

# Discourses on and against Civilization in Pre-war Japan

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## Introduction

A decade ago, Samuel P. Huntington published an insightful and provocative book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996, New York). I am not prepared to discuss the book in detail in this paper. Still, being an intellectual historian myself, I would like to mention a couple of statements made by Huntington, in particular, his classification of the major contemporary civilizations. Huntington enumerated eight contemporary civilizations, among which is also included Japanese civilization. He says, “Some scholars combine Japanese and Chinese culture under the heading of a single Far Eastern civilization. Most, however, do not and instead recognize Japan as a distinct civilization which was the offspring of Chinese civilization, emerging during the period between A.D. 100 and 400.”<sup>1</sup> If you have some knowledge of Japanese intellectual history, this classification by him sounds rather fresh, because one of the topics concerning Japan has been whether Japan falls into Western civilization or Eastern civilization.

In this paper, I would like to discuss, in addition to Huntington’s classification, how civilization was conceptualized in Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Let me start by looking at the original meaning of the word civilization in the West and how it was imported into modern Japan.

## The Original Meaning of Civilization both in the West and in Japan

In French and English in the late eighteenth-century, the term “civilization (civilisation)” was initially employed to describe “a progressive process of human development, a movement towards refinement and order and away from barbarism and savagery.” Behind this emergent sense lay the spirit of the European Enlightenment and its confident belief in the progressive character of the modern era.

Whereas in French and English, the words “civilization” and “culture” were often used interchangeably to describe a general process of human development, in German, on the other hand, these two words were usually contrasted, in such a way that *Zivilisation* acquired a negative implication and *Kultur* a positive one. This distinction originated from the fact that, while French was the language of the courtly nobility and of the upper layers of the bourgeoisie, a small, German-speaking stratum of intellectuals, who were excluded from courtly life, derided the upper classes who spent their energies in refining manners and imitating the French. The polemic against the upper classes was expressed in terms of the contrast between *Kultur* (culture) and *Zivilisation* (civilization).<sup>2</sup>

Samuel Huntington did not fail to point out this dichotomy between civilization and culture, either. He said, “Nineteenth century German thinkers drew a sharp distinction between civilization, which involved mechanics, technology, and material factors, and culture, which involved values, ideals, and the higher intellectual artistic, moral qualities of a society.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout his book, Huntington thus contended that only the Germans clearly distinguished between civilization and culture. However, I would like to take exception to this view, because in the early twentieth century, the same kind of distinction between civilization and culture began to emerge and became prevalent in Japan. Let me now concentrate on how civilization or *bunmei* was interpreted in the nineteenth and the early twentieth-century Japan.

### **Civilization as a National Goal in Meiji Japan**

As was mentioned earlier, civilization in the West was associated with a movement towards refinement and order and away from barbarism and savagery. Intellectuals in the Meiji period (1868-1912) did not fail to grasp this “etymology” so that they employed civilization or *bunmei* in the sense opposed to “savagery” (*mikai* or *yaban*). A typical example of this understanding of civilization or *bunmei* is found in Fukuzawa Yukichi’s *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (*Bunmeiron no gairyaku*). Fukuzawa was the most famous and influential teacher and advocate of things Western in early Meiji. In the second chapter of the book entitled “Western Civilization as our Goal,” he shows the famous classification concerning the stages of civilization:

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 (*bunmei*), while the Asian countries, such as Turkey, China, and Japan,

may be called semi-developed (*hankai*) countries, and Africa and Australia are to be counted as still primitive lands (*yaban*).<sup>4</sup>

He went on to say that ‘civilized,’ ‘semi-developed,’ and ‘primitive’ are the stages through which mankind must pass. Another book by Fukuzawa, *In Praise of Learning (Gakumon no susume)*, begins with the following sentence: “It is said that heaven creates no man above another nor creates any man below another.” This basic principle of equality among individuals is also extended to apply to the relations among nations. In reality, there are, of course, differences in ability and intelligence among people and in military and economic strength among nations. In people, these are differences in educational attainment, in nations, differences in levels of “civilization and enlightenment.” This understanding brings Fukuzawa to a conclusion:

...we cannot be satisfied with the level of civilization attained by the West. But shall we therefore conclude that Japan should reject it? If we did, what other criterion would we have? We cannot rest content with the stage of semi-development; even less can the primitive stage suffice. Since these latter alternatives are to be rejected, we must look elsewhere...present-day Europe can only be called the highest level that human intelligence has been able to attain at this juncture in history. Since this is true, in all countries of the world, be they primitive or semi-developed, those who are to give thought to their country’s progress in civilization must necessarily take European civilization as the basis of discussion, and must weigh the pros and cons of the problem in the light of it.<sup>5</sup>

### **Westernization as Civilization**

In the field of diplomacy as well, Westernization was the primary prerequisite to provide Japan with an opportunity to revise the unequal treaties concluded in the 1850s. In other words, Westernization was an admission ticket to the international society on an equal basis. Inoue Kaoru, one of the foreign ministers in 1880s, is reported to have said: “What we have to do is to transform our empire and our people like the people of Europe.”<sup>6</sup> This statement succinctly reveals the true feeling shared by those in the government in the Meiji era.

According to Fukuzawa’s classification of three stages through which mankind must pass—“*bunmei*,” “*hankai*,” and “*yaban*,” both Japan and China were

categorized as *hankai* or “semi-developed.”

More than two decades later at the time of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), Mutsu Munemitsu, then the foreign minister, wrote as follows:

More recently, the influence of many European nations has reached Asia, and elements of what we call Western civilization have now been implanted in the farthest reaches of the Orient. Particularly in Japan, the government and people have worked assiduously for nearly three decades since the Restoration to adopt Western civilization. We made rapid progress toward this end through many reforms, virtually transforming Japan from old to new and exciting the wonder and admiration of the advanced nations of the West. Meanwhile, China adhered strictly to outmoded customs of the past, and failed to make any effort to bring her ancient ways into line with existing conditions at home and abroad. We are thus presented with the remarkable spectacle of two countries separated only by a narrow stretch of water, one of which represents Western civilization while the other remains the guardian of the outworn practices of East Asia...Whatever form the quarrel might take, though, it was patently clear to all that the real cause of friction would be a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia.<sup>7</sup>

After summarizing the cultural relationship between China and his country, the foreign minister thereby presented a perspective that the Sino-Japanese War was precisely “a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia”. It should be noted that the foreign minister referred to his country as one representing “the new civilization of the West”. In other words, Fukuzawa’s slogan of “Western Civilization as our Goal” was at last realized.

### **Cross-cultural experience and Civilization**

Under its nationwide modernization policy, the Meiji state zealously introduced Western learning. In a lecture he delivered in 1902, Mori Ogai, one of the great literary figures of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan, listed three ways in which Western learning could be introduced into Meiji Japan: “one can master a Western language and read books in that language or read those books secondhand in translation; one can engage foreign instructors and listen to their expositions; or one

can go abroad to study.” Of these, the third option of “going abroad to study” was a way of gaining firsthand experience of a foreign culture, but such an opportunity was afforded only a select few, and most people simply learned about foreign cultures indirectly through books or foreign instructors. But, in the last year of the nineteenth century, the opportunity for a large number of Japanese to experience a foreign culture firsthand unexpectedly presented itself.

In 1900 the Qing dynasty in China hoped to root out the influence of the great powers by taking advantage of the Boxer Uprising (*Giwadan no ran*), a major anti-foreign movement in China composed mainly of peasants and raising the slogan “Uphold the Qing, Exterminate the Foreigner (*Fushin yometsu*)”; with that goal in mind, it declared war on the allied forces on June 21, leading to the North China Affair. One result was the siege of foreign legations and residents in Beijing. Regarding the dispatch of troops to rescue them as a golden opportunity to raise the nation’s prestige, the Japanese government sent a relief army after a joint request was issued by the Western powers. The Allied army won the victory without much trouble. Even after the fighting had ended, the German and Russian troops engaged in plunder, assault, and rape, for which they came under international criticism. In Japan as well, journals such as *Yorozu Choho* (All Things Morning News) and *Nihonjin* (The Japanese) took up the spectacle of this depraved “civilization”; not only did they vehemently denounce it, but they also set about investigating its roots. The joint dispatch of troops in the North China Affair represented that imperial Japan had participated in a collective action on the international scene on an equal footing with the Western powers for the first time, and it became the driving force behind Japan’s entry into the family of civilized nations.

Mori Ogai made a unique analysis of the North China Affair, when he was in Kokura in Kyushu, serving as the top medical officer in the Army Division there. In a lecture he delivered at the army officers’ club in Kokura in December 1901, Ogai began by taking up the powers’ joint dispatch of troops in this incident from the viewpoint that “several contemporary races raised an army as one and rushed forward with one objective.”<sup>8</sup> And he underscored the significance of this development from the standpoint of comparative history, stating that “the only phenomenon of this kind in former times was the Crusades.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, concerning the fact that Japanese troops had conducted military operations in concert with troops of the Western powers, he added the following observations:

Ever since the Meiji Restoration, we have already long been studying

and copying the armies of the European powers with which we have come into contact. But, with our reliance on books, on hired Westerners, and on a few overseas students and travelers, it has all been secondhand. Now, from the general on high rank to the private below, our men are making direct contact.<sup>10</sup>

Ogai emphasized the fact that this troop dispatch provided the opportunity for many Japanese, ranging from generals to privates, to experience foreign cultures firsthand, even though they may have met with language difficulties.

With this direct experience with other cultures and other nationals on a large scale and the reported brutal behavior of the allied expeditionary force that suppressed the Boxer Uprising, the general discourse on civilization or the perspective on civilization that could lead to Fukuzawa's slogan began to change at the turn of the century. Thus, before anyone knew it, there had emerged among the Japanese one "opinion" or interpretation of Western civilization, about which Nakae Chomin, another Meiji-Japan intellectual, wrote succinctly:

When the German troops lined up on the battlefield in North China and engaged the enemy, they badly exposed their weaknesses; and seeing their barbarous conduct, all our soldiers realized for the first time that their so-called civilization was more often than not confined to things material and that, as far as reason and justice were concerned, they were no better than we and possibly far inferior.<sup>11</sup>

Here we see the emergence of the view that Western civilization may be superior in "things material," but is decidedly *not* in terms of "reason and justice." Besides, with the progress in industrialization, civilization thus gradually began to be associated with the world of materialism, rationalistic but shallow spiritual planning and the leveling of existence. That is, civilization, once a brilliant state objective, began to remind one of something negative.

This understanding had developed by the Taisho period (1912-1926) into the ascendancy of spiritual "culture" or *bunka* over the "civilization" or *bunmei* represented by technology. This new concept of culture or *bunka* was chiefly influenced by the German term *Kultur*. *Bunka* thus appeared as a critic of *bunmei*. Culture or *bunka* was employed in the sense of the cultivation, improvement and ennoblement of the physical and spiritual qualities of a person or a people. It was in

the Taisho period that the term *bunka* was used on a wide scale for the first time, in contrast to the associations raised by the description of Meiji Japan as *bunmei*.<sup>12</sup>

Above all, this new usage of culture or *bunka* meant a reverence for the diverse creations of the spirit, for the mystery of the arts, which possessed a power and beauty greater than life itself. Yet, such a conception of culture or *bunka* was employed to attack what was seen as a mechanical or material character of civilization or *bunmei*. In contrast to the previous usage of civilization or *bunmei* in the early years of Meiji, *bunmei* came to possess a negative implication.

### **Civilization as an Enemy in the War-time period**

Culture or *bunka* was employed to attack what was seen as the mechanical or material aspect of *bunmei*; with the result that *bunmei* came to possess a ring of negative implication. A notable example of asserting this dichotomy between *bunmei* and *bunka* was probably seen in a literary movement called *Kindai no Chokoku* (overcoming the modern).

The year 1941 witnessed the outbreak of the Pacific War. In July 1942, a group of distinguished intellectuals, academics, and critics were summoned to Kyoto by the Literary Society named *Bungakkai* to discuss a theme of *Kindai no Chokoku*. All of the participants believed that the debate would mark the end of “modern civilization” in Japan and would reveal the outline of a “glorious new age.” Although the participants submitted papers beforehand, they often talked at cross-purposes and failed to reach a definite conclusion about “overcoming the modern.” Nevertheless, it was significant that the theme of the symposium was “modernity,” which was then considered synonymous with Western civilization. Furthermore, one participant, Nakamura Mitsuo, wrote in his paper, “One could go so far as to say that at bottom the introduction of Western civilization at that time [during the Meiji period] amounted to nothing but the importation of machinery and the acquisition of the know-how to operate it.”<sup>13</sup> And another, Hayashi Fusao, declared at the symposium, “Civilization and enlightenment meant the adoption of European culture after the Meiji Restoration and resulted in the submission of Japan to the West.”<sup>14</sup>

Although it would be somewhat rash to regard these men as representative of Japanese intellectuals at the time, both the theme and the comments attest to the fact that intellectuals were taking a keen interest in such matters as civilization, modernity, and the West. It could be said that behind the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the United States they saw not a clash of civilizations but a clash between the Western civilization and culture. Put another way, it was a Japanese revolt against the West.

### Some Concluding Remarks

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Japan embarked on building a modern state, making a model of the Western powers. Civilization was associated with something brilliant. With the passage of time, though, Japan came to know, chiefly through direct cross-cultural experience, the reality of its mentor, the West and attempted to attack what was seen as a mechanical or material character of civilization or *bunmei*. The road to the Pacific war was none other than a road away from civilization. It is therefore significant that the post-war international military tribunal, which prosecuted Japanese wartime leaders, was sensationally referred to as “the trial of civilization.” It could be said that the West attempted to reprimand in the name of civilization its former pupil, Japan, who had rebelled against the teacher.

- 1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations—Remaking of World Order* (1996, New York), p.45.
- 2 John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford, 1990), p. 125.
- 3 Huntington, p.41.
- 4 Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* translated by David A. Dilworth and G. Cameron Hurst (Tokyo, 1973), p. 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 6 Marius B. Jansen, “Modernization and Foreign Policy in Meiji Japan” in Robert E. Ward, ed., *Political Development in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), p. 174.
- 7 Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku* translated by Gordon Mark Berger (1982, Princeton), pp.27-8.
- 8 Mori Ogai, “Hokushin jiken no ichimen no kansatsu” (Observations on One Aspect of the North China Incident), in *Ogai zenshu* (Tokyo, 1974), vol. 34, p. 216.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*, p.217.
- 11 Nakae Chomin, “Ichinen yu han” (One and a Half Years), in *Nakae Chomin zenshu* (Tokyo, 1983), vol. 10, p. 207.
- 12 Harry, D. Harootunian, “Introduction: A Sense of an Ending and the Problem of Taisho” in Bernard S. Silberman and Harry D. Harootunian eds., *Japan in Crisis: Essays on Taisho Democracy* (Princeton, 1974), p. 15.
- 13 Nakamura Mitsuo, “‘Kindai’ e no giwaku” (Doubts about “Modernity”), in Kawakami Tetsutaro et al., *Kindai no chokoku* (Overcoming the Modern) (Tokyo, 1979), p. 157.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 239