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Review Article

Reconstructing the Center in Japanese Thought: Motoori Norinaga and Yanagita Kunio

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the center–periphery structure in Japanese intellectual history through the thought of Motoori Norinaga and Yanagita Kunio. It explores how Japan sought self-identity and independence under external cultural and academic pressures. During the Edo period, under the influence of Chinese civilization, Motoori Norinaga reinterpreted the Huayi distinction, emphasizing indigenous tradition and Shinto thought while rejecting China's absolute centrality and repositioning Japan as a cultural center. In the modern era, facing a Western-dominated academic system, Yanagita Kunio proposed "national folklore studies" to secure the autonomy of Japanese scholarship through a strategy of relative centralization. By comparing their approaches, this study reveals both continuity and transformation in Japan's center–periphery structure. It argues that despite differences in historical context and disciplinary focus, both thinkers retained the hierarchical logic of the center–periphery framework while redefining Japan's position within it.

Keywords: Yanagita Kunio, Motoori Norinaga, center–periphery, cultural independence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The center–periphery structure has long been a persistent issue in Japanese intellectual history, particularly in relation to how Japan defines its position within broader civilizational and academic systems. A key concern has been how to respond to perceived marginality while pursuing self-identity and independence.

This problem became especially prominent in the Edo period under the influence of Chinese civilization, when thinkers such as Motoori Norinaga reconsidered the Huayi framework and sought to reconstruct Japan's cultural autonomy. In the modern period, the rise of Western academic systems further intensified this challenge. Yanagita Kunio, as the founder of modern Japanese folklore studies, confronted the problem of maintaining scholarly autonomy under Western dominance.

This paper examines how Motoori Norinaga and Yanagita Kunio addressed the center–periphery problem in different contexts. It asks how Japanese thinkers interpreted their peripheral position and by what means they reconstructed the "center." Through comparison, the study analyzes how cultural and academic strategies were employed to pursue independence.

2. Motoori Norinaga and the Japanized Huayi Framework

2.1 The Traditional Huayi Framework

The *Huayi* distinction, a political theory addressing the relationship between the Huaxia (the "civilized") and surrounding "barbarian" groups ("Yi," "Man," "Rong," and "Di"), took shape during the late Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn period (Chen,2010). It constituted a hierarchical structure centered on cultural orthodoxy, in which the self was positioned as the source of civilizational norms, while others were relegated to the periphery. The distinction between *Hua* and *Yi* thus signified not only cultural difference but also disparities in civilizational level and political legitimacy: *Hua* denoted "orthodoxy" and superiority, whereas *Yi* implied inferiority and marginality (Han,2007). In essence, this was a center–periphery structure.

Within this framework, China was established as the civilizational center. The Huaxia world, characterized by ritual propriety, was contrasted with surrounding peoples seen as lacking such refinement and therefore subject to transformation under the "Celestial

Court," which itself had no need to learn from them (Bu,2001). Accordingly, the center possessed the authority to define norms, while the periphery was expected to accept or emulate them. Confucian classics functioned as universal standards, and the ritual–musical system marked civilizational completion. Other polities were thus incorporated into graded categories of "barbarian," with Japan historically classified as one of the "Eastern Barbarians."

However, Japan occupied a structurally ambiguous position. On the one hand, admiration for Chinese civilization was widespread (Hao,1994), and Japan extensively adopted Chinese institutions and cultural forms, including the ritsuryō system, writing, and Confucian and Buddhist traditions. Through such processes, Japan largely acknowledged China's cultural and intellectual authority; by the early seventeenth century, Zhu Xi learning had become dominant, represented by figures such as Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan (Xie,2015). On the other hand, Japan maintained political independence and was never fully integrated into the tributary system. During the Ming period, its participation was intermittent: while trade was frequent, diplomatic relations remained unstable, and Ming efforts to incorporate Japan through tribute and investiture were ultimately unsuccessful.

The coexistence of cultural recognition and political autonomy placed Japan at the margins of the civilizational order: it participated in the hierarchy without being fully absorbed into it. While acknowledging China as the center implied acceptance of the hierarchical order, political independence created space for reinterpreting "orthodoxy." This structural ambiguity provided the conditions for early modern Japanese thinkers to reconsider the locus of the civilizational center.

2.2 Norinaga's Reinterpretation of the Huayi Order

Within the hierarchical civilizational order of the traditional *Huayi* framework, the question of "orthodoxy" was closely tied to the locus of the center: those who possessed the authority to interpret the classics and transmit the civilizational lineage occupied the central position. Intellectual responses in early modern Japan were structured around this issue, and Motoori Norinaga's Japanized *Huayi* perspective represents a significant transformation.

This perspective emerged in the context of the Ming–Qing transition, the rise of the Qing, and broader shifts in East Asia (Han,2007). The Manchu conquest of China, by overturning established distinctions between "civilized" and "barbarian," contributed to the diversification of *Huayi* conceptions. "Hua" was no longer exclusively associated with China, and multiple, competing criteria for distinguishing "Hua" and "Yi" developed across and within societies (Kishimoto,2005).

Against this background, Norinaga rejected territorial scale as a measure of national greatness, instead emphasizing Japan's status as a "divine land" (Liu,2024). From a *kokugaku* perspective, he interpreted texts such as the *Kojiki* to argue that the hierarchy of the gods corresponded to the social order, elevating Japan to the status of the "central court" while relegating other countries to the position of "barbarian." He maintained that Japan's value derived from its indigenous "ancient way" (*kodō*) and divine will, rather than from Chinese ritual systems or classical texts (Shi,2015).

In doing so, Norinaga challenged the identification of China as the origin and standard of civilization. Whereas the traditional *Huayi* framework privileged ritual institutions and canonical texts, he emphasized internal values such as the "true heart" (*makoto*) and the "ancient way," relocating the foundation of civilization in Japan's own spiritual and mytho-historical traditions. This redefinition undermined the authority of Chinese classics and destabilized the Sinocentric framework.

However, Norinaga did not abandon the center–periphery distinction. Instead, he redefined it by assigning Japan a more primordial status while relegating others to the periphery. The hierarchical structure remained intact; only the locus of the center shifted from China to Japan.

Overall, Norinaga's Japanized *Huayi* perspective exhibits a dual character. While it weakened China's centrality by reasserting Japan's cultural foundations, it retained the hierarchical logic of civilizational superiority. Rather than rejecting the traditional framework, Norinaga redefined orthodoxy and relocated the center within Japan itself.

3. Yanagita Kunio and "National Folklore Studies"

3.1 The Western-Centered Knowledge System

The formation of the modern academic system established the West—particularly Europe and North America—as the center of academic discourse. With the institutionalization and theoretical development of disciplines such as anthropology and folklore studies, Euro-American scholarship came to dominate standards of evaluation and knowledge production, forming a global knowledge system (Kuwasan,2019). Within this system, academic authority is concentrated in the West, where scholarly outputs occupy a privileged central position, while non-Western knowledge is often treated as derivative or peripheral. This asymmetry produces a structural imbalance: scholars at the center are not disadvantaged by ignorance of peripheral knowledge, whereas those at the periphery must engage with central scholarship or risk marginalization. Even then, access to the center remains limited.

Within this global system, the center–periphery relationship constitutes a durable hierarchy of academic power. Western scholars occupy a dominant position, while Yanagita Kunio and Japanese folklore studies are relegated to the periphery (Kan & Lu,2024). Although Japanese scholars actively adopted Western theories and methods from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, they did not achieve equal standing with Euro-American academic traditions. Early Japanese folklore studies, despite incorporating Western frameworks, continued to be regarded as a localized practice lacking international authority.For example, American and German folklorists could ignore Japanese research without consequence, whereas Japanese scholars who failed to engage with Western scholarship risked being labeled as outdated or uninformed.

The authority and centrality of Western academia thus posed significant challenges for non-Western knowledge systems seeking international recognition. For Japan, how to attain an equal position within this global structure became a pressing intellectual problem. It is within this context that Yanagita Kunio's folkloristic practice can be understood as a response to Western academic centrality and an attempt to establish folklore studies as an autonomous discipline within Japan.

3.2 Re-centering Knowledge in Yanagita's Folklore Studies

In response to the Western-dominated academic system and the peripheral position of Japanese scholarship, Yanagita Kunio adopted an independent stance rather than fully embracing Western theoretical frameworks. He criticized the epistemic dominance of Western academia and, within a broadly nationalist framework, articulated a vision for the autonomy of Japanese folklore studies. This vision took shape as "national folklore studies" (ikkoku minzokugaku), which reflects his response to the problem of the center.

In his early career, Yanagita was deeply influenced by Western anthropology and folklore studies, particularly the works of James Frazer and Lewis Henry Morgan. However, he later recognized that applying Western paradigms to Japanese folklore risked undermining indigenous subjectivity and reinforcing Japan's marginal position within the global academic system. He thus argued that Japanese folklore studies must detach from Western frameworks and establish an autonomous scholarly system.

"National folklore studies" refers to the study of a nation's folklore by its own people. Yanagita emphasized two key aspects. First, he advocated the creation of an indigenous form of folklore studies distinct from British and German traditions, thereby asserting the value of Japanese academic production and addressing social issues through the study of folk traditions (Pang & Jin,2023). Second, he maintained that outsiders could not adequately grasp folklore as a form of lived consciousness, and that only Japanese scholars could produce an authentic understanding of Japanese folklore (Yanagita,2010).

This position entailed rejecting Western epistemic authority and redefining scholarly subjectivity within a national framework. By delimiting the scope of research to Japan and focusing on local folk culture, Yanagita sought to achieve academic autonomy and reconstruct the center–periphery relationship through intellectual indigenization. In this sense, "national folklore studies" functioned both as a disciplinary strategy and as a response to the global academic order.

However, this approach did not transcend the center–periphery structure. Rather, it relocated it to a more localized level. By contracting the "center" from the global arena to the national context, Yanagita effectively centralized Japanese folklore studies within Japan, while leaving its peripheral position in the global knowledge system unchanged.

In sum, Yanagita's "national folklore studies" represents a form of strategic reconstruction. By redefining the subject and boundaries of research rather than confronting Western academia directly, he achieved relative centralization within Japan, while preserving the underlying center–periphery structure.

4. Norinaga and Yanagita: Convergences and Divergences

As an Edo-period kokugaku scholar, Motoori Norinaga, and as the founder of modern Japanese folklore studies, Yanagita Kunio, developed their ideas under different historical and disciplinary conditions. Yet in confronting the problem of the center–periphery structure, their thought reveals both significant similarities and important differences. Both thinkers responded to external cultural or intellectual systems by reassessing Japan's position within broader civilizational or academic orders. Despite these differences in context, their approaches converge on a shared concern: how to overcome peripheral status, reconstruct Japan's subjectivity, and reposition Japan as a center.

First, their intellectual frameworks display a fundamental similarity in that neither fundamentally rejects the hierarchical logic of the center–periphery structure. Although Motoori responded to the influence of Chinese civilization and Yanagita to the dominance of Western academic systems, both retained assumptions of civilizational hierarchy in their responses to external pressures. Motoori reworked the traditional Huayi framework into a Japan-centered model, positioning Japan as the locus of civilization grounded in its status as a "divine land." Yanagita, by contrast, restricted the scope of scholarly inquiry to Japan through his concept

of "national folklore studies," emphasizing the epistemic authority of Japanese scholars over their own culture. In both cases, the existence of a periphery is not denied; rather, Japan is repositioned toward the center in order to secure cultural or academic autonomy.

At the same time, their strategies for reconstructing the center differ in fundamental ways. Motoori Norinaga sought to displace the existing cultural center by reinterpreting texts such as the Kojiki and redefining Japan as the source of civilizational legitimacy. Through his notion of the "divine land," he attempted to elevate Japan to the apex of cultural and mythological order, thereby shifting the center away from China. His approach thus represents a relocation of the cultural center.

By contrast, Yanagita Kunio operated within a Western-dominated global academic system and, recognizing the difficulty of achieving parity within it, did not attempt to overturn Western centrality. Instead, he adopted a strategy of inward contraction, establishing a form of relative centralization within the national context. By focusing on Japanese folklore and asserting the interpretive authority of Japanese scholars, he avoided direct competition with Western academia while securing an autonomous position within Japan's scholarly field.

A further difference lies in their respective understandings and applications of the center–periphery structure. Motoori sought to replace the external center by redefining Japan's cultural superiority, whereas Yanagita accepted Japan's peripheral status in the global system and pursued autonomy through the restriction of scholarly scope. Thus, while both reconfigured the position of the "center," neither moved beyond the structural framework itself; rather, they followed distinct paths to reposition Japan within it.

Based on this analysis, the key features of their respective modes of center reconstruction are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison of Center-Reconstruction Strategies

Category	Motoori Norinaga	Yanagita Kunio
Period	Early Modern	Modern
International Context	Sinocentric East Asian order	Western-centered global knowledge system
Original Center	China	The West
Attitude	Rejection of China's centrality	Rejection of Western centrality
Strategy	Relocation of the center	Contraction of the center
Outcome	Establish Japan as a cultural center	Achieve academic autonomy within Japan
Japan's Self-Positioning	Source of civilization	Academic subject
Positioning of Others	Relativization of China	Exclusion of the West
Hierarchical Structure	Retained	Retained
Objective	Attain cultural centrality	Realize academic centrality within Japan

Although Motoori Norinaga and Yanagita Kunio differed in historical background, academic field, and specific modes of response, neither transcended the traditional center–periphery structure. Instead, both sought to secure an independent position within their respective domains through the redefinition of the center. The persistence and reconstruction of the center–periphery structure reflect a form of continuity in Japanese intellectual history: when confronted with external pressures, Japan has consistently attempted to achieve autonomy by reshaping the center, while at the same time preserving the underlying hierarchical logic. In this respect, the intellectual trajectories of both thinkers reveal the complexity and enduring influence of the center–periphery structure in Japanese thought.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the responses of Motoori Norinaga and Yanagita Kunio to the problem of the center–periphery structure through a comparative analysis of their thought. Although situated in different historical contexts and academic fields, both thinkers, when confronted with external cultural or intellectual pressures, did not depart from the traditional center–periphery framework. Instead, they sought to secure independence within their respective domains by redefining Japan's position as a center.

Motoori Norinaga pursued a relocation of the cultural center by rejecting the absolute centrality of Chinese civilization and asserting Japan as the locus of civilization, emphasizing the superiority of its ancient mythology and historical tradition. In contrast, Yanagita Kunio, through his proposal of "national folklore studies," shifted the focus of scholarly inquiry to Japan itself, thereby avoiding direct competition with Western academia and securing the autonomy of Japanese folklore studies within a domestic framework.

Despite their apparent differences, these two approaches share a common underlying logic. Both operate within the center–periphery framework and seek to achieve autonomy and identity in cultural and academic fields by redefining the meaning and position of the center. This study not only reveals the continuity and transformation of the center–periphery structure in

Japanese intellectual history, but also provides a new perspective for understanding how Japan has pursued independence through cultural and academic strategies in response to external pressures.

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