
Civilizations Seen and Unseen

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Civilization in Meiji: an embodiment of progress

Bummei or civilization in the early Meiji period was a brilliant word, an embodiment of the popular interest in progress at the very outset of constructing a new modern state. The term 'civilization' was initially used in French and English in the late eighteenth century to describe a progressive process of human development, a movement towards refinement and order and away from barbarism and savagery. Meiji intellectuals did not fail to grasp this 'etymology.' They employed *bummei* as opposed to *mikai* (uncivilized) or *yaban* (savage).

A typical example of this understanding is *Bummeiron no Gairyaku* [*An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*] by Fukuzawa Yukichi. In the second chapter entitled "Western Civilization as our Goal", he referred to the stages of civilization:

When we are talking about civilization in the world today, the nations of Europe and the United States of America are the most highly civilized (*bummei*), while the Asian countries, such as Turkey, China, and Japan, may be called semi-developed (*hankai*) countries, and Africa and Australia are to be counted as still primitive lands (*yaban*)¹⁾.

'Civilized', 'semi-developed', and 'primitive' are thus enumerated as the three stages through which mankind must pass. To Fukuzawa as well, civilization was precisely "a movement towards refinement and order and away from barbarism and savagery." Despite the chapter title "Western Civilization as our Goal", he by no means asserted that civilization was the monopoly of the West.

[W]e cannot be satisfied with the level of civilization attained by the West...
[P]resent-day Europe can only be called the highest level that human intelligence has been able to attain at this juncture in history. Since this is true, in all countries of the world, be they primitive or semi-developed, those who are to give thought to their country's progress in civilization must

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necessarily take European civilization as the basis of discussion, and must weigh the pros and cons of the problem in the light of it²⁾.

Simply put, civilization was to him universal; every country, regardless of the present 'stage', has a chance to attain it. By thus introducing civilization in the West, Fukuzawa served as an extremely influential advocate of Westernization in the years after the Meiji Restoration.

Likewise, in the sphere of diplomacy, westernization was the primary prerequisite to give Japan an opportunity to revise the unequal treaties. Inoue Kaoru, the foreign minister in the 1880s, for instance, is reported to have said, "what we have to do is to transform our empire and our people like the people of Europe³⁾," a statement that succinctly reveals how the people in government felt in the late 19th century Japan. Although he failed to accomplish the task of revising the treaties, his style of diplomacy has often been referred to as a *Rokumeikan* diplomacy named after the palace where balls were frequently held. Inoue placed great emphasis on westernization in every respect, from clothing to architecture.

Fukuzawa categorized both Japan and China as *hankai* or 'semi-developed.' The year 1894 witnessed the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. The war generated a different view of civilization from Fukuzawa's. Mutsu Munemitsu, then the foreign minister, looked back upon the war and presented a very stimulating interpretation:

We made rapid progress toward this end [to adopt Western civilization] through many reforms, virtually transforming Japan from old to new and exciting the wonder and admiration of the advanced nations of the West. Meanwhile, China adhered strictly to outmoded customs of the past, and failed to make any effort to bring her ancient ways into line with existing conditions at home and abroad... it was patently clear to all that the real cause of friction would be a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia⁴⁾.

Mutsu thereby regarded the Sino-Japanese War as "a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia." Unlike Fukuzawa, Mutsu did not hesitate to call Japan a western country; in other words, more than two decades later, Fukuzawa's slogan of "Western Civilization as our Goal" came true. Civilization in Meiji Japan, after all, functioned as a driving force for establishing a new powerful modern state. Who could then have imagined that more than half a century later Japan would be tried by none other than civilization?

Trial of Japan by Civilization

Mr. President, this is no ordinary trial, for here we are waging a part of the determined battle of civilization to preserve the entire world from destruction... A very few throughout the world, including these accused, decided to take the law into their own hands and to force their will upon mankind. They declared war against civilization. They made the rules and defined the issues. They were determined to destroy democracy and its essential basis—freedom and the respect of human personality; they were determined that the system of government of and by and for the people should be eradicated and what they termed a “New Order” established instead. And to this end they joined hands with the Hitlerite group... Together they planned, prepared, and initiated aggressive wars against the great democracies enumerated in the indictment⁵⁾.

On the first of June, 1946, Joseph B. Keenan, the chief prosecutor of the Tokyo war crimes trial—officially known as the International Military Tribunal for the Far East—began his long opening statement with these words. This statement, including the prosecution’s view of the tribunal, its understanding of the relationship between the tribunal and the existing international law, some aspects of the Japanese aggression to be proved and so forth, drew the world’s attention. For the notion of civilization was sensationally brought into light. Civilization in Keenan’s usage referred to “freedom and the respect of human personality,” “the system of government of and by and for the people,” “the great democracies enumerated in the indictment.” That is, the Allied powers, for instance America, Britain and France, were none other than the civilization in this context. Employed in this manner, civilization here did not imply the conflicts between Western and Eastern civilizations; the view was not presented that Western civilization was about to try Japan, a country of Eastern civilization, for China and India, countries of non-Western civilization, were among the accusers. The framework was thus presented that powers of civilization would sit in judgment on Japan, the uncivilized savage. “[T]o preserve the entire world from destruction” therefore meant “to preserve the Allied powers from destruction.”

Keenan then referred to the other international military tribunal in Nuremberg, which was in reality a predecessor to the Tokyo counterpart, and expressed no concern with it. There was, however, much similarity between the two trials.

The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated... Civilization can afford no compromise with the social forces which would gain renewed strength if we deal ambiguously or indecisively with the men in whom those forces now precariously survive⁶⁾.

Robert Jackson, the chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg trial, began his opening statement as above. He even declared that “the real complaining party at your bar is Civilization.”⁷⁾ The Nazi-Germany’s Holocaust—a shocking genocide revealed on a large scale after the war—undoubtedly functioned as one of the indispensable tools for Jackson’s declaration. He referred to the genocide as “the most savage and numerous crimes planned and committed by the Nazis⁸⁾.” Indeed, as the scholars of the Holocaust—from Raul Hilberg of *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) to Michael R. Marrus of *The Holocaust in History* (1987)—have put it, “at Nuremberg, immediately after the war, crimes against the Jews, were part of the proceedings conducted by the International Military Tribunal, but such crimes never assumed a prominent place”⁹⁾; however, the Holocaust was fully made use of in the opening statement to convict the uncivilized character of the Nazis.

Keenan’s opening statement was sensationally reported on the front pages of Japanese newspapers. One newspaper reported, using such headlines as, “The Determined Battle of Civilization to Preserve the Entire World from Destruction,” “The Responsibility Always Rests upon Human Agents,” and “The Japanese People are Also the Victims of the Accused.”¹⁰⁾

The aspect of “trial by civilization” was not discussed much in the press thereafter; rather, most of the attention was paid to the statement that the Japanese people were also the victims of the defendants. The distinction between Japanese people in general and the wartime leaders initially appeared in the Potsdam Proclamation: “there must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest...”¹¹⁾

This perspective was, in fact, entirely new to the Japanese. For, during the wartime period, the view of the Allied powers of Japan was quite different from that of Germany. They perceived the enemy as “Nazis” on the one hand and “Japs” on the other. The implications were enormous, for this left space for the recognition of “good Germans,” but scant comparable place for “good Japanese.”¹²⁾ In other words, the Japanese had been treated as a whole until the end of the war. It could be said that the Potsdam Proclamation and the opening statement of the Tokyo trial played a significant role in changing the view of the Japanese people in general.

The trend of the day was, therefore, that in order to prove himself innocent one had only to speak ill of the militarism of pre-war Japan and to take sides with the victims. A popular contemporary novel succeeded in depicting the national atmosphere through the lips of the narrator:

I cannot help being appalled by what I read in newspapers and magazines nowadays. Many people seem to pride themselves on slandering and

blaming others. "It's all that fellow's fault," they declare, as arrogantly as if we had won the war. "That's why the country is in such a mess." But these are the very people whose attitude during the war was hardly admirable, and who manage to live extravagantly even now.¹³⁾

In this manner, the framework painted by the Allied powers became prevalent all over Japan: a handful of military cliques deceived the people into committing an aggressive war.

Intellectuals lost no time in following the trend. A typical example is Maruyama Masao's "Thought and Behaviour Patterns of Japan's Wartime Leaders" (1948). In it, Maruyama made a comparison between the thought and behavior patterns of the accused at both the Tokyo and Nuremberg trials, and then concluded that Japan's leaders had been much more belittled than the Nazis. He introduced, in depicting the behavior patterns of former leaders, such conspicuous terms as "submission to *faits accomplis*" and "refuge in one's competence or jurisdiction."¹⁴⁾ Despite the excellent reputation the work has enjoyed, Maruyama intentionally omits some parts of the proceedings of the trial in discussing the subject. After all, this work lacks serious scholarship.¹⁵⁾ Still, the popularity of the work clearly testifies to the fact that it went well with the trend of the time—degrading and criticizing former national leaders and then drawing a clear line between them and the Japanese in general.

One may wonder how the Japanese responded to another framework of the trial; I will then discuss an intellectual response to the civilization aspect of Keenan's statement.

Civilization on Trial

One day I went to the court to hear the trial. Since a special case was being tried that day, there was no need of admission tickets or no inspection of personal belongings...The accused on trial that day was the one who had never been reported even in the newspapers. We had never seen a photograph of his face before...The defendant looked much more outrageous, overwhelming than other accused...

We were not allowed even to whisper in the courtroom, but I asked the one next to me secretly, "What is the name of this new accused?"

He replied—"modern civilization."¹⁶⁾

In October of 1946, about four months after the opening statement delivered by Keenan, Takeyama Michio wrote this essay. He himself went to the court to hear the trial. Most of the essay "Mr. Hyde's Trial" is composed of the severe speech by the prosecutor to the accused named "modern civilization", an impeachment of "modern civilization" imitating the manner of the prosecutor's speech at the Tokyo trial. A

stage is set up where “modern civilization” is being investigated for responsibility as one of the Japanese wartime leaders at the Tokyo trial. A completely unexpected setting, one would say, for at the trial only Japanese former leaders were destined to be judged.

This essay was probably the earliest criticism against the tribunal, given the fact that it was originally written only five months after the declaration of “the determined battle of civilization” brought by Keenan. Being extremely challenging, the essay would surely have evoked many responses had it then been published; as it was, the censors of GHQ did not allow it to come to light. The important point is, Takeyama presented an acute analysis of the fate of modern civilization, which the court as well as Keenan had overlooked. The court overlooked it on purpose, because investigating modern civilization in search of those responsible for the calamity would inevitably lead to condemning Western civilization. The Tokyo trial was executed based on the framework of judging “the uncivilized, savage” under the name of “civilization.” Thus, it was absolutely impossible for Westerners to be willing to destroy this premise. Had they judged “modern civilization,” the result would automatically have led to impeaching their own past.

Takeyama’s contention is not to attribute all responsibility to “modern civilization”; but rather he emphasized the importance of grasping the two sides of “modern civilization” —splendid accomplishments in the haves on the one hand and wicked, evil characters in the have-nots on the other.¹⁷⁾ He called the former character of modern civilization, “Dr. Jekyll’s face,” and the latter, “Mr. Hyde’s,” contending that in Japan modern civilization proved to be Mr. Hyde only. At first sight, this essay, “Mr. Hyde’s Trial,” may seem to stress the wholesale innocence of Japan’s actions. However, Takeyama did not fail to criticize in a reasonable manner the actions of former national leaders of Japan.¹⁸⁾

He concludes the essay with these words:

Mr. President, we are doing justice here in this court under the name of civilization. We consider it a great honor to do so and take pride in it.

We respect civilization, and worship its noble character. We firmly believe that our civilization will be forever pure, and that its light will direct mankind eternally.

We believe in the civilization with Dr. Jekyll’s face. It is quite regrettable that it turned out to be Mr. Hyde’s face in some countries of the world. It is a big problem assigned to mankind—how to get rid of such a disastrous character in the future. We have to investigate thoroughly Mr. Hyde’s character in our civilization...

Why has our modern civilization transformed itself into Mr. Hyde in the have-nots ? When and under what conditions does such a transformation

appear—how does it produce such leaders, or at least did it produce them in this case? It is not merely because of the moral problem, such as the characteristics of this or that country is bad, or simply because they did not follow the words of Dr. Jekyll in the haves. This is an essential issue, we believe, that people in richer countries, which have not yet met with Mr. Hyde, must consider together as well.¹⁹⁾

Keenan as well as Jackson declared in court that the accuser was none other than civilization. In contrast, Takeyama contended that modern civilization was none other than the accused — although not the only accused. He implied that the prosecution's view would not contribute to a fundamental solution to the calamity the world had experienced. To achieve an ever-lasting peace of our civilization, one of the key issues of Keenan's statement, it should be considered thoroughly under what conditions modern civilization transforms itself with such disastrous results.

Epilogue—on world history

Besides dissecting the characteristics of modern civilization, Takeyama went on to emphasize, although implicitly, the importance of examining world history, which of course includes the history of the accusing countries. The history of the Allied powers is the history of imperialism and colonialism. Given this perspective, Takeyama's essay can also be read as a criticism against the one-sided view of history presented at the Tokyo trial. This contention immediately reminds us of one of the dissenting opinions presented by the Indian judge, Radhabinod Pal, at the conclusion of the Tokyo trial:

I would only like to observe once again that the so-called Western interests in the Eastern Hemisphere were mostly founded on the past success of these western people in 'transmuting military violence into commercial profit.'²⁰⁾

"Mr. Hyde's Trial" was written in the same manner as the prosecutor's statement in court, a technique which allowed the author to convey all the more effectively his criticism against the superficial and political interpretation of the world history presented at the Tokyo trial.

Half a century after the Sino-Japanese war, the fate of Japan was completely changed: from a proud winner to a miserable loser. Japan was defeated and even tried by "civilization," a brilliant figure and a challenging objective to attain at the beginning of constructing a new nation.

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- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 3) Marius B. Jansen, "Modernization and Foreign Policy in Meiji Japan" in Robert E. Ward, ed., *Political Development in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), p. 174.
- 4) Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku* translated by Gordon Mark Berger (1982, Princeton), pp. 27-8.
- 5) *Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East*, pp. 384-5.
- 6) *Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal [Nuremberg]*, Vol. 2, p. 99.
- 7) *Nuremberg*, Vol. 2, p. 155.
- 8) *Nuremberg*, Vol. 2, p. 118.
- 9) Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York, 1987), p. 4.
- 10) Mainichi-shinbun, June 2, 1946.
- 11) *Nihon-Gaikoshi (Japanese Diplomatic History)* Vol. 25. (Tokyo, 1972), p. 189.
- 12) John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986), pp. 78-9.
- 13) Takeyama Michio, *Harp of Burma* translated by Howard Hibbett, (UNESCO, 1966), p. 90.
- 14) Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (London, 1963), p. 103.
- 15) Ushimura Kei, "Tozai Kokusaigunjisaiban no Hikokutachi [Japanses and German Defendants in the two International Military Tribunals]," Seiron, Sep. 1985.
- 16) Takeyama Michio, *Showa no Seishinshi [The History of Spirit in Showa]* (Tokyo, 1983), pp. 299-300.
- 17) *Ibid.*, pp. 301-2.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 315-6.
- 20) B. V. A. Röling et al., *The Tokyo Judgment* (Amsterdam, 1977), p. 627.