

# Kokutai as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

Suzumura, Yusuke / Uchihara, Hidetoshi / Sato, Toyo /  
Yoo, Jong Chul

---

(出版者 / Publisher)

法政大学大学院 国際日本学インスティテュート専攻委員会

(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)

国際日本学論叢 / 国際日本学論叢

(巻 / Volume)

9

(開始ページ / Start Page)

100

(終了ページ / End Page)

88

(発行年 / Year)

2012-03-23

(URL)

<https://doi.org/10.15002/00008323>

***Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism:  
The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period**

Yusuke Suzumura

*Hosei University Research Center for International Japanese Studies*

Jong Chul Yoo

*(Former Affiliation) Master's Course, Major in Japanese Literature, Graduate School of International Japanese Studies Institute, Hosei University*

Hidetoshi Uchihara

*Doctors' Course, Major in Sociology, Graduate School of International Japanese Studies Institute, Hosei University*

Toyo Sato

*(Former Affiliation) Master's Course, Major in Politics, Graduate School of International Japanese Studies Institute, Hosei University*

**Introduction**

In his speech at the Economic Club (*Keizai Kurabu*) on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1937, Ishibashi Tanzan (石橋湛山, 1884-1973) said that “the establishment of dictatorial politics in Japan goes against the national polity, and can therefore not be carried out by any possibility”<sup>(1)</sup>. The national polity, national entity or polity of Japan is a translation of Japanese word, *kokutai* (国体). This term has been commonly used to refer to what was seen as the uniquely Japanese polity, the most important elements of which were rule by an unbroken imperial line (*Bansei Ikkei*, 万世一系) and the concept of the state as a family

*Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

(*Kazoku Kokka*, 家族国家): likening the relationship between the emperor and his subjects to that between a father and his children. The term also implied that Japan was regarded as a holy, sacred nation. And at the same time, this concept of *kokutai* was the ultimate authority for excluding liberal or democratic thoughts, and for advocating a political intervention by military or dictatorial politics after the 1930s. Ishibashi's claim, "the establishment of dictatorial politics in Japan goes against the national polity", was very different from and opposed to the common interpretation of the concept of *kokutai*. The main purpose of this paper is to clarify Ishibashi's notion of *kokutai* or the national polity that led him to say that "the establishment of dictatorial politics in Japan goes against the national polity".

### Brief Review of the Historical Background of the Concept of *Kokutai*

It is well known that the concept of the national polity was theorised in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) especially by the late Mito School (*Mitogaku*, 水戸学) after the 1820s. Aizawa Seishisai (会沢正志斎, 1782-1863), an authority on Neo-Confucianism and leader of the Mito School, popularised the word *kokutai* in his *Shinron* (新論, *New Theses*, 1825), which also introduced the term *Sonnō Jōi* (尊皇攘夷, Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians). Aizawa developed the idea of *kokutai* using the thematic arguments of Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長, 1730-1801), presenting: the Japanese national myths in the *Kojiki* (古事記) and *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) as historical facts, including the claim that the emperor was directly descended from *Amaterasu Ōmikami* (天照大神), the sun goddess. Aizawa idealised this divinely-ruled ancient Japan as a form of *saisei itchi* (祭政一致,

unity of religion and government; theocracy). In this sense the term *kokutai* “meant something still rather vague and ill defined” and it “was more or less the Japanese “nation's body” or “national structure” <sup>(3)</sup>.

After the Meiji Restoration (*Meiji Ishin*, 明治維新, 1868), the concept of *kokutai* took on new significance and meaning, because the Emperor was now recognised as the ruler of Japan. For example, the 4<sup>th</sup> Article of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan of 1889 (*Dai-Nippon Teikoku Kempō*, 大日本帝国憲法) declares that “the Emperor is the head of the Empire, combining in Himself the rights of sovereignty”. And in Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyoiku ni kansuru Chokugo*, 教育勅語, 1890), the concept of *kokutai* was defined as follows <sup>(4)</sup>.

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.

These sources may be interpreted as meaning that *kokutai* equalled the rule of the Emperor. In fact, as Josefa López noted, under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, *kokutai* acquired an additional meaning: *kokutai* was extra-judicial, more something cultural than positive <sup>(5)</sup>.

The most important democracy movement in the pre-the Second World War era, took place in the Taishō period, and is commonly known as Taishō Democracy. Advocates of a democratic system or political liberalism had to take into account views of the *kokutai*, and how to balance the power between the rule of the Emperor defined in the Constitution, and the establishment of the rights of the people, the ultimate purpose of this

*Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

movement. Yoshino Sakuzō (吉野作造, 1878-1933), one of the leaders of the Taishō Democracy, rejected Western style democracy, people's rule, and suggested Japanese style democracy, *Mimponshugi* (民本主義, people based principle) <sup>(5)</sup>.

Another examples was the case of Minobe Tatsukichi (美濃部達吉, 1873-1948), a Professor Emeritus of Law at Tokyo Imperial University. Minobe interpreted the position of the Emperor as that of an organ of government (*Tennō Kikansetsu*, 天皇機関説), which recognised the emperor as an organ of the state and not a sacrosanct power beyond the state. Minobe's theory was based on a rational and democratic interpretation of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan. Minobe was appointed to the House of Peers in 1932, but in 1935 he was attacked on the grounds of disloyalty to the emperor. The government was finally pressured into banning three of Minobe's works; it issued statements declaring the organ theory to be "contrary to the true meaning of the national polity." As a result Minobe was forced to resign from the House of Peers and indicted on the charge of lese-majesty.

This incident of the interpretation of the Emperor as an organ of government (*Tennō Kikansetsu Jiken*, 天皇機関説事件) was a result of the debate concerning the clarification of the national polity (*Kokutai Meichō Mondai*, 国体明徴問題) instigated by extremist elements in the army, right-wing politicians, and civilian groups. On 30<sup>th</sup> March 1937, a political tract *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (*Kokutai no Hongi*, 国体の本義) was published by the Ministry of Education. It was regarded by the Japanese government as a statement of the fundamental principles of the *kokutai*, the national polity. As stated in its introduction and conclusion, the avowed purpose of *Kokutai no Hongi* was to combat social unrest, which was seen largely as stemming from Western influence. Its fundamental thesis is

that of Japan's divine character and mission, and it explores Japanese customs, culture, rites, and direct rule by the Emperor to justify its conclusions. This book was the theoretical background of the national polity, presenting the grand sum of arguments for *kokutai*, the national polity.

### Ishibashi's Recognition of the National Polity

How did Ishibashi arrive at his different interpretation of the meaning of *kokutai*? Which reasoning did he follow to reject the notion that *kokutai* justified the establishment of dictatorial politics? Research on Ishibashi has centred on topics like economic or political liberalism, or international cooperation, but few have commented on his views of *kokutai*.

In fact, Takayoshi Matsuo (松尾尊兌) linked Ishibashi's approval of the Manchurian Incident(満州事変) to his view of *kokutai*, and only commented on Ishibashi's general opposition to the term *kokutai* <sup>(6)</sup>. Hiroshi Masuda (増田弘) was the only one to claim that Ishibashi "was perfectly free from the curse of *Kōkokushikan* (皇国史観)" <sup>(7)</sup>.

In order to fill in this gap in our knowledge of Ishibashi's interpretation of the concept of *kokutai*, we start by examining Ishibashi's evaluation of the Meiji emperor and the Meiji era.

For Ishibashi, the Meiji era was not the golden age of militarism or imperialism, but the age of democratic reformation <sup>(8)</sup>.

Temporal policies, accidental events lost meaning according to the process of the condition of the times. However by famous five oaths declared in 1868, imperial rescript on the opening of Chamber of Elders and Supreme Court commanded in 1875 or 1881's imperial rescript on

*Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

the opening of the Imperial Diet, politics based on public opinion or through general conferences, the great principle of democracy, will hereafter be applied still wider and wider and be brightened more and more, but never lost its meaning by processes of the condition of the times. And if the Meiji era shall be marked on the history of human beings, the object of the memorable must be this democratic principle.

In this critical article, Ishibashi emphasises the role of the Meiji emperor as the origin of a democratic political system in Japan, because the first article of the oath declares that “an assembly shall be widely convoked, and all measures shall be decided by open discussion.” And the imperial rescript on the occasion of the opening of Chamber of Elders, Supreme Court or the Imperial Diet, usually presented as one of the immortal achievements of the Meiji emperor, is taken as evidence that the emperor, representing *kokutai* or being identical to the national polity itself, promotes and values the democratic political style. This interpretation by Ishibashi refutes the claim that democratic political style or dictatorial politics are not suitable for Japanese political system and that those who advocate a democratic political style might be in contravention of the national polity of Japan.

The well-known details of the Charter Oath are as follows <sup>(9)</sup>.

- (1) An assembly shall be widely convoked, and all measures shall be decided by open discussion. (広ク会議ヲ興シ万機公論ニ決スベシ)
- (2) High and low shall be of one mind, and the national economy and finances shall be greatly strengthened. (上下心ヲ一ニシテ盛ンニ経綸ヲ行フベシ)
- (3) Civil and military officials together, and the common people as well,

## 国際日本学論叢

shall all achieve their aspirations, and thus the people's minds shall not be made weary. (官武一途庶民ニ至ル迄各其ノ志ヲ遂ゲ人心ヲシテ倦マザラシメンコトヲ要ス)

(4) Evil practices of the past shall be abandoned, and actions shall be based on international usage. (旧来ノ陋習ヲ破リ天地ノ公道ニ基ツクベシ)

(5) Knowledge shall be sought all over the world, and the foundations of imperial rule shall be strengthened. (知識ヲ世界ニ求メ大イニ皇基ヲ振起スベシ)

The Charter Oath was the national credo of the Meiji government, and therefore the Meiji Restoration was not only the restoration of direct imperial rule but also the declaration of the adoption of the idealised view of the West as the model of Japan <sup>(10)</sup>. Therefore if one interprets the Charter Oath logically, the political or value system of the established government by the Meiji Restoration may be very well be based on those of the West <sup>(11)</sup>. This may justify our claim that Ishibashi's notion of the Charter Oath was not far removed from the nature of the Meiji Restoration, because the democratic system and open discussion were actually the essential product of the Meiji Restoration as stated in this Charter Oath

After writing an essay on the Charter Oath in 1912, Ishibashi continued for more than 30 years to refer to the importance of the Charter Oath, especially the first article which guarantees open discussions. For example, Ishibashi argues that the supreme right to rule shall be not in the hands of the emperor but the people (1915) <sup>(12)</sup>, he despairs over the restrictions on free speech in the context of the Siberian Intervention (1918) <sup>(13)</sup>; he rejects the authorities refusal to discuss the Communist Party arguing that it was



# *Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

opposed to the *kokutai* <sup>(14)</sup>, and he criticises the *Taiseiyokusankai* (Imperial Rule Assistance Association, 大政翼賛会) and the *Yokusanseijikai* (Imperial Rule Party, 翼賛政治会) as obstacles to public discussion <sup>(15)</sup>.

As we mentioned above, the concept of *kokutai* or the word by itself became an argument not to be questioned in order to justify dictatorial politics and the army's interposition to politics. In contrast, Ishibashi used the concept of *kokutai* in support of democratic politics, because the Charter Oath as the national credo of Japan which had declared and promised the right of open discussion.

## Democratic Politics vs. Dictatorial Politics: Domestic Thought vs. Foreign Thought

Ishibashi analysed the reason of the demise of *Taiseiyokusankai* system by the reason of its one party like character. But why were the one party system and dictator politics abandoned? Ishibashi answered this question clearly: the one party system was a foreign thought opposed to *kokutai*.

Ishibashi said that "the establishment of dictatorial politics in Japan goes against the national polity, and can therefore not be carried out by any possibility", as we referred above. This claim was a result of his speech after the dissolution of parliament by Prime Minister Hayashi Senjūrō in March 1937. In this speech, Ishibashi remarked as follows <sup>(16)</sup>.

Whenever such an incident occurs many people are anxious whether the fascists are not again increasing their strength politically, or else whether in the economy [the trend towards] a so-called controlled economy is not becoming extreme. However, as I have always been

saying, I do not think that fascism or a controlled economy will appear in Japan in a way that makes people afraid. To begin with, from an economic point of view, there is no basis in Japan for the appearance of dictatorial politics such as in Russia, Italy, Germany and so on... Society does not merely move [according to] ideology. If the Japanese economic situation were more pitiable, if the life of the citizen were extremely distressed as in Russia after the war, or in Italy, or in Germany at the time Hitler appeared, and under such circumstances an economic situation would develop where public peace could not be maintained, and further at the international level independence could not be maintained, it may not be excluded that fascism may occur in Japan. While it is unfortunate for aspirants of dictatorial politics, that is not the case in Japan now. The attempt to carry out dictatorship through an imported ideology is just like the dream communists had, who thought that it would be possible to communize Japan, which has no economic background against which communism is expected to occur. On that point I am not worried that fascism is going to become more intense. Further, also on the political level, the establishment of dictatorial politics in Japan goes against the national polity, and can therefore not be carried out by any possibility.

Or more directly Ishibashi asserted that “a foreign thought, the one party system, is absolutely contradictory to our *kokutai*”<sup>(17)</sup>. What was clarified by Ishibashi's assertion is that the one party system or dictatorial politics derive from foreign thought and comes from abroad. They differ from *kokutai* whose origin is rooted in Japanese heritage. Ishibashi uses the same logical reasoning normally used by those who advocate dictatorial politics and

*Kokutai* as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period

blame democratic political systems: they claim the former is based on the domestic thought and the latter is introduced from foreign thought. In other words, Ishibashi turns their argument on its head in claiming the domestic origin of democratic thinking, as an effective way to prove the deviousness of his opponents, a claim not easily refuted, because Ishibashi's claim had a strong evidence in the Charter Oath promulgated by the Meiji emperor. By defining the concept of *kokutai* based on the Charter Oath which was authorised by emperor himself, Ishibashi succeeded to obtain a reasonable argument in favour of democratic politics. In this meaning Ishibashi was different from nativists, who saw the Japanese state in mythical term <sup>(18)</sup>, and deprived mythical meanings from the word, *kokutai*. In doing so, Ishibashi could deny dictatorial politics and the one party system, using the concept of *kokutai* as the symbol of democratic politics.

## Conclusion

Advocating democratic politics, Ishibashi used the concept of *kokutai* to oppose dictatorial politics. *Kokutai* as represented by the Charter Oath, however, was not merely an expedient argument for Ishibashi. Rather, *kokutai* was taken as having a true meaning for Ishibashi's notion. In seven consecutive editorials published after 25<sup>th</sup> August 1945, Ishibashi claims that the resurrection of the Charter Oath is the most important thing for the departure of Japan as the new born state and the recovery from defeat in the war. In this sense, *kokutai* became a true symbol of democratic politics or liberalism in politics for Ishibashi.

## Acknowledgement

We express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Dr. Kurt Werner Radtke to his comment on this paper.

## Note

- (1) Ishibashi Tanzan Zenshū Hensan linkai (1972 343). This translation from original Japanese text is based on Kurt Radtke (2003).
- (2) Miller (1982 92).
- (3) *Kyoiku ni kansuru Chokugo* (1890).
- (4) Valderrama López (2006).
- (5) Stegewerns (2003 3-16).
- (6) Matsuo (1982).
- (7) Masuda (1995 250).
- (8) Ishibashi (1912).
- (9) Charter Oath.
- (10) Watanabe (1997 209).
- (11) About the view of Japanese in the late Edo Period toward the idealised West, Watanabe's discussion is so beneficial. See Watanabe (1997 192-215).
- (12) Ishibashi (1915).
- (13) Ishibashi (1929).
- (14) Ishibashi (1944).
- (15) Ishibashi Tanzan Zenshū Hensan linkai (1972 343). This translation from original Japanese text is based on Radtke (2003).
- (16) Ishibashi (1944).
- (17) Ishibashi (1944).
- (18) Radtke (2003).

## Works Cited

- Charter Oath. *Kōdansha Encyclopedia of Japan, Tokyo: Kōdansha*, 1983.
- Ishibashi, Tanzan, 1912, Orokanaru Jingū Kensetsu no Gi (Silly Argument on the Building of the Shrine, 愚かなる神宮建設の議) in *Tōyō Jiron*, September 1912.
- Ishibashi, Tanzan, 1915, Daigiseiji no Ronri (Theory of the Representative Government, 代議政治の論理), in *Tōyō Keizai Shimpō*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1915.

**Kokutai as the Principle of Liberalism: The Argument by Ishibashi Tanzan in the Pre-war Period**

Ishibashi, Tanzan, 1929, *Kyōsanshugi no Shōtai* (Substance of the Communism, 共產主義の正体), in *Tōyō Keizai Shimpō*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1929.

Ishibashi, Tanzan, 1944, *Aete Bashin wo Hirekishi Shin-naikaku ni Nozomu* (Friendly Message to the New Cabinet, 敢えて嬰心を披瀝し新内閣に望む), in *Tōyō Keizai Shimpō*, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1944.

Ishibashi Tanzan Zenshū Hensan linkai (eds.), 1972, *Ishibashi Tanzan Zenshū*, Vol. 10, Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shimpō.

*Kyoiku ni kansuru Chokugo*, 1890, [http://www.japanorama.com/zz\\_ebook/eb\\_IROE\\_1890.pdf](http://www.japanorama.com/zz_ebook/eb_IROE_1890.pdf) (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> October 2011).

Masuda, Hiroshi, 1995, *Ishibashi Tanzan*. Tokyo: Chūōkōron-sha.

Matsuo, Takayoshi, 1982, Jūgonensensōka no Ishibashi Tanzan (Ishibashi Tanzan under the 15 Years War, 十五年戦争下の石橋湛山). *Nempō Seijigaku*, 33: 209-233.

Miller, Roy Andrew, 1982, *Japan's Modern Myth*. New York: Weatherhill.

Radtke, Kurt Werner, 2003, Nationalism and internationalism in Japan's economic liberalism—The case of Ishibashi Tanzan. In Stegewerns, D. (eds.), *Nationalism and Internationalism in Imperial Japan: Autonomy, Asian Brotherhood, or World Citizenship*, New York: Curzon, 168-194.

Stegewerns, Dick, 2003, The Dilemma of Nationalism and Internationalism in Modern Japan: National Interest, Asian Brotherhood, International Cooperation or World Citizenship?, In Dick Stegewerns (eds.), *Nationalism and Internationalism in Imperial Japan - Autonomy, Asian brotherhood, or world citizenship?*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

Valderrama López, Josefa. 2006, Beyond words: the "kokutai" and its background. *Història Moderna i Contemporània*, IV: 125-136, <http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/hmic/16964403n4p125.pdf> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> October 2011).

Watanabe, Hiroshi, 1997, *Higashiajia no Ōken to Shisō* (Confucianism and After: Political Thoughts in Early Modern East Asia, 東アジアの主権と思想). Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

## Abstract

*Kokutai* or National polity had an important significance in Japan after the Meiji Era. Especially after the enforcement of the Peace Preservation Law (1925), democratic movements using the term “Taishō Democracy” were constrained by the authorities. This was followed by further restrictions prohibiting associations aiming to “change the *Kokutai*” [Japan’s polity] after delegitimizing the Theory of the Emperor as an Organ of Government (1935), and the declaration of the *Kokutai Meichō* Statement by the Okada Keisuke Cabinet (1935). The development towards a totalitarian system with the exclusion of the democratic parties and the creation of the *Taisei Yokusankai* took place under such conditions. Ishibashi Tanzan, a well known liberalist and democrat in the pre-war period, was opposed to interference with the party government and repression of the political parties, and criticised the *Taisei Yokusan* political system. In his criticism Ishibashi referred to Article 1 of *Gokajō no Goseimon* (the Charter Oath) promulgated in 1868, “Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by open discussion.,” and pointed out that totalitarianism was not in agreement with the Japanese national structure. Most of those advocating totalitarianism, held that totalitarianism was a natural consequence of upholding the *Kokutai*. In this paper we focus on *Kokutai* as the symbol for Japan’s body politic and the basis of totalitarianism, and discuss how Ishibashi by contrast was able to promote the principle of liberalism or democracy through his interpretation of the Charter Oath.