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Haga Yaichi and the *Kokuminsei jūron*: A Fragmentary Imagination of National Identity

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In 1907, amidst the national triumph following the Russo-Japanese War and the domestic unrest symbolised by the Hibiya riots, Haga Yaichi published *Kokuminsei jūron* [*Ten Essays on National Character*]. As an heir to the *kokugaku* tradition, a “father” of Japan’s literary canon, and a transmitter of German philology, Haga identified ten characteristics of the Japanese people in this widely circulated volume. The text quickly became a touchstone for discourse on national identity. While scholars in the 1970s embraced it as a precursor to *nihonjinron*, recent scholarship has reinterpreted it primarily as a tool of governmental suppression—prefiguring *Kokutai no hongi* (1937) by equating Japaneseness with readiness for war and death.

This presentation challenges both interpretations through a close reading and contextual analysis. While framed through the conceptual lens of modern Western nationalism, *Kokuminsei jūron* complicates state-centred visions of national essence. It presents national character as something larger: an entity to be loved, but also to be interpreted and negotiated. Through stylistic and conceptual fragmentation, the work constructs a narrative of cultural particularism that draws on the authority of modern literary scholarship to encompass everyday habits and sensory impressions.

By operating across a broad spectrum of registers—blurring the boundary between learned discourse and lived experience—Haga’s work offers a unique window into prewar Japanese self-imagining. This research aims to expand our understanding beyond familiar themes of imperial loyalism or agrarian nostalgia, reframing *kokuminsei* as a dynamic site of identity production.

Alberto Zizza is a PhD candidate at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, specialising in modern Japanese intellectual history. Since his Master’s studies at Sapienza University of Rome, his research has examined the construction of Japanese national identity in the Meiji period, focusing on Haga Yaichi’s influential work. Alberto has been a PhD student at the DIJ Tokyo since March 2025.

About:

The DIJ Study Group is a forum for scholars from all disciplines conducting research on contemporary or modern Japan. The event is open to all.

This session is organized by David M. Malitz.

This is a public event. Please be aware that audio-visual recordings may be made, stored, and published during and after the event.

Hybrid Event:

On-site participation: please register via email to malitz@dijtokyo.org until February 4, 2026.

Online participation: please register via our webpage.

Venue:

Online and DIJ Tokyo: <https://www.dijtokyo.org/access/>