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## A Historiography in Modern Japan: the laborious quest for identity

### 1 Introduction

The development of modern Japan might surprise Europeans. Like other Asian countries, Japan retained the feudal system until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, establishing itself as a great economical power by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, at the outset of this article, we must confirm that, in forming the modern society, the Japanese experienced two historical conversions. The first was the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Since that date, Japan has denied its traditional society and promoted industrialization and modernization. This was the process of “westernization” to which Japan was urgently exposed in the context of the imperialist expansion by the Western powers. This process of urgent westernization in Japan involved a lot of historical problems. It followed upon the unequal development within the Japanese society and the imperialist invasion of Asian neighbours. The result of such distorted westernization was the defeat in WWII, which was the second conversion for the Japanese. After 1945, reforms by the GHQ<sup>1</sup> swept away not only the old social systems but also the national identity, which had its roots in the Meiji Restoration. Post-war Japan was thus required to build a democratic society and rebuild its national identity, so as to be suitable for democracy.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we can say that these two conversions each constituted a time of crisis for the Japanese, obliging them to modify their own identity. Generally speaking, when the Japanese met such crises, they were keen to import methods and values from the West. So westernization served not only to “modernize” Japanese society by appropriating western ways, but at the same time to “westernize” Japanese values. Academism was also influenced by western values. For example, when trying to identify themselves, Japanese historians have used the concept of “Asia”. But the name “Asia” was originally created as a standard of cultural identification by Europeans in the dichotomy between “Europe” and “non-Europe”, when Europeans compared their culture to others. This dichotomy influenced Japanese historians who were tormented by the backwardness of their nation. Most of them interpreted the dichotomy as a confrontation between “the developed Europe” and “the undeveloped Asia”. In terms of such a dichotomy, Japanese historians have tried to identify themselves. Some recognized Japan as a member



































