Oliviero Frattolillo

Debating the Citizen-State Dialectic in Early Meiji Japan (1870-1890)

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Abstract

The Japanese case of transition towards political modernity and the accentuation of citizen/individual status vis-à-vis the State presents some peculiarities that make it unique in its historical experience. The abandonment of late feudalism around the middle of the nineteenth century catapulted the country into a completely new universe in political, social and cultural terms. The newborn Meiji State experimented with forms of parliamentary democracy, but it was only in the last decades of that century that Japan saw a first rise of the individual as a political subject within a State controlled by an oligarchy. This fuelled a lively intellectual debate, the most significant moments of which have been investigated in this essay.

Keywords: *Meiji Japan, Statehood, Intellectuals, Subject/Citizen*

Introduction

The Japanese case of transition towards political modernity and the accentuation of citizen/individual status *vis-à-vis* the State has certain peculiarities that make it unique in historical experience. This requires equally specific analysis which, on the one hand, highlights analogies with the European context and, on the other, shows notable dissimilarities. The end of late feudalism around the middle of the nineteenth century and with it the isolation imposed by the shogunate which had lasted over two centuries before a Western-inspired political model based on a national Constitution was adopted, projected the country into a completely new political, social and cultural universe. The new-born Meiji State experienced forms of parliamentary democracy on the ashes of a feudal reality and a rigidly hierarchical society: nothing to do with the Enlightenment ferments that had encouraged this process in Europe, or more generally with the Western experience from the eighteenth century onwards. In this context, it was only in the last decades of the nineteenth century that Japan witnessed a first rise of the individual as a political subject towards the State which, however, was controlled by an oligarchy that exercised the control typical of a nation-State. It is a path which is at the basis of the political creation of modern Japan and its subsequent inclusion in the Western community of states, unlike all other Asian countries.

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Tokugawa Japan and Impersonalization of the Public

Against such a background, one needs briefly to outline Japan's historical and social scenario in the Tokugawa era (1603-1868) – after which the modern Meiji State was founded –, if the reader is to understand the peculiarities of that transition process by comparison with the experience of European countries[1].

In his famous work *Shinron* (1825), Aizawa Seishisai[2] brilliantly explained the ideological-political dimension of Tokugawa Japan:

> 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. Today, the alien barbarians of the West, lowly organs of the legs and feet of the world, are scurrying across the seas, trampling other countries underfoot, and daring, with their squinting eyes and limping feet, to override the noble nations[3].

Unified by Tokugawa Ieyasu after about a century of domestic struggles (*Sengoku jidai*, 1477-1576), from the first half of the seventeenth century Japan embarked on a phase of unprecedented internal peace and stability, destined to last for over two centuries and a half. One of the peculiarities that distinguished this period was the country's closure to the outside world (*sakoku*), formalized by a Shōgun edict in 1639, which allowed continuation of commerce with the Dutch alone, although confined to the islet of Deshima, in the bay of Nagasaki, under strict surveillance. This policy aimed at consolidating the power of the Tokugawa who feared the threat of external influences: the increasingly marked and aggressive presence of Europeans all over the Asian continent and the Christian revolt of Shimabara (1637-1638), put down in blood, were the factors behind this decision[4]. The new State was based on a dynamic relationship be-

[1] Among the copious existing literature on the Tokugawa one should mention: M.B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2000; H.D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen. Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Japan*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988; H.D. Harootunian, *Toward Restoration. The Growth of Political Consciousness in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970.

[2] As is common with literature in the field, the Japanese family name always comes first.

[3] Quoted in P. Varley, *Japanese Culture*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2000, p. 232; the text in its original version (two volumes) is: Aizawa S., *Aizawa sensei-cho*, Edo, Suifu Ogino Tanizō-ban, 1857. Aizawa Seishisai (1782-1863) was a samurai and a nationalist thinker belonging to the Mito School (*Mitogaku*), founded in 1657 by Tokugawa Mitsukuni, *daimyō* of the Mito *han* (Hitachi area). This was oriented towards a neo-Confucian approach to the study of national history and known for the creation of *Dai Nihonshi* (History of Great Japan), which became the official history of the unified country under the leadership of the emperor and based on respect for the imperial court and for Shinto as the national cult. On this topic see: J.V. Koschmann, *The Mito Ideology: Discourse, Reform, and Insurrection in Late Tokugawa Japan, 1790-1864,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 56-77.

[4] Christianity was proscribed in 1614, and thousands of believers were martyred in the various persecutions that preceded and followed this order. The goal was to eradicate this religion from Japan as it was considered a threat to the social stability of a country in which the common morality and

tween the central power located in Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and the *han* (the possessions of the *daimyō*, local lords or high-ranking samurai), in a late-feudal system that was based on a rigid Confucian-style social hierarchy known as *mibunsei* or *shi-nō-kō-shō* (samurai – peasants – artisans – merchants). The hereditary figure of the samurai who dominated this social pyramid was converted from that of a warrior in battle to a mercenary under the great lord of the moment, salaried and as often as not employed in office work. Thanks to their privileged social status and the education received in the Confucian academies (*hankō*), many samurai became prominent intellectuals and formed the educated class of Japan, who were instrumental in «Japan's transition to a modern society»[5]. In other words, the autarchic Tokugawa regime sought to freeze society in a rigid hierarchical mould, immobilizing it by turning back the clock, though that should not be understood literally: the Japanese experiment in any case allowed a politically as well as economically powerful proto-bourgeoisie to arise thanks to the emerging of commercial towns inhabited by supposedly free citizens, especially along the *Tōkaidō*, the road that connected Kyoto (Japan's ancient capital) with Edo and was built in this very period.

Another central feature of this background is that before the Tokugawa period, authority was exercised through paternalistic structures of social organization and was channelled at all levels through personal ties or bonds. This was exemplified in the domains of the *daimyō* during the sixteenth century, when they divided and assigned land to their subject vassals, who in turn exercised authority over the families who managed the territory (*myōshu*) and who counted on the loyalty of the servant families (*nago* or *fudai*) for the agricultural workforce (*shōen-kokugaryō system*)[6]. This situation gradually changed over the next century because of a more dynamic process of social engineering promoted by more active *daimyō*, whose expansion of regional power allowed independent fiefdoms to be absorbed into the domains they directly controlled[7]. These vassals resided in the *daimyō*'s castles and were salaried as direct servants. Similarly, the samurai were mobilized from the countryside, and this made it possible to eliminate any form of local resistance on the part of merchants or religious communities, ensuring that the will of the *daimyō* extended to the entire *han*. The most immediate consequence of this phenomenon was that society began to distinguish more clearly between classes and groups, and this encouraged not only the process of social hierarchization, but also the systematic segmentation of each social stratum into self-regulated units, such as military groups (*kumi*), village communities (*mura*), or cities (*machi*) over which the *daimyō* managed to extend their control using a

customs should adhere to a rigid Confucian conservatism. See P. Nosco, *Secrecy and the Transition of Tradition. Issues in the Study of the Underground Christians*, in «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies», 20, 1, 1993, p. 3. See also K. Paramore, *Ideology and Christianity in Japan*, London, Routledge, 2010.

[5] R. Rubinger, *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 3-6. See also B.W. Platt, *Prosperity, Crisis: The Generation of Tokugawa Village Elites*, in «Monumenta Nipponica», 55, 1, 2000, p. 51.

[6] Nagahara K., *Landownership under the Shōen-Kokugaryō System*, in «The Journal of Japanese Studies», 1-2, 1975, p. 277.

[7] D.R. Howland, *Samurai Status, Class, and Bureaucracy: A Historiographical Essay*, in «The Journal of Asian Studies», 60, 2, 2001, pp. 358-361.

new administrative apparatus[8]. However, the crucial feature of this new social arrangement was the position of the individual within the institutionalized group and the way the government exercised control over the individual, whose identity was regulated both by status in society and by the group (and family) to which one belonged[9]. It was a sort of double linkage, vertical and horizontal, which effectively limited indiscriminate arbitrariness in the exercise of power by superiors. The result was a certain impersonalization of the administration. This can be seen quite clearly if we consider the changes occurring within the *mura*, where authority was personified by the samurai and the village chief: towards both, the *daimyō* now acted as a mediator and broke personal ties through a system of impersonal administration. The village chief no longer had to answer directly to the samurai, but to the *daimyō*, and could recognize himself as a member of a political entity. When dealing with Tokugawa Japan, we should keep in mind the peculiarities of this historical set-up, without forgetting that it was a society disciplined by a certain rigidity, where movement of individuals from one class to another was almost impossible. Moreover, Confucian ethics, so deeply pervading Japanese culture of the time, precluded any concept of individual rights.

When Things Turned Upside-Down: The Emerging of the Subject/Citizen Paradigm

When four «black ships» (*kurobune*) captained by the American Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry landed at the port of Uraga in Edo Bay on 8 July 1853 the event triggered the final phase of the Tokugawa era[10]. The Commodore forced the Japanese authorities, at gunpoint, to deliver a letter from the President of the United States to the Shōgun, asking for diplomatic and commercial relations to be recognized between the two countries. Japan, unarmed, was left with little choice[11]. The Treaty of Kanagawa, signed on 31 March 1854, officially opened the two

[8] On this subject see: Miyachi M., *Bakumatsu seiji katei ni okeru gōnōshō to zaison chishiki-jin*, in Miyachi *et al.* (eds.), *Ishin henkaku to kindai Nihon*, vol. 1 of *Nihon kin gendaishi*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1993; Mizumoto K., *Kinsei no mura shakai to kokka*, Tokyo, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1987; Takahashi S., *Gōnō to minshū*, Tokyo, Miraisha, 1985; Watanabe T., *Kinsei no gōnō to sonraku kyōdōtai*, Tokyo, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1994.; H. Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice: Class, Status, Power, Law*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996; A. Walthall, *The Family Ideology of Rural Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth Century Japan*, in «Journal of Social History», 23, 3, 1990, pp. 463-84.

[9] R.P. Dore, *Talent and the Social Order in Tokugawa Japan*, in «Past & Present», 21, 1962, p. 60.

[10] However unexpected Perry's arrival was, on 20 July 1846 the American Commodore James Biddle anchored with the two warships in Uraga Channel to open Japan to trade with the United States but was ultimately unsuccessful. He was told that Japan forbade all trade and communication with foreign nations besides that of the Dutch. He was informed that all foreign affairs were conducted through Nagasaki, and that his ships should leave Uraga immediately. See W. McOmie, *American Eyewitness Accounts of Bakumatsu Japan, 1842-1846*, in «Kiyō ronbun», 45, 2011, pp. 23-43.

[11] The Tokugawa had prohibited the construction of seagoing vessels since 1635 to avoid any contact with the outside world that could threaten their dominance over the country. It was only after the arrival of the American «black ships» that the danger the country was facing from foreign powers became evident, making it necessary to start building a navy. T.C. Smith, *The Introduction of Western Industry to Japan During the Last Years of the Tokugawa Period*, in «Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies», 11, 1-2, 1948, p. 141. See also J.C. Perry, *Great Britain and the Emergence of Japan as a Naval Power*, in «Monumenta Nipponica», 21, 3-4, 1966, pp. 305-321.

ports of Shimoda and Hakodate to the United States, definitively putting an end to the country's isolationist policy[12]. The challenge facing Japan was serious: much of the Asian continent was under the rule of the colonial powers and China had been reduced to a semi-colonial state (which went down in history as the long century of Chinese humiliation). Opening to the Americans would mean that shortly other Western countries would demand the same treatment (as in fact occurred) and Japan had to be ready to face them without risking the same fate as neighbouring countries. This implied a profound reform of its political, economic and military institutions and a deepening of scientific knowledge in order to compete with the Western powers on a footing of equal dignity. In an extraordinarily short span of time, Japan had to radically reinvent itself.

For that process to be successful without being unduly traumatic, the model that would be followed in the coming years was summarized by the slogans *wakon-yōsai* («Japanese ethics – Western learning») and *fukoku-kyōhei* («enrich the nation and strengthen the military»). In other words, the country set as strategic priorities not only economic growth and a strong military identity, but also the acquisition of knowledge from the Western world (in every field), while preserving its own cultural identity. A sort of change through continuity[13]. This programme proved successful, and within a few decades Japan managed to transform itself from a late feudal country into a modernized nation on the model of the more advanced Western States. The process of modern nation-building centred around the figure of the emperor (*Tennō*) in his divine nature as a symbol of the unity of the country and involved the abolition of the socio-economic and political privileges of the samurai class[14]. During the new historical phase known as the Meiji era (1868-1912) and starting with the so-called «Meiji Restoration» (*Meiji ishin*), Japan adopted a modern Constitution (the Meiji Constitution, or Constitution of the Great Empire of Japan – *Dai Nippon Teikoku Kenpō*, coming into force in 1889) which established the rights and duties of citizens, and introduced unprecedented changes such as a parliamentary system, a universal school system, a renewed administrative structure, a national army, private ownership and a national taxation system[15]. None of these institutions existed in the Tokugawa period. It was therefore

[12] Kitahara M., *Commodore Perry and the Japanese: A Study in the Dramaturgy of Power*, in «Symbolic Interaction», 9, 1, 1986, p. 60. See also P.H. Clark, *The Perry Expedition and the Opening of Japan to the West 1853-1873: A Short History with Documents*, Cambridge, Mass., Hackett Publishing, 2020.

[13] On this topic see C. Gluck, *Patterns of the Past: Themes in Japanese History*, in A.T. Embree and C. Gluck (eds.), *Asia in Western and World History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 723-771.

[14] This was not a smooth process, of course. The Satsuma rebellion, for example, was the final act of organized military resistance to the reforms of the Meiji government. See J.H. Buck, *The Satsuma Rebellion of 1887. From Kagoshima Through the Siege of Kumamoto Castle*, in «Monumenta Nipponica», 28, 4, 1973, p. 427.

[15] For the drafting of the Constitution, the Japanese authorities requested the assistance of Friedrich Hermann Roesler (1834-1894), a German legal scholar who became the foreign advisor to the Meiji government, and had an influential role in preparing the draft. Roesler recommended a constitutional monarchy in which the *Tennō* was head of State without constraining the legislature, his role being not to govern the country or to promulgate laws. Furthermore, the sovereignty was with the *Tennō* and not with the people. See J. Siemes, *Roesler and the Making of the Meiji State*, Tokyo, Sophia University and The Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1968. An English translation of the Constitution is available at the National Diet Library of Tokyo website: https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c02.html.

only during the Meiji years that the concept of *kokumin* (commonly translated as «citizen», but literally «country-person») came into use in Japan for the first time in its history. However, the meaning and scope of this concept in the Japanese setting must be considered in the light of many factors. First, the nature of the Meiji Constitution and the consequent new political-institutional structure that was introduced in the country deserve separate discussion, but this would require a broad analysis that I will confine here to a brief outline. According to the prevailing interpretation among Japanese historians and constitutionalists, the 1889 Constitution (and the restoration of the imperial power) was a reactionary tool taken up by the bureaucratic oligarchy, behind a facade of constitutionalism, to perpetuate its power centring on the absolutism of the *Tennō*[16]. As pointed out by Ben-Ami Shillony, the emperor's new status as absolute monarch followed the Chinese example and «was different from the model of Europe at that time, where emperors were limited by constitutions»[17]. The lack of full parliamentary-democratic development would mean depending on the Constitution and the role it attributed to the emperor[18]. Hence, any discussion of the state-citizen relationship in Meiji Japan is only possible at an embryonic level when compared with the European experience of the same period, but nevertheless leaving room for interesting points of comparison. The concept of «citizen» is in fact a derivation of the Western political and social tradition, as is the idea associated with it whereby the citizen (seen as an individual constituent of the State) is a member of a State which guarantees his equity of rights (typical of the Western nation-states). In the 1889 Constitution the Japanese people are defined as «subject» (*shimin*) of the emperor, which was certainly not an element imported from outside. From this perspective, the Japanese case is interesting not so much for the juridical features of this phenomenon in itself, but for the political experience that generated it: it was the result of a particular dialectical process that took place in a social and political space far from Western tradition and characterized by unique features. The Meiji era favoured the creation of a new Japanese identity which gradually took shape in the public debate although, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, this was confined to the intellectual sphere. While, in fact, the *genrō-in* (the elder statesmen who had worked on drafting the Constitution) had in mind an autarchic state model governed by an elitist oligarchy, the compromise that the country had to accept in order to open up to the world, posing as a modern nation, required at least some semblance of popular participation and recognition of rights[19]. The Meiji Restoration was a revolution from

[16] The title of «Tennō» («heavenly emperor») is used exclusively for the Japanese emperor and, although it is commonly translated as «emperor», it is not used to translate other titles of foreign emperors such as «Kaiser», «Tsar», or «Emperor» more generally. In the Japanese case, in fact, this term has a religious connotation, since, until the so-called «Declaration of humanity» (*Ningen-sengen*) made in 1946 by Hirohito, it was believed that the *Tennō* had a divine nature as the direct descent from Amaterasu Ōmikami, the sun goddess. The *Tennō*, therefore, was not only considered the absolute head of the nation and the symbol of the country's unity, but also its greatest spiritual and ethical guide. For an interesting reading on this subject, see S. Thal, *Redefining the Gods: Politics and Survival in the Creation of Modern Kami*, in «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies», 29, 3, 2002, pp. 379-404.

[17] B.-A. Shillony, *The Meiji Restoration: Japan's Attempt to Inherit China*, in I. Neary (ed.), *War Revolution and Japan*, Kent, Japan Library Publishing, 1993, p. 25.

[18] F. Mazzei, *La Costituzione Meiji. Il ruolo del Tennō*, in «Il Giappone», 31, 1991, pp. 5-6.

[19] B. Teters, *The Genrō In and the National Essence Movement*, in «Pacific Historical Review», 31, 4, 1962, p. 361.

above and therefore remote from the democratization process of European states (as in the French and British cases) which was triggered by pressures and movements generated in the very heart of those societies. The primary objective was basically that of creating a *fukoku-kyōhei* («enrich the nation and strengthen the military») and this probably entailed sacrificing the process of democratization and the extension of citizens' rights[20]. Moreover, one must bear in mind the objective difficulty of codifying civil and social rights in a society working at the same time on creating a modernized State and a new identity in a remarkably short space of time (something that in Europe had taken centuries). The Japanese terminology that came into use during this period is a direct reflection of this situation. Japanese intellectuals introduced various neologisms attempting to translate the western concept of citizen: *kokumin*, *minken* («people's right») or *kokuseki* («nationality»). Furthermore, the term *shiminken* («citizenship») doesn't appear in any Japanese legal text but was widely used to explain the concept of «citizenship» in Western societies. As Douglas Howland argued, the concept of nation itself needs to be more fully explored in terms of its associations with words like *kokumin*; it needs framing in context, particularly since Japanese nationalism was such a direct consequence of the political transformation taking place in the Meiji era[21].

Meiji Japan's Intellectuals Debating the Issue of Freedom and the Citizens' Role

Western ideas about freedom, the importance of the individual, and people's rights exerted a profound impact on many of Meiji Japan's intellectuals, and certainly more than on the ruling elite. Most intellectuals had spent some years in the United States or Europe, admiring the social emancipation of those nations and returning to Japan with the idea that the country could only become an effective member of the international community if it adopted the same liberal spirit and reformed its social order accordingly. Although they remained on the sidelines of Japan's political decisions, their ideas circulated widely within the country and created the conditions for subsequent change. Even today, many of these are considered as «Japan's scholars of Western learning» (*yōgakusha*), like Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), Nishi Amane (1829-1897), Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930), and Mori Arinori (1847-1889), to mention just a few. Fukuzawa's series of pamphlets *Gakumon no Susume* (The Encouragement of Learning, 1872-1876)[22], which encouraged Japanese citizens to embark on the study of Western science and ethics, was soon sold out. The author – considered among the greatest exponents of the «civilization and en-

[20] It is worth highlighting the birth of the *Jiyū minken undō* (People's Freedom and Rights Movement) that had grown in Japan since 1874, along with the first vote for the establishment of the National Diet. The movement dissolved in 1890 precisely with the establishment of the Diet. The *Jiyū minken undō* had promoted requests such as the guarantee of freedom of association and expression. See M. Patessio, *Women's Participation in the Popular Rights Movement (Jiyū Minken Undō) during the Early Meiji Period*, in «U.S.-Japan Women's Journal», 27, 2004, pp. 3-26.

[21] D. Howland, *Translating Liberty in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», 62, 1, 2001, p. 163.

[22] Fukuzawa Y., *Gakumon no susume*, in Tomita M. and Tsuchibayashi S. (eds.), *Fukuzawa Yukichi zenshū*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1959, pp. 644-646.

lightenment» process (*bunmei-kaika*) – felt that Western learning would help the Japanese to become effective members of a new society based on market capitalism and freedom (a concept he rendered with the Japanese term of *jiyū*). In his series of pamphlets, Fukuzawa focused on the relationship between government and the people and explained that the goal of learning was to achieve independence of the nation – as he phrased it in his thesis «national independence through personal independence». One of Fukuzawa's key contributions to the promotion of democracy in Meiji Japan was his translation of the concept of citizenship and the support he gave to public speechmaking (*enzetsu*)[23]. Fukuzawa was the first intellectual to translate the English word «citizen» (in the sense of an actor participating in the democratic process of self-ruling) by the word *shimin*[24]. He emphasized the individualistic component of citizenship, while recognizing the importance of the social field in which the individual achieves self-fulfilment and contributes to both personal and State well-being. Fukuzawa explained the relationship between the individual and the State, using the idea – familiar to us Westerners – that in a constitutional regime the citizen must both rule and be ruled[25]. These and other ideas on the relationship that should be established between the citizen and the Meiji State, were expressed by Fukuzawa in his *Gakumon no susume*, particularly in the fourth issue entitled *Gakusha shokubun ron* (The Duty of Scholars) that sparked a lively debate among the most eminent intellectuals of the time. The reactions of his colleagues belonging to the *Meirokusha* (The Meiji Six Society)[26], circulated through *Meiroku zasshi*, the magazine generally regarded as the most important journal of the early Meiji period, through which it seemed possible to detect the voice of intellectuals as a mirror of the ongoing changes, including transformations in the paradigm of public discourse and the relationship of the individual with the State[27]. In no other journal that circulated in the years 1870-1890 has it been possible to trace references to the intellectual debate on the condition of the Japanese citizen in relation to the State[28].

In the fourth section of his *Gakumon no susume*, entitled *Gakusha no shokubun o ronzu* (The Duty of Scholars), Fukuzawa had argued that the enlightened intellectual could not really be such if he was tied to the governing elite. And although all the members of the *Meiroku-*

[23] The experience of participation in *enzetsu* was a sort of training in individualism strongly promoted by Fukuzawa who founded Keiō Gijuku Daigaku (today's leading Keiō University of Tokyo) in 1858, establishing «some of the material preconditions for the spontaneous appropriation and spread of the techniques by which common people in rural areas gained access to novel experiences of individuality and were validated as participants in public life». See J. Branstetter, *Debate and the Performance of Citizenship in Early Meiji Japan*, in «The Journal of Japanese Studies», 48, 2, 2022, p. 272.

[24] Fukuzawa Y., *Seiyō jiyō*, Tokyo, Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppansha, 2009, p. 148.

[25] See chapter VII of Fukuzawa Y., *Gakumon no susume*, cit.

[26] The members of the *Meirokusha* were all prominent intellectuals who had travelled abroad and aimed at introducing Western studies (*yōgaku*) in Japan. The Society was organized in 1873 and disbanded in 1875, after coming under pressure from the State. As thinkers and government officials, they wielded a deep influence over the intellectual community of Meiji Japan.

[27] The *Meirokusha* are remembered today especially for their influential journal, the *Meiroku zasshi*, Japan's first journal which published 43 numbers starting in February 1874. The final issue appeared in November 1875. See D.J. Huish, *The Meirokusha: Some Grounds for Reassessment*, in «Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies», 32, 1972, p. 214.

[28] The issues of the other two best-known journals published in those years, *Kokumin-no-tomo* and *Tayō*, were also examined, without any results.

sha agreed that their duty was to enlighten the people (albeit with different personal views), there was no similar agreement on the positions they should take towards the government. In Fukuzawa's eyes, people could not be educated to become citizens while serving the interests of the political class[29]. He puts it as follows:

> Some people are saying that it is only a temporary expedient to use governmental means to manage the stupid people until they have sufficiently developed their intellectual and moral levels to be able to enter the stage of modern civilization on their own. This theory is easy to enunciate but difficult to realize in practice. Since time immemorial, the people of the whole country have suffered under despotic rule which did not allow freedom of expression. They stole security by deception and escaped punishment by telling lies. Fraud and subterfuge thus became necessary tools of life; injustice and insincerity became daily routine. […] In recent times, the external form of government has been overhauled, but its despotic and oppressive spirit continues as of old. The common people also retain their base and insincere spirit, even after acquiring their rights to some degree. […] In short, the reason lies in the fact that, having been oppressed by this spirit, the people have not been able to exercise their natural abilities to the full. […] If the government uses fraud, the people will respond with falsehood. This cannot be called the best policy. Therefore, I say that the civilization of Japan cannot be made to advance solely by use of government power[30].

Fukuzawa's progressive ideas provoked a reaction from intellectuals such as Katō Hiroyuki, Mori Arinori, Tsuda Mamichi and Nishi Amane, as evidenced by the articles they published in *Meiroku zasshi*. The *Meirokusha* men in the government were resentful of Fukuzawa's criticisms of their involvement in politics and believed that the dichotomy he saw between the government and the people was nonsensical. Unlike the others, Fukuzawa preferred to remain free from any ties to institutions, promoting the spread of liberal ideas until the end of his life and supporting the idea of individual rights over State authority[31].

In the article *Fukuzawa sensei no ron ni kotae* (In response to Fukuzawa), Katō accused Fukuzawa of being «a liberal» and that «liberalism is never appropriate»[32]. He argued that the European countries were experiencing «a phase of triumphant liberalism from which Japan should beware, since the State's power must ultimately be undermined if there is a great excess of liberalism»[33]. These criticisms were specifically directed against the idea expressed by Fukuzawa about the need to encourage a balance between the rulers and the people (the citi-

[29] Fukuzawa Y., *Gakumon no susume*, cit., p. 645.

[30] Fukuzawa Y., *The Duty of Scholars*, in D. Dilworth and Umeyo H. (eds.), *An Encouragement of Learning*, Tokyo, Sophia University, 1969, pp. 22-23.

[31] M. Hane, *Early Meiji Liberalism. An Assessment*, in «Monumenta Nipponica», 24, 4, 1969, p. 367.

[32] Katō H., *Fukuzawa sensei no ron ni kotae*, in «Meiroku zasshi», 2 (undated), collected in Y. Sakuzō (ed.), *Meiji bunka zenshū* [hereafter MBZ], Tokyo, Hyōronsha, 1928, vol. 18, p. 58. Issue 2 of «Meiroku zasshi», although undated, certainly appeared between February (when the first volume of the journal came out) and May 1874; issue 7, in fact, was published in May 1874.

[33] *Ibidem*.

zens), promoting a greater participation by the latter in public affairs[34]. Mori's reaction, which he made public in his article *Gakusha shokubun ron no hyō* (Criticism of the Essay on the Role of Scholars) was similarly conservative and starts as follows:

> The essay [by Fukuzawa] on establishing the power of the people is sufficient to move the reader, its meaning being clear and its logic well developed. I feel, however, that some aspects of his thoughts are immoderate. […] Fukuzawa states, «A country in its entirety can only be successfully ordered if government and people stand side by side». What kind of reasoning is this?[35]

Mori's criticism seemed to arise from unawareness of the basic message launched by Fukuzawa, probably due to a lack of knowledge of the Western concept of citizen referred to (or an absolute denial of its very essence). This can be deduced from the same article, where he stated:

> […] the government, being the government of all the people, is established by the people and for the people. And so, I neither understand the principle nor recognize the situation in which government and people stand side by side. There were absolute monarchs in the various countries of Europe who ruled as they pleased, since the royal authority was unlimited and since political rights were held by one family. From this, there arose discord and disturbances among the disaffected people so that limited monarchies or republics often have been finally established by restricting absolute power and by sharing political power widely. Nevertheless, I have never heard of an example or a theory in which government and people, standing side by side, stimulate and offset each other[36].

From the above one sees the extent to which the debate on the concept of citizen in the early Meiji period was still in an embryonic state and the numerous resistances that even the most enlightened intellectuals had in this regard, deliberately ignoring the social and civil developments attained in various European countries about which Mori was sceptical. Slightly less conservative appeared the position of Tsuda, who in his article under the same title as Mori's (*Gakusha shokubun ron no hyō*) pointed out that since ancient times, Japanese people «were forced by the tradition of unlimited monarchy to follow the government's decrees, however unreasonable these may have been»[37]. Words of lucid awareness from Tsuda, who goes on to clarify his position as follows:

[34] In the background of this conflict with the other intellectuals of the Society there was disagreement caused by the fact that Fukuzawa had distanced himself from *Meirokusha*, since his colleagues agreed to serve the oligarchs. Fukuzawa's own decision not to publish his *j'accuse* in the *Meiroku zasshi* journal is significant in this respect.

[35] Mori A., *Gakusha shokubun ron no hyō*, in «Meiroku zasshi», 2 (undated), collected in in Y. Sakuzō (ed.), MBZ, cit., vol. 18, p. 59.

[36] *Ibidem*.

[37] *Ibidem*.

> Therefore, I greatly hope that, by advocating ideas of liberty and independence to the limit of our strength, we shall implant a spirit of freedom in our people and teach them that they have a right to reject unreasonableness in government decrees. Whether we are officials or private citizens, we should be able to follow our professions and exert ourselves appropriately to this end[38].

In the article *Hi-gakusha shokubun ron no hyō* (Criticism of the Essay on the Role of Scholars) Nishi, who was one of the most prominent Meiji Japan enlighteners, took a franker position than his colleagues[39]. To quote him at length:

> I would consider clearly appropriate for our times [Fukuzawa's] references to Japan's continuing tradition of autocratic government and to our ignorant people who, now as in the past, are powerless and without spirit. Yet should we desire to reform, we probably cannot achieve success with a single blow since these [evils] did not arise in a night and a day. In a country like ours, in which primordial clan theocracy was followed by the Chinese imperial system and later by military rule, oppression and servility have been daily fare for 2500 years. Even though the Restoration strongly supported Western institutions, it was but seven years ago. […] While we may now want to press for quick success within a day, is this not like an over-hasty scheme to roast birds before they are caught?[40]

From Nishi's statement it appears clear that the author was aware not only of the autarchic condition of his country, but also that a reform would be necessary in Japan for individuals to become citizens, free from the oppressive power of the State. His scepticism seemed due to the fact that times were still premature. However, a certain conservatism that linked him with Katō, Mori and Tsuda can be glimpsed from what emerges further on, when Nishi links the prospect of the citizenship process developing to the possibility of seeing political factionalism proliferate in Japan, considered as a potential threat to the social order. As he stated:

> It is all very well when the public spirit is strong and when society is upright. But it is most unfortunate when disturbances ultimately erupt after the emergence of factionalism. So we must also reflect on the fact that England and America are countries in which stimulation is appropriate, while stimulation is somewhat unbalanced in France and Spain. Such things generally depend upon the current of the times and are not easily controlled by a single man or a single party[41].

[38] Tsuda M., *Gakusha shokubun ron no hyō*, in «Meiroku zasshi», 2 (undated), collected in in Y. Sakuzō (ed.), MBZ, cit., vol. 18, p. 60.

[39] Nishi A., *Hi-gakusha shokubun ron no hyō*, in «Meiroku zasshi», 2 (undated), collected in in Y. Sakuzō (ed.), MBZ, cit., vol. 18, p. 60. In his *Hyakuichi-shinron* («A New Theory on the Hundred and One [Doctrine]»), published in 1874, he went so far as to oppose Confucian ethics as no longer appropriate for Japan, while not rejecting the Japanese heritage.

[40] Nishi A., *Hi-gakusha shokubun ron no hyō*, cit., p. 60.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 61.

In Nishi's eyes, promotion of the rights of the individual (citizen), though an almost inevitable path, would entail a danger of destabilization for the ruling government due to the potential increase in political factions and relative demands. The examples given about the English and American situation, as well as that in France and Spain, were meant as a warning, overlooking the crucial point that situations of imbalance are intrinsic to any healthy democracy in which citizens are given the opportunity to freely express their voice. Nishimura Shigeki (who was another intellectual belonging to *Meirokusha* and leader of the Meiji Enlightenment) took up a different position, somewhat closer to that of Fukuzawa. Indeed, he believed that the Meiji government should unquestionably serve a purpose for the people of Japan. In one of his articles that appeared in June 1875, as evidenced in the title itself – *Seifu kō shimin irigai ron* (On the divergent interests of government and people) – Nishimura resorted to the use of the term *shimin*, pleading the cause of citizens' rights and advocating an open-minded cultural and conceptual mentality that was unusual in the Japanese context of that time. An excerpt from his article reads:

> In a half-civilized country, however, the government's authority is normally heavy, and its demands normally numerous. The position of the people is the opposite of this. If [we] try to establish a balance of national power, this cannot be truly achieved if both government and people retreat five steps, since the government's power normally amounts to eighty or ninety percent while the people's power does not exceed ten to twenty percent. Certainly, a balance can only be achieved if the government retreats two or three steps and the people advance eight or nine steps. This is why public-spirited men never cease to reiterate their support of the citizen's rights. After all, the citizen's rights, as the finest treasure inherent in the people, are not matters that should depend upon the generosity of the government[42].

Nishimura's vision, somewhat close to Fukuzawa, may be considered a sign of appropriation of the Western citizenship culture that will find a greater echo in the late Meiji years, when – as we learn from an editorial appearing in the famous journal *Tayō* [43] – the prevailing theme became (probably for the first time in Japanese history) that the mere fact of being born and raised in a country was not enough to be considered a citizen (*kokumin*): the prerequisite had to be a sense of belonging to a nation (*kokkateki kannen*), without which «the people remain "*un*patriots" (*hikokumin*) and the nation endangered»[44]. It would be the late 1890s before, due to a series of domestic changes, the understanding was shared between conservatives and progressives that a constitutional monarchy could not exist without the people being aware of their role as *kokumin* and *shimin*: dealing successfully in a highly competitive international environment made it necessary to be able to count on trust and national pride[45].

[42] Nishimura S., *Seifu kō shimin irigai ron*, in «Meiroku zasshi», 39, 1 June 1875, collected in in Y. Sakuzō (ed.), MBZ, cit., vol. 18, p. 245.

[43] *Tayō*, 20 October 1897, Issue 3, No. 20, pp. 58-59.

[44] C. Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths. Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 25.

[45] *Ibidem*, p. 102.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay I have tried to present some features that characterized the critical transition from late feudal to modern Japan, focusing my attention on the reception of the Western concept of citizen. I have attempted to depict the cultural debate that arose on this topic within the elite circles of Meiji intellectuals, basing my evidence on the circulation of their ideas through scholarly journals circulating between 1870 and 1890. My analysis has been limited by several factors, primarily the lack of awareness, or openness, shown in those years about the concept of citizens and their rights (as proactive members of the state community). The Japanese case is exceptional, especially when compared with the European contexts of the same years, if we consider that in the period we are dealing with Japan had just emerged from a historical phase that Europe had gone through in the Middle Ages. It was frenziedly preparing to push through a radical transformation of its entire institutional and civil apparatus, so as to be able to interact with the imperialist powers on an equal footing. However, while such an experiment could be carried out in a timespan of a few decades, achieving extraordinary results in economic and military development, it would not be reasonable to expect the same on the civil plane regarding the conquest of individual rights. An operation of that kind calls necessarily for a longer processing time, and this clearly happened in Japan, partly owing to the strong cultural conditioning factors linked to Confucian ethics, which tended to hierarchize interpersonal relationships. The juridical goal of adopting a first national Constitution, which established a parliamentary system as early as 1889, was an unparalleled achievement when one remembers that only forty years earlier the country was governed by a Shōgun. Moreover, the thousand-year-old Japanese imperial institution, based on divine foundations, served at the same time as a social glue and a limitation: «Revere the *Tennō* and expel the barbarians» (*sonnō-jōi*) was the common moral dictate and the ideological basis for indoctrination of young people. Finally, the oligarchy in power was pursuing several goals, such as the making of Japan into a rich but also militarily strong country. To achieve these objectives within a limited time frame it was necessary to count on a cohesive and obedient population. Such strategic interests within a cultural climate alien to Western tradition curbed any broader democratization. Nevertheless, as in any great process of historical change, the ideological ferment coming from outside as to the role that the citizen should play in the new Japan, had already penetrated the country. It was only a matter of time. The time it took for the ruling class to understand that it was becoming increasingly essential to be able to count on citizens, rather than on subjects, in order to be able to compete with the Western powers; and the time it took for the common people to emancipate from the traditional political culture. As highlighted in a detailed study carried out by Wang Xiaoyu, the diffusion of the use of the terms *kokumin* and *shimin* only gradually accelerated as of 1880, reaching a real upsurge around 1905[46]. That study was conducted by analysing the *Fu-on sōzu ei-wa ji-i* (English-Japanese dictionary) of 1872 and the *Tetsugaku ji-i* (Philosophical dictionary) of 1884. It emerged

[46] Wang X., *Kindai Nitchū ni okeru 'kokumin' gainen no seiritsu – Kokka kōseiin no ikusei to chishiki hito no kokoromi*, in «Kansai Daigaku tōzai gakujutsu kenkyūjo-hen», 49, 4, 2016, pp. 297-312.

that, while at the beginning of the Meiji period the words «citizen» and «nation» were translated without distinction, over the years the differentiation between the two terms had become more marked. It is interesting to note that in China the situation was not dissimilar from that of Japan, despite the profound differences existing between the two political and social contexts. As shown in the graphs below, Wang draws on Taiwan Chengchi University's Database of Modern Chinese Thought to illustrate the number of times the two terms appeared in public documents during the years between 1830 and 1930. Just as occurred in Japan, the pattern turns out to be the same: it is significant that the highest finding was around 1905, then in the second half of the 1920s: the end of the Sino-Japanese war along with the imminent outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war in the first case, and the accentuation of Japan's expansionist policy towards Manchuria in the second case, clearly influenced the importation of Western terminology – and with it the concept of citizen –borrowed from Japan[47].

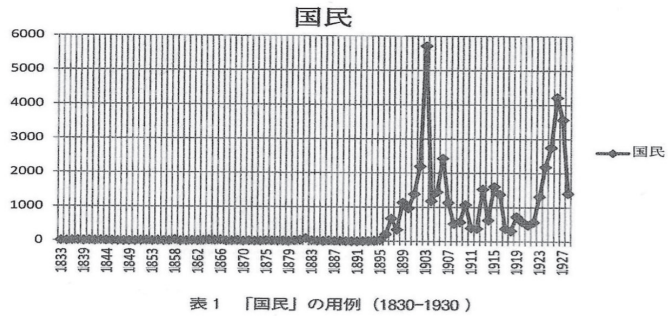

Fig. 1. Spread of the word *Kokumin* (国民), 1830-1930.

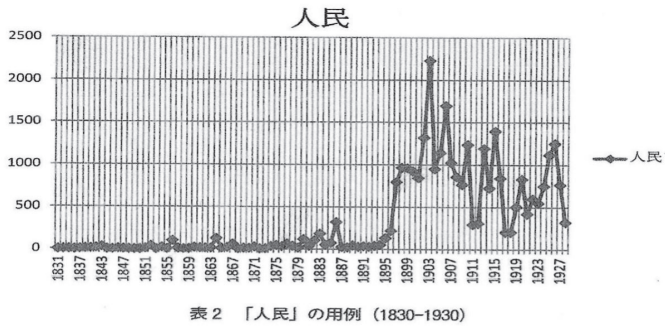

Fig. 2. Spread of the word *Shimin* (人民), 1830-1930.

Source: Wang X., *Kindai Nitchū ni okeru 'kokumin' gainen no seiritsu – Kokka kōseiin no ikusei to chishiki hito no kokoromi*, in «Kansai Daigaku tōzai gakujutsu kenkyūjo-hen», 49, 4, 2016, p. 299.

[47] On this subject see: S. Wijeyeratne, *A Race to War: Japanese Public Intellectuals and Racial Explanations of the Russo-Japanese War*, in «The Asia-Pacific Journal», 18-19, 2020, pp. 1-17; Shimazu N., *Patriotic and Despondent: Japanese Society at War, 1904-5*, in «The Russian Review», 67, 1, 2008, pp. 34-49.

Leading Japanese intellectuals of the time, such as Fukuzawa, Nishi, Uchimura, and Nori were able to discuss the accentuation of the individual *vis-à-vis* the State through pamphlets or articles published in the *Meiroku zasshi* journal. Analysis of their individual stances proved to be extremely interesting because it highlighted through historical sources the irreconcilable positions of enlightened intellectuals who, all in all, were looking in the same direction (i.e. the development of the country) but with very different sensitivities. The central issue was whether the freedom and rights of the citizens would harm the interests of the State, or whether the country could only benefit from them. The comparison with European nations was disappointing for some, disturbing for others, though encouraging for a few. The rise of the individual within the State clashed with the organicistic idea of the State, which was widespread throughout the country. However, Japan's democratization process had already started, and the dynamics of social development were under way, though they were still latent. With the beginning of the twentieth century (as also shown in the two graphs above), and even more with the advent of the Taishō era (1912-1926) Japan would witness a more mature phase of liberal democracy (which had roots in Meiji Japan)[48] through a liberal interpretation of the Meiji Constitution and the appearance of the so-called *moga* (modern girls) and *mobo* (modern boys): a remarkable result just sixty years after the collapse of the feudal regime.

Oliviero Frattolillo, Università di Roma Tre, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Via Gabriello Chiabrera 199, 00175 Roma, oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it
https://orcid/0000-0003-1585-5303

[48] See Takii K., «*Meiji» to iu isan kindai Nihon o meguru hikaku bunmei-shi*, Tokyo, Minerva Shobō, 2020; G.A. Hoston, *The State, Modernity, and the Fate of Liberalism in Prewar Japan*, in «The Journal of Asian Studies», 51, 2, 1992, p. 294.