ethnic groups) have historically contributed to the nation's greatness. In reality, the modern Chinese state considers the Han Chinese as the ideal Chinese citizen.
- **Cultural Primacy:** State-led educational initiatives, museums, and heavily publicized archaeological projects promote the belief (narrative) in a continuous 5,000-to-7,000-year history. This creates immense pride by showcasing China's past cultural and technological supremacy.
- **The "Chinese Dream":** Under the leadership of current president Xi Jinping, the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦) serves as the modern ideological equivalent of an imperial "golden age". It rallies the public around collective prosperity, national strength, and social harmony. This beautiful China of today contrasts the "century of humiliation," during the Western imperialism of the 1800s—the West (foreigners) were a main cause of China's problems in the 1800s, not necessarily the terribly violent and corrupt Manchu-led Qing empire.
- **Han Cultural Resonance:** While the overarching framework is multi-ethnic, the mainstream narrative leans heavily on Han cultural foundations, such as Confucian ideals and traditional arts, to provide spiritual unity and legitimize state authority. The Han status quo legacy also helps to push all Chinese toward a single cultural and ethnic identity.

### Global Perspective

Scholars note that China's nationalist approach transforms China from a traditional nation-state into a "civilization-state". By connecting the country's economic and technological growth to its deep historical roots, the leadership seeks to build a strong bond between modern citizens and the state's global ambitions.

However, external observers and academics debate the value of this approach. While the promotion of national pride is largely successful at home, critics argue that this form of aggressive, state-led nationalism can punish differences and minorities and lead to tension with foreign powers.

## Ethnic Erasure in China

Modern China officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups. But the government counts people in clever ways, which allows them to make the inaccurate and exaggerated claim that the Han are over 90% of the population. While theoretically recognizing diversity, the government has increasingly pushed a strict assimilation agenda, legally enforcing **Han-centric cultural and linguistic dominance** to manufacture a singular, unified "Chinese Nation" identity.

The push to unify China under one dominant cultural and ethnic identity is enforced through several distinct strategies:

- **Legalized Assimilation:** China passed an sweeping "Ethnic Unity" law mandating the use of Mandarin, requiring instruction on state-approved history, and pressuring citizens to shed "outdated customs".
- **Population Management:** Authorities encourage the mixing of ethnic populations, promoting Han migration into minority-heavy regions like Tibet and Xinjiang. This is part of an effort to place all cultures, ethnicities, and even genetic distinctions into a single "Han" category.
- **Institutional Education:** Many minority children have been placed in state-run boarding schools (taken from their parents), where they are educated to primarily identify with the dominant Chinese culture and the Communist Party, raising significant identity erasure concerns.

## Genocide in Chinese History (examples)

Genocide in Chinese history spans from ancient mass exterminations during early dynastic expansions to the modern persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. While early state-directed massacres reflect the brutal consolidation of empires, recent atrocities involve systemic cultural erasure and demographic suppression. Key examples of genocide and mass extermination include:

- **Mongol Conquest of the Western Xia (1226–1233):** Genghis Khan and the Mongol armies carried out a devastating campaign against the Tangut people, nearly erasing them from history.
- **The Dzungar Genocide (1755–1758):** During the Qing dynasty, the Emperor ordered the near-total extermination of the Dzungar (Oirat Mongol) people. An estimated 80% of the population were killed or died of disease.
- **Mao-Era Mass Killings (1949–1976):** Under the Chinese Communist Party, utopian policies and political purges—such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—resulted in tens of millions of unnatural deaths from state-induced starvation, forced labor, and executions.
- **Cultural and Religious Suppression in Tibet (1959–Present):** Human rights and legal organizations have documented practices in Tibet that target the region's Buddhist identity. These include forced labor, systematic religious persecution, and the settling of Han Chinese into the region.
- **Persecution of Uyghurs and Minorities (2014–Present):** Modern policies in the Xinjiang region have been widely designated by international governments as genocide. The Chinese government has detained over one million individuals in camps, subjected women to forced sterilization (can no longer have children), separated families, and engaged in systemic cultural erasure and forced labor.

## Qing Empire (specific instances)

Brutality under the Qing Empire (1644–1912) manifested in mass-casualty conquests, cultural oppression, extreme criminal punishments, and the suppression of rebellions. While the early empire was marked by extreme violence used to establish dominance, the latter centuries saw staggering death tolls from catastrophic civil conflicts.

Specific instances and forms of brutality include:

- **The Conquest Massacres (1640s):** To force submission across Ming China, Manchu forces carried out brutal massacres against civilians. During the Yangzhou Massacre in 1645, led by Prince Dodo, and the subsequent Jiangyin Massacre, tens of thousands of civilians were killed after refusing to wear the Manchu hairstyle and clothing.
- **The Dzungar Genocide (1750s):** During his expansion into modern-day Xinjiang, the Qianlong Emperor ordered the mass extermination of the Dzungar people. It is estimated that between 500,000 to 800,000 people were wiped out through targeted military violence and the intentional spread of smallpox (disease).
- **The Queue Edict:** To assert control, the Qing strictly enforced the shaving of the front of the head and the wearing of a braid (the queue). Resistance to this cultural imposition was deemed treason, punishable by immediate execution.
- **Literary Inquisitions:** Under emperors like Qianlong, the state heavily censored and burned texts considered subversive or anti-Manchu. Scholars, writers, and their families faced execution, enslavement, or brutal physical punishment for possessing or writing prohibited books.
- **Torture and the Legal System:** The criminal justice system employed institutionalized and precisely legislated torture, such as bamboo beating and the use of heavy fetters, to extract confessions or punish dissidents. Executions could be public and agonizing, and harsh physical punishment was routinely used for even minor offenses.
- **The Taiping Rebellion Suppression (1850–1864):** The Qing government's campaign to crush the Taiping Rebellion resulted in staggering civilian deaths and scorched-earth (destroying everything) warfare. The total death toll of the conflict is estimated to be 20 to 30 million, making it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history.



Despite the violence, severity, and huge loss of life during the Qing Empire, it remains popular among contemporary Chinese politicians and Chinese nationalist scholars to focus on European imperialism for China's problems during the 1800s, and point to the West in general as the main source of China's problems today.

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## 人種神話

「人種神話」とは、生物学的な根拠がないにもかかわらず、特定の集団が優越性や純血性を主張するために構築・利用してきたイデオロギーです。これは国家や支配層によって「文化的均質性」を創出する過程で、国民統合の手段として強力的に機能してきました。

### 人種神話の形成と機能

- **純血性の幻想:** 多くの国民国家は、近代化の過程で「単一の血統」や「共通の起源」という神話を生成しました。歴史的には、多様なルーツを持つ人々を統合し、統治を容易にするための政治的な装置として機能してきた経緯があります。
- **「われわれ」と「他者」の境界線:** 人種神話は、内部の同質性を高めると同時に、境界線の外側にいる異質な集団を排除・差別する構造を生み出しました。

### 文化的均質性の創出メカニズム

- **制度による同化:** 国民教育や共通語の強制、統一された歴史の記述などを通じて、多様な地域文化やマイノリティの言語・習慣を国家の枠組みに回収してきました。
- **制度的暴力:** 均質性の維持は、時に「純粋な国民」にふさわしくないとされる属性を排除する同化政策や、強制的な社会統合を伴う暴力的な側面を持ちます。

### 現代の課題と人種神話の解体

現在、グローバリゼーションや人の移動の活発化により、多くの社会で単一の民族・文化という前提が崩れつつあります。こうした背景から、人種や文化の純粋性を前提とした「人種神話」を解体し、多様性を包摂する多文化共生のあり方を模索する議論が学術的にも社会運動的にも進められています。

A "racial myth" is an ideology that, despite lacking biological basis, has been constructed and utilized by certain groups to assert their superiority or racial purity. This has functioned powerfully as a means of national integration in the process of creating "cultural homogeneity" by states and ruling classes.

## Formation and Function of Racial Myths

**The Illusion of Racial Purity:** Many nation-states have generated myths of "single bloodline" or "common origin" during the process of modernization. Historically, this has functioned as a political mechanism to integrate people with diverse roots and to facilitate governance.

**The Boundary Between "Us" and "Others":** Racial myths have increased internal homogeneity while simultaneously creating a structure that excludes and discriminates against heterogeneous groups outside the boundary.

**Mechanism for Creating Cultural Homogeneity Institutional Assimilation:** Through national education, the enforcement of a common language, and the writing of a unified history, diverse regional cultures and the languages and customs of minorities have been incorporated into the framework of the state.

**Institutional Violence:** Maintaining homogeneity sometimes involves violent aspects, such as assimilation policies that exclude attributes deemed unsuitable for a "pure citizen," and forced social integration.

**Contemporary Challenges and the Deconstruction of Racial Myths:** Currently, due to globalization and increased human migration, the premise of a single ethnic group and culture is crumbling in many societies. Against this backdrop, discussions are progressing both academically and socially to deconstruct "racial myths" that presuppose the purity of race and culture, and to explore ways of multicultural coexistence that embrace diversity.

# JAPAN

## Identity and Atrocity

Modern Japan establishes its sense of national identity by mythologizing specific historical eras as a "Golden Age." By blending classical traditions—like the cultural peak of the Heian period and the disciplined honor of the Samurai sub-culture—with modern technological futurism, Japan creates a unique, unbroken narrative of "Japan-ness" (日本らしさ) and an ethnocentric Japanese exceptionalism (民族中心主義の日本人論) is synthesis is deeply woven into modern Japanese nationalism through several key mechanisms:

- **Inventing Historical Nostalgia:** Following the trauma of rapid modernization, war, and economic restructuring, modern mass media (like *manga*, *anime*, and historical films) frequently idealize feudal and classical aesthetics to promote a collective, continuous national character.
- **Shinto & Imperial Continuity:** The myth of the unbroken imperial lineage ties ancient mythologies to the modern state, centralizing Shinto practices as a cornerstone of Japanese ethnicity and belonging.
- **Pop Culture (Soft Power):** Modern media repackages classical eras—such as the courtly aesthetics popularized by the translations of *The Tale of Genji*—into a global "Cool Japan," projecting an image of elegance, harmony, and resilience onto the modern Japanese nationality.

民族中心主義（自文化中心主義・エスノセントリズム）を背景とした日本人論とは、日本人の文化的・人種的な特異性を強調し、自民族の価値観や行動様式を絶対視・優越視する言説群を指します。これらは「日本は単一民族である」という前提に立ち、西洋の近代化理論とは異なる独自の社会システムや精神性を説く傾向があります。

### 代表的な日本人論の潮流と特徴

- **特殊性と均質性の強調:**  
日本社会を「単一民族」「単一言語」の均質な社会と捉え、和や集団主義、情緒的結合を美德として強調する傾向があります。
- **西洋との比較によるアイデンティティ構築:**  
西洋の「個人主義」や「契約社会」に対し、日本の「集団主義」「情緒的依存（縦社会など）」を対比させ、日本的なあり方の優位性や独自性を証明しようとしています。
- **古典的著作の系譜:**  
代表的な論者として、日本社会の縦のつながりを分析した中根千枝の『タテ社会の人間関係』や、日本人の精神構造を説明した土居健郎の『「甘え」の構造』などが挙げられます。これらの知見は一時期の日本文化の理解に貢献した反面、過度に日本の特性を「普遍的」かつ「特殊」なものとして扱うため、結果として民族中心主義的な言説として受容・消費される側面もありました。

### 学術的批判と現代的課題

- **「日本文化論」批判:**  
文化人類学者のハルミ・ベフ（別府春海）などは、こうした一連の日本人論の多くが学術的な実証性を欠き、大衆消費財として「日本は特別である」という優越的幻想を植え付けるイデオロギーとして機能してきたと強く批判しています。
- **グローバル化と現実の乖離:**  
日本国内でも多文化共生や外国籍住民の増加が進んでおり、かつてのような「単一民族神話」は実態と乖離しているという指摘がなされています。

## Homogeneity, One Race, Cultural Erasure

The concept of Japan as a single, ethnically homogenous nation is largely a modern construct heavily promoted by the government starting in the late 19th century. While Japan is often perceived as homogenous, this "mono-ethnic" identity was intentionally created through deliberate assimilation and nationalistic policies.

## The Myth of Homogeneity

- **The "One Race" Narrative:** Between 1952 and 1985, the Japanese government officially projected an ethno-racially homogeneous vision of society to the world. Politicians have occasionally reinforced this by referring to Japan as a nation of a "single race".
- **Genetic Makeup:** Modern Japanese people are actually a genetic blend of the indigenous Jōmon hunter-gatherers, continental Yayoi rice farmers, and waves of Kofun-era immigrants from mostly Korea. Geneticists estimate that contemporary mainland Japanese individuals are roughly 20% Jōmon and 80% a continental mix of peoples related to Koreans and Chinese.

## How the Identity Was Created

- **Assimilation of Indigenous Groups:** Prior to the modern era, the Japanese islands were home to diverse populations. To build a unified modern nation-state during the Meiji era (1868-1912), the government forced the assimilation of the **Ainu** in the north and the people of the **Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa)**.
- **Cultural Erasure:** Distinct languages, traditional tattooing practices, and indigenous religions were severely suppressed, and the assimilation of these groups into the Yamato ethnic Japanese mainstream was encouraged.

## Japan Today

- **Official Recognition:** In 2008, the Japanese government officially recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people, but there is still a strong negative reaction from ultranationalists and racists.
- **A Shifting Reality:** Modern Japan is increasingly multicultural. Official statistics indicate that over four million non-Japanese live in Japan, which is about 3.3% of the total population. This includes significant populations of Chinese, Vietnamese, and **Zainichi Koreans**—the latter being descendants of individuals who arrived during Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula.
- **Naturalization:** Immigrants who become Japanese citizens are counted only as Japanese in population statistics, which helps to inflate the "single ethnicity" claim.

日本人に対する民族中心的な見方とは、日本文化や日本人を世界の中心や絶対的な基準とし、他者や他文化を劣ったものや異質なものとして捉える自文化中心主義（エスノセントリズム）を指します。これらは歴史的背景や社会状況の変化に伴い、「単一民族神話」などの現代の神話として形を変えて表出しています。

### 民族中心的な見方の歴史的背景

明治以降の近代化の過程や戦時中において、国家統合の象徴として「日本人の優秀性」や「神国思想」が強調されました。この潮流は、アジアにおける日本の指導的立場を正当化する思想へとつながり、結果として他国・他民族に対する優越意識を生み出す要因となりました。

### 「単一民族神話」という現代の神話

第二次世界大戦後、日本は多民族国家としての側面を公式な歴史認識から遠ざけ、事実上の「単一民族国家」という認識（単一民族神話）が広く定着しました。

この現代の神話には、以下のような特徴と影響があります。

- **同質性の強調:** 日本人は「同じ言語、同じ文化、同じ血統を共有する単一の集団である」という思い込みが形成されました。
- **排他性の内包:** 内部の均質性を過度に重視するあまり、アイヌなどの先住民族や在日コリアン、近年増加している外国人労働者など、異なる文化的背景を持つ人々を排除・同化させる圧力が生じやすくなりました。
- **「日本人らしさ」の固定化:** 独自の精神性や道徳観（和の精神など）を日本固有のものとし、他者と比較して優位に立とうとする態度の基盤となっています。

### グローバル社会における課題

現代のグローバル化や多様性の時代において、この民族中心的な見方や単一民族神話は、多くの課題を露呈しています。異なるルーツを持つ人々との共生が求められる中、排外主義（ゼノフォビア）の台頭や、社会の分断を招く要因として議論の対象となっています。

実際の日本列島人のルーツは、縄文時代以来の先住集団とユーラシア大陸からの渡来人が混血を繰り返して形成された多様な歴史を持っており、実態と神話の間には大きな乖離が存在します。

## Atrocity in Japan's History

### - Shimabara Rebellion 島原の乱 (1637-38) (example)

The Shimabara Rebellion—which could also be called a “freedom uprising”—began as a reaction to the famine, massive taxes, and brutal treatment caused by a local daimyo (land lord). The Shimabara region (in Kyushu) belonged to the Matsukura clan, known as oppressive and corrupt. Most of the peasants in the Shimabara area had been converted to Catholicism by Portuguese missionaries, and the rebellion soon took on Christian overtones. However, the revolt was more than a Christian rebellion—unfortunately, most history books still call it a Christian rebellion. The freedom uprising included a large number of *rōnin* (masterless samurai), who hated Matsukura and fought aggressively against the apx. 124,000 Tokugawa samurai forces that supported the corrupt daimyo. The uprising forces were so successful that the Tokugawa (Edo) government asked a Dutch gunboat to bomb the rebel castle. The bombing was very effective, and the uprising asked for a ceasefire. The Edo government forces used the ceasefire to not only execute all the rebel fighters, but to also execute many of the children and elderly people in the surrounding villages.

島原の乱（しまばらのらん）は、1637年（寛永14年）から1638年（寛永15年）まで、島原・天草地域で引き起こされた、百姓やキリスト教徒を主体とする江戸幕府への大規模な武力闘争事件である[4]。島原・天草一揆（しまばら・あまくさいっき）[4]、島原・天草の乱（しまばら・あまくさのらん）[4]、とも呼ばれる。

島原藩主の松倉勝家が領民の生活が成り立たないほどの過酷な年貢の取り立てを行い、年貢を納められない農民、改宗を拒んだキリシタンに対し熾烈な拷問・処刑を行ったことに対する反発から発生した、大規模な農民反乱である。

**Almost none** of the estimated 37,000 people involved in the Shimabara Rebellion survived (apx. 99% killed). The Tokugawa shogunate forces slaughtered virtually everyone in Hara Castle when the fortress fell in 1638. No one was spared, even small children.

The catastrophic end of the rebellion resulted in several specific outcomes:

- **Complete Massacre:** The shogunate forces took no prisoners during their final assault. Men, women, and children were beheaded, and their bodies were buried together with the ruins of the burned fortress.
- **Execution of Leaders:** The teenage rebel commander, Amakusa Shirō, was beheaded, and his severed head was publicly displayed in Nagasaki as a warning against further uprisings. The daimyo of Shimabara, Matsukura Katsue, was also beheaded for his severe misrule that sparked the revolt.
- **National Isolation:** Suspecting foreign Christian influence, the shogunate accelerated its national isolation policy (*sakoku*), expelling Portuguese traders and strictly forbidding Christianity.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Atrocities

Japan's most severe atrocities occurred during its imperial expansion (1894–1945). Though different from the Holocaust in WWII Europe, the Imperial Japanese military engaged in widespread, systematic mass killings, forced labor, biological experimentation, and cultural assimilation across the Asia-Pacific that scholars classify as democide (state-sponsored murder 大量虐殺), war crimes, and cultural genocide.

### The Asia-Pacific War and Mass Atrocities (1937–1945)

- **Nanjing Massacre (1937–1938):** Following the capture of the Chinese capital, the Imperial Japanese Army engaged in a six-week rampage of murder, rape, and looting. Estimates indicate between 260,000 to 350,000 civilians and disarmed soldiers were killed. This campaign of mass terror has been renamed by Japanese nationalists as the Nanjing "Incident" (an unforeseen event that has no connection to anything else).
- **Unit 731:** A covert biological and chemical warfare research and development unit of the Imperial Japanese Army. They conducted brutal, fatal human experimentation on thousands of Chinese, Russian, and Korean prisoners.
- **The "Three Alls" Policy (*Sankō Sakusen*):** A brutal scorched-earth policy in China—meaning "Kill All, Burn All, Loot All"—殺光：シャープグワン) 焼き尽くす (焼光：シャオグワン) —designed to eradicate resistance and destroy local resources, leading to the deaths of countless civilians.
- **The Death Railway and Forced Labor:** Japan forcibly conscripted hundreds of thousands of civilians and Allied prisoners of war (POWs) from occupied territories (like Korea, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies) to build infrastructure. Tens of thousands died from malnutrition, disease, and abuse.
- **"Comfort Women":** The military systematically abducted and forced an estimated 200,000 women—primarily from Korea, China, the Philippines, and other occupied nations—into sexual slavery.

### Cultural Erasure and Colonial Policies

- **Colonization of Korea (1910–1945):** Japan pursued policies of forced assimilation. Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese surnames, the use of the Korean language in schools and public places was banned, and historical texts were destroyed in an attempt to erase Korean cultural identity.
- **The Ainu and Ryukyans:** Japan's early imperial modernization involved the forceful assimilation of indigenous populations, such as the Ainu in Hokkaido and the Ryukyans in Okinawa. This included the dispossession of traditional lands and the suppression of their distinct languages and religious practices.

### Modern Discourse and Denial

The categorization of these events as "genocide" remains complex. While the definition of genocide centers on the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, many of Japan's actions were driven by military expediency, imperial dominance, and brutal racism rather than the exact ideological framework used in Europe. Furthermore, historical acknowledgment remains controversial. While successive Japanese governments and leaders have issued formal apologies, the minimization or denial of events like the Nanjing Massacre and the "Comfort Women" by certain politicians and right-wing groups continues to cause friction with neighboring countries.

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