

Japan, the First Quest of Modernization in East Asia

LJILJANA MARKOVIĆ

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, Doktora Ivana Ribara 60, 11000
Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: ljiljana.markovic@gmail.com

In 1868, Japan embarked on its unique journey to become a modern country that was deemed successful and advanced by Western standards. But what characterized Japanese civilization at the outset of this quest and how did the makers of modern Japan conceptualize their goals? To answer this question, we will look at the long tradition of the *Mito School*, with special attention for the works of the *Later Mito School*, and to the thinkers and practitioners of the *Bakumatsu* and *Meiji* periods. This shall enable us to determine the aim, the nature and the success of Japan's quest for its own path to modernization. The dissemination of the paradigm of modernization thereby attained to Korea and China shall be followed through and evaluated.

A quest for modernization is a desire to catch up with the current level of a neighbouring civilization, or the world civilization, that ensues after a dialogue between or among civilizations.

The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.¹ For example, the knowledge that issues of modernization, the progress of human societies and cultural development, the possession of knowledge and its increase that lead to development in the realm of technology, the economy, and human affairs, inevitably leads to destruction of the old and creation of the new. There is a clear ethical dilemma involved in such destruction and creation. Progress often entails that thousands lose their jobs, that their knowledge and skills become irrelevant, that the machinery they use in the production processes is rendered obsolete, and that the ensuing capital and human loss are immeasurable. Therefore, a clear question could be posed here as to the ethical nature of such acts. Do they bring any good to humanity, if we pose this criterion as one of the crucial criteria of the ethics of processes? Is it ethical to exercise knowledge, and ensure the stochastic, upward development trend for mankind as a whole, whereby each leap upward and forward inevitably carries with it the destruction of the old world, of the way of life, of a world-outlook that had been passed on to the destroyers/modernizers by generations of their predecessors?

The nature of progress in any area of knowledge, including the humanities and social sciences, is stochastic, its driving force is the possession of an increasing stock of knowledge, which enables progress when sufficiently accumulated.² The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility in the following complex threefold sense:

- (a) diachronically, providing for the birth of the new out of the destruction of the old. The pains of destruction are real and sizeable, the suffering of all who are engaged in the traditional sector, which is undergoing destruction as a result of the increase in the stock of knowledge, is often bitter and irreparable, especially in those cases in which they remain unable to find a place for themselves in the newly-formed paradigm;
- (b) securing growth and development: the possession of knowledge is the golden key to the paradigm of modernization, of the progress of mankind by means of technological, economic, social and cultural development. This progress is stochastic, as explained by René Thom's Theory of Catastrophes³ and Thomas Kuhn's⁴ view of the nature of scientific revolutions, whereby each step forward arises out of the destruction of the previous state or governing paradigm. The possession of knowledge, therefore, carries an ethical responsibility for the destruction of the existing values, ways of producing and governing social relations;
- (c) avoiding failing to enable growth and development: if we were to give up applying the knowledge we possess in favour of preserving tradition, we would have to face the ethical issue of whether we are responsible for the loss of the opportunity to further the development of mankind, or of developing and nurturing a particular technology, industry or community, precisely because we did not exercise our increased stock of knowledge and failed to secure technical progress and economic growth based upon it, and which would have served as a potent basis for medical, welfare and educational improvement, as well as all round human development.

The counter-argument to the desirability of modernization centres upon considerations arising from another paradigm embedded in a different knowledge area, the area of environmental studies and ecology. However desirable from the perspective of improving living standards, welfare, and economic development as such, modernization brings about the destruction of our eco-systems, the destruction of numerous biological species and the long-lasting pollution of air, water and soil. Externalities, to borrow from the terminology of economics, created in the process of modernization are the mirror-image of the effects of the law of diminishing returns, which dictates the limits to the growth and development processes and defines the tipping point where instead of producing positive effects they start producing negative ones.

The human cost of modernization has been high indeed in terms of villages left empty of inhabitants, creating ghost-towns where there are no living able-bodied hands to be found even to perform the burial of the remaining ageing inhabitants.

Ways of knowing⁵ which enable us to gain the propositional knowledge (Ref. 1, p. 5) relevant to understanding and grappling with the complexities of the different facets revealed by the paradigm of modernization encompass perception, reason, language and emotion. All of these are precious in affording our understanding of the multi-layered knowledge issues involved. In order to gain the relevant propositional knowledge we have to integrate our ways of knowing into a holistic path to cognition. To the same measure of being integral and holistic, our cognition will be reliable and relevant to forming an adequate picture, surpassing in its attainment the Justified True Belief paradigm (Ref 1. pp. 5–7). However, this should not blind us to our limitations to comprehend the full complexity of the real-life issues pertaining to the paradigm of modernization in the knowledge area of the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, we can never pretend to having arrived at a conclusive and functional answer to the question of the ethical responsibilities involved in the process of transformation of a traditional community to a modern and technologically and economically highly-advanced one, as was the case with Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Previous to the 1868 so-called Meiji Restoration, Japan had been implementing the closed-door policy (*Sakoku*) for over two centuries. This fostered the formation of an unprecedented cultural uniqueness and at the same time brought about a vibrant pre-modern economic development complemented by a highly elaborate and administratively centralized feudal state. Such a high level of political, social, educational and economic development in pre-modern Japan contributed to rapid and successful modernization

Over the long period of self-imposed isolation, Japan continued to receive, through Hirado and Nagasaki, a one-way flow of information and knowledge transfer from China and western countries. This contributed to a continuously high and rising level of scholarship in the Edo period, with special emphasis on reading and studying western books pertaining to the realm of the natural and technical sciences. Thus, the Japanese language became enriched through translation of western works and sustained its capability of serving as a medium of modernization from the early Meiji period on.

The insular nature of Japan's geography made it possible to choose and select among incoming cultural influences and knowledge, which helped maintain a strong stability against an excessive or disruptive influx of foreign cultural elements, enabling the Japanese to be positive and utilitarian in accepting the most advanced foreign cultures that they came into contact with.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, Japan became increasingly aware of the dangerous developments in China, culminating in the Opium Wars. Resolved to escape from undergoing the fate of China, Japanese thinkers gathered in the Neo-Confucian Academy, the Kodokan in Mito, and came up with a patent for a 'Revolution from Above'. The foundations of this revolution were laid by Aizawa Seishisai, who in his major work, *Shinron (The New Theses)*, made public in 1825, expounded the doctrine of strengthening Japan and thus staving off the threat of an invasion by hostile foreign powers.⁶

Aizawa and his doctrine continued a nearly 300-year-old tradition of scholarship in Mito Province, where the grand historiographical project, the compilation of *Dainihonshi* (The Great History of Japan), had been carried out with the task of creating a sense of Japan's identity and the legitimacy of its rulers. The underlining world view promulgated in the *Dainihonshi* was characterized by a Neo-Confucian framework filled with *Kokugaku* (The School of National Learning) content. The Neo-Confucian framework assured the 'scientific' respectability while the Japanese mythology embedded in the teachings of *Kokugaku* added weight to the Japanese sense of uniqueness and the significance of its tradition. The conclusion he drew from the works of all his predecessors as well as from his own observations of the current situation in China led young Aizawa to propose a plan for national revival and modernization, with the strictly defined aim of safeguarding Japan's strength and sovereignty.

As Aizawa was a young and extremely learned samurai from Mito, one of the Three Honourable Houses, or The Gosanke (Kii, Owari and Mito), he was the theoretical father of Japan's revolution from above while his *Shinron*, studied thoroughly and recited by heart by young samurai throughout the country, effectively unified Japan on the eve of Modernization, and prepared it superbly for the oncoming changes.

Aizawa's *Shinron* was laid down in two books. The first, *Jo*, defined the national polity of Japan (*Kokutai*), singled out the country as the Land of Gods, and arrived at the conclusion that all Japanese have a Great Duty (*Taigi*) towards their Sacred Homeland. The second book, *Ge*, lays out a set of concrete actions to be taken in order to strengthen, develop and defend the country. With an eye to defying any potential invasion by possible enemies, one of the principles here laid down was *Fukoku Kyohei*: to enrich the country and strengthen the military. The other key concept proposed by *Shinron* was: Revere the Emperor, expel the Barbarians (*Sonno Joi*). The cornerstone of Aizawa's plan is that Japan shall modernize by incorporating the fruits of Western science and technology in order to become strong and capable of defending itself against that same West that Aizawa, in spite of recognizing its technical superiority, considered barbarian and spiritually and ethically inferior and inadequate. Aizawa's new paradigm of modernization thus posited a Japan strengthened by Western technology, but fully preserving and cherishing the Japanese spirit.⁷

Investing in propulsive scientific and economic growth and catching up with the most advanced western nations, but with the sole aim of preserving Japan's national identity and purpose, resulted in the country's swift and thorough modernization and gave birth to the so-called Ethical Capitalism. It also ensured that Japan should be successful in the short as well as in the long run. In the short run, its strengthening staved off any military threats from the great powers of the day and spared the country from a colonial destiny. In the long run, Japan modernized successfully and joined the Great Powers by 1905, with its brilliant victory in The Russo-Japanese War.

Acknowledgement

This article originates from a workshop, 'In Quest of a New Paradigm: A Dialogue of Cultures', held at the University of Belgrade from 18–20 March 2013.

References and Notes

1. N. Lemos (2007) *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 2–7 and 217.
2. E. Dombrowski, L. Rotenberg and M. Bick (2007) *Theory of Knowledge, Course Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 130–134.
3. R. Thom (1972) *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press; new edition, 21 January 1994).
4. T. Kuhn (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 50th anniversary edition, 30 April 2012).
5. S. Bastian, V. Bammi, C. Howard, J. Kitching, J. Mackenzie, D. Oberg, M. Salomon and D. Wilkinson (2008) *Theory of Knowledge* (Harlow: Pearson), pp. 30–36.
6. S. Aizawa (1825) *Shinron, Mito, Kokuritsu Kokkai Toshokan* (Tokyo, Collection of Woodblock Prints).
7. B. T. Wakabayashi (1982) *Aizawa Seishisai's Shinron and Western Learning: 1781–1828* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

About the Author

Ljiljana Marković (born Djurović) is Full Professor in Japanese Studies and Vice Dean, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Chairperson of the Doctoral Studies Program, Member of the Belgrade University Council and Coordinator of Academic Cooperation with Japan. She was educated at The United World College of the Atlantic, Cambridge University and Chuo University, and awarded the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan Prize, 2010. Since 1976, she has been a full-time member of the teaching staff at the Faculty of Philology. She has been Visiting Professor at Toho University, Tokyo since 2005. She is the author of numerous books and other academic publications on Japanese language, literature and civilization, such as *Pravni sistem Japana* [*The Legal System of Japan*] (2011), *Stari Japan: društvene i kulturološke posebnosti* [*Old Japan: Social and Cultural Specificities*] (2008), *Istorija civilizacije Japana* [*The History of Civilization of Japan*] (2008). She is a member of the European Association of Japanese Studies.