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The Quest of Modernism in the 19th Century Japan: An Assessment

ABSTRACT

This paper will deal with the process of modernization of Japan with particular reference to important elements of Japanese pursuits of modernization at the expense of growing Western penetration into the country. This will specifically deal with the Meiji Restoration where process of modernization has taken place. Furthermore, there will be a discussion on the efforts of Japanese statesmen in their attempts to modernize several aspects of vital institutions in Japan as well as issues concerning the modernization encountered by the Japanese statesmen in the country. Sources for this analysis will be taken from studies of both Western writers and inside writers on modernization in Japan. The ability of Japanese statesmen to adopt and adapt foreign practices which later infused with local circumstances suggest that they are capable of modernizing their country by their own rights.

Introduction

The quest for modernization in Asian countries is seemed a matter of grave importance for their survival in world politics. In this respect, a rising Asian power like Japan had experimented modernization into their country. This was come about when the Japanese leaders realized that there was a need to revitalize their country at the expense of steady Western encroachments into the country. In Japan, Japanese leaders felt the need for modernization as the Western powers kept requesting to Japan to open their country for trading and commercial through gunboat diplomacy. This had compelled the Japanese leaders to succumb to foreign requests for instance opening Japanese ports for trading with the West. The Japanese leadership realized the urgency to remedy this increasing decline in almost all aspect of their life which paved the way for Meiji Restoration in 1868.

In the next discussions, we shall look at the ways how the Japanese leaders deal with their quest for modernity as an attempt to resist further western encroachments in their country. As far the Japanese' effort for modernization was concerned, there had been at least two contrasting views; the first party like Mutsu Mumemitsu (1884-97), who later served as an Ambassador to the United States as well as Japanese Foreign Minister, pointed out during his speech in Wakayama in 1886 that

“Customs and usages differ from one European country to another...but throughout Europe there is a single culture and a common element. The adoption of this element as a means of reforming the life of the people, to make it those same as that of the people of Europe, is the most important consideration for the survival of the Japanese people. For that purpose, we must reform everything, from such intangibles as educations and morals to the concrete things of everyday life such as clothing, food, and houses”. (Donald H. Shively, 2005).

While on the contrary, the other party like Motoda Eifu (1818-91), who was the Confucian tutor to the Meiji Emperor, had criticized the replacement of old school system with a new school system which

was inspired by Western-style ethics, opined that it would produce students who would exhibit deficiency “in the spirit and soul of our country and shallow in their foundation in morals and in courage for righteous causes...” Instead, he clearly emphasized on the need to maintain the old school system which promoted Confucian moral values like those of loyalty, filial piety and patriotism (Donald H. Shively, 2005). With respect to responses to a series of modernization programme carried out in Japan, we could observe here that there had been a different sort of attitudes, as briefly discussed above. The newly created Meiji leadership was heavily criticized for their plans for modernization due to many reasons (some because of traditions and values, while others because of political and economic interests). Nonetheless, interestingly, some of this criticism were not so much because of total emulation of the West, but they had to do with a sort of political-economic gains in the inner circle of the government. The classic example would be that of Saigo faction from Satsuma who decided to withdraw from the government because he failed to exert his influence within the government (over the issue of Korea). He protested against the modernization measures by the government which according to him done without much deliberation and consultation. This dissatisfaction culminated into an armed revolt in 1877.

Retrospectively, one scholar said, however, the underlying reason behind such a bold move against the government due to loss of privilege and influence enjoyed by him (and his fellow samurai) and Satsuma domain at large. While other party like those of factions from Tosa and elsewhere, were disappointed with the policy of government which practically excluded them from participating in the main state's apparatus, thus they demanded a representative assembly. They frequently used Western liberal political ideology to criticize the government. This conflict then witnessed a departure of Okuma from the current leadership, which urged the government to honour its promise to establish a national constitution in 1890. As far as the type of constitution was concerned, there were two opposing views; one was in favour of the British-style parliamentary system (represented by Okuma) which cabinet responsible to the assembly, creation of political party and press freedom; while the second party was favour of Prussian style of constitution (represented by Ito and his inner cliques within the government), no political part and restricted press freedom. In this respect, the second group gained much favour and influence. As a result, the government decided to abolish the party system, banned political campaigning, and imposed suppressive monitoring over publications so that the government could proceed without harassment with its proposed plans (Donald H. Shively, 2005).

METHOD

This essay is a discussion on the existing literature which discusses the modernization process in Japan which came into being, if not entirely responsible for such plan, following the Western attempts to establish their foothold in Japan. The Japanese leaders realized that it was just a matter of time before their nation would fall under the control of Western powers which while at the same time they need to face a growing number of domestic issues in the countries. Thus, in order to address such increasing Western pressure in their nation, a number of efforts had been carried out by the Japanese statesmen in Japan as to show to the Western powers that they were capable of modernizing their countries and could stand on par with the former. In this respect, sources for this analysis will be taken from studies on a wide range of scholarly works which are written by the Western and Japanese scholars. This article uses method of content analysis which can be defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use”.

That said, the researcher uses analytical constructs or inferences, making sense of texts found into contexts where the current study is conducted. In this respect, two domains, the texts and the contexts, are logically independent, and the researcher makes conclusions by looking at these two domains (White & Marsh, 2006).

Moreover, this content analysis uses one particular technique which is coding system which simply means labelling. According to Boeje (2010), as what normally used in the grounded research approach, coding is normally performed at three levels: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. For the first level (open coding) it is done by taking out texts and rearranging them into its own different themes and concepts found in the data. Afterwards, this set of different information is then reorganized based on their content into a number of categories which is termed as axial coding. Moreover, the third level, known as selective coding, was carried out by making rational links between the core categories so as to make sense of understanding what has been really happening in the observed practices and or events (Dina Wahyuni, 2012). This research method allows the researcher “to understand social reality in a subjective yet in scientific manner; explore the meanings underlying physical messages; and is inductive, grounding the examination of topics and themes, as well as inferences drawn from them, in data” (Kaid, 1989; Patton, 2002; Zhang & Wildenmuth, 2009)

ANALYSIS

There seems a little doubt about the Meiji Restoration of 1868 which considered by many scholars as the turning point for Japan to embark on its path to modernization, as this period witnessed the end of seclusion policy (*sakoku*) of the previous Japanese government under the Shogunate administration. This Meiji Restoration saw the restoration of power to the Japanese Emperor which previously held by the Shogun (*de facto* ruler of Japan) who ruled Japan on behalf of the Emperor. It was engineered by leaders from Satsuma-Choshu domains, notably Saigo Takamori and Kido Takayoshi. Following the death of his father (Emperor Komei), in February 1867, Prince Mutsuhito became the 122nd Japanese Emperor who then ruled Japan until July 1912. The Emperor was styled as Emperor Meiji (Enlightened Ruler). In short, this period marked the beginning of a new democratic state of Japan modeled based on Western lines. There have been a number of reasons which scholars tend to associate with the fall of Shogunate system in Japan and the emergence of Meiji Restoration.

In this respect, Peter Duus and Yayori Takano, rightly observed that the steady increase of foreign warships and vessels came near to the Japanese shores signified that this will sooner or later pose threats to Japan’s sovereignty and independence. At the turn of 19th century witnessed an advanced state of imperialism activity across the globe where the Great Western Powers had steadily subjugated non-Western societies into their colonies. These Powers claiming to bring a much needed ‘light’ to this uncivilized societies. The same scenario could be said of East Asian region. Great Powers like Britain, United States, Germany, French and Russia to name a few were gaining more concessions from the Chinese government, and Japan, as a small state, situated very close to these political games. Of course, viewing from the standards of Western world, Japan’s economy and military was weak. Thus, it was incumbent for the Shogunate administration to address this alarming situation which they did to remedy the existing situation, nonetheless, without much success.

Soon, Japan was officially opened to the West following the gunboat diplomacy exercised by Great Western powers which resulted in the signing of an unequal treaty between both parties. This had

allowed the opening of a few Japanese ports for Western trading and commerce with little benefits to the Japanese trade and commerce. Realizing a need for Japan to address this chaotic situation, a group of lower ranking samurai from four domains, decided to overthrow the Shogunate administration and eventually to restore the right of rule to the Japanese Emperor in 1868. This then marked the beginning of Japan's march into a modern country. This newly created Japanese government, famously known as Meiji oligarchy faced difficult tasks at hand to push Japan into a modern and strong country at the expense of growing Western activities in the country. One such problems was the prevalent of anti-Foreign sentiments which the Meiji government tried to cool down the sentiment as best as it could. At one side, despite this growing anti-foreign sentiments, the new Meiji government envisioned of transforming Japan into a "civilized country" like other countries in the West.

Many Japanese individuals had travelled to Western countries where they witnessed with their own eyes the advancement that the West had in economy and military realms. Thus, to survive in this ever-competitive world, the Japanese had to push their ways into a modern world. This was manifested in a diplomatic mission, consisting of far-sighted Japanese leaders which better known as Iwakura Mission. This mission was joined by several Japanese intelligentsia who later contributed towards the modernization of Japan in almost all walks of life. To elaborate, this mission was carried out in 1871 consisted of men of power and influence including among others Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883), Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909) and Kido Takayoshi (1833-1877). It was said the main purpose of this mission, apart from renegotiating unequal terms of the previous signed treaties with the major Western powers, it sought to learn the Western 'tools' which thought to be implanted and refined them in Japan. One of pivotal observation of Western civilization was done by specific studies of the West by Kido Takayoshi as well as Tanaka Fujimaro on matters concerning the West's political-administrative institutions, economy and industry as well as its military advancement (Eugene Soviak, 2005).

Eugene Soviak also observed that these individuals realized the bitter truth that Japan could not compete with the wealth and power of the West at that point of time. He has rightly observed that since significant number of its members were to play a greater political control through the next following years, thus it was largely depended on their hands to which direction Japan would have to undertake the process of modernization into the country. Retrospectively, Iwakura Mission was seemed to be a significant move made by the new government leadership to prepare Japan in its undertakings for modernization process in the country as this mission provide first-hand observations and studies on the Western world throughout their visits to different countries in the West. According to Eugene, the mission official report, known as *Jikki*, highlighted, among others, that there was not an easy feat to alter long-established political and social patterns in Japan to make a way for the creation of a modern and strong Japan. Therefore, this would require a great deal of caution, adaption, and selectivity for Japan in its efforts to modernize the country.

In their pursuit of modernity, the Japanese leaders had also introduced a number of changes in the administrative and socio-political structures in the country. For this regard, it deems necessary to have a look at the Iwakura Mission which served as a golden platform for the Japanese leaders to learn from the West and eventually translate those initiatives into their own country. Retrospectively, this was in fact in line with the famous national slogan of the late Edo period and early the Meiji rule, namely *fukoku kyohei* ("enrich the country, strengthen the military"). One of the significant aspects through which this 'seed' of modernization could be actualized was via education reforms. In this respect, one of the foremost Japanese scholars, Michio Nagai had touched this aspect of modernization in Japan

which later gave birth to a certain process which he termed as ‘Japanization’. In simple words, this process of ‘Japanization’ meant adoption of western ‘tools’ into the country which was then refined and implemented in matters concerning Japanese education, administration, economy and military affairs to name a few based on Japanese values and traditions.

It was known that, for instance, in the case of introducing changes in the Japanese education system, the Meiji government had carried out this reform with different kinds of Western model (from the French type to the American and then to the Prussian) (Michio Nagai, 2005). Thus, to speak of educational reform, the efforts towards reorganization Japanese’s education system was without doubt steadily took place following the return of Iwakura Mission from abroad in early 1870s. The gesture towards a new compulsory system was officially authorized through the Education Ordinance of 1872 that called for, “the establishment of eight universities, 256 middle schools, and 53, 760 elementary schools. All in all, the compulsory education was set at four years. To elaborate, the Meiji leadership thus had decided to impose a compulsory education system, modelled after Western type of schooling systems. That said, there was no single model adopted for this reorganization given the fact that it was first modelled after French, later shifted to American and followed by the Prussian systems. Nonetheless, one should bear in mind that, in the midst of this reorganization, there had been feelings of uneasiness especially among the Japanese notable individuals (the classic example was Motoda Chifu) that the basis and tradition of Japanese schooling system (which heavily rooted in the Confucian’s teachings) would be faded away, thus giving a way to Western values and traditions.

At last, after a series of disagreements, compromises and modifications, the Japanese traditions and values were fused into Western models. In short, as what Michio Sagai has observed, in view of this modernization effort, the process of Meiji transformation of education system is not fully mean adoption of Western models in its entirety (Shunsuke Sumikawa, 1999). In addition, in matters concerning the reforms in Japan’s administrative and political landscapes, it seemed also little doubt that Prussia became one of the most influential countries through which Japan looked it as model. (Augustus Flottman, 2012). In this respect, Ito Hirobumi together with his fellow Japanese embarked on another observation mission in Europe. This mission was purposely meant to study and to investigate the Western political systems as means to prepare for the creation of a much-awaited Japanese constitution. Interestingly, Ito found his ways in Germany and Austria. In Germany, he came into contact with Rudolf von Gneist and later he went to the University of Vienna (Austria) through which he studied arts of monarchical government under Lorenz von Stein. Von Stein emphasized that supreme legislative and administrative power resided in the monarch and that the monarch and the state were synonymous.

It seemed that Ito was fascinated by ideas of this Austrian thinker where the former came into conclusion those who followed the models of liberal countries like England, America and France had led Japan towards the wrong direction. Upon his return to Japan from his visits to Austria and Germany, Ito took the reins of the government’s efforts to fulfil a series of promises and commitments towards modernization, where the creation of the Japanese Constitution assumed among the foremost agenda of the government. Among the measures he implemented was firstly to lift the very position of the Emperor where the Imperial Household was to put under a separate administration. A specific law governing the Imperial Household was also enacted. Moreover, the ancient court title Naidaijin (Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal) was revitalized in 1885. Other important creation was the institution of a peerage system in 1884. It comprised of a number of conservative leaders a nucleus which would

convene in 1890. In 1888 he instituted the creation of Privy Council (Sumitsu-in) as he gave up the Council of State (Dajokan) which was previously in practice in the early years of Meiji administration.

In addition, he led the way for creation of a strong executive cabinet based on the German model. In terms of the state's administration, a civil service examination was introduced in 1887 to select and appoint qualified government officers in the country. On top of that, the day-to-day state's administration was put under a close tight executive control (Eugene Soviak, 2005). In terms of military restructuring, which according to Meiji leadership, constituted one of the critical areas that would determine the sovereignty of Japanese state at the expense of growing Western encroachments in the East Asian region. To illustrate this, the Meiji government had introduced a compulsory military conscription in the country (promulgated in January 1873); Japanese military was later modelled after the Prussian model, while its navy followed closely that of British navy. One certain scholar opined that by introducing the Japanese youths of all classes to the arts of military life, this had thus created a sense of nationalistic spirit within themselves (Ernst L. Presseisen, 1965).

Moreover, the government had also founded an autonomous General Staff in 1878 and created an Army War College in 1883. Following the introduction of The Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors of 1882, this then characterized a direct relationship of Japanese Emperor had upon the military which later had been formalized through the 1890 of Japanese Constitution. The constitution designated the Japanese Emperor as the Commander in-chief. Moreover, the ministers of army and navy only can be filled in by officers on active duty as spelled out in two Imperial Ordinances in 1900 (Leonard A. Humphreys, 1995). In terms of military's strength, at least before 1886, Japan could only have eight modern warships. Nonetheless, in the late 1880s, with the presence of one able Japanese farsighted military leader, none other than Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922) had started the programme of transforming the small-scale Japanese troops into that of large-scale, mobile, self-sufficient operational units combining infantry, cavalry, artillery engineers, and supply troops (the division). In addition, there had been a number of military experts invited from abroad to come over to Japan to help the Japanese government to modernize its army. Such names include Klemens Wilhelm Jacob Meckel (1842-1905), who had been appointed as a professor at Army College and concurrently the advisor to the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff in 1885 (James B. Crowley, 1966).

In terms of political transformations, it seemed vital for the Japanese leadership to restructure the country's institutions according to standards of Western countries, of course, some of Japanese leaders differed in their views and preferences on how much they could emulate the West. As a matter of fact, among the first thing that the Meiji government did following the takeover of Shogun-led administration was the grant of Charter of Oath in April 6, 1868 by the Emperor Meiji. This outlined the commitment of the Meiji government to provide justice and equality to all the Japanese society through a number of reforms programmes that they were about set up and implement in the country. For instance, the new leadership promised that a sort of national assembly would be established to deal with all public and state matters through public discussion at one hand. Moreover, all that non-civilized customs and acts of the past would be put to an end. To elaborate on this Charter, specifically, it was said, according to Suzuki (2002) that the underlying intention of this Charter was "to reject to reject despotism in politics and expand political participation, to build a society in which individuals could exercise their talents, and to acquire knowledge by joining the ranks of the international community, especially developed countries, without adhering to old customs".

In this respect, there had been a series of early attempts to implement the government's commitments towards creation of "assemblies and public discussions" mentioned in the Charter Oath, nevertheless, it took some time before the Meiji government could actualize those promises. Then came a momentous event in 1889 when Japan introduced its first constitution which was modelled along the Western lines. A parliament, called the Diet was established and the emperor was placed as the sovereign figure head (Shunsuke Sumikawa, 1999). With the return of Imperial court to the state's affairs (though it may lack of direct power), the two opposing sides, the pro-Bakufu and the newly created Meiji leadership parties however seemed to agree that the Imperial Court should refrain itself from a direct intervention in the political affairs of the state, yet still there was a need for the participation of former feudal lords in the running of the state's affairs through 'kogi' or assembly. Another similar move seen in June 1870 when the government released one certain document called the 'Document of the Form of Government'. This then led to the creation of one certain political body, called the Grand Council of State.

With this document, elements of fundamental governmental mechanism such as the separation of Powers, the authority and jurisdiction of main state's institutions and appointment of officials came into existence. In this respect, in July 1873, Kido Takayoshi, who returned back to Japan earlier than the rest of the Iwakura Mission to Europe and United States, submitted a memorandum to the emperor, proposing that it was imperative to expand the Charter Oath and to create a Japanese Constitution. He saw the significant roles of the Emperor could play (for instance in mobilizing the support from masses) in securing the independence, wealth, and power of the country. Thus, it was not surprising to observe his preference of creating a strong government under active roles of Emperor. This, according to Kido, shall be realized through the establishment of constitution. In the midst of preparing the modernization plans into the state's administration, other fellow Japanese statesmen were preoccupied with Korea's issue, known as 'seikanron'. In this regard, Kido rejected the need to deal with the Korea's issue at that moment of time, primarily on the basis that there was more an urgent need to push through internal reforms (for instance constitutional reform) than the latter.

Kido's ideal proposal was a constitutional monarchy accompanied with a growth in national consciousness. Moreover, Kido's fellow statesmen, Okubo Shigenobu had also expressed his views in matters concerning the types of government which possible for Japan to adopt; he said that in a memorandum (1873), there were three possible systems of government which would allow for the centralization of power in the country, namely first, an autocracy with a constitution, secondly constitutional popular "co-governance" (democracy), and thirdly "co-governance" by the monarch and the people (which refers to constitutional monarchy). He went on to argue that out of these three systems of government, the third option was seemed the most suitable for Japan to stimulate the people's political participation (Takii Kazuhiro, 2014). In discussing about models of constitution which suitable for Japan to adopt in the state, it seemed Japanese statesmen like Ito Hirobumi and his close circles were looking at Prussianstyle of constitution as a right model for Japanese Constitution. Others like Okubo favoured British-based constitution.

Takii Kazuhiro mentioned that it seems vital for the Japanese leaders to establish an executive branch which could exert its influence vis-a-vis the parliament. In this respect, such a prominent leader like Ito Hirobumi came into scene. He had been working the country's constitution since his return from second and third visits to Europe in the 1880s. He had at first worked on putting aside the Emperor and its Imperial Household outside the perimeter of cabinet's control. Moreover, upon assuming a prime

minister post in 1885, Ito had created a strong cabinet system as well as a clear-cut separation between the imperial house and the executive branches (Takii Kazuhiro, 2014; Kenichi Ohno, 2017). Furthermore, in terms of economic transformation, Alexander David Brown (2005) for instance contended that economic changes in Japan were characterized by a considerable increase in technological capabilities of state's industry which allowed the country's economy to rapidly industrialized. He commented that the Meiji government had initiated a policy of replacement which called kokusanka that literally denotes 'converting to domestic production'.

Without doubt, this aspiration was to be achieved through borrowing of Western 'tools' and know-how into the country's industry. By doing this, as a result, it would lead to 'technological diversification' in industry which then increased the competitiveness of export industries. This of course required a state's direction and or intervention and close cooperation with the private sectors. Interestingly, in the early years of Meiji administration, the strategic aim of Meiji economic policies (which primarily focused on the build-up of military capacity of the country) led to the development of heavy industry along the way though it was not intended for industrialization per se (Alexander David Brown, 2005). On the same note, Mijamoto et al. (1965) commented that the borrowing of Western technology and know-how into Japanese industries did not simply mean its total adoption but rather it showed an adjustment and modification of the Western technology into local circumstances. As mentioned earlier, the Meiji economic policy, in the earlier years of post-Restoration era, characterized by its emphasis over military production had made this Western technology gained its much appeal in the Japanese factories and firms.

Interestingly, the traditional industries such as silk reeling had also benefited from this borrowing. As Japan later embarked on its expansionist policy overseas, it had created steady demands for instance the establishment of military arsenals and shipyards which as a result, became a springboard for the continuation of technological diversification and innovation (Alexander David Brown, 2005). Other economic historian like Kenichi Ohno mentioned that Okubo Toshimichi, who formed part of Iwakura Mission to abroad, showed keen interests in the Western technology. Upon witnessing splendid conditions in the West, it was said that Okubo was very enthusiastic in promoting an industrialization plan into Japan economies. This was possible when he assumed the post of Minister of Finance and later as a Minister of Interior during the early Meiji administration. Among his known policies were hiring foreign experts, reorganization public infrastructures including construction of roads, railroads, and creation of specific research centres. In order to facilitate this borrowing of Western technology, the government had created state-owned industries which catered mainly for military production, shipbuilding, and silk reeling to name a few.

In addition to that, new reorganized systems of weights and measures, monetary system, banking system, and joint stock companies were later introduced as to support the intended pro-Western economic environments in the country. Nevertheless, Okubo was later assassinated in 1878 yet his keen followers like those of Kuroda Kiyotaka and Okuma Shigenobu, continued his policies. Interestingly, with the government's assistance, a list of conglomerates started to form; this gave birth to what was known as zaibatsu (such conglomerates include Mitsubishi and Furukawa) which usually controlled by businessmen who had connections to the government (Kenichi Ohno, 2006).

CONCLUSION

It is important to reiterate here that in the height of high imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, a notable number of 'conscious' non-European societies felt alarmed with steady Western encroachments into their shores, which in this respect, the Japanese leaders felt there was a dire need to remedy their existing situations. The Western Powers, on their part, citing that they were tasked to bring the most commonly used expressions none other than civilization and enlightenment into these non-Western societies. Of course, viewing from the standards of Western world of the time, Japan was left behind in many aspects (military, economic and administrative structures to name a few). In this respect, the Japanese leadership, had mobilized their men of influence and intellect to reorganize their society soonest possible to avoid from being turned into their colonies. The Japanese leaders knew, militarily and economically speaking, they were far left behind and it just a matter of time before the Western powers stepped into their country and exploited their nation for the latter's benefits. Thus, the only way possible for Japan, at least to halt further Western penetration into their country, was to demonstrate to the Western world that their country could modernize their economy and military sectors. Upon embarkation of this modernization agenda (inevitably Western models became their points of reference), the Japanese leaders faced a series of problems, especially to convince their fellow countrymen on the need to reform their country as they faced mounting pressure to push through this modernization plans in their country. Interestingly, of course the Japanese leadership could not exactly find any single Western models which could work perfectly with their own needs and requirements, therefore, the best they could was to refine and adopt them according to their domestic circumstances. Thus, it is safe to note that the borrowing of Western knowledge and expertise into their country, strictly speaking, was not adopted in its entirety, but it passed through the process of 'compatibility' with the local needs and circumstances before its final absorption and application