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著者	Uemura Kunihiko
journal or publication title	Kansai University review of economics
volume	14
page range	1-16
year	2012-03
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00017193">http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00017193</a>

## Fukuzawa Yukichi and Eurocentrism in modern Japan

Kunihiko Uemura\*

Fukuzawa Yukichi is generally regarded as one of the founders of modern Japan. He introduced earnestly the Western thought of enlightenment and civilization as a translator, teacher and writer. But, at the same time, he is often criticized as a supporter of Japanese imperialism. This paper examines the coherence of Fukuzawa's social thought by noticing his acceptance of the Eurocentric imaginations about "the Asiatic."

Keywords: Fukuzawa Yukichi, Asiatic despotism, Civilization, Eurocentrism

### 1. Introduction

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) was the first social thinker in Japan who appreciated the importance of Western civilization and enlightenment (Bunmei kaika) and made it to the national concern. We Japanese see his portrait everyday on the bill of the highest denomination, the 10,000 yen banknote, since 1984, which means that we currently consider him as a national leader of the civilization and modernization of Japan.

The most important work of Fukuzawa is *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization (Bunmeiron no gairyaku)* published in 1875. Maruyama Masao, late member of Japan Academy, regards it as a manifesto of liberalism and nationalism in modern Japan (Maruyama 1986). And Koyasu Nobukuni, historian of Japanese thought, consists that it was a criticism of the ideology of conservative Restoration and adoration of Emperor at the time (Koyasu 2005).

However, Fukuzawa was also the author of an article titled "Escape from Asia" (Datsu-a ron) of 1885. This leading article in his daily news-

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paper *Jiji Shimpo* had a very great influence on the imperialist and colonialist policy in modern Japan. At the same time, it indicated a starting point when we began to see Asian peoples as “Others” and to consume “the Asiatic,” for example, the foods and cultures of Asian peoples as something exotic for us. It is the subject of this paper to consider why Fukuzawa shifted himself from a vanguard of civilization and enlightenment to a supporter of imperialism and furthermore to examine the origin of our imagination about Asia (for further details of my discussion, see Uemura 2006).

## **2. The European Concept of Civilization**

### **2-1. Savage and Civilization**

In 1854 Japan opened a door for the United States of America and other European countries. In the very next year Fukuzawa began to learn Dutch and finally decided to learn English in 1858. This linguistic ability gave him the rare opportunity to travel to America as a member of the Tokugawa governmental mission at the first time in 1860, then to Europe (France, England, Netherlands, Germany, Russia and Portugal) in 1861-62, and to America again in 1867. Then he brought many English books with him back to Japan, and founded the first private university, Keio Gijuku, before the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

In the winter of 1867, shortly after coming back from America, Fukuzawa wrote the second part of *Conditions in the West (Seiyo jijo)*, where he already mentioned about the civilization: “The history of mankind developed gradually from rude wildness to civilization” (Fukuzawa 1868: 172).

In 1869, after the Restoration, he published *Handbook of the Myriad Countries (Shochu bankoku ichiran)*, the best-seller at the time. Herein he described the four phases-development of human history. However, in fact, it is a faithful translation from an English book, *Mitchell's New School Geography*, written by a famous American geographer Samuel Augustus Mitchell (1792-1868) and published in 1865. This is the fully revised new edition of *Mitchell's School Geography* that was first published in 1839 and continued in print through successive editions (see Craig 2009: 41, 174), and “Fukuzawa bought the second 1866 printing of this new work at Appleton’s bookstore in New York during his

trip to the United States in 1867” (Craig 2009: 46).

In his text Mitchell explains the states of mankind as follows:

Mankind, in respect to their social condition, may be divided into two great classes, viz., Savage and Civilized. ... These two classes may be still further divided into five: the Savage, Barbarous, Half-Civilized, Civilized, and Enlightened. ...

Savage life is the lowest stage of existence among wandering tribes. It is but little removed from the life of brutes. Such is the condition of some of the natives of Central Africa, of New Guinea, and Australia. Savages roam over a great extent of country, and live by hunting and fishing, and sometimes upon insects, roots, and wild fruits. They make war upon each other, and are very cruel and superstitious. Some savages are cannibals and eat human flesh. ...

The barbarous state is the second stage, not quite so low as the savage. The tartars, the Arabs, and some North African tribes are in this state. Barbarians live in tents or rude houses, which they move about from place to place in search of pasture for their flocks and herds. Barbarians eat the flesh of their flocks and herds and drink their milk. They also pay some attention to agriculture, and raise various kinds of grain for foods. ...

The Half-Civilized state is a decided improvement, in life and manners, upon the barbarous state. In the half-civilized state agriculture is conducted with some degree of skills, the useful arts are practiced and improved, cities and towns are built and adorned, and a considerable advance is made in learning and literature. ... China, Japan, Turkey, and Persia are the principal countries of this class.

Civilized and enlightened nations are those which have made the greatest progress in morals, justice, and refinement, among whom the arts are constantly being improved and the sciences are diligently cultivated. ... In this way comforts and luxuries are provided, and the bulk of the people are rendered contented and prosperous. The best examples of enlightened nations are the United States, England, France, and Germany.

(Mitchell 1865: 35-8)

The translated text by Fukuzawa is a representation of the original

word by word (see Fukuzawa 1869a: 100-101). However, there is a mysterious difference. Mitchell mentions, as we saw above, “China, Japan, Turkey, and Persia” as examples of “half-civilized state,” but Fukuzawa names only “China, Turkey and Persia” and removes Japan, as if he rejects to classify Japan into “half-civilized state” (cf. Uemura 2006: 132; Craig 2009: 49).

In the same year Fukuzawa published another version of the translation from *Mitchell's New School Geography*, that is *All the Countries of the World (Sekai kunizukushi)*, where he repeats the same rejection (about problems of translation in this book, see Uemura 2006: 132-3; Uchiyama 2009: 67-75).

This theory of four stages development is based on the Eurocentric idea that Montesquieu (1689-1755), Adam Smith (1723-90), Hegel (1770-1831), and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) have gradually constructed. According to this idea, only European countries and the United States stand on the latest summit of historical progress, and Asia stays still in the backward state. It is this idea that Fukuzawa has received together with the concept of civilization.

## **2-2. Asia as “half-civilized”**

In his *Outline* of 1875 Fukuzawa ultimately accepted Mitchell's statement that Japan stands in the half-civilized or semi-developed state. Herein, however, he describes human history in three stages, instead of four stages as before.

When we are talking about civilization in the world today, the nations of Europe and the United States of America are the most highly civilized, while the Asian countries, such as Turkey, China, and Japan, may be called semi-developed countries, and Africa and Australia are to be counted as still primitive lands. These designations are common currency all over the world. While the citizens of the nations of the West are the only ones to boast of civilization, the citizens of the semi-developed and primitive lands submit to being designated as such.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 17)

At the same time, however, he admits that these designations are

relative rather than fixed, because even European nations were formerly half-civilized. Accordingly he goes on to say: “Thus, for example, present-day China has to be called semi-developed in comparison with Western countries. But if we compare China with countries of South Africa, or to take an example more at hand, if we compare the people of mainland Japan with the Ainu, then both China and Japan can be called civilized” (Fukuzawa 1875: 19).

The word “semi-developed” used here is selected by translators in the published English text of *Outline*, but Japanese original word “han-kai” refers exactly to “half-civilized,” and Fukuzawa has already used “han-kai” as an equivalent term for “half-civilized” in his *Conditions in the West* (Fukuzawa 1868: 107) and *All the Countries of the World* (Fukuzawa 1869b: 183). Albert M. Craig, American historian of East Asia, uses properly “half-civilized” in his own translation of this passage cited from *Outline* (Craig 2009: 107)

Fukuzawa learned the connotation of “half-civilized” from Mitchell at first and then from John Stuart Mill. In his *Principles of Political Economy* Mill designates “backward” nations as “half-civilized” by comparing with the European full civilization (Mill 1848: 702), and mentions frequently about “a very backward state of society, like that of Europe in the Middle Ages, and many parts of Asia at present” (157) and “poor and backward societies, as in the East, and in Europe during the Middle Ages” (714).

In fact, Mill was the author who gave the greatest influence upon Fukuzawa together with Thomas Buckle (1821-62), the author of *History of Civilization in England* (1857-61), while writing *Outline* (Matsuzawa 1995: 369). Furthermore, Fukuzawa accepted the idea of the progression of civilization and the measure of “forward /backward” or “more advanced /less advanced” from Mitchell and Mill. He writes in his *Outline*:

The overall evidence conclusively shows that the civilization of Japan is less advanced than that of the West. When some countries are more advanced than others it is natural for the advanced to control the less advanced and the less advanced to be controlled by the advanced.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 225)

Then, what means “the less advanced”? Why can Europeans designate Asian nations as “half-civilized”? The key of understanding is the European way of imagination about Asia. Therefore, first of all, we should examine the concept of “Asiatic despotism” that we can see in many classic texts in Europe.

### **3. The European imagination about “the Asiatic”**

#### **3-1. “Asiatic despotism”**

Montesquieu was the first European thinker who gave a total image to Asia as a whole and disseminated it all over Europe. In *The Spirit of the Laws* he talks about “that part of the world, Asia, where despotism is, so to speak, naturalized” (Montesquieu 1748: 63) and the “despotism of Asia” (158), and explains that “in despotic countries, where one is already in political slavery, civil slavery is more bearable than elsewhere” (246).

In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel also speaks about “oriental despotism” (Hegel 1821: 301) and writes in *The Philosophy of History*: “While we found a moral despotism in China, whatever may be called a relic of political life in India, is a despotism without a principle, without any rule of morality and religion” (Hegel 1831: 161).

In *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill is talking about despotism in the whole East: “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement. ... The greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history, because the despotism of custom is complete. This is the case over the whole East” (Mill 1859: 272). And in his *Considerations on Representative Government* Mill also mentions about “the paternal despotism in China” (Mill 1861: 396).

Mainly by reading Mill’s works, Fukuzawa accepted the Eurocentric concept of “Asiatic despotism” and admitted that the government in Japan was really despotic. In his *Outline* he writes:

The Japanese people suffered for many years the yoke of despotism. Lineage was the basis of power. Even intelligent men were entirely dependent upon houses of high lineage. The whole age was, as it were, under the thumb of lineage. Throughout the land there was no room for human initiative; everything was in a condi-

tion of stagnation.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 84)

In this way Fukuzawa grants that government in Japan was fully despotic. Nevertheless, he compares Japan with China respecting the degree of despotism, and emphasizes “Japan’s great good fortune” as follows:

Had the power of the military elite been held by the Imperial House during the seven hundred years of shogunal government, or had the military elite, in turn, possessed the prestige of the Imperial House, with the most sacrosanct and the most powerful thus united and lodging simultaneously in the minds of the Japanese people, there would be no Japan as we know it today. ... In summary, I say that China has endured as a theocratic autocracy over the centuries, while Japan has balanced the element of military power against the element of theocracy. China has had but one element, Japan two. If you discuss civilization in these terms, China has never once changed and thus is not equal to Japan in her development. It is easier for Japan to adopt Western civilization than for China.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 84)

It is demonstrably a discourse in behalf of distinguishing Japan from China, despite both in the “half-civilized” stage. At the same time, it was actually a weapon of polemic against the ideology of conservative Restoration and adoration of Emperor in Japan at the time.

### **3-2. “stationary and fixed Asia”**

There is another discourse of “the Asiatic” in the Eurocentric imagination. That is “stationary and fixed Asia.”

For example, Adam Smith writes in *The Wealth of Nations* that “China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary” (Smith 1776: 89).

Hegel also mentions in *The Philosophy of History* that “India, like China, is a phenomenon antique as well as modern; one which has



remained stationary and fixed, and has received a most perfect home-sprung development” (Hegel 1831: 139). Wherefrom he draws a conclusion as follows: “The English, or rather the East India Company, are the lords of the land; for it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans; and China will, some day or other, be obliged to submit to this fate ” (142-3).

At last Mill writes in *On Liberty*: “We have a warning example in China. ... They have become stationary, have remained so far thousands of years; and if they are ever to be farther improved, it must be by foreigners” (Mill 1859: 273). Thus he declares in *Considerations on Representative Government*: “If the smaller nationality, supposed to be the more advanced in improvement, is able to overcome the greater, as the Macedonians, reinforced by the Greeks, did Asia, and the English India, there is often a gain to civilization” (Mill 1861: 549- 50). In this way the Eurocentric discourse has been constructed, which justified “the ideal rule of a free people over a barbarous or semi-barbarous one” (567).

Fukuzawa has received this imagination of “stationary and fixed Asia” at the depth of his heart. In his *Outline*, as we saw, he says that in Japan everything was “in a condition of stagnation” for many years by the yoke of despotism. Therefore he writes:

Therefore, throughout the whole twenty-five centuries or so of Japanese history, the government has been continually doing the same thing; it is like reading the same book over and over again, or presenting the same play time after time. ... A certain Westerner writes that, though there have indeed been revolutions and insurrections in Asian countries, no less than in Europe, in Asia these upheavals have not advanced the cause of civilization. In my opinion, this is undeniable.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 185)

Stagnation is not only for Japan. Fukuzawa indicates critically “the credulity of old customs” in India, and continues as follows:

But while the Indian people were preserving this revered classic and their ancient national customs, and thus living in a kind of

trancelike state, their sovereignty was being snatched away by Westerners. The great spiritual land of India becomes England's kitchen, and the descendants of Prathama-Rajah become the slaves of the British. All this talk about six million years or two billion years, and things being as old as heaven and earth, was nothing but an absurd boast.

(Fukuzawa 1875: 42)

It was Fukuzawa's warning for the contemporary Japanese that "stationary and fixed" nations must be ruled and controlled by Europeans, and it was just the fate of India. This means that an Asian thinker justifies the Eurocentric thought and repeats it for himself, because he has deeply accepted the European imagination of "backward and stationary Asia."

However, Fukuzawa was not a simple Eurocentric ideologist. He did not praise the European civilization in its entirety, but criticized it severely in parts. For example, he notes that "there is no greater calamity in the world than war, and yet the nations of the West are always at war. Robbery and murder are the worst of human crimes; but in the West there are robbers and murders" (Fukuzawa 1875: 19).

These words are based on the concrete and historical knowledge of the colonization in America and Asia by European nations, and on an urgent sense of crisis as an Asian:

Whose country was present-day America originally? It is not true that the Indians who owned the land were driven away by the white men and now the roles of master and guest are switched around? Hence the civilization of present-day America is really the civilization of the white man and cannot be called the civilization of America. What about in countries of the East and the islands in Oceania? In all places touched by the Europeans are there any which have developed their power, attained benefits, and preserved their independence? What has been the outcome in Persia, India, Siam, Luzon, and Java?

(Fukuzawa 1875: 248)

To admit that Japan is "despotic and stationary" means to admit that

Japan, like India, can be ruled and controlled by the European nations. Therefore he concludes this book with these words: “National independence is the goal, and Japan’s present civilization is the means of attaining that goal” (Fukuzawa 1875: 256).

#### **4. The leader of Asia and/or Escape from Asia**

##### **4-1. Desire for being the leader of Asia**

If Europe is now at the summit of civilization, there is no choice for Japan except for trying to adopt, so to say, civilization as Westernization. For Fukuzawa, Great Britain is especially the model for imitation. In his *Commentary on the Current Problems (Jiji shogen)* he expresses this idea at the first time:

We have entirely changed our governmental system, and consequently we enjoy now the stability of state and hold the Imperial House for all eternity. This condition is similar to that of Great Britain by chance. Therefore, we can expect, it is only a matter of time that we will build up, so to speak, a New Britain in the East, compete with all nations for power and wealth, and earn the respect of the world.  
(Fukuzawa 1881: 190)

This purpose of civilization and Westernization of Japan is, for Fukuzawa, never divided from a desire for being the leading power of Asia. He continues in this little book: “Apart from Japanese nation, who can become the center of civilization in the East and oppose against the Western nations as a vanguard? We Japanese should prepare to take full responsibility for the security of East Asia.” (Fukuzawa 1881: 259)

In an article in his newspaper, “How to manage the East” (Toyo no Seiryaku hatashite ikagasen) of 1882, he repeats a similar expression: “We are already a nation of the strongest power in the East, and hold tariff autonomy. Our state is already powerful and our industry flourishes now. It is not so difficult for us to be engaged in trade with our own initiative and build up, so to say, a New Britain in East Asia” (Fukuzawa 1882b: 145).

In this article Fukuzawa uses the word “leader of Asia” as follows:

“Together with you readers, we would like to do our duty as a nation, to realize our purpose of East Asian policy, and to be a forerunner in the intellectual civilization and a leader of Asia in the military security” (Fukuzawa 1875: 142).

In this way, Fukuzawa believed that the leader of Asia should oppose against the European invasion into Asia and take responsibility for the military defense of East Asia. Here we can see how deeply he has the sense of crisis concerning the European imperialism.

At the time Fukuzawa expected a possibility of the cooperation of the East Asian nations yet. In other words, he believed a possibility of the civilization in the whole East Asia. In an article, “On the Dealings with Korea” (Chosen no kosai wo ronzu) of 1882, he says as follows:

The civilization of the Western nations is advancing day by day, and their armaments are advancing, too. It is natural that their desire for the annexation of other countries is growing together with growing armaments, and it is clear that the object of their desire focuses on East Asia. If the whole Asia must cooperate with each other in order to oppose against the Western invasion, which nation should be the forerunner and leader of this league? It cannot be objectively anyone else than Japan who can take responsibility of the leader, though I do not dare to be proud of my own country. We are already the leader in effect. How are our neighbors, China and Korea, and what should they do together with us? There is no option for them but to imitate us and join to the present-day civilization.

(Fukuzawa 1882a: 128-9)

There are accordingly two preconditions for Japan to be the leader of Asia. At first, the reformists in China and Korea will win national politics over the conservatives and the civilization of both countries will actually begin. Secondly, the triumphant reformists there will accept the leadership of Japan. For that purpose, Fukuzawa was indeed willing to support the Korean reformists, Kim Ok-kyun (1851-94) and Pak Yong-hyo (1861-1939).

In December 1884, the Korean reformists carried out a coup d'état in conspiracy with Japanese ambassador in Korea, that is called Gapsin Coup in Korea and Koshin Incident (Koshin Jihen) in Japan, both refer-

ring to the year of 1884. As the Japanese government treated it with silent contempt, in spite of Fukuzawa's appeal for the military intervention, Chinese army intervened and suppressed the coup d'état in three days, and Kim and Pak ran away to Japan.

In this way, the trial for the civilization of Korea was defeated in vain. As a result, Fukuzawa reversed his opinion. Neither the civilization of East Asia nor the leader of Asia seemed possible to him anymore. Thus he abruptly thought up a new phrase: "Escape from Asia."

#### **4-2. "Escape from Asia"**

The leading article "Escape from Asia" (Datsu-a ron) published in his daily newspaper on March 16, 1885 was a manifesto of the restart of Fukuzawa's thought. Herein he says:

Though Japan stands in Far East Asia, our national spirit has moved on into the Western civilization from the Asiatic old-fashioned traditions. However, unfortunately we have two neighbors, China and Korea. The both nations have maintained the Asiatic traditional manners of life for many years as well as Japan, but they are indeed similar to each other and entirely different from Japan, though I do not know exactly if their race or their heredity and education are different from ours. The both nations never try to reform the personal and national conditions and hold firm to their old-fashioned traditions as same as thousands years before, though they must be well-informed about the current civilization in the worldwide communications.

(Fukuzawa 1885: 222)

Fukuzawa declares here a renunciation of hope for the civilization of China and Korea in effect. He no longer expects that Japan will be the leader of Asia, but the master of Asia. It was the conclusion of this article that Japan should adopt the manners and methods of the Western imperialism and colonialism. He concludes as follows:

In creating the plans of tomorrow now, we do not have any more time to await the civilization and enlightenment of our neighbor nations so that we can work together to make Asia prosperous. It is

better for us to leave the ranks of Asian neighbors and go along with the civilized nations of the West. Consequently we do not have to promote friendly relations with China and Korea because of neighborhood, but we should treat them just in the same way as the Western nations do. Who keeps bad company cannot get past a bad reputation. We will firmly deny those bad East Asian friends from our heart.

(Fukuzawa 1885: 224)

Fukuzawa's claim to escape from Asia is therefore not a simple remark about the civilization of Japan, as often misunderstood. He gives up here expecting the civilization of East Asia as a whole. He insists clearly that Japan cannot cooperate with China and Korea anymore, because the both nations are essentially different from Japan. He declares that China and Korea are absolutely "Others" for us in respect of their race and heredity. In other words, he, so to say, translates here the logic of racism as a basis of the Western imperialism into Japanese.

Five years after, when the Imperial Diet first opened in 1890, Fukuzawa wrote an article on "the Future of the Diet" (Kokkai no zento) and insisted that Japanese was not the Oriental. "I wish," he says, "the intellectuals of foreign countries would study faithfully the many hundred years history of Japan and discover the fact that Japanese nation is not the Oriental as they have ever imagined, though Japan stands in East Asia. If they would only do so, they could naturally convince that the establishment of the Diet in Japan today is not accidental" (Fukuzawa 1890: 204).

Fukuzawa's insistence seems to be based upon his intense desire for the admission by the Westerners. He wanted to say that Japanese was entirely different from all other nations in East Asia, like Chinese and Korean, and only Japanese could become the partner of the Westerners. Probably we can see here the self-hatred or self-denial by an Asian who has accepted and internalized the Eurocentric thought. It was the meaning of "escaping from Asia."

## 5. Conclusion

When the First Sino-Japanese War over control of Korea broke out in 1894, Fukuzawa's newspaper carried a leading article titled "the Sino-Japanese War is the war between Barbarism and Civilization" (Ni-shin no sensou wa bun-ya no sensou nari). Herein the anonymous author firmly declares:

Though this war surely broke out between Japan and China, it is not the war between Japanese and Chinese, but between the one who tries to promote the civilization and the other who attempts to prevent it. ... The enemy of Japan is neither Chinese people nor Chinese state. We only attacked those who opposed to the civilization, because our purpose is promoting the progression of the world-wide civilization. Accordingly, this war is neither a simple conflict between two peoples nor between two states and we can regard it as a kind of religious struggle.

(Fukuzawa 1894: 491-2)

The so-called mission of civilization! It was a typical phrase of the Western imperialism. Remember Mill's words justifying "the dominion of a more civilized people" (Mill 1861: 567).

Fukuzawa accepted and internalized the Eurocentric concept of civilization, and consequently he thought that the more civilized and advanced nations should properly rule and control the less civilized. Therefore he aimed to civilize "Asiatic" Japan in order to maintain the independence of Japan. At first, he expected China and Korea to imitate Japan and take part in the civilization of East Asia as a whole. However, as a result of the failure of Koshin Incident in 1884, he changed his scheme. He began to think that Japanese was not "Asiatic" by nature and essentially different from the other Asian nations, just like Chinese and Korean.

By this Eurocentric thought and logic, Fukuzawa and Japanese people could finally justify for themselves to discriminate against the neighbor nations in East Asia and to regard them as the object of colonial rule. Its necessary result was the aggressive war continued intermittently for half a century, since 1894 until 1945, in East Asia.

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