Fukuzawa Yukichi and Maruyama Masao: Two Visions of Japan

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Fukuzawa Yukichi and Maruyama Masao are arguably the most interesting Japanese intellectuals of the last two hundred years. It is a great honour, but also somewhat humbling, to be talking about them, and to be doing this in the illustrious Centre for Japanese Studies at Berkeley. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to visit the west coast of America for the first time, and to share some ideas with you.

The task of briefly summarizing their visions of Japan is made both simpler and more complex by the fact that their theories are so intertwined. Increasingly through his life Maruyama went back to Fukuzawa’s ideas and his Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics, in particular, is filled with quotations from and allusions to Fukuzawa. As Carol Gluck wrote in the Maruyama seminar last year, ‘You want to trace Maruyama, his own ideas, look at what he writes on Fukuzawa.’

A second difficulty is that there is a widespread image of Fukuzawa and Maruyama as the great modernizers. Certainly when I encountered each of them as a non-specialist I first learnt that their importance was that they saw more clearly than anyone else the values of western modernity. I was told that they were determined to introduce many aspects of the politics, social relations and, in Fukuzawa’s case, the technology, which had made the west so open and powerful.

I received an image that each had faced a crisis, and for each of them the solution was rapid ‘modernization’, the replacing of a crumbling, brittle and unsatisfactory ‘eastern’ structure by a shining, efficient, open new model. Fukuzawa used modern forms as a way of smashing down the claustrophobic
late Tokugawa world of his youth and laying the foundations for modern Japan. Maruyama advocated a return to western values as an antidote to the disastrous fascist tendencies which had led into the war experience of Japan in the 1930’s and 40’s.

It took me some time to realize that while there is a half-truth in this representation, it tends to miss much of what makes these two thinkers so great. Like Tocqueville, their power arises from a tension, from almost equal loyalties to two different orders. They do not advocate the destruction of an older Japan, to which they still feel a deep attachment, but rather a synthesis. They advocated preserving the best of the continuities with the past, while absorbing enough of the new lines of force which have been developed in the west. It is this balancing act which makes them so interesting.

As you will know, Fukuzawa was born in 1835, into a late Tokugawa society which he described so brilliantly in his *Autobiography*. He found himself growing up in a world which, in comparison to his experiences in America and Europe, seemed extraordinary. On the surface it was a highly advanced pre-industrial society, a complex civilization stretching back thousands of years, filled with money, markets, cities, internal trade, a high literature, superb crafts, ingenious technologies. It had taken the best of Chinese civilization and improved on it. In the material and external sense it seemed about as high level an equilibrium as could be achieved without industrial power, as Susan Hanley and others have argued.2

The central problem in Fukuzawa’s life and thought came from the realization that however well Japan had done by pursuing the Chinese agrarian path, when faced with the American warships and the aggressive imperialisms of the industrial and scientific west, all this was doomed. Japan’s meticulous, organic, skilled world would be brushed aside and trampled over by those who had already cracked open China in the Opium Wars, had gobbled up India, South America and much of the Pacific. Japan was next on the list.

To avoid the fate of becoming an imperial colony, something drastic had to be done. Many people, of course, were saying the same thing. Fukuzawa’s genius was to see that the changes that were needed went far beyond a technical appropriation of bits of western technology.

It was not enough to introduce isolated bits of western technology, to follow China in buying weapons from the West, for instance. It was essential
that Japan learnt the principles or spirit behind the technology and created the appropriate institutional structures. ‘The idea seems to be that, if England has one thousand warships, and we too have one thousand warships, then we can stand against them.’ This was not enough. It was ‘the thinking of men who are ignorant of the proportions of things.’ Much more was needed. ‘If there are one thousand warships, there have to be at least ten thousand merchant ships, which in turn require at least one hundred thousand navigators; and to create navigators there must be naval science.’ Even more than this was required. ‘Only when there are many professors and many merchants, when laws are in order and trade prospers, when social conditions are ripe—when, that is, you have all the prerequisites for a thousand warships—only then can there be a thousand warships.’

So what Fukuzawa set about doing was to undertake a comparative anthropology of civilizations along the lines which he had observed in the work of western philosophers. He felt that once he could understand the deeper nature of the whole of western and eastern civilizations, he could then work out what changes were needed.

Fukuzawa based his ideas on the work of Guizot, Tocqueville and Mill. This led him to believe, like Montesquieu, that there must be a separation and balance of powers. If there was the Confucian fusion of kinship and politics, there would be hierarchical absolutism. If there was a fusion of politics and religion, there would be despotism. For instance, he commented that in the case of Buddhism, ‘its teaching has been entirely absorbed by political authority. What shines throughout the world is not the radiance of Buddha’s teachings but the glory of Buddhism’s political authority. Hence it is not surprising that there is no independent religious structure within the Buddhist religion.’

Or again, if there was a fusion of society and economy there would be stagnation. If there was a fusion of public life and private morality there would be absolutism. The parts needed to be separated and artificially held apart.

‘To use a simile, if you take metals such as gold, silver, copper and iron, and melt them together, you would not end up with gold, or silver, or copper, or iron, but with a compound mixture that preserves a certain balance between the various elements, and in which each adds strength to the others. This is how Western civilization is.’ There must be a never-ending contest, which no part wins. ‘The point of difference between Western and other civilizations is that