Liberalism in Prewar Japan: Origins, Evolution and Demise

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In his best-selling book, Blueprint for a New Japan: The Rethinking of a Nation (1993), Ozawa Ichiro, a leading member of the Liberal Democratic Party, argues that Japan must become a "normal" nation. The Japanese, he writes, "must reform our politics, our economy, our society, and our consciousness to bring them into greater currency with the rest of the world." To do this, Ozawa writes, the Japanese "must strive toward the goal of 'five freedoms'", including "placing greater value on individual life," and "allowing individuals...more freedom." If accomplished, these "five freedoms" would mean for Japan a greater emphasis on the individual than ever before in its history. In Ozawa's view, only by achieving these freedoms and becoming a "laudable country" can Japan continue to pursue economic development, and thereby "assume its international responsibilities and create a new, stable post-cold war global structure."1

Ozawa is arguing that Classical Liberalism, based on its cornerstone of individualism, contains universal values that can take root anywhere, not just in the West. Much is known about liberalism in a Western context - libertarian scholars have devoted many pages to discussions of Lockean ideas, Adam Smith, Austrian economics, modern libertarian theory and so on. But what about liberalism in a non-Western context? Late 19th century Japan saw the rise of a notable liberal intellectual trend that deserves the scrutiny of scholars of Classical Liberalism. An inquiry into the development of liberalism in Japan provides an important opportunity to view liberalism in a non-Western context and to consider the prospects for liberalism elsewhere.

Ozawa's ideas are contemporary echoes of the thinking that guided Japan's modernization that began with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. In 1868, having toppled the 250 year old Tokugawa Shogunate, young samurai leaders endeavored to set Japan on the path of modernization, summarizing their goals in the slogan, "Rich Country, Strong Army." These words would guide the new Meiji leaders as they adopted policies designed to achieve equality with the Western powers and free the country from the unequal treaties Western nations had pressured the Tokugawa leadership to sign.

At the end of the 19th century, many in Asia looked to Japan as a potential model for modernization and independence from Western domination. Influential Chinese reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qiqiao advocated modernization along Japanese lines, and thousands of Chinese students made their way to Japan to study. Korea sent its first students abroad in the early 1880s, young officials of the royal court who studied in Japan.2 But Japan's role as a model for Asian modernization was thoroughly discredited by the aggressive policies it pursued against its neighbors in the 1930s and 1940s, its "anti-colonial imperialism."3 While the animosity and fear that Japan's Asian neighbors harbor toward it have not completely abated, Japan has nevertheless emerged once again as a model for development. South Korea, Taiwan, and the other "mini-dragons" of Asia have
all been able to borrow aspects of the Japanese model in building their economies, and in turn, in liberalizing their political structures and their societies. Now, with China poised on the brink of major change, Japan’s example may be influential there as well.

Japan’s 19th century goals of "Rich Country, Strong Army" were to be achieved by studying and adopting from the West those features the Japanese believed contributed to Western strength. Touring Europe and the United States with the Iwakura Mission of 1871-1873, Meiji leaders learned all they could of the West, concluding, for example, that the factories, from which "black smoke rises to the sky...[were]...sufficient explanation of England’s wealth and strength." Thus the Meiji government pursued industrialization as a means to building a "rich country." Late 19th century Prussia offered Japan a model of the strongest military of the time, and so the Prussian model was followed for the military, down to the shakos on the helmets. The Meiji leaders also observed the political systems of the West, and on this basis concluded that Japan, too, must adopt some type of liberal democracy. Liberalism, they believed, provided the foundation of Western strength.

Lacking a true understanding of classical liberalism, however, early Meiji thinkers and politicians introduced to Japan liberalism with a fatal flaw: Liberalism was viewed not as a means for responding to the wishes of the people, but as a tool for building a strong state and a "strong army." Arriving, as it did, on the coattails of "Western imperialism and military pressure," liberalism came to Japan already tainted. More importantly, however, because the impetus for liberal government came from above and not through struggle from below, conditions for the development of liberalism in Japan were not as fertile as they might otherwise have been. Thus classical liberalism entered Japan in the last decades of the nineteenth century fundamentally misunderstood and misapplied. This article will examine the fate of liberalism in Japan in the prewar period and the implications the failed application of liberalism had for Japan.

One of the earliest and most vigorous proponents of liberalism in Japan was Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901). Having traveled to the US in 1860 and 1867 and to Europe in 1862, Fukuzawa compiled astute observations of life in the West in numerous best-selling books, and became Meiji Japan’s primary source of information about the West. His goal, however, was not merely to popularize the West, but to develop the values of Western civilization - the "spirit of independence" in his countrymen:

...I find that Japanese civilization will advance only after we sweep away the old spirit that permeates the minds of the people. But it can be swept away neither by government decree nor private admonition. Some persons must take the initiative in doing things in order to show the people where their aims should lie.

Fukuzawa, leader of what became known as the "Japanese Enlightenment," would show the Japanese that first and foremost, they must develop individualism.

Fukuzawa realized that for the Japanese, whose language lacked a suitable translation for the English terms "freedom," and "liberty," (he had to select an ancient Buddhist term to connote these ideas) developing a spirit of individualism would be a struggle. The struggle would require them to overcome centuries of Confucian teachings. Confucianism,
which Fukuzawa called a "disease inherited from our distant ancestors," described a well-ordered, harmonious society strictly built on hierarchical principles and demanding respect for and obedience to authority. Confucian ideals so permeated society that despite the Meiji reforms in the late 1860s eliminating the rigid traditional class structure, the bulk of the Japanese people retained habits that were "still those of inferiors...When told to stand, they stand; when told to dance, they dance. Their subservience is like that of hungry dogs raised in a house." Centuries of Confucian tradition, Fukuzawa believed, created a situation in Japan in which an "imbalance of power pervades the entire network of Japanese society." On an individual level, this produced the fawning and currying of inferior to superior, and the haughty disdain of superior to inferior. On a countrywide scale, however, the implications were even more dire for Japan, resulting in authoritarian government. Fukuzawa argued that "the common people had never asserted their rights" and as a result, he believed, "...in Japan, there is a government, but no nation." In fact, it was this absence of a nation, this lack of popular participation in civic life, that Fukuzawa feared most. Individual subservience would become national subservience: "The humiliation not only of a single individual, but of Japan." Thus the missionary zeal with which he proselytized individualism was wholly directed toward achieving and preserving national independence. "When the people of a nation do not have the spirit of individual independence," he wrote, "the corresponding right of national independence cannot be realized." Fukuzawa's concern over Japanese independence was completely reasonable in the 1870s, the years of his strongest liberal message. Having seen China, their great continental neighbor, brought to its knees in the Opium Wars 30 years earlier, and subsequently forced by the West into a servile position, many Japanese feared their own country, having already signed unequal treaties with Western powers in the 1850s and '60s, would meet the same fate. Fukuzawa's determination to teach his countrymen how to avoid this inspired his liberal prescription for Japan. "Now, the only duty of the Japanese at present is to preserve Japan's national polity," Fukuzawa wrote in 1875. As we have seen, individualism formed the basis of Fukuzawa's prescription; he fleshed it out by applying individualism to the political and economic structure of the country. "Popular parliaments," he believed, "can serve as a balance of power in regard to the government," remedying the authoritarian, top-heavy imbalance that plagued Japan. He recognized, however, that the outward form of a parliament would be meaningless until a generation of "Japanese people...[are]...born who will be a stimulus to government instead of its plaything." Just as participatory government was important for Japan, so too was popular participation in the economy. In the traditional social structure the merchants, despised as a "parasite class," occupied the lowest position, and economic activity in other classes was severely limited both by law and custom. The elimination of class distinctions shortly after the Meiji Restoration went a long way toward freeing up the economic sphere, vital to achieving the goals of "Rich Country, Strong Army." Fukuzawa unequivocally supported this opening up of economic opportunity, and in 1882 even founded a newspaper that focused largely on business and financial issues. He was a strong believer in the
efficiency of the market: "If something fills a real need, when the time comes there will be buyers. Conversely, if there is no need and no market for an item, they should close up shop." 19

Laissez-faire policies caught the attention of other Meiji intellectuals as well. Journalist Tokutomi Soho (1863-1957) advocated wholesale Westernization of Japan "along the lines of 19th century liberal doctrine," 20 and viewed "government involvement in commerce with suspicion...[favoring]...a policy of freedom of trade as the best way to increase the nation's wealth and standard of living." 21 These ideas inspired some in the Finance Ministry, among them Taguchi Ukichi (1855-1905) whose book, A Free Trade Policy for Japan (1878) was strongly influenced by the works of Adam Smith. 22

It would hardly be right, however, to imply that the new Meiji government itself adopted the policies of free trade outlined by Taguchi and supported by Fukuzawa. Pursuing the all important goal of "Rich Country, Strong Army," as a way to gain equity with and acceptance by the West (and thus preserving national independence) the government involved itself heavily in economic development. In the 1870s, the Meiji government laid Japan's first railroad tracks, connecting Tokyo and Yokohama, and continued to invest in infrastructure as well as heavy industry such as shipbuilding, mining, and chemicals manufacture. Economic hardship in the mid-1880s forced the government to sell off these failing industries to private investors who for the most part made them successful. The government link with business remained strong and continues to be so today.

This link between government and business was forged with one underlying goal: national independence. Fukuzawa's own advocacy of liberalism too, aimed at the achievement of this goal: "...the way in which to preserve...independence cannot be sought anywhere except in civilization [viz. Western-style liberalism]. The only reason for making the people in our country today advance toward civilization is to preserve our country's independence" (italics added). 23

This then, was the bottom line for Fukuzawa - liberalism would be used not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Fukuzawa never understood liberalism as a good in itself, but rather saw it as the basis for building a strong state. Thus Fukuzawa's liberalism was inherently weak, indeed, it had a fatal flaw, for rather than championing the individual as a bulwark against the overwhelming power of the state, Fukuzawa upheld the individual solely as a component whose primary value was for building a strong state. Indeed, it was not the opening of the first Diet (parliament) in 1890, but Japan's 1895 victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War that seemed to vindicate Fukuzawa's devotion to the liberal cause. For Fukuzawa, as for Japan as a whole, this victory inspired exultation. To be sure, Japan was merely following the Western imperialist example in warring with China over paramountcy in Korea, and Fukuzawa rationalized the war as a Japanese attempt to reform Korea and "awaken China to the blessings of civilization." 24 Nevertheless, his jubilation over the outcome of the war betrayed a turn to nationalism, and underscored his insistence on liberalism as the tool for building a strong nation. "How happy I am; I have no words to express it!" Fukuzawa wrote in reference to Japan's victory. "...Unimpassioned thought," he continued, "will show this victory over China as nothing more than the
beginning of our foreign policy." This was an ominous thought indeed in light of Japan’s later military aggression in Asia.

For others of his generation, the turn to nationalism at the expense of liberalism was even starker. For Tokutomi Soho, whose advocacy of "19th century liberal doctrine" for Japan was complete, the turn to nationalism was also complete. Following the Sino-Japanese War, the Triple Intervention of France, Russia and Germany demanded Japan return to China the Liaotung Peninsula, ceded to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki. After this setback, Tokutomi wrote he was "baptized to the gospel of power," and came to believe that "the adoption of Western civilization no longer represented unqualified progress." So seductive were imperialism and military victory as signs of national strength that as one Japanese intellectual historian explained, after the Sino-Japanese War, "Even those who were [previously] considered unalloyed liberals [became] militarists." Thus Japan’s victory over China, and to an even greater degree, victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War ten years later, proved a watershed for Japan. Victory on the battlefield seemed to demonstrate the validity of liberal doctrine. Liberalism worked: Liberalism won wars.

A generation later, liberal intellectual Hasegawa Nyozekan (1875-1969) recognized the rise of nationalism, and its danger to liberalism, noting that, "As we entered the Meiji twenties [viz. 1890s] the trend in modern Japanese history reversed from a process toward liberalism to a process toward nationalism." In his long career as a journalist and social critic, Hasegawa Nyozekan commented on Japanese society, endeavoring to mould public opinion and create an intellectual basis for the growth of liberalism in Japan. Nyozekan’s central characteristic as an intellectual and journalist was his liberalism. As a member of the generation educated by Fukuzawa and his cohorts, Nyozekan received an education grounded in the Western knowledge that was flowing into Japan in the early years of Meiji. Unlike his mentoring generation, however, Nyozekan’s study of Western philosophy, and of liberalism in particular, took place in an atmosphere largely relieved of the gnawing fear for Japanese independence. Born seven years after the Meiji Restoration, Japan’s position was more secure than it must have felt to Fukuzawa, whose concern over maintaining national independence was the bedrock of his liberalism. More importantly, however, Nyozekan’s understanding of classical liberalism went deeper than that of Fukuzawa and his generation.

Nyozekan attended Chuo University, a private university, which like other private universities, was more conducive to liberal ideas and attitudes than the imperial universities. There he received an education firmly grounded in English and French philosophy, avoiding the German-based education that was dominant in the imperial universities. Shortly after graduating from Chuo University, ill health forced him into a period of recuperation, which he spent, despite doctor’s orders, at the library, immersing himself in the works of Spencer, Mill, Hume, Spinoza, Toqueville, and others. He also read Marx and Engels during this time, tackling the English translation of Marx’s Kapital, and Engels’ Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, later admitting that he never really "got" Marx. In 1910, Nyozekan took a trip to England in his capacity as a journalist with the Osaka Asahi Shimbun, the leading liberal voice of the day. This trip left a strong imprint, as eminent legal scholar Matsumoto Joji pointed out, "...the liberal aspect of Nyozekan’s character gradually expanded after his trip to England."
During this trip, Nyozekan read avidly of the English books and newspapers available to him, and was especially drawn to the ideas expressed by British social theorist Leonard T. Hobhouse in his book, *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (1918). Introducing Hobhouse’s ideas to a Japanese audience in the pages of his own magazine, *Warera, (“Ourselves”)* in 1920, Nyozekan pointed out that the book was an attack against the statism of Hegel, and Hegel’s "idealized exaltation of the state." Nyozekan explained that while the metaphysical theory of the state holds that the "raison d’etre of the state is itself," the democratic or humanitarian view regards the state as a means, "a servant of humanity [that must be] judged by what it does for the lives of its members." Nyozekan was clearly aware of the weakness in Fukuzawa’s application of liberalism to Japan. Realizing the fallacy of the ideal of liberalism for building a strong state, Nyozekan embraced classical liberalism for its own sake.

Just five years before victory over China gave proof of Japanese strength, the Meiji Constitution, a "gift" from the Emperor to his people, was promulgated, and the first Diet was convened. Soon after the Meiji Restoration, bureaucrats had decided that Japan should become a nation guided by a Constitution. The debate over what kind of constitution Japan should adopt, however - English-style, weighted toward the parliament, or German-style, weighted toward the monarch - was divisive. The constitution that finally emerged, based largely on the German model, was an unfortunate hybrid that reflected the government’s schizophrenic view of liberalism. Paying lip service to the idea of representative government, the Constitution created a bicameral Diet, whose lower house was elected by a miniscule electorate. At the same time, the Constitution severely limited the authority of the Diet, arrogating almost all power to the Emperor and his Privy Council, which Nyozekan noted was a "curio of feudal government [that possesses] more power than the parliament itself."

Though the Diet provided an avenue for popular political participation, it was a very narrow one. After the victory over Russia in 1905, popular movements grew, as did demands for enlarging the electorate. Many in the government bureaucracy, however, still imbued with the Confucian traditions that valued harmony, came to fear the perceived chaos of a society based on the notion of individual liberty, especially the social dislocation they observed as an accompaniment to *laissez-faire* industrial growth in the West. If the government allowed the social fabric to fray, the nation’s goals, of "Rich Country, Strong Army", would unravel as well. To remedy this, in the nineteen-teens and ‘twenties, the government enacted a flurry of social legislation as a "preemptive strike" to prevent social upheaval, in effect, robbing the populace of an opportunity for political action and retarding democratic development. Finally, in 1925, after repeated attempts, the Diet passed the Universal Manhood Suffrage bill, extending the right to vote to all non-indigent men over the age of 20. As a check on this vast expansion of the electorate, however, that same year the Diet enacted the Peace Preservation Law, making it illegal for anyone to advocate changing the system of government or to advocate outlawing private property, thus providing a legal basis for future political repression. (In 1941, Peace Preservation Law was extended to allow for "preventative arrest").

Unlike Fukuzawa, for whom the demonstration of Japanese national strength in the victories over China and Russia served to validate liberalism, Nyozekan believed that the
conquest of other peoples was anathema to liberty at home. Echoing Hobhouse in his analysis of the relationship between national and international liberty, Nyozekan argued in 1920 that Japan's demonstrated unwillingness to respect the will of the people of other nations meant that it could not respect the will of its own people. After the 1925 Peace Preservation Law, the truth of this became increasingly evident.

The Manchurian Incident in September, 1931, in which Japan extended colonial control over China's huge northeastern region, gave additional weight to Nyozekan's belief in the connection between Japanese military aggression abroad and political repression at home. Hobhouse's statement that the conqueror "forfeits his liberty as long as he retains his power" was borne out shortly after the Manchurian Incident in the May Fifteenth Incident of 1932. In May, 1932, a group of young naval officers staged a coup, hoping to destroy the political parties and other democratic institutions and "restore" national unity founded on an intimate relationship between the emperor and the people. Though the coup failed, party government was sufficiently shaken, and Prime Minister Saito put in place a "cabinet of national unity" with representatives from the military, bureaucracy, and parties, ending the practice of party cabinets and limiting popular input in government.

Japan's aggressive policy in Asia, Nyozekan observed shortly after the Manchurian Incident, had a long history, becoming especially pronounced from the middle of the Meiji period, after which, he wrote, "the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars were the outgrowth of our continental policy." Two years later he would warn with chilling accuracy that "...the danger of the Manchurian Incident moving toward a second world war and a demand for the general mobilization of the population is clear." For Nyozekan, then, the Manchurian Incident signalled the onset of fascism in Japan, and formed the pivotal event around which his 1932 book, Critique of Japanese Fascism (Nihon fashizumu hihan) revolved. In his critique, Nyozekan explored the process by which the liberal ideas that Fukuzawa had championed in the early Meiji period had devolved into fascism.

Central to Nyozekan's analysis of the development of fascism in Japan was the country's status as a late-developing capitalist nation. In his Critique of Japanese Fascism, Nyozekan first explored Italian fascism, and argued that Japan closely resembled Italy in that it was "still not sufficiently developed as a capitalist state." Playing catch-up with the West, the Japanese government during the Meiji period took a leading role in industrialization. Even after Finance Minister Matsukata sold government industries to private investors in the mid-1880s, government continued to work closely with industry, and Nyozekan believed this prevented the formation of an independent and oppositional bourgeoisie. In Europe in the early throes of democratization, the institution of parliament was established, Nyozekan wrote, "To destroy the dictatorship of the aristocracy." In Japan, however, the government, in its single-minded pursuit of the twin goals "Rich Country, Strong Army," forged a bond with monopoly capital to create an overpowering force, one which "small and middle landowners and small and middle capitalists" were unable to oppose, thus paving the way for the development of fascism in Japan.
In Nyozekan’s view of Japan’s fascist political development, "professional politicians served merely as tools for the struggles of the capitalists." Thus fascism, he believed, did not preclude the existence of a parliament, it merely required that the parliament not function as a body representing competing interests in society. Parliamentary formation in Japan, Nyozekan believed, had stopped short, providing the outer shell of the institution but lacking the inner mechanism to make it work.

Japan’s fascism, in Nyozekan’s analysis, was "cold" or "legal" fascism, "more self-possessed and gradual" than Mussolini’s fanatical fascism. It was not the result of a violent coup that overthrew the existing power structure, but was built within that power structure itself. In this process, party politicians and the bureaucracy gradually overran independent political forces in the country, and in Nyozekan’s view, coopted various rural political groups, using them in the gradual fascization of the country. The parties, rather than serving to lead the struggle for political power between the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the aristocracy and the bureaucracy on the other, were merely "the engine of the struggle for advantage between one group of capitalists and another." The small and middle capitalists, the very elements in society that might have linked with the political parties to oppose the authority of the government in its collusion with monopoly capital, failed to do so, fearing the possibility of chaos and disorder. The left provided the only example of opposition to the government, but disapproving of their methods, the small and middle capitalists instead opted for law and order and themselves became part of the fascist movement.

In the same way that the wars with China and Russia that straddled the turn of the century prompted a retreat from liberalism, a combination of international and domestic tensions in the 1920s and 1930s prompted a similar withdrawal. Nyozekan’s view of liberalism was not marred by misunderstanding as was Fukuzawa’s, but he was aware of these misunderstandings in others, and of the ways in which this contributed to the development of fascism in Japan. Liberalism suffered this fate not only during the Meiji era, but in the Taisho (1912-1925) and early Showa (1925-1989) eras as well. Nyozekan once commented on this prewar liberalism saying, "Japanese didn’t really understand the difference between liberalism and Marxism very well...[they]...couldn’t see that liberalism was opposed to Marxism." Unable to grasp the glaring difference between liberal individualism and the communalism of Marx, finer ideological differences became meaningless.

Nyozekan’s prediction that the Manchurian Incident would lead Japan into a second world war was all too accurate. The end of World War II, however, and the Allied Occupation of Japan seemed to fulfill another of Nyozekan’s predictions: his belief that democracy would develop in Japan. After the war he wrote that Japan’s postwar democratization "followed a course which the history of the modernization of Japan and of the Japanese themselves would have taken anyway if left to its natural tendency." Indeed, aside from their wholly personal relief at having survived the war, many Japanese have expressed the view of the occupying forces as "liberators," liberating them from their own government. "Swaggering military men and rigid bureaucrats! If they were ultimately victorious, where would that have led?" asked ninety-four year old retired corporate chairman Haratani Ichiro.
In 1890, on the day the Meiji Constitution was promulgated, Kuga Katsunan, one of Nyozekan’s early mentors whose advocacy of liberalism in the early Meiji period had attracted Nyozekan, wrote of his nation with a strange pride saying that:

the historical relationship between Emperor and people was unsullied by strife or jealous competition for rights. Japanese advocates of people’s rights who had drawn their theories from Western liberal doctrines had ignored this relationship. Because Japan had never known a revolutionary struggle against its imperial institution, Western liberalism was irrelevant...and would never find root in Japan.60

Nyozekan disagreed with his mentor, that Western liberalism would never find root in Japan, as Ozawa too would disagree. Liberalism, both would argue, is a universal value, which has universal application. Individualism as a value, Nyozekan believed, was not a foreign transplant to Japan, but had indigenous roots. And just as a plant must grow from its roots, liberalism cannot be imposed from above, as was the attempt in prewar Japan, but must come from below. Now, with China poised on the brink of change as the world’s last major communist nation, Japan’s role as a model in Asia may provide a valuable lesson, not just for one-fifth of the world’s population, but for all. Japan’s experience may once again provide a model for political liberalization in Asia.
Notes


40. Japan's first modern riot occurred in 1905 in protest to what the Japanese public believed was the unfair settlement of the Russo-Japanese War in the Portsmouth Treaty. Unaware of how narrow the Japanese margin of victory actually was, largely because of inaccurate, trumpeting press reports, the public felt entitled to more than the Portsmouth Treaty delivered. I think it is significant that nationalism, not popular demands for greater democracy, motivated this first riot.


51. Ibid, 337.

52. Ibid, 279; 290 and passim.


54. Ibid, 197.


56. Tanaka, "'Chokokka shugi' to 'fashizumu' ni koshite," 310.


