

EXCERPTS FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF FUKUZAWA YUKICHI

Introduction

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) was Japan's preeminent interpreter of "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*) — the lifestyles, institutions, and values of the modern West that Japan strove to understand and embrace in the early decades of the Meiji period. Born into a samurai family of modest means and little influence, Fukuzawa was intelligent, energetic, and ambitious, and as a youth he eagerly studied foreign languages (Dutch and then English) to expand his horizons and improve his prospects in life. In 1860, he was a member of one of the first missions sent to America by the Tokugawa shogunate, and in 1862 he traveled through Europe. Based on these experiences Fukuzawa wrote a series of books that explained the customs and manners of the West in accessible, practical ways and became runaway bestsellers. Fukuzawa was well known as a forceful advocate for the Western way of life, was a teacher and advisor to many of Japan's most influential national leaders, and founded a successful newspaper as well as a leading private university.

Fukuzawa dictated his autobiography, now seen as a classic account of Japan's transition from a closed, feudal state to a modern world power, in 1898, not long before his death.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur L. Tiedemann, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 658-660. © 2005 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi

I am willing to admit my pride in Japan's accomplishments [in rapid modernization]. The facts are these: It was not until the sixth year of Kaei (1853) that a steamship was seen for the first time; it was only in the second year of Ansei (1855) that we began to study navigation from the Dutch in Nagasaki; by 1860, the science was sufficiently understood to enable us to sail a ship across the Pacific. This means that about seven years after the first sight of a steam ship, after only about five years of practice, the Japanese people made a trans-Pacific crossing without help from foreign experts. I think we can without undue pride boast before the world of this courage and skill. As I have shown, the Japanese officers were to receive no aid from Captain Brooke throughout the voyage. Even in taking observations, our officers and the Americans made them independently of each other. Sometimes they compared their results, but we were never in the least dependent on the Americans.

As I consider all the other peoples of the Orient as they exist today, I feel convinced that there is no other nation which has the ability or the courage to navigate a steamship across the Pacific after a period of five years of experience in navigation and engineering. Not only in the

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Orient would this feat stand as an act of unprecedented skill and daring. Even Peter the Great of Russia, who went to Holland to study navigation, with all his attainments in the science could not have equaled this feat of the Japanese. Without doubt, the famous Emperor of Russia was a man of exceptional genius, but his people did not respond to his leadership in the practice of Science as did our Japanese in this great adventure. [pp. 118-119]

Questions:

1. On what basis does Fukuzawa feel pride in Japan? What qualities in the Japanese does he admire?
2. How does Fukuzawa compare Japan to other nations? How do you think he compares Japan to nations not mentioned here, like the United States or Great Britain? What does he see as the measure of a great nation?

... A perplexing institution was representative government.

When I asked a gentleman what the “election law” was and what kind of institution the Parliament really was, he simply replied with a smile, meaning I suppose that no intelligent person was expected to ask such a question. But these were the things most difficult of all for me to understand. In this connection, I learned that there were different political parties — the Liberal and the Conservative — who were always “fighting” against each other in the government.

For some time it was beyond my comprehension to understand what they were “fighting” for, and what was meant, anyway, by “fighting” in peace time. “This man and that man are ‘enemies’ in the House,” they would tell me. But these “enemies” were to be seen at the same table, eating and drinking with each other. I felt as if I could not make much out of this. It took me a long time, with some tedious thinking, before I could gather a general notion of these separate mysterious facts. In some of the more complicated matters, I might achieve an Understanding five or ten days after they were explained to me. But all in all, I learned much from this initial tour of Europe. [pp. 142-144]

[*The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi*, trans. Kiyooka]

Questions:

3. Why do you think Fukuzawa had such a hard time understanding the workings of British democracy?
4. How would you explain a democratic political system to Fukuzawa, in terms he might have understood in 1862?
5. From these short passages, what insights do you have into Fukuzawa’s character and his feelings toward the West?