

Nationalism and the Decline of Liberalism in Meiji Japan

MIKISO HANE

Knox College

During the early Meiji years in Japan there was widespread interest in Western civilization, and the desire for knowledge about Western institutions, practices, and ideas seemed to permeate the entire society. In the intellectual world, the most popular current of thought was Western liberalism. "Liberty," "independence," "equality," "reason," "progress," "civilization," "people's rights," "constitutional government," and "national assembly" became catchwords of the age. At the forefront of the movement to enlighten the people about Western civilization and liberalize the existing society were such men as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) and the members of the Meirokusha, an intellectual society organized in 1873 by Fukuzawa and his friends.

Fukuzawa needs no introduction as the most prominent and influential advocate of liberalism and Westernization in Meiji Japan. He produced volumes and volumes of pamphlets, tracts, books, and articles calling for the transformation of Japanese modes of thought, institutions, and practices. He asked the people to adopt "the spirit of civilization" which he defined as "number and reason" and "independence and self-respect."¹

The other members of the Meirokusha circle are not as closely identified with liberalism since they soon modified or changed their attitudes toward it. But during the early years of the Meiji era they played active roles in introducing new knowledge and ideas from the West. Among the founders of the Meirokusha was Mori Arinori (1847-1889) who in 1885 became the minister of education in the first Ito Cabinet. He spent some time in

both England and America and upon his return advocated such reforms as the abandonment of the samurai practice of sword bearing, equality of the sexes, religious freedom, and the adoption of English as Japan's national language. While in America he wrote a short article in English entitled, "Religious Freedom in Japan."

Nakamura Masanao (1832-1890) did very little original writing on behalf of the liberal cause but he contributed greatly to the dissemination of English liberal thought by translating two English works which became the most widely read translations of early Meiji: Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. He also embraced Christianity and, in 1872, before the ban against Christianity was lifted, he submitted, under a pseudonym, an open letter to the emperor proposing that the latter adopt Christianity to set an example for the people.² Nakamura was also interested in feminine education and was one of the pioneers in this field.

Nishi Amane (1826-1894) was among the first Japanese to be sent abroad by the Tokugawa government to study in the West. In 1862 he went to Holland and remained there for three years. He was the first serious student of Western philosophy, and he sought to introduce the Western system of logic into Japan, relying primarily on Mill's *System of Logic*. Mill's utilitarian philosophy also interested Nishi and he not only translated the former's *Utilitarianism* but presented his own interpretation of utilitarianism in the *Meiroku Journal*.³

Among those who went to Holland with Nishi was Tsuda Mamichi (1829-1903) who, after his return, also sought to introduce Western learning to Japan, and called for liberal reforms in his many articles in the *Meiroku Journal*. He was one of the few Meirokusha members to support Itagaki Taisuke's call for the establishment of a national assembly in 1874.⁴ Kato Hiroyuki (1836-1916) is known more as the advocate of German statism and a supporter of the Meiji oligarchy but, during the early years of Meiji, he favored the establishment of a constitutional government and free trade, and wrote several books calling for liberal reforms.⁵ Nishimura Shigeki (1828-1902) is better known as a Confucian scholar but he too was interested in liberal ideas

and institutions and sought to educate the public about them in the *Meiroku Journal*. He was also one of the few men to support Itagaki's proposal for the immediate establishment of a national assembly.⁶

The enthusiasm for Western things and for the following that liberalism had gained during the first decade or so seemed, on the surface, to indicate that Japan would indeed be transformed into the image of a liberal Western society. But by the middle of the 1880's, it was clear that liberalism was losing its popularity. A re-evaluation of traditional ideas and institutions, a more critical appraisal of Western civilization, a revival of traditional intellectual and cultural forces and, above all, the rising sense of nationalism changed the complexion of things in the cultural and intellectual spheres.

If the growth of nationalism was the single most important factor which brought about the decline of liberalism in Meiji Japan, we can say that the seed of its demise was embedded from the beginning in the liberal movement itself, for prominent among the motives which led men like Fukuzawa to embrace Western liberalism were nationalistic considerations. The liberals, like the leaders of the government, were acutely aware of the dangers that confronted Japan just emerging from feudalism. They all agreed that in order for Japan to survive she would have to accommodate herself to Western ways as quickly as possible. The government leaders were interested primarily in Western science and technology to enable Japan to modernize her armed forces and develop her industries. The liberal intellectuals, however, went further and believed that to build a vigorous nation it was also necessary to adopt the values, attitudes, and institutions prevalent in the most advanced nations of the West, such as England and America. The importation of Western liberalism would, they concluded, not only further the well-being of the individual Japanese but it would also serve the national interest.

This belief was expressed repeatedly by Fukuzawa who insisted that "the independence of the individual will be followed by the independence of the nation."⁷ In urging the adoption of Western civilization he stated:

We must fix our goal and advance toward civilization. Our goal is . . . the preservation of our national independence. There is no other way to preserve our independence except through the adoption of [Western] civilization. The Japanese people are to advance toward civilization solely for the purpose of maintaining this nation's independence.⁸

He was aware, he explained, that there were higher goals than the mere preservation of national independence, but these had to wait for the future. The immediate task was the defense of Japan's independence. "Without a nation and without the people we cannot talk about Japanese civilization," he stated.⁹

The development of individualism in Japan would make the people energetic defenders of Japan's national sovereignty. "Those without the spirit of independence," Fukuzawa argued, "are incapable of thinking seriously about their country . . . In order to defend our nation against foreign powers, we must saturate the entire nation with the spirit of independence."¹⁰ For the same reason he pleaded for the development of the people's intellectual capacity. Before this can be accomplished blind adherence to ancient practices and beliefs must be ended, and the "spirit of civilization" instilled into the people. This is the way "to fortify our nationality and give added luster to our imperial dynasty," he asserted.¹¹ Refusal to accept changes, he held, would not result in the glorification of the imperial dynasty and the nation; on the contrary, it would lead to their decline.

Fukuzawa based his plea for the establishment of a constitutional parliamentary government on the ground of national interest also. The people must be allowed to participate in national affairs in order to make everyone personally interested in the fate of the nation. "There is only one way," he wrote, "to make the people shoulder the burdens of the nation, and that is to grant them political rights and establish a national assembly."¹² Others also shared this view. Before he changed his position, Kato Hiroyuki believed that the way to further the national interest was the establishment of a constitutional government.¹³ The men who submitted the Memorial of 1874 asking for the establishment of a national assembly stated:

We fear . . . that if a reform is not effected the state will be ruined. Unable to resist the promptings of our patriotic feelings, we have sought to devise a means of rescuing it from this danger, and we find it to consist in developing public discussion in the empire.¹⁴

At first the liberals did not see any contradictions in their espousal of liberal principles and nationalistic goals. "The people's rights and national rights go hand in hand and cannot be separated," wrote Fukuzawa.¹⁵ Certainly, they were not narrow-minded, militant ultranationalists. Fukuzawa constantly cautioned against letting the love of one's country lead to a contempt of other countries or to an unrealistic sense of national grandeur. He was the first to criticize those who asserted that Japan was "the land of righteousness" and "the most sacred land of the gods."¹⁶ Nakamura, who was perhaps the least nationalistic of the Meirokusha men, cautioned his countrymen not to scorn the Chinese,¹⁷ while Nishimura was one of the few men to speak out against Japanese imperialism later in the Meiji era. "Do not make aggression our national policy," he called out, "it is banditry to encroach upon other countries."¹⁸

Fukuzawa explained that he believed it was necessary to harp upon the question of national interests because the Japanese who were just emerging from a feudal era were not sufficiently accustomed to thinking in terms of the entire nation.¹⁹ Thus, in the beginning, the emphasis on national interests was intended primarily to rouse the Japanese and rally them to the defense of their nation's independence. But as Japan became more secure and her leaders shifted their attention from the preservation of her independence to the pursuit of a more aggressive foreign policy in Asia, many of the liberals rushed to support the imperialistic policies of their government. If individual interests got in the way of national interests, they would have to be curbed for the sake of building a powerful Japanese state and empire. At the same time, the liberals too went through a period of re-evaluation of Japanese and Western values and institutions. Soon many of the early champions of the liberal movement began to desert the cause.

By the time Mori was appointed minister of education in 1885 he had abandoned his liberal sentiments. Upon taking

office he reorganized the existing school system which had been influenced greatly by American educational concepts, and established a system which was designed to produce obedient, nationalistic subjects of the state.²⁰ Kato forsook the liberal cause by the late seventies and in 1881 he asked the government to prohibit the circulation of his earlier works. In a new work published in 1882 he denounced the proponents of natural rights and upheld the principle of "survival of the fittest," insisting that men enjoy certain rights only because the strongest authority in society restrains the strong from attacking the weak in order to maintain peace and stability; men are not born with natural rights.²¹ He served the ruling clique faithfully, and became the president of the Imperial University of Tokyo and a member of the Privy Council.

Nishi also became a supporter of the government and helped to draft the imperial rescript addressed to the armed forces. His friend, Tsuda, was elected to the Lower House of the Diet in 1890 and was chosen as its vice-speaker, but he belonged not to the liberal parties but to the government faction. Nishimura was never an all-out supporter of liberalism but he was in favor of constitutional government and popular rights. He was, however, critical of utilitarianism, and began to emphasize strongly the necessity of reviving Confucian moral values. Although he did not become a rabid nationalist, Nakamura too turned his attention away from Western learning and concentrated on the teaching of the Chinese classics. Unlike Fukuzawa, these men did not refrain from accepting posts in governmental institutions.

Only Fukuzawa appeared to remain faithful to the liberal ideals as he continued to maintain his independence from the government, refusing to become an "official scholar." But in his thinking the inner contradictions of the liberals is seen most clearly. A dichotomy in his views about internal and external issues became evident before many years of the Meiji period had passed. At first he seemed to believe in the rule of law in the international sphere and the need to respect the rights of all nations. In his *Gakumon no Susume (Encouragement of Learning)*, a series of essays published between 1872 and 1876, he stated:

The individual man and individual nation are independent and free in accordance with the principle of heaven. If the freedom of an individual nation is obstructed, that nation should not fear fighting for its rights even if it meant challenging the entire world. If the freedom of an individual man is obstructed, he need not fear even the officials of the government (in fighting for his rights).²²

But after observing the manner in which international affairs were actually conducted by the advanced Western nations—and after the initial threat to Japan's independence had passed—he and the other liberals adopted the view that the law of the jungle and not the rule of law and justice prevailed in the international sphere. By 1880 Fukuzawa was writing:

Such things as treaties of amity and international law sound very wonderful but they are merely superficial forms and terms. In the actual conduct of international affairs, there is only a struggle for power and greedy pursuit of self-interest . . . A hundred volumes of international law is no match for several cannons, and volumes of treaties of amity are no match for a box of gunpowder. Cannons and gunpowder are not used to maintain existing rights but are devices to create rights where rights do not exist.²³

This denial of just principles in the international scene became more pronounced as the European powers became more active in Asia. Fukuzawa accepted the concept that might is right and asserted that force alone counted in the realm of international relations:

If others behave foolishly, we too must respond in a foolish manner. If others use force we too must use force . . . The struggle of the nations of the world is like the struggle of the birds and the beasts. Japan too is a member of this family of animals. At times we may be devoured by others, and at other times we may devour others. The only thing that we can depend upon is brute force.²⁴

Although Fukuzawa sought to make a distinction between international and domestic affairs and continued to insist upon individual rights and freedom at home, he was compelled to revise his position. In the early 1880's, as Japan became increasingly interested in Korea, he professed his willingness to subordinate individual rights to the interests of the nation:

My life-long goal has been the extension of national rights. The question of control of political power at home is insignificant compared to the question of national interests. Even if the form and name of the government are autocratic, as long as the government is capable of extending our national interests I am satisfied.²⁵

Earlier, Fukuzawa had been one of the severest critics of the Satsuma-Choshu clique that controlled the government but he began to take an increasingly moderate position in the struggle for popular rights and constitutional government. In fact, he became highly critical of the more radical proponents of political reforms, labelling them "the vulgar advocates of popular rights."²⁶ He advised his followers to accept less than true parliamentary government to maintain harmony at home so that Japan could further her interests abroad. Japan, he decided, would have to be content with a mixture of the vestiges of feudalism and Western parliamentary government for the time being.²⁷ After the 1880's, "Harmony Between the Government and the People" became his political slogan.

In the conduct of foreign affairs, he asked the government leaders to take strong measures, and became an energetic supporter of the official policy of strengthening the military forces. He constantly alerted the people of the dangers of further Western encroachments in Asia and urged his country to join the ranks of the imperialistic powers and treat Korea and China as they did.

In 1882 he published a series of articles criticizing Chinese interventions in Korea. He called for the Japanese government to put an end to this. China, he held, must be prevented from becoming the strongest power in Asia. For this purpose, Japan's military forces must be built up and the people must be willing to bear heavier taxation. In order to stir the people to support this policy, he painted a dire picture of the consequences of a Chinese victory in any future war between the two nations. The Chinese would, he predicted, "commit outrages against our women, loot and plunder our property, kill the aged and the young, burn our houses, and commit all the crimes imaginable."²⁸ If, on the other hand, Japan strengthened her military forces and became the dominant power in Asia, she would enjoy the dis-

tion of being the England of Asia. He recalled observing earlier, when he was on his way to Europe, the high-handed manner in which the British treated the natives in India. While sympathizing with the natives, he also felt envious of the British power which enabled them to behave in this arbitrary fashion. He secretly vowed, he stated, to build Japan's position to a level where the Japanese too could treat not only other Asians but the British themselves in the same arbitrary manner.²⁹ The Japanese people, he pleaded, must willingly endure an austere life and defray the cost of strengthening the armed forces so that "the rising sun will cover the entire Orient, and its influence extend to the distant Western nation."³⁰ He continued to advocate the adoption of aggressive policies toward China, and when the Sino-Japanese War broke out he became one of the most vociferous supporters of the war. He urged the people to give complete support to the government's war efforts:

Japanese subjects must not criticize the government's policies... My sole object is victory in this war. As long as we win the war and extend our national power so that we Japanese can be proud among the nations of the world, there is no need to complain about domestic matters no matter how much discontent and unreasonableness may prevail.³¹

He donated ten thousand yen, a considerable sum in those days, to the government to help the war effort, and insisted that the war must be continued until China was completely crushed. This war, he held, was a conflict between a civilized and a barbarous nation.³²

After the war he returned to his espousal of liberal principles and continued to speak about "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," but his words no longer captured the imagination of the young idealists of the new century.

The Sino-Japanese War, then, can be viewed as marking the end of a chapter in the history of Meiji liberalism. That it had a decisive impact on the thinking of many liberals is dramatically illustrated by the example of Tokutomi Soho, a man who seemed destined to become the outstanding liberal of the second half of the Meiji period. He was a Christian, a staunch pacifist, a warm

admirer of the English Utilitarian liberals, and the founder and editor of the most influential journal of the middle Meiji years, *Kokumin no Tomo* (*Nation's Friend*).

In 1886 he published a book called *Shorai no Nihon* (*Japan of the Future*) pleading for the cause of peace and attacking militarism and expansionism. He cited the views of various English writers of the nineteenth century, particularly the leaders of the Manchester School, Cobden and Bright, to buttress his arguments for peace. Japan and the other nations of the world, he argued, should pursue a policy of developing economic wealth rather than concentrating on the expansion of their military forces.⁸³

Militarists, he argued, seek to maintain national honor by sacrificing the interests of the people while economic producers seek to preserve national honor in order to further the well-being of the people. Conflict is the object of the former while peace is the goal of the latter. The former seek to benefit at the expense of others while the latter would further both the interests of themselves as well as others. The former seek to rob other nations while the latter endeavor to maintain national independence and associate with others peacefully. The former operate on the principle of violence while the latter operate on the principle of justice.

Wars, he pointed out, result in heavy casualties and costly expenditures. While the people are compelled to endure hardships and make great sacrifices, they derive no benefits from war even in victory. He condemned Bismarck's militaristic policies and deplored Western imperialism in Asia. He especially criticized his fellow liberals who championed popular rights at home but were the first to call for the invasion of their neighbors. They failed to realize, he noted, that if war broke out the power of the government would increase even more while the rights of the people would decrease proportionately. The aggrandizement of national power and expansionism, he argued, would inevitably result in the violation of individual rights.

Tokutomi stood out as the most eloquent pleader for a peaceful foreign policy. Here was a man who seemed devoted to the cause of liberalism, pacifism, and rationalism. And yet, the

Sino-Japanese War brought about a total transformation in his outlook. Like Fukuzawa, when fighting commenced, he abandoned all opposition to the government and supported the war effort. The Triple Intervention after the war, he claimed, transformed him suddenly into an ultranationalist and an advocate of imperialism. This intervention, he later explained, made him realize the folly of his earlier views which were based on book learning, not on the realities of life. He concluded that force alone counted in this world and completely abandoned his idealistic liberal ideas.³⁴ He then became one of the most aggressive advocates of expansionism and a harsh foe of liberalism. As the dean of the newspaper world he helped to rouse militaristic, imperialistic sentiments for the next half century up to and through the Pacific War.

Liberalism, then, lost many of its champions, and those like Fukuzawa who continued to write for its cause lost their effectiveness. Confucianism and Shintoism regained their prestige, and the more moderate conservatives turned to the cultural nationalism of the movement led by Miyake Yujiro, who sought to effect a reappraisal of Japanese culture and educate the public to appreciate the finer aspects of Japan through his journal, *Nihonjin* (*Japanese*). An important leader of this circle, Kuga Katsunan, struck at the sore spot of liberalism when he wrote: "Alas! Liberalism, did you not bring about the revival of the Yamato spirit as well as the birth of Japanese imperialism?"³⁵

NOTES

1. Fukuzawa Yukiechi, *Autobiography*, Kiyooka Eiichi, trans. (Tokyo, 1916), p. 244.
2. Yoshino Sakuzo, ed., *Meiji Bunka Zenshu*, XV (Tokyo, 1927-1930), 223 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, XVIII, 236 ff.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-16.
5. Cf. vols. V and VII.
6. *Ibid.*, XVIII, 413-14.
7. *Fukuzawa Yukiechi Senshu*, I (Tokyo, 1951) 104.
8. *Ibid.*, II, 263-64.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, I, 104.
11. *Ibid.*, II, 38-39.
12. *Zoku Fukuzawa Zenshu*, VII (Tokyo, 1932), 441.

13. *Yoshino, op. cit.*, VII, 4-9.
14. W. W. McLaren, ed., "Japanese Government Documents," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, vol. XLIII, sec. 1, p. 428.
15. *Fukuzawa Yukichi Zenshu*, IV, 65.
16. *Zoku Fukuzawa Zenshu*, VII, 372-73.
17. *Yoshino, op. cit.*, XVIII, 222.
18. Iyenaga Saburo, *Nihon Dotoku Shiso Shi* (Tokyo, 1954), p. 230.
19. *Fukuzawa Zenshu*, IV (Tokyo, 1925-1926), 186-87.
20. Shigenobu Okuma, *Fifty Years of New Japan*, II, (London, 1910), 94.
21. *Yoshino, op. cit.*, V, 574-76.
22. *Fukuzawa Yukichi Zenshu*, I, 92.
23. *Ibid.*, IV, 108.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 422. (Quoted from Maruyama Masao's analysis of Fukuzawa's political thought included in this volume).
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 424-25.
26. *Fukuzawa Zenshu*, V, 271.
27. *Zoku Fukuzawa Zenshu*, II, 625.
28. *Fukuzawa Yukichi Zenshu*, IV, 349.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 346.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 347.
31. Iyenaga, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-31.
32. *Zoku Fukuzawa Zenshu*, VI, 455 and 526-27.
33. Tokutomi Soho *Shu* (Tokyo, 1930), pp. 65 ff.
34. Tokutomi Soho and Masamune Hakucho, "Isseiki o Ikinuku Ho," *Chuo Koron* (Nov., 1955), p. 245.
35. Maruyama Masao, "Kuga Katsunan to Kokumin Shugi," *Minkenron Kara Nashonaricumu* (Tokyo, 1957), p. 198.