

Echoes of the Japanese Empire: the Legacy of Fascism and Its Transformation into Populist Movements in East Asia

Yifu Sun , Yifan Bai

The University Of Sydney, China

Abstract

Since the end of World War II, Japan has officially renounced fascism, yet significant ideological legacies from its prewar era have persisted, evolving subtly within democratic contexts. This article explores how core elements of prewar Japanese fascist ideology—including emperor-centric nationalism, Pan-Asianism, and imperialist narratives—have transformed and adapted into contemporary right-wing populist movements. Specifically, it analyzes the ideological continuity from prewar figures such as Kita Ikki, Ōkawa Shumei, and Shimoi Harukichi to modern nationalist organizations, notably Nippon Kaigi. Utilizing historical-comparative analysis and discourse analysis, this study examines how fascist concepts have been preserved through institutional and cultural channels, manifesting today in constitutional revisionism, educational reform, and historical revisionism. Furthermore, it situates Japan within a comparative East Asian framework, examining how China and South Korea also mobilize historical memories of Japanese imperial aggression to fuel their contemporary populist-nationalist discourses.

Findings demonstrate that while explicit fascist political structures were dismantled, their underlying ideologies have proven adaptable, enduring through democratic rhetoric and institutions. These ideological residues significantly influence current political identity formation and nationalist mobilization in Japan and across East Asia. Ultimately, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how historical legacies shape contemporary populism and nationalism, emphasizing the broader implications for regional political dynamics and international relations.

Keywords: Japan; Fascism; Right-Wing Populism; Historical Memory; Nationalism; East Asia; Nippon Kaigi; Ideological Continuity