"Long Revolution" in Modern Japan:
Rethinking the Search for Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Tadashi KARUBE
School of Legal and Political Studies, the University of Tokyo

1) Meiji Restoration or Meiji Revolution?

The (so-called) Meiji Restoration is one of the most significant events in the history of Japan. I doubt that anyone would disagree with that assessment. It was in Kyoto on the 3rd of January, 1868, that samurai, mainly from the Satsuma Domain, staged a coup d'état, abolished the Tokugawa Shogunate, and created a new government centred around the Meiji Emperor. This change of political regime led to modernization in all respects: political institution, law, society and culture.

From a country separated into a large number of fiefdoms belonging to Daimyo lords and *tenryo* (territories under the direct control of the Tokugawa Shogunate), Japan became a modern nation-state under the unified control of a centralized bureaucratic structure. From a society in which, due to a system of hereditary rank, advancement of personal status involved forcing one's way up through numerous levels, Japan became (officially, at least) a society in which anyone could aspire to get on in life should the opportunity arise. It was a transition from traditional East Asian culture to the embracement of modern Western thought and institutions. Even when we consider the whole of human history, the breadth and rapidity of this change is surely remarkable.

In Japanese Studies of recent years, we have come to see this Meiji Restoration being referred to as the 'Meiji Revolution'. Some examples are the books *The Making of Modern Japan* by Marius B. Jansen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), *A Modern History of Japan from Tokugawa Times to the Present* by Andrew Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and *A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600–1901* by Watanabe Hiroshi (Tokyo: I-House Press, 2012). In the 2017 online Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History the term 'Meiji Revolution' was also adopted as an entry heading. My own personal evaluation as a contemporary historian is that it is more appropriate to refer to the change of governmental system in Japan in 1868 as a revolution, and I also think that accords with how the Japanese people of the time perceived it.

For those who have some knowledge of Japanese history, calling this event a revolution may perhaps feel a little strange. Certainly, the Imperial House has survived continually from the Tokugawa era until modern times, and there was no dismantling of the existing economic system of personal property such as was seen during twentieth-century communist revolutions. But on the other hand, it is not enough to simply explain the various reforms instituted by the new Meiji government after 1868 with the phrase 'political change'. During the period from 1868 to around 1890, the system of hereditary rank which positioned the samurai as Japan's ruling class was dissolved, rule by a legally based bureaucracy and legislature was established, a legal system based on a written constitution was set up, the right of personal land ownership was brought in, and the economy

switched to capitalism. Considering these changes as a whole, I think it is appropriate to use the word 'revolution'.

In Japanese, this Meiji Revolution is usually referred to as the 'Meiji *ishin*'. 'Ishin [維新]' (*weixin* in Chinese) is a term that originates in ancient Chinese texts, and is translated into English as 'reform' or 'reformation'. Japanese people living in 1868 often referred to the change of government using this term 'ishin', or by a synonymous informal term '*goisshin* [御一新]'.

Yet at the same time there were many Meiji intellectuals, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Takekoshi Yosaburo, who referred to the changes as a '*kakumei* [革命]', which means 'revolution' in Japanese. Uchimura Kanzo's 1908 *Representative Men of Japan* is one of the most famous books written in English by a nineteenth-century Japanese intellectual, and the title of its first chapter is 'The Japanese Revolution of 1868'.

Kakumei (*geming* in Chinese) is also a word that has its origin in ancient Chinese texts, and its precise meaning is a change of hereditary dynasty by the renewed order of heaven to the current ruler. Even so, in Japan from the nineteenth century onwards it began to be used as a translation for the English word 'revolution', indicating a large-scale transformation covering political system, society and culture. Individuals such as Fukuzawa, Takekoshi and Uchimura used the words 'kakumei' and 'revolution' because they thought they were appropriate to describe these wide-ranging changes.

Yet, the name that is familiar to those in English-speaking countries with knowledge of Japan is not the 'Meiji Revolution' but the 'Meiji Restoration'. When Japanese dictionaries and general information books on Japanese history touch on the 1868 change of government they mostly refer to it with this term. But the word "Restoration" have one meaning; namely, the restoration of a monarchy, as in England in 1660. The word 'restoration' cannot indicate the huge change expressed in the Japanese words 'ishin' (reformation) or 'kakumei' (revolution).

So why has the word 'restoration' been used in English and become established? The reason is that right after the change of government in 1868, the new Meiji government described itself as such to various foreign countries. On 8th February, 1868, the new government transmitted a sovereign message from the Meiji Emperor to the ambassadors of six countries (France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the United States, Prussia and Holland), thus establishing diplomatic relations. This was written in *kanbun* (a form of classical Chinese used in Japan) and had the title 'A Sovereign Message to Proclaim of the Return of Imperial Rule'. At that time, the new government set out its legitimacy to these foreign countries by saying that it had overthrown the Tokugawa Shogunate and restored a government with the Emperor at its centre. The name Meiji Restoration reflects this ideology of the new regime.

2) Mysteries about the Meiji Revolution

However, the proclamation of restoration that the new government itself issued within Japan did not indicate only the revival of an old system of rule. Rather, in effect it used the name 'restoration' to justify the creation of various new political institutions.

On the occasion of the January 3rd, 1868 coup d'état, a document was issued in the name of the Meiji Emperor and with the title 'Great Proclamation'. The Emperor proclaimed to the Japanese

people the abolition of the Tokugawa Shogunate and restoration of imperial rule. However, the principle behind the restoration referred to in this great proclamation was implementation of 'various matters based on the beginning of the Emperor Jinmu's reign' (i.e. implementing various matters based on the principles dating back to when the Emperor Jinmu established the Japanese nation). This phrase, 'beginning of the Emperor Jinmu's reign', had a special meaning according to the thinking of those who drafted the proclamation.

In other words, although it referred to abolishing the Tokugawa Shogunate and bringing back a prior era, that was not the recreation of the medieval Kamakura period or an ancient nation under the *ritsuryo* codes. The phrase 'based on the beginning of the Emperor Jinmu's reign' meant a major revolution in which the history of the nation would be remade from the start. It meant a huge renewal of Japan's political structures through returning to the starting point of the nation. This symbolic 'beginning of the Emperor Jinmu's reign' actually functioned to justify deep reform: abolition of the Tokugawa Shogunate and establishment of a new regime, the creation of a national structure of centralized power through abolition of *han* feudal domains, dismantling of the hereditary system of rank, a centralized hold over the people by means of a family register system, unified national coinage and tax systems. In such ways, the Jinmu reign announced the commencement of a series of reforms aimed at the establishment of a modern nation. At first glance, the use of the word 'restoration' to refer to huge reforms that could be properly called a 'revolution' might seem like an insolvable mystery, but the phrase 'beginning of the Emperor Jinmu's reign' serves to connect the two words.

There is a second mystery that emerges when we look into this revolution. It was the samurai of the various domains, such as Satsuma and Choshu, that led the political process of the Meiji Revolution. These samurai swept away the Tokugawa Shogunate system of rule, and together with the court nobles took political power in the name of the Emperor. Yet, three years later in 1871, this new government abolished the han feudal domains. During the years of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Daimyo ruled over the various regions, and there was a kind of federal system in which these lords, as vassals, had ties of allegiance to the Tokugawa Shoguns. In turn, samurai were retainers of the Daimyo in different regions. Both the status of the Daimyo and the status of the samurai which had a many-layered hierarchy, was hereditary, and as a rank-based ruling structure maintained its stability.

The abolition of the han feudal domains in 1871 changed this federal system into a national system of centralized power, and meant abolishing the very samurai rank itself. Even though this force that monopolized the centre of the new government had pushed out the previous regime and risen to the top of the political order, it destroyed the special privileges that came with its own rank. The new government's rulers dissolved their own hereditary rank. You could call it a kind of status suicide. This case must be exceptional in world history.

Fukuzawa Yukichi presents an interesting take on this Meiji Revolution mystery in his 1875 work, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. As mentioned earlier, in this book Fukuzawa gives the 1868 regime change the name 'revolution' (kakumei). He treats the 1868 revolution (or what he calls "reform by monarchical power") and the 1871 abolition of the han feudal domains as distinct events. In other words, it was not logically inevitable that the new government established through the revolution would go on to abolish the han feudal domains. Once the government had abolished the Shogunate, it had the option to create a system in which the Daimyo were in allegiance to the

Emperor, thus maintaining the special privileges of samurai status; and in fact, at the time there were some people in Japan who proposed such a plan. Nevertheless, the new government choose not to preserve the Daimyo, instead abolishing the han feudal domains and dissolving the samurai rank. The importance of this choice emerges from Fukuzawa's account.

3) Fukuzawa Yukichi as historian

An *Outline of a Theory of Civilization* is well known as one of Fukuzawa's principle works. As the title suggests, Fukuzawa puts forward a law of human history in which there is progress from a state of barbarity to civilization. He argues that Japan should deliberately strive towards 'civilization', and that very effort is a means for Japan to maintain its independence within international society. Fukuzawa learned from the works of Western intellectuals such as François Guizot, Henry Thomas Buckle and John Stuart Mill, while also developing his own view of history. He argued that Japan should refer to the 'spirit of civilization' of Western nations, at the same time as striving towards modernization.

Yet, at the same time, this book is interesting as a work setting out a historical interpretation to answer the question: 'Why did the Meiji Revolution of 1868 enable abolition of the han feudal domains?'. This debate can be found in the fifth chapter of *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* and continues the previous chapter a discussion regarding the 'intellect and virtue' of a nation's people.

According to Fukuzawa, it is the advancement of a whole society's intellect and virtue that supports its progression from barbarity to civilization. Even in Tokugawa-period Japan there was ongoing development of the intellect and virtue of both the rulers (the samurai) and the ruled (merchants and farmers). But in the Japan of that time, those with superior intellectual abilities were not able to choose their occupation freely, nor were they able to improve their social status. Even among the samurai, it was difficult for low-ranking individuals to rise up to a high position within the administrative structure. Of course, merchants and farmers were not able to reach the rank of rulers, and even within the class of the ruled distinctions of vertical rank were strictly determined. For both rulers and ruled, the whole of society was ordered by rank, and it was difficult for individuals to rise above the status fixed by their hereditary rank.

As well as his discussion of improvement of intellect and virtue, Fukuzawa points out that from the beginning of the nineteenth century there was increasing dissatisfaction among many classes of society regarding the hereditary rank system. Since it was an era when open criticism of political matters was forbidden, that did not manifest as brazen criticism of the government. Nevertheless, that dissatisfaction was hinted in various forms. It is possible to sense this by reading between the lines of the works of novelists and scholars in many different fields. Fukuzawa believed that the true cause of the 1868 revolution was this passion of dissatisfaction that had grown gradually over a long period.

In 1853, the American fleet of Admiral Perry had arrived at Japan's shores and demanded that the Shogunate open diplomatic and trading relations; and the Shogunate acceded to this. Samurai who were dissatisfied by this took up the slogans 'royalism for the Emperor' and 'the expulsion of foreigners', launched a fierce political movement and eventually deposed the Shogunate. In Fukuzawa's view, the anti-Shogunate movement on the part of these samurai was really a

manifestation of dissatisfaction with the system of hereditary rule. Therefore, it was inevitable that this movement would not stop at the revolution that deposed the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868, but progress to the abolition of the han feudal domains in 1871, and eventually result in the dismantling of the system of rank itself.

But even today, many conventional historical narratives explain that the 1853 arrival of Perry's fleet at Japan's shores shocked the Japanese and that the political movement of 'royalism for the Emperor' and 'the expulsion of foreigners' brought about the Meiji Revolution (Restoration).

Due to the strengthened influence of Marxist theory after World War II, the explanation that the political doctrine of "revere the emperor, expel the barbarians" caused the Meiji Revolution has on the face of it disappeared from academic historical studies in Japan. The focus of historical analysis has simply shifted to economic structure and popular social movements. But one might say that the original interpretation regarding the causes of the Revolution itself remains. What's more, the Meiji Revolution as portrayed in popular novels and films still centers on a movement to "revere the emperor, expel the barbarians".

But as we saw before, this interpretation cannot explain why the revolution led to the dissolution of samurai rank and leaves that issue shrouded in mystery. The historical account regarding the causes of the revolution presented by Fukuzawa successfully gives an answer to this mystery that is more than persuasive enough, even for today's historical studies.

4) Long revolution in nineteenth-century Japan

It was not the occasion of Perry's fleet arriving at Japan's shores that caused the Meiji Revolution, rather the true cause was long-term social change that began around the latter half of the eighteenth century or beginning of the nineteenth century. As a name for this social change, perhaps we can borrow the title of Raymond William's book, the *Long Revolution*?

After Fukuzawa's work, there is another book that points to the existence of a long revolution that led to the revolution of 1868; this is *History of New Japan, 2 Vols., 1891–1892*, by Takekoshi Yosaburo. Takekoshi points to the striking economic growth during the time of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and the increase in wealth and intellectual standards connected to the underlying rise in status of farmers and merchants. These merchants and farmers were responsible for governing villages and towns, and sometimes supported the livelihoods of samurai by lending them money, in effect reversing the power relationship. This view is in accord with interpretations from contemporary economic history research.

What is more, it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Japan that the publishing industry developed. Many volumes entered distribution and dissemination of knowledge became easy. In addition, the class of newly wealthy merchants and farmers created demand for academic studies and supported the development of various academic fields, such as Confucianism, study of the Japanese classics and Western learning. Among these, Takekoshi focuses on how Confucianism (or rather the political philosophy of Neo-Confucianism) spread as far as the common people.

Unlike the terminology of Western political philosophy, the constitution that is presupposed by Confucianism limits political regime to the monarchy, and there is no room for the principles of

democracy, in which the common people are the agents of politics. In Confucianism, however, the monarch should earnestly accept the requests of the people, and taking into account various economic and public health issues so that the people can live peacefully. That is the ruler's most important obligation. In addition, in neo-Confucianism, it is thought that all humans essentially have the same intellectual and moral capacity. Accordingly, it is expected that if humans (albeit only men) receive the appropriate intellectual cultivation they can develop their morality, then become officials and assist in benevolent government by the monarch.

Also, according to neo-Confucian thought, it is desirable that such people of high moral standing should reach the rank of monarch and official. So, it follows that if the monarch does not pay attention to the suffering of the people and continues with arbitrary rule, in an extreme case it is permissible for a person of high moral standing to stage a rebellion, expel the monarch and begin a new dynasty with himself as ruler. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan, this concept spread as an ideal together with neo-Confucianism. Takekoshi explains that it was linked to dissatisfaction with the hereditary system of rank and also served to amplify it. The concept both supported and lay at the root of the samurai revolutionary movement of 1868.

This dissatisfaction with the system of hereditary rule that was ubiquitous in Japanese society became entwined with ideals of neo-Confucianism and resulted in demands for new forms of government. One example of this was advocacy of the concept of 'public discussion' (koron 公論). In 1852, the Confucianist Yokoi Shonan addressed a policy proposal to a Daimyo in which he suggested that a body for public discussion be created as part of regional governance by Daimyo, that samurai discuss policy without distinction according to rank, and that the Daimyo administrate according to the outcome of those discussions. He also said that not only the samurai but ordinary people too should debate policies in each house, and that the Daimyo should listen carefully to those results too. We can say that a respect for equal debate drawn from the academic method of neo-Confucianism was independently reused as an idea for a political system.

Consequently, when Yokoi learned about the political institutions in various Western countries, he formed a high opinion of the Western parliamentary system as a body for administration based on public discussion, and advocated its introduction to Japan. We must be careful to note, however, that Yokoi did not simply advocate importing a political institution from Western culture while maintaining traditional morality. Rather, taking the ideas of traditional Confucianism as his standards of value, he believed that the Western political system was superior. At the same time, that was an assessment made after noticing the fact that Western countries were much better prepared than those of East Asia when it came to institutions for old people and orphans, the elderly and the poor: a Confucian ideal. Yokoi's argument for the introduction of a parliamentary system was based on an assessment that the West had actually better realised the ideals of Confucianism.

This positive assessment of social policies and politics by public discussion in various Western countries was not limited to Yokoi; it was shared by a range of political groups. As a result, the new government established via the Meiji Revolution included a declaration at the head of the 'national policy' it issued in April 1868. This was that 'Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by public discussion'. Throughout the later political history of the Meiji period the

establishment of assemblies became a shared concern of government and people alike, and in fact 1890 saw the establishment of the Imperial Diet.

5) In search of the Commonalities of Civilization

Japan's modernization in the nineteenth century is often characterized by the phrase 'Japanese Spirit, Western technique'. But this is a misunderstanding. As we can see from the example of Yokoi Shonan, Japanese intellectuals of the time didn't only comprehend and receive Western culture as technique. Rather, they imported Western culture precisely because they could view it in the light of traditional Japanese values and evaluate it. Also, although Fukuzawa Yukichi is often interpreted as being an unconditional admirer of Western civilization, this too is a misunderstanding. For Fukuzawa, civilization was an ideal that both the West and Japan should aim for. He judged that, even if the countries of the West had progressed further than Japan, they were still far from completing this process. In the first place, Fukuzawa chose to translate civilization with a Japanese word, *bunmei* [文明], that expresses a state of full moral development in Confucianism.

But, what did these Japanese intellectuals focus on and admire in Western culture? In order to express this in English, we may borrow a phrase from Samuel P. Huntington; what he calls, the 'Commonalities of Civilization'. Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) is famous for predicting a future situation in which various civilizations, such as Western civilization, Confucian civilization and Islamic civilization oppose each other and clash.

Not much attention is paid, however, to how at the end of his book Huntington proposes a path towards coexistence between civilizations rather than eventual conflict. In that section, he distinguishes civilizations with a small "c", i.e. cultural systems that have spread across specific regions, such as Confucian civilization and Islamic civilization, while also pointing to the existence of one single upper case Civilization. This single upper-case Civilization equals the universal values, such as a high level of morality, education, philosophy and material well-being, that are the shared aims of all the lower-case civilizations. Huntington argues that it is crucial for the maintenance of the world order that we take a hint from this single Civilization shared between the various different civilizations, and aim for discussion and coexistence.

It is perhaps also these Commonalities of Civilization that Japanese of the nineteenth century discovered in the West. Looking at the real state of Western nations at that time, perhaps they included some misunderstandings. Yet, Japanese people of that time found culture features that they could share with their own in Western countries once thought to have a completely different culture; and they tried to accept those. They found those Commonalities in foreign cultures, and their attitude of using them as hints for continued dialogue is ever more important in this age of globalization. These experiences of the Japanese in the nineteenth century may serve as a valuable precedent.