

Nippon, Old or New? Political Visions of Bakumatsu Japan

1.

We are presently in the course of celebrating 150 years of German-Japan relations. When we do that, we do not just celebrate a simple date. We celebrate a relationship which, despite covering geographic distances, cultural differences, and a great span of time, has been exceptionally close. Both nations in their own ways achieved great successes during those 150 years, and also led their people – and many more people in other countries – into disasters of historic dimensions. It is therefore important to find out what lay – and lies – at the very heart of the German-Japanese relationship. How did – and do – we perceive each other, and why? What images do we have of each other, and how did they come about? As both the representative of Germany in Japan, and personally as a Japanologist, I welcome the effort you make with this symposium of today and tomorrow. It will give the many (in fact, already more than 100) activities that follow during 12 months texture and it will, hopefully, make us think and contemplate about the deeper roots as well as the prospects of our respective countries.

2.

Colonialism, since the days of Columbus, constituted an extreme challenge for the peoples and cultures it threatened with death, slavery, the destructions of their beliefs, value systems and ethnic norms. Basically similar to military and cultural expansionism and imperialism of the past known by most major cultures – Western, Egyptian, Chinese, Arab, etc. – colonialism differed from these traditional forms of aggressive state behaviour in that it knew neither borders nor bounds. That is why it may be said that it prepared the ground well enough for the globalism we all experience today. In the context of the discussion of colonialism as much as of examining the situation of modern Japan, it is of interest why and how Japan managed to resist colonialism so

exceptionally. It is of even greater interest because there is that so much bigger empire just across the East China Sea which was not capable of resisting Western conquerors in a comparable way.

How Japan overcame the colonialist challenge is known well enough, and much of it will be discussed in the course of these two days. In short, the recipe was radical and rapid modernisation. But one question continues to intrigue me: did those who set Japan on the course of modernisation know what there were doing? Did they have any idea, any inkling, how much Japan would have to change in the course of its path towards becoming a “modern” nation?

The traditional narrative is that Japan's leaders only recognized the military threat (naturally, given the news of the Opium War) and realized that Japan's military capabilities were inferior to those of Western countries. Opening the country following Perry's and Europeans' demands (including demands put forward by pressure) was meant to be only temporary. After acquiring Western arms technologies, the “barbarians” would be driven off Japanese lands. The feudal system was to be saved, not abolished (never mind whether more Tenno-oriented or Bakufu-centered).

We may assume that this was what the majority of the social elite – the *bushi* – believed. Zobel has analysed newspaper reports about the first official Japanese delegation to Prussia, in 1862, and found how amazed German newspaper reporters were to find that the delegation was most of all interested in Prussian arms. But things went beyond acquiring modern weapons quickly. At the Museum of the Yasukuni Jinja, photographs are on display of the “Westernized” Japanese army in the 1880ies or Nineties where the generals stand in postures directly copied from the way European or American generals used to stand in the field. Here the process of imposing momentous change upon Japan is already, and visibly, in full swing (even while some still propagated that Japan only needed “Western technology” but needed to keep its “Eastern spirit”). Therefore, what about those Japanese who initiated the “revolution from above” the Meiji-Restoration? Those who originally led the elite, as politicians or as thinkers? What was in the minds of those Japanese

who led the way conceptually?

It is not so much a question of knowing what the world outside was like. That was known to anybody in a position of responsibility not only in the Bakufu but also in many of the Daimyo fiefs . It is more a question of visions. If Fukusawa Yukichi after his first trip abroad in 1862 (bringing him also to Germany) as he told it in his Autobiography wants to have said: “*We must first reform mens' minds before we can begin to reform the nation*” he shows knowledge of what modernization will mean for his country. But was anyone thinking like that before Perry was sighted approaching Japan?

3.

The *Shinron* is the major work written by Aizawa Seishizai, a scholar in Mito, a representative of the thought of the Later Mitogaku, a Confucian-nationalist philosophic school founded by Tokugawa Mitsukuni in 1657. Aizawa Seishizai also was a teacher of Tokugawa Nariaka, the Mito Daimyo who was one of the most fiery proponents of *sonno-joi* once Perry had arrived and the Bakufu discussed what measures to take. The *Shinron* was forbidden by the Bakufu soon after its publication because it proposed changes to Japan's system of governance which would have upset the traditional feudal order for the sake of bringing all the people together behind nationalist concerns. Until its final publication in 1857 it was circulated in a multitude of copies and both informed the developing *sonno-joi* thought. Professor Maruyama called it the most systematic approach to the question of how Japan should deal with the challenge the West posed at that time. It also laid the terminological groundwork for what was later to become conservative national thought in Japan culminating before the Second World War. As concerns my question, the *Shinron* is remarkable in two ways.

First, twenty years before the Opium War, Aizawa's grasp of the international situation is profound. If we usually assume that the Bakufu had knowledge of the world on the basis of the regular Dutch reports plus what was learnt through spurious contacts with American whalers, Russian fur hunters, English traders and of course Yogaku scholars, then we have to accept that there was

not much room for error about the nature of the West encroaching upon Japan. I quote: *"It is about 300 years that the Western barbarians dominated the seas. The territories they possess become more by the day, their greed grows bigger every day. ... If they want to win another country, they first send their traders as spies, then they send troops and attack. If that is not possible, they preach the barbarian religion to fool the hearts of the people."*

It is clear: there was ample reason for Japan to be afraid. But, the second remarkable element: there was no fear. To the contrary, Aizawa tries to instill respect and fear of Western designs in his country men's minds who he thinks are much too sanguine. I quote: *"The Westerners seduce other people, ruin other countries and do what their barbarian god wishes. They use the words of love for everybody only so as to conquer even more. However greedy their soldiers maybe, they are dutiful warriors. They possess so many countries and regions only because of their great capabilities."* But at the same time, he tries to instill confidence, and he does it based upon precise and far-reaching proposals which would in effect put to rest *sakoku* policies: Japan must build a navy, possess modern artillery, train its troops in the same way Westerners do, and it has to go on the attack itself. If that were possible, Japan wouldn't need fear anything at all.

Now, a best-seller, by all experience, doesn't become a best-seller if it tries to sell thoughts that are completely alien to its readers. A best-seller is successful because it represents the thoughts of "everyone" in novel ways. So Aizawa can't have been the only person in Japan who assumed that Japan's very existence was threatened but who did not fear that threat and instead was utterly convinced that Japan, employing the right strategies, could win. Indeed, we find that same argument, if less well argued and less logically supported, among many of the major thinkers during Aizawa's times, and before. It is what then was to become the *fukoku kyohei* concept: Making the country rich and militarily strong. The most impressive thinker of that school may have been Sato Nobuhiro who in his *Udai Kondo Hisaku* in 1823 already developed a plan to unify the whole world. Under Japanese leadership of course, beginning by conquering China and in the end having all the barbarians come "on their

knees and elbows” to the Emperor.

This is at least an indication that in pre-Bakumatsu Japan the elite knew sufficiently about the dangers of colonialism, and was convinced at the same time that it was danger which could be dealt with satisfactorily. Two questions then remain: Where does the strength of that conviction come from? And the crucial one: Were these persons ready to accept a complete overhaul of Japanese society?

As for that last question, again I quote the *Shinron*. Aizawa says about a future Japan, that it is not only a Japan able to withstand and resist or even attack. It is a Japan that needs a grand design (the one he proposes), a new concept for the way of governing itself because only once it has completely renewed itself, it will be able to “*rescue all countries in the world from their misery*”. Then the Tenno will be like a father to them and they will come to watch the shine of Japan's virtue and its god-like strength. As far as the first question is concerned, the *Shinron* opens up by assuring its readers that Japan possesses a very special status: “*Our divine land is where the sun rises and where the primordial energy originates. The heirs of the Great Sun have occupied the Imperial Throne from generation to generation without change from time immemorial. Japan's position at the vertex of the earth makes it the standard for the nations of the world. Indeed, it casts its light over the world and the distance which the resplendent imperial influence reaches knows no limit.*”

4.

Again, also this is not quite new . Honda Toshiaki in 1798 expounds that Japan has learned the best government of all because of 1.500 years of uninterrupted imperial reign which let it become the greatest nation of the world. Hirata Atsutane in his *Kodo Taii* at about the same time says there is an “*immense difference between Japan and all the other countries of the world to defy comparison*” because Japan is the only country in the world that never had a change in its dynasty from the moment that the sun goddess created it. Motoori Nobunaga, one of the major proponents of the Kokugaku in the late 18th century writes: “*Our imperial land is superior to the rest of the world in its*

possession of the correct transmission of the ancient way, which is that of the great Goddess who casts her light over all the world." This thought of a natural superiority of Japan represents an extreme exceptionalism, astonishing at a time when Japan was not threatened at all by enemies from abroad. Is it possibly not more than the self-confidence of an island people who rarely in history had to make the experience of being subjugated but who observed how others were? It must be more, deeply rooted as that thought is. Possibly it is the answer more to an internal than an external threat. Or, more precisely, an internalized threat. During the Tokugawa reign, Neo-Confucian thought which had entered Japan earlier but had not yet played a great role during the civil war seemed to prove as ideal an instrument of rulership as it had done in China. Neo-Confucian thought, however, was linked so directly to the Chinese concept of virtue emanating from a Chinese-style ruler and his bureaucracy (*kunshi*). Adopting it completely - as many did - meant foregoing Japan's sense of an identity of its own. The Kokugaku therefore evolved as a school of thought to rescue Japanese traditions.

First, this was mainly a question of literature, linguistics, and religion. But confronted with the vast dominance of Neo-Confucian schools, a more profound justification for the effort of resistance must have become necessary. That is where Kada Azumamaro, Kamo Mabuchi, Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane began step-by-step to develop their nationalist paradigms, the core of which was Japanese exceptionalism. Doing this, they were able to draw on even earlier efforts to prove Japanese superiority. It was mainly a work which already had impressed Tokugawa Mitsukuni (the founder of the Mitogaku). It was the *Jinno-Shotoki* written by Kitabatake Chikafusa around 1340 on the basis of studies of both ancient Japanese history and its interpretation by Ise shinto. It begins by saying: "*Great Japan is the Divine Land. The heavenly progenitor founded it, and the sun goddess bequeathed it to her descendents to rule eternally. Only in our country is this true. There are no similar examples in other countries.*" At that time - besides having a very practical political objective - the author was battling foreign influence, too, only at that time it was Buddhism; and indeed, Kitabatake Chikafusa helped rescue shinto. Perhaps, even he himself followed an even older model, analysed in great

detail by Wang Zhenping. Wang shows to which great pains the ambassadors of Nara Japan to the Tang Court went in order to seem to be tribute bearers to the Chinese but to report back home to a Tenno whom by their usage of language they made believe that he had in international relations the same status as the Tang emperor.

It is plausible therefore, to deduct that Japanese exceptionalism as one part of Japanese political thought over centuries acquired the overwhelming strength of an uncontested dogma. Especially the symbiosis of Neo-Confucianism and Kokugaku thought proved strong enough to allow an extremely self-confident approach to the Western challenge. Simply put: A country that exceptional can change in whichever way, it will always be exceptional. Here, too, the development of that notion in previous centuries is illuminating. After all, almost all of the treatises of Japanese exceptionalism were not only written in flawless Chinese. They also adopted the Confucian hierarchical logic of governance and statehood, leading to an almost perfect fusion of kokugaku thought and Neo-Confucianism. Aizawa is thus led to even simply transfer the usage of the word "Middle Kingdom" (*chugoku*) from China to Japan.

Japan, to conclude, was able to answer to colonialism and the challenge of modernization by becoming like the West because it was certain it would not become the West. This extreme self-confidence allowed Japan to succeed where almost no other country challenged by Western colonialism did.