



THE PARADOX OF JAPANESE MODERNITY

Posted on October 1, 2022 by Matthieu Giroux



Modernity, as it appeared in Japan in the 19th century, baffles the Westerner who might consider questioning it. Because it is often wrongly perceived as an exclusively European phenomenon, its Japanese expression is reduced to an attempt to imitate it in order to make up for economic, political and military backwardness. Yet, in *Moderne sans être occidentale: Aux origines du Japon aujourd'hui* (*Modern without being Western: At the Origins of the Japan of Today*), Japanese history specialist Pierre-François Souyri demonstrates that Japanese modernity, far from being an ersatz of Western modernity, has an identity and genesis of its own.

The identity between modernization and westernization of Japan is one of the most commonplace points of view. Writers, filmmakers, but also, more seriously, historians often describe a feudal archipelago that embraced Western modernity by discovering the new power of the expanding European empires in the mid-nineteenth century. The British gunboats created a sense of urgency and weakness in this traditionally isolationist people, forcing them to catch up technically, economically and politically. This approach thus holds that Japanese modernity is the product of the West; that the deep causes of the transformation of Japanese society are exogenous and that this radical change can be understood in the mode of pure and simple imitation, in particular through new tendencies, such as nationalism, imperialism or Japanese-style capitalism.

However, defends the thesis of an autonomous development, by underlining the internal causes that pushed the archipelago to embrace a specific and, precisely, non-Western modernity. In his opinion, if modernity has its origins in 16th century Europe, it also found its expression in 19th century Japan which, independently of the arrival of the Americans on its territory, experienced upheavals that profoundly redefined the organization of Japanese society, as well as the very mentality of its people. According to him, "the European vision of modernity... permeated Japanese discourse, to the point that some see it as a 'spiritual colonization from within' that polluted their historical imagination for more than a century." In other words, the Japanese themselves were until recently unable to think of their own modernity outside the Western paradigm. They "long sought to conceive of the gap between Japan and the paradigm, consciously or not, by doing 'Eurocentric comparatism.'"

It is not a question here of affirming that Japanese modernity owes nothing to Western modernity; rather, it is a question of restoring the originality of a historical phenomenon, by avoiding a systematic comparison with the European model. "For the past twenty years, this way of looking at things has been revisited in Japan, to the point that the history of Japanese modernization is now conceived at a pace identical to that of the 'great powers,' with shifts that were often less relevant than one might have

thought." From then on, Japanese modernity was no longer to be apprehended negatively, i.e., by always looking for what Japan does not have compared to Europeans, but positively, i.e., by reflecting on the nature of this modernity. In short, it is no longer a question of reasoning in terms of failure but of difference. "History indeed invites us to see that specific forms of modernity were born in Japan, with their own dimensions, hybrid and heterogeneous, and that they can sometimes be exported."

The Japanese "Enlightenment"

The change of regime is decisive to understanding this period of Japanese history. The Meiji Restoration (1867-1912), the return of the emperor to the forefront, after more than two centuries of rule by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1867), is part of the Japanese "Enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*). In the ninth century, with the failure of the central state to defend the provinces, the political power of the emperor had faded to give way to a feudal Japan, dominated by *daimyos* (lords) and several centuries of civil war, until the arrival in power of Tokugawa Ieyasu in the early seventeenth century. The authority of the Tokugawa shogunate had been based in part on its ability to pacify Japan; but, faced with the military and technical superiority of the West, the regime no longer seemed to have the means to protect the country. From then on, only a central state with a modern army could ensure the security of the Japanese people against a possible invader.

The supporters of the Japanese "Enlightenment" were particularly impressed by Bismarck, during the Iwakura mission, which toured Europe from 1871 to 1873. The restoration of the Emperor was thus part of a context of modernization and "civilization," but, unlike Western modernity, it did not involve the creation of a new type of regime, as in France or the United States. The writer and political theorist Fukuzawa Yukichi refers to this as "revolutionary restoration."

From the outset, Japanese political modernity had something "conservative" about it; and Westerners were perfectly comfortable with the authoritarian character of the new regime. The Japanese case is thus very different from the French and American cases marked by intrinsically progressive revolutions. Moreover, if the West appears as a model in technical and military terms, it is also a rival, an enemy that must be imitated in order to better protect Japan. It is thus a double movement, both xenophilic and xenophobic, which conditions the advent of Japanese modernity.

That said, many supporters of the "Enlightenment" felt that political change was insufficient and that it was also necessary to transform society in depth by influencing mentalities. This is the case of the

Society of the Year VI, which imported from Europe the practice of public debate, which had been completely absent in the archipelago. "We knew the *palabra* or the informal discussion in small groups; but confrontational debate was hardly in use. It would even have been shocking," explains Souyri.

Muragaki Norimasa, deputy head of the Japanese delegation that went to Washington in 1860, was very surprised by the verbal violence of certain exchanges in parliament. "A minister who was taken to task by a member of parliament replied calmly, whereas a samurai would have drawn a sword!" Feudal Japan was administered by the samurai who respected a strict code of honor. The elites were forged by a warrior mentality and not a politician one. Insults were answered with weapons. There was therefore a long way to go to move from a society of hierarchy and honor to a society of free individuals practicing public debate and exchange between equal citizens.

Some members of the Year VI Society understood the link between the nature of the political regime and individual mindsets, as despotism was not really able to produce "civilized" individuals as in the West. The philosopher Nishi Amane said: "Docility is an important quality for the Japanese. In a despotic regime, it is indeed a highly prized quality." Nakamura Masano, on the other hand, believed very early on that assemblies and councils elected by the people should be created to break with this despotic tradition and awaken the Japanese to the practice of politics.

The "Doctrine of the Quintessence of the Country"

Japanese modernity was also characterized by the emergence of nationalisms of different kinds. If the first intellectuals of the Meiji period wondered about the possibility of a change of regime to allow the Japanese to have more individual rights (freedom of assembly, association, expression) and real political freedoms, the debate then turned to the question of defining this new Japanese identity. "From the years 1887-1888... the terms of the debate evolved and henceforth crystallized around the question of identities within the nation, with a balancing act between three elements, the West and its always fascinating and threatening influence, the East (but this is mainly China) which became a kind of land of utopia or expansion, and finally Japan, whose essence had to be constantly redefined between the two previous poles."

What is particularly interesting in the Japanese case is that nationalism, which is par excellence a modern political doctrine, was not only formed from the Western model. This is particularly true of a trend called the "doctrine of the quintessence of the country" (*kokusui shugi*). "They wanted to be the

defenders and promoters of a pure national identity, of a form of nationalism of a new nature, of a national idealism," Souyri emphasizes. From then on, we must not blindly imitate the Western model, which destroys what makes up the Japanese identity, but build a nationalism capable of grasping and respecting Japanese history and ethos. By adopting Western mores and techniques, Japan risked losing its soul, losing what is specifically Japanese. Those who defended the "doctrine of the quintessence of the country" believed that Japan should not be absorbed by modernity but should invent its own modernity, especially by preserving what is specifically Asian.

The Meiji government used an ancient concept to define the nature of the Japanese nation in order to confront popular demands and the supporters of the old feudal system: *kokutai*, which "refers to the national peculiarity of the imperial dynasty that has ruled the country forever and ever." However, *kokutai* originally meant only the form and identity of a state, Japanese or not. It was a form of mystical nationalism in the 19th century that gave *kokutai* a new and specifically Japanese meaning: a conservative, national and anti-feudal doctrine. The idea of *kokutai* disrupted the old feudal hierarchies that structured society under the Tokugawa dynasty. It was used to build a strong central state that advocated the equality of all subjects before the deified person of the emperor, a particularly effective way to foster the emergence of a modern nation. "The emperor combines political authority with prestige of a spiritual nature. He is both the German Kaiser and the Pope of Rome embodied in one individual."

Once again, we observe that Japanese political modernity was built by borrowing and recasting notions inherited from tradition, not by wiping the slate clean. The term *kokutai* appeared in the Imperial Constitution of 1889. Its first article states: "The Empire of Greater Japan is under the government of the emperor whose lineage has ruled our country since the beginning of time. The historical continuity of the Japanese Empire, despite periods of displacement, notably under the Tokugawa shogunate, allowed the defenders of the new Meiji regime to make themselves the guarantors of an absolute political authority, capable of resisting Westerners and defending a threatened ancestral Japanese identity." Paradoxically, this new form of nationalism, out of rejection of Western values, turned in particular to Confucianism. "If there is a doctrine, it is rather a form of syncretism in which the most conformist Confucian thought is allied with the national precepts of autochthonist thought, mixed with forms of social Darwinism and modern nationalism," says Souyri.

Japanese Anti-Modernism

In 1886, Shiga Shigetaka founded a new type of nationalism of cultural type. In *Landscapes of Japan* (1894), he explained that the beauty of Japanese nature is superior to that of Western countries and that from this aesthetic superiority should come a feeling of pride. "Shiga bridges the gap between a poetic and impressionistic discourse, and a naturalistic discourse that is scientific but based on the comparison, implicit or not, with the rest of the countries." The objective of this book was to decompress the Japanese towards the Westerners by insisting on the natural beauty of the archipelago but also by praising the greatness of their poetry. Shiga's thought thus went against the universalism of the Enlightenment to develop a new form of particularism but without falling into the xenophobia of the "doctrine of the quintessence of the country," in which he did not recognize himself. "More than a political ideology, it is a thought with a cultural vocation," insists Souyri.

In the same vein, we can cite Okakura Tenshin, famous for his *Book of Tea*, who understood early on the importance of valorizing Japanese art in the establishment of the new state. He participated in the creation of museums, the protection of heritage and the teaching of art. In his eyes, "fine arts are the quintessence and splendor of a nation." While the Japanese were fascinated by Western art, Okakura Tenshin, who was a connoisseur of Western art, had the ambition to bring the importance of traditional Japanese art to the West. He "at the origin of this image of an anti-modernist Japan, based on a mysterious and refined Japanese culture." In this, Okakura Tenshin's modernity can be compared to the anti-modern modernity of a Baudelaire defined by Antoine Compagnon. His anti-modernism is a reaction to Western cultural domination that sought to reactivate, within the framework of the development of the modern state, the aesthetic forms of Japanese tradition. In doing so, he participated in creating "a kind of invariance, the 'eternal' Japan" as well as his "own orientalism."

Pierre-François Souyri's book allows us to understand that Japanese modernity was structured as much by imitating the Western model as by rejecting it. If there was indeed, in the history of Japan, a first movement influenced by the European Enlightenment, it was quickly counterbalanced by political doctrines that sought to preserve the spiritual and cultural identity of Japan, drawing on heterogeneous elements: Asianism, Confucianism, but also on a reinterpreted *kokutai*. This book is thus an invitation to detach oneself from any ethnocentrism in order to better understand the conditions of possibility of the emergence of a specifically Japanese modernity. "This forces us to assimilate in our mental schemas this simple idea: we are not the sole depositaries of modernity. Modernity was not invented once and for all by Europeans, and European modernity is perhaps not an exceptional and almost miraculous phenomenon. Other forms of modernity have manifested themselves elsewhere, and particularly in Japan."

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[Featured](#): "Founding of the Nation," by Kawamura Kiyoo; painted in 1929.

