



Fridericiana Varia

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JAPAN AND THE
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FEUDALISM AND MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN DURING THE MEIJI PERIOD. THE IGNORANCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD*

1. The failure of contacts between Japan and South Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries

The first European to write about Japan which he called Cipango, was Marco Polo, the well-known Venetian merchant. When he landed in the Caribbean islands in 1492 Columbus who was from Genoa, was convinced he had reached Japan which for him, was part of India. The Jesuit missionaries who tried to evangelize Japan during the 16th century came to the archipelago on Portuguese vessels and were sent to Japan in the name of the Roman Pope. All of the priests who stayed in Japan during this period came from Portugal, Spain and Italy. When the Jesuits organized what was called the first Japanese embassy in Europe during the years 1582-1590, the young Japanese lords visited mainly Portugal, Spain and Italy, with a brief stop in Saint Tropez, south of France. So Catholicism as it spread during the "Christian century" in Japan was deeply influenced by its south european roots. The first contacts between West and Japan were obviously contacts between South Europe, Mediterranean Europe and western Japan. With the proscription of Christianity in the archipelago, the persecutions and the ban for Spanish and Portuguese merchants and ships to land in Japan in the beginning of the 17th

Century, we can affirm that the first massive contacts between Japan and the Mediterranean World ran into a dramatic failure.

The second historical period of the contacts between Japan and the West occurred during the period of *sakoku*, seclusion of Japan in the Tokugawa period, through the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The Dutch were protestants and the United Provinces were not a Mediterranean power. But what the Dutchmen merchants in Nagasaki chose to show (and to sell) to the Japanese as cultural products of the western civilization were not limited to the cultural products coming from Holland. Through Holland, Japan was able to keep a biased contact with the entire western civilization including the south European World.¹

In 1858, Japan was forced to sign the unequal treaties with western powers, the United States at first and then just after Holland, Russia, England and France. During the 1860's, many Japanese delegations made the trip to Europe. They crossed the Indian Ocean, the Suez Canal and they arrived in Marseilles, first contact for them with the dreamed Europe. But our Japanese travellers were only to break the journey at Marseilles. They had another goal: they travelled by train to Paris and they used the capital of France as a turntable to go to London, Belgium, Holland, Prussia and even Saint Petersburg. Very few of the Japanese travellers, diplomats and students chose to visit Spain or Italy, not to speak of Greece. Fukuzawa Yukichi who travelled to northwest Europe during this period made no exception to the rule: but when he decided to make a detour through Portugal, it was for nostalgic reasons (to see the country of the first *nanbanjin*). The result was also to confirm one of his intuitions: Japan had to learn much from Europe but to be more precise, from north-west Europe.

When Iwakura Tomomi sailed for America and Europe for a world round trip from 1871 to 1873 with an important part of the Japanese government (*Iwakura kengai shisetsu*), the official delegation chose to visit many countries which I file here according to the length of stay: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Russia, Holland, Belgian, Denmark and Sweden. A little bit more than 20 days in Italy for 495 days in the other countries. The Mediterranean world and South Europe obviously did not interest the official Japanese delegation.

Tanaka Akira who studied this Japanese embassy explains the reasons of the choice:

"The Iwakura diplomatic delegation has seen in the United States an independent and sovereign State one century after its birth. In England which was like Japan an island country, the Japanese had seen a commercial and industrial power. In France, they had felt the class contradictions in a civilized country which had been confronted with the 'bandits' of the Commune de Paris. But they also gave some compliments to the president Thiers, in charge of the repression, 'a skilled and experienced politician'. In Germany just after the creation of the second Reich, they had experienced the logic of strength of Bismarck and Moltke and their politics. They felt the gap in the level of civilization between United States, England and France and their country and this led them to a feeling of sympathy with developing and growing countries like Germany. In Russia, they compared the Emancipation Act of slaves with the land reforms in Japan... and in Italy they experienced the roots of European civilization".²

The embassy travelled many places in Italy (Verona, Firenze, Roma, Napoli and Venezia) but the Japanese were more impressed by the recent process of creation of a nation state in the peninsula (*Risorgimento*) than by the roman ruins, even if Kume Kunitake, who as the secretary of the delegation wrote a chronic of this world round trip, the *Bei ou kaian jikki*, explained that he felt in Italy "the weight of history".

Naples in particular is described as a poor city with people of mean appearance, without education and lazy, the most poverty stricken and dirty town of all the cities visited by the Japanese delegation, wrote Kume³ who compares the city to Shanghai!

And when Itô Hirobumi sailed to Europe during the mid 1880's to inquire after the constitutions and the legal systems of European countries for the count of the Japanese government, he spent the most part of his stay in England, France and Germany. On the political level, there was nothing to learn from the southern countries of Europe.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the Meiji period, is well known to have sent out in 1885 his famous slogan *Datsu A Nyû Ô* (Let us leave Asia and join Europe). It was an exhort to follow the same way as Europe, especially in the tech-

nological and cultural matters. When Fukuzawa wrote the word Ô (West, Europe), he was thinking to the western civilization as a whole but more specifically he was referring to the United States, England, Germany and France. After the 1860's, the modernization of Japan was thought through the western framework, which was, for the essential part, the north west European pattern. The Mediterranean countries which were crossed by the Japanese travellers during their trip to Europe aroused hardly their attention. And if it was so, it was for quite exotic reasons: if they had time during the crossing of the Suez canal, Japanese passengers could tickled their fancy to admire the Pyramids and the sphinx of Gizeh.

For the second time, the contact between Japan and the southern Europe failed to really have a concretization at that time again.

2. Does Japan look like Europe?

Anyway, the comparative economical and military outcomes of Japan during the last years of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century, especially after the victory against Russia in 1905, drove a number of Japanese intellectuals to ask themselves for the hidden motives of those successes. The generation of the *keimôshisôka*, the "enlighteners" like Fukuzawa or Nishi Amane had to fight against the old society, the *Ancien régime* which was considered as archaic and feudal. For them, the development of a modern society was linked to the decline of the old customs and ways of behaviour. But he thinkers of the new generation which emerges in the first years of the 20th Century had a quite different point of view. They had more respect for the so-called traditional Japanese culture and were perhaps more confident in the potentiality of their country than the older "revolutionary" generation. Many of them found the "secret" of this success story in the historical process of the Japanese society itself. They compared the historical development of Japanese society to the historical process of Europe and felt that the both were not so different. R. Brentano, a German specialist of the economic history of Germany at the end of the 19th Century related a story concerning one of his Japanese students, Fukuda Tokuzô who was studying in Germany economic

and social history. He remarked that Fukuda was smiling during one of his conferences when he was explaining the economic development of Europe during the period of the absolute monarchy. Brentano asked why Fukuda was in such a good mood and Fukuda replied: "because we had the same kind of process in Japan".⁴ Fukuda then wrote a book published in Germany in 1900 "*Die Gesellschaftliche und Wirtschaftliche Entwicklung in Japan*" (translated in Japanese and published in 1907: *Nihon keizaishiron*). He seems to have been the first Japanese scholar to have so clearly set out the idea that the economic success of Japan could be the result of a similar historical development as that of Europe.

What was so similar between Europe and Japan? The Japanese historians of that period, mostly influenced by the foreign professors teaching in Japan and especially German professors (the German historical school was prominent during this period among the western historians), quickly identified the source of the similarity. It was because Japan had known a feudal society during the medieval times like Europe. The concept of feudalism began then to play an important role as explanatory factor. The Japanese historians started to build up a new paradigm which had some consequences on the future of the country and on the relationships between Japan and other countries of the Far East. Fukuda Tokuzô, Hara Katsurô, Nakada Kaoru and many other specialists of Japanese history began to think that the emergence of a warrior class in medieval times had changed entirely the historical process. Fukuda summarized this idea with one phrase: "the Japanese middle ages means the irruption of Europe in the heart of Japan".⁵ The seizure of power by a class of samurai warriors had created the conditions of new social relationships quite similar to those which were developing in Europe during about the same period. In 1905 the problem was not to demonstrate that Japan had to "leave Asia and join Europe" as Fukuzawa said twenty years before, but to affirm that Japan had never been Asiatic. To demonstrate the validity of the thesis, it was important to compare the social structures of the medieval societies of Japan and Europe and to demonstrate that both of them were feudal. The European feudalism was not an exception in the world's history. There was another feudalism born in the far east of the Eurasia continent, in Japan.

3. *If so, Japan has nothing to see with Asia*

Where had appeared the European feudalism? In north west Europe, in the core of the most developing countries at that time, between the Loire, the Thames and the Rhine. One more time, when they thought about the West or Europe, the Japanese thought about North west Europe. But the comparison between North west Europe and Japan had another important consequence. If Japanese history looks like European history, it means that Japan has nothing to see with the other parts of Asia and especially China. The Japanese scholars, influenced one more time by their European counterparts, began to see China defeated by Japan in 1895 as a stagnant country. The Chinese stagnation versus the Japanese growth became at that time another stereotype. China was not able to renew its social and political structures. China has known a beautiful civilization during the old periods of its history but was now plunged in under development. China had never been able to go beyond the stage of Antiquity. As the Greek and Roman civilizations had fallen in decline, after having handed down the essential part of their genius to people living in north west Europe, China had handed down a part of its civilization to Japan without being able to advance itself. China had stayed in Antiquity stage and its history process was quite repetitive. China is stagnant. Japan on the contrary had deeply changed. Japan had known a medieval/feudal stage and then after like Europe a modern/industrial stage.

In 1906, Hara Katsurô, professor at the Imperial University of Kyôto, published a book *Nihon chûsei shi* (History of Middle Age in Japan). He defended a new argument: the new civilization which growths in Japan during the Middle Ages was not only a superficial imitation of Chinese culture, but, on the contrary, was a creation of something completely new and original: it was the Japanese civilization itself.⁶ For Hara Katsurô, the real birth of Japan as a nation dated back to the feudal period of Kamakura, when the country tried to escape massively from the Chinese influences and became for the first time "independent", as he wrote. The independence of Japan meant for him cultural independence, the birth of new cultural forms. The emergence of a new warrior middle class allowed to spread those new cultural forms which he quali-

fied as "healthy" (*kenzen*), in comparison with Chinese culture almost spread in the Court aristocracy of Kyôto which was qualified as "cosmetic" (*hisôteki*). For Hara, to run down the Chinese culture allowed to emphasize the new warrior culture emerging during those times and to explain that Japan was an independent nation since the feudal times. Japan had a long history of cultural and political independence. This also explained the fact that Japan had never been colonized or invaded during the modern times by western powers. The Japanese nation was the consequence of a primitive but healthy culture, created by the samurai of Eastern Japan, "where the primitive characters of the nation were preserved". The warriors had swept out the Kyôto Court which was polished but also superficial and effeminate, and was entirely mastered by cultural influences coming from China and Korea. For Hara, Kyôto, Nara and the western parts of Japan had received during the ancient times a veneer of Chinese culture and there, the "true" Japan had lost its virginal purity. But in Kantô and Tôhoku (Hara was born in Morioka, northeast Japan), the continental influences had been avoided and the people of this provinces had kept their pure and vital energy.

It is not difficult to recognize in Hara's explanations the influences of German nationalist historians of the 19th Century who saw the Germanic wandering people jumping over the *limes* of the Roman empire as regenerating a decadent Roman civilization. For Hara, eastern Japan's society played the same role as Germanic people in Europe. The imperial court of Nara and Heian dominated by Chinese and Korean culture was compared to the Roman empire dominated by the Greek and oriental cultures. As the German and Frank warriors coming out of the forests of central Europe subverted the old roman empire, the samurai coming out from Kantô and East of Japan organize the subversion of a decadent Court to substitute a feudal order ruled by military lords.⁷ In this way, Japan is not Asiatic, Japan looks like Europe. But we can also understand that China and Korea looks like decadent Mediterranean civilizations. In *Shina shisô to Nippon* (Chinese thought and Japan) published in 1938, a great scholar like Tsuda Sôkichi could again follow the arguments of Hara and he explained that China and Japan were two different worlds despite the cultural

contacts between the two countries. The historical process in China and Japan were of a different nature.

The Japanese modernization - often understood as westernization during the Meiji period - and also the Japanese nationalism in the first part of the 20th Century have been built up, as we have seen with those examples, on a north west European pattern which negates to the Mediterranean civilizations their place in the construction of a modern society. When Japanese thinkers spoke about greatness of Greece and Rome, it is because they thought Greece and Rome as grounds of the modern Europe of today. But they only considered the idea itself, not the concrete contemporaneous societies. In the same way, the nationalists in Japan before the war had respect for ancient China but often felt contempt for today's China. The relative lack of interest in Japan for southern Europe in the beginning of the 20th Century should be related to the Japanese ideology itself. The Mediterranean World is put in a category, the one of Ancient Times, vanished civilizations, ruins.... This refers to another image: the image of a stagnant and backward Asia of which Japan tries to escape.

4. *South Europe and south east Asia?*

The Japanese historians today do not like to use the word feudalism as it was always used in the pre- and after-war period. Amino Yoshihiko for example has published in 1997 a "History of Japanese Society" (*Nihon shakai no rekishi*) in which the word feudalism is really scarcely used. Feudalism as a concept compels the historian to compare Japan with western societies. Japanese historians, especially historians of medieval periods, prefer today to analyse Japanese history in the context of Asia history (*Ajia no naka no Nihon no rekishi*) and if comparisons are necessary, they prefer to compare Japan and Korea, Japan and China, Japan and South-east Asia. Journalists have recently tossed out the provocative idea *Datsu Ô nyû A* (Let us leave Europe and join Asia) which is, of course, an allusion to the slogan of Fukuzawa Yukichi one century ago. This means that there is a new interest in Japan not only for business in Asia but also to reconsider the historical judgements on

the past of the Far East societies. Now there is also a new interest in Japan for Mediterranean societies, especially south European societies. This international conference may be linked to this revival. We can see this phenomenon in literature: the novels of Ogawa Kunio in the post war period had yet a taste of exoticism⁸ but the allusions to Mediterranean "art de vivre" in recent Murakami Haruki's novels seems to have more deeply influenced the new generation. The success of the Japanese translation of Braudel's *Méditerranée* has also to be noticed. In a quite different and shallow context, the passion of the young Japanese women for Italian restaurants or the new interest of Japanese tourists for Italy, Spain and Greece seems to mean something new.

The partial collapse of the productivist ideology which dominated Japanese society since the end of the past century seems to have some consequences for our problem. The paradigm which was created one century ago and which dominated the representations in Japan of both western societies and Asian societies is now drawing to a close. Because Japan has to see in a new way his relations ships with its neighbours, because the representations of the Orient (Tôyô) are changing,⁹ because the model of civilization dominated by the Anglo Saxon world has reached his limits in a certain way, the Japanese are looking nowadays to a different way the non north-western civilizations. The disintegration of the old ideology which denigrated both East Asia and South Europe as a model, push the people in Japan to recognize now the qualities of other old cultures like those of China and South east Asia, and those of Mediterranean World. For both people of those parts of the world, it is an opportunity to grasp. More than one century ago, the Japanese are now ready to consider the advantages of societies where one can feel the "weight of history".

Notes

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¹ On these problems, see Jacques Proust, 1997, *L'Europe au prisme du Japon, XVIe-XVIIIe*, Paris, Albin Michel, who insists on the historical role of the Dutch screws

of the VOC in Nagasaki as "cultural mediators" between the whole western civilization and Japan.

² Tanaka Akira, 1977, *Iwakura shisetsudan*, Kôdansha, p.170.

³ Quoted by Tanaka, p.167.

⁴ Quoted by Ishii Susumu, 1971, *Nihon ni okeru chûsei no hakken to sono imi*, in "Sôbun", 93.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Hara Katsurô, 1978, *Nihon chûsei shi*, republished by Kôdansha, p.40.

⁷ Pierre F. Souyri, 1984, *Aux racines du consensus: l'écriture de l'histoire au Japon*, in *Japon. Le consensus: mythe et réalités*, Paris, Economica.

⁸ More than South Europe, the novels take place in east mediterranean world.

⁹ Stefan Tanaka, 1993, *Japan's Orient, Rendering Past into History*, University of California Press.