Takeshi Ishida

The Introduction of Western Political Concepts into Japan: Non-Western Societies' Response to the Impact of the West

Im folgenden Aufsatz wird aufgezeigt, wie die Ideen von »Freiheit« und »Recht« in Japan eingeführt wurden. Es wird ein Vergleich mit China hergestellt, da in Japan dieselben Schriftzeichen wie in China für die beiden Begriffe benützt werden, auch wenn sie in beiden Ländern verschieden ausgesprochen werden. Da die Begriffe, mit denen »Freiheit« und »Recht« übersetzt wurden, im klassischen Chinesisch ebenso wie im klassischen Japanisch eine eher negative Bedeutung hatten, fanden sie in den beiden Gesellschaften wenig Anklang. Gleichzeitig jedoch spielten sie eine wichtige Rolle in den demokratischen Bewegungen beider Länder gegen ihre jeweilige autokratische Herrschaft. Nach der Niederlage des imperialistischen Japan wurden die Konzepte »Freiheit« und »Grundrechte« zu den wichtigsten Grundsätzen des politischen Systems. Es ist heute ein gewisser Bedeutungswandel der Begriffe »Freiheit« und »Recht« sowohl in Japan als auch im Westen festzustellen, der wahrscheinlich darauf zurückzuführen ist, daß in Japan ebenso wie in den westlichen Gesellschaften Einwicklungen hin zur postindustriellen Gesellschaft stattfinden. Bei aller Ähnlichkeit in der Tendenz lösen jedoch die Begriffe »Freiheit« und »Recht« in Japan nicht ganz die gleichen Emotionen aus wie im Westen.

I. Introduction

As the subtitle of this study indicates, I would like to deal with the problem of the introduction of Western concepts into Japan as a case study of non-Western societies. Of course non-Western societies cannot form a cultural unit. They include such diversified cultures as Islamic, Indian and Chinese cultures. One common element found in these societies is, however, the fact that in the modern period they all experienced Western political impact and had to respond to it in one way or another.

When we reflect on the studies of the response of non-Western societies to the impact of the West, we can easily notice that there exists a remarkable historical change in the evaluation of the relationship between modern Western elements and traditional elements. In the 1960s the social scientists who advocated the theory of »modernization« tended

to think that there was a sort of zero-sum relationship between modernity and tradition or between Western and indigenous elements. This tendency was already criticized in the late 1960s by various studies of concrete situations. For example, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph's *The Modernity of Tradition, Political Development in India,* published in 1967 was one such study.

In this way, the simple dichotomy between modernity and tradition has lost its validity. Since the late 1970s and particularly in the 1980s a new tendency emerged with regard to the evaluation of traditional elements. In the new tendency represented by, for instance, Roy Hofheinz, Jr. and Kent E. Calder, *The Eastasia Edge,* 1982, the very traditional element is considered to be a contributing factor to rapid economic growth in Eastasia, i.e., Japan, China and the so-called »gang of four« (NICS: Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong). In comparing the authors with advocates of the theory of »modernization«, they are on the other extreme of the spectrum between modernity and tradition, in the sense that they overemphasize the importance of tradition.

What is, then, the content of the traditional element commonly found among Eastasian countries as a contributing factor to rapid economic growth. For instance, the »Japanese pattern of management«, which has recently been evaluated highly by Westerners is by no means a genuinely traditional one. Instead, it is nothing but a synthesis of traditional elements and American theories of management which were enthusiastically introduced into Japan in the 1950s.

In my view, it is not very useful to contrast the modern or Western and traditional or indigenous elements, because in the concrete situations in Non-Western societies in the modern period it is almost impossible to distinguish these two elements.

Considering the above, what is important is not the quantitative comparison between modern and traditional elements, which tends to result in oscillation between the two extremes, but the analysis of how the two elements have been entangled with each other and how each element has modified the other.

As the difficulties of accurate translation would suggest, the introduction of Western ideas into a different culture was inevitably accompanied by a necessary modification of these ideas. The problem of how Western concepts were modified or in extreme cases misunderstood in a certain society can be used as a key to understand the particular nature of that particular culture. On the other hand, the non-Westerners' understanding of Western ideas may be able to tell the Westerners about what they do not know about themselves, as Louis Hartz pointed out in his introduction to Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power. Yen Fu and the West.* This is because in the process of the introduction of Western ideas

into non-Western societies, a certain aspect can be particularly overemphasized.

II. The Concept of Freedom or Liberty

When the present translation of »freedom« *jiyu* (or *tzuyu* in Chinese, using the same characters) was first used has not been precisely identified yet. Neither has it been clear whether it was the Chinese or the Japanese translation which appeared first. However, it is well known that Fukuzawa Yukichi's widely-read book *Seiyo Jijo* (Conditions in the West) popularized the term »jiyu« among the Japanese people. In this book published in 1869, which contained a translation of the Declaration of Independence of America, he had to add a careful note warning the reader not to interpret the term *jiyu* to mean »selfishness«. He explained that it was because of the lack of an appropriate Japanese term that this word was used. This warning was necessary because *jiyu/tzuyu* in both Chinese and Japanese classics meant »selfwilled« or »selfish«, and in general it had a pejorative meaning.

When Nakamura Masanao published his translation of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in 1872, the term *jiyu* had already become so popular that he did not need to add any note to this term. The increased popularity of the term, however, does not necessarily imply a better understanding of it. In fact the increased popularity of the term was sometimes related to misunderstanding in the sense that *jiyu* was considered to approve the emancipation of all human desires or instincts. This misunderstanding made the term jiyu more encouraging to those who wanted to fight against autocratic rule and Confucian rigorism.

Another misunderstanding, which also resulted in encouraging the Movement for Freedom and People's Rights, can be found in Nakamura's translation of the word »society« in Mill's *On Liberty*. Because of the lack of a separate concept of »society« in Japan at that time, Nakamura could not understand the distinction between »society« and »government«. In chapter four of *On Liberty*, where Mill talked about society's control over an individual, Nakamura understood it as a problem between government and the individual. In the same way »collective opinion« was translated as »the government's opinion.« Thus Mill's idea of the »tyranny of the majority« could not be properly understood by Nakamura, and the simplified dichotomy between government and the individual became the focal point of the translation.

The relatively low evaluation of individual freedom compared with the importance of national wealth and power is probably common in all those non-Western nations which confronted Western imperialist expansion,

but it was particularly so in China and Japan because of the traditional connotations of the term *tzuyu/jiyu.* At the same time, it should not be ignored that in both nations the symbol of freedom played an important role in the movement against autocratic rule.

As the result of Japan's defeat in World War II and subsequent reforms ordered by the Occupation authority, a radical change took place in terms of value-orientation and the political system. Following the policy line declared in the Potsdam Declaration, which stated: »Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights, shall be established,« the idea of freedom became one of the highest values of the new political system, which was well established by the Constitution of 1946. Thus, the goals propagated by the pre-war liberals such as political democracy and civil liberties were accepted universally, or at least as a matter of principle.

The feeling given by the Japanese expression »jiyu«, however, did not change very much. Once a distinguished Japanese writer wrote an essay in a leading national paper saying that Japanese people have too much freedom. Through this statement he wanted to criticize the hedonistic attitudes among present-day Japanese people. In fact, he mentioned as an example that Japanese have too many opportunities to get drunk in bars. In his use of the term »jiyu« he meant something which people are enjoying as the result of the emancipation of their desires, instead of something to be pursued as a normative goal. Of course this way of understanding is closely related to the traditional use *of jiyu,* and hence has a long historical background. At the same time, however, this understanding of freedom reflects a certain aspect of a post-industrial society in which the consumption-oriented mass culture has replaced protestant asceticism. We can easily be reminded here of C. Wright Mill's criticism of contemporary American society which said that people are simply celebrating freedom but they rarely defend it. In this sense, we may be able to detect a tendency toward convergence between Japanese and Western understandings of the term »freedom.«

III. The Concept of Right

When it was that the term *ch üanli* (the same Chinese characters are used in Japanese too and pronounced *kenri)* was first used to translate »right« has not been established. It is clear, however, that the term became popular when it was used in W. A. Martin's translation into Chinese of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* (Boston, 1863) published in 1864. In the following year it was reprinted by the Shogunate government and read widely amongst the ruling elite and intellectuals in Japan.

The fact that the concept of »right« was first introduced in a book on international law made it easy for it to be understood as an attribute of a sovereign state. The »rights« of individuals, however, were much more difficult for the Chinese and Japanese to understand.

The difficulty in understanding the concept of individual rights was due in part to the traditional connotations of the expression *ch'iianli/ kenri.* In Chinese and Japanese classics this was approximated to mean »the consideration of profit« and was used to characterize vulgar attitudes. To consider one's own profit *(li/ri* means profit) is not considered to be appropriate behavior in Confucian ethics which emphasize the virtue of modesty.

Therefore it was necessary for them to explain the new concept of »right« in such a way that it could be accepted by society with sufficient legitimacy. When they introduced the idea of »natural right« which had originally been buttressed by the Christian belief, they interpreted it as »human rights bestowed by Heaven« using the Confucian concept of heaven as the source of legitimacy. Although the tradition of monotheistic religion has been lacking in East Asia, the concept of heaven is a universalistic concept which plays a similar role to that of the absolute God in the West. It was, therefore, most appropriate for the Japanese intellectuals in the period of enlightenment to justify the idea of natural right by using the concept of heaven.

Being encouraged by the idea of »human rights bestowed by Heaven«, a political movement called »Movement for Freedom and People's Rights« *Oiyu minken undo)* emerged in the late 1870s.

There are, however, two problems related to the concept of »people's rights«. One is the bearer of rights, i.e., the problem of *who* has the rights. *Minken* in Japanese or *minch iian* in Chinese (with the same Chinese characters as in Japanese) was usually understood by political activists as the rights of a group called »people« who were fighting against the autocratic government rather than as the rights of the individual.

The second problem is that the term *minken* was understood as something related more to an actual power struggle than to the normative value. In other words, while the activists were engaged in power struggles, they tended to believe that »might is right.«

In so far as »right« was considered to be related to a collectivity rather than an individual, and related to the actual power relations rather than the normative value, it was not theoretically difficult, and in reality rather common that the believers in *minken* (people's rights) were converted to or fused with advocates of *kokken* (state's right) vis-à-vis foreign powers, when they were defeated by the government after a struggle for power. The justification for the conversion or fusion was that in order to promote the welfare of the »people«, it was necessary to strengthen the power of the state to compete with Western powers.

In China the concept of »minch'üan« (people's rights, the same characters as *minken)* had the same problem as *minken* in the sense that it was considered to be the right of the group rather than that of individuals. On the other hand, however, the shift from »people's right« to »state's right« or the fusion between the two did not take place in China because before the revolution in 1912, state power was in the hands of the Manchu dynasty and hence it was the target of attack by the nationalist movement.

Another contributing factor to the shift of emphasis in the Japanese intellectual climate from people's right to state's right in the late nineteenth century is the introduction of Social Darwinism as a theoretical means of erasing the influence of the natural right idea.

An important result of Social Darwinian thinking was that it increased the Japanese people's feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis the strong Western powers. This feeling needed to be compensated by a sense of superiority on the part of the Japanese towards their Asian neighbors. Thus, Japan herself wanted to become a great power, sacrificing her Asian neighbors. Her victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 was nothing but the first step on this path. Since then Japanese ruling elites continued to follow this line in attempting to compete with the Western imperialist powers.

In contrast, because China was defeated by Japan and was more directly threatened by Western imperialism, Chinese intellectuals looked at the notion of »survival of the fittest« as the process of the »destruction of the weak«. Thus, for example, Li Ta-chao preferred Kropotkin's anarchism with its emphasis on »mutual aid«, and socialism with its idea of emancipation through a class struggle by the oppressed, to Social Darwinism.

The patrimonial basis of the Constitution of 1889 in Japan made it difficult to separate legal problems from the matter of national morality often called »national polity *(kokutai).«* Imperial rule as a matter of sovereignty was not simply a legal problem any more, it ceased to be a question even in legal arguments. The patrimonial element in the Constitution became the real problem later in the political crisis in the 1930s.

As the result of Japan's defeat and subsequent reforms, the value system changed radically to focus on respect for human rights, which was declared as one of the three major principles in the new Constitution of 1946.

Similar to the concept of freedom, the concept of right as understood by contemporary Japanese has less and less difference in meaning from that understood by Westerners. **In** order to make necessary qualifications to the above statement, however, one example should be mentioned here. Now some conservative politicians are still saying that the present Constitution should be revised because rights are excessively respected and hence in the revised Constitution more emphasis should be placed on

duty. Here we should be reminded of the fact that in classical Japanese use the term *kenri* (right) had a pejorative meaning while *gimu* (characters used to translate the word duty) had a positive connotation.

IV. Conclusion

After tracing the process of the introduction of Western political concepts into Japan, what conclusions can be drawn? One may call the process of the Western concepts' taking root in Japanese society as that of acculturation or cultural assimilation to Western culture. It is a matter of definition, and I would not particularly deny the terminology, although I personally prefer »cultural contact« to the above terms, because it can mean a more reciprocal relationship. What is important, however, is that the following two elements should not be ignored when terms such as acculturation are used. The first is the significance of the socio-economic changes in Japanese society in the process of which the Western concepts have taken root in society. In fact the present tendency towards convergence between the meanings of a political concept in the West and that in Japan may be due chiefly to the similarity between the two as post-industrial societies.

The second point is, however, the fact that the concepts *of jiyu* and *kenri* continue to be different from those of»freedom« and »right.« As long as a certain concept is expressed in one language, which has its own historical tradition, it is impossible to completely eradicate the inherent traditional connotation. Also in the future *jiyu* and *kenri* cannot be the same as »freedom« and »right« in terms of the feeling conveyed by those expressions. In this sense one may tend to be a cultural relativist.

The next question to be raised is »In which cultural unit can the uniqueness of meanings be maintained?« The same expression is often used differently in different subcultures and in different periods in the same society. If we examine carefully the process of the introduction of Western concepts into Japan, we notice that the simple dichotomy between West and non-West is not always appropriate to explain concrete situations. For example, the idea of Social Darwinism was easily fused with the Japanese animistic belief in natural growth already existing in Shintoist tradition, and it confronted the idea of natural rights fused with such an universalistic aspect of Confucianism as the concept of heaven.

Western civilization has had various contradictory aspects, for instance, the ideological buttress for imperialist expansion on the one hand and ideas for emancipation of human beings on the other. What is more important than the simplified dichotomy between West and non-West is the problem of *which* element in the Western culture was fused with *which* element in the non-Western culture by whom and how.

Here let me add a brief comment on the comparison between the Japanese and Chinese cases. The problem of *by whom* was more obvious in China, where there was a conspicuous diversity of subcultures, such as those between Nationalist and Communist parties, than in Japan, where the intellectual atmosphere changed from one period to another with a stronger degree of national conformity. Also the fusion between Western and indigenous elements took place more easily in Japan, where among *samurai* there existed the traditional attitude of practical adjustment to changing situations. On the other hand in China the Confucian orthodoxy was maintained by mandarines recruited through a traditional type of examination system which survived until 1905. The above differences are, however, not qualitative but rather they are a matter of degree. In both cases there has always been a close interrelationship between various Western elements and various traditional elements.

The careful analysis of this interrelationship will give us a precious opportunity to reflect on both Western and non-Western cultures. Without such a careful examination of this interrelationship, a schematic crosscultural comparison tends to be arbitrary. In this sense I would prefer to be a »relationalist« rather than a »relativist«, if I may borrow the terminology of Karl Mannheim. The reflection on both cultures through the examination of the interrelationship between the two would give us a better opportunity to improve mutual understanding and find a way to engage in fruitful intercultural dialogue.