

# Confucian Thoughts in Edo Period and Yukichi Fukuzawa

Masamichi KOMURO  
(Keio-Gijyuku University)

## 1. Preface

Why did such thinkers as Yukichi Fukuzawa, who realized the modern civilization precisely, appear on the stage of Japanese history comparatively earlier? Why in China and Korea were there more difficulties for the appearance of such thinkers? To answer these questions, we should consider how the Confucian culture of Edo period influenced Fukuzawa's generation. Because the people of this generation lived their first half lifetime in Edo period. In this paper I would like to show that the intellectual tradition of Edo period is a necessary condition for the early appearance of the thinkers such as Yukichi Fukuzawa.

## 2. Fukuzawa's view of Confucian tradition in Edo period

Yukich Fukuzawa is very famous as a caustic critic against Confucian tradition. But Fukuzawa himself was a parson of fairly rich Confucian knowledge, as he said in his '*Autobiography*', "I became *zenza*, or senior disciple who had the privilege of giving occasional lectures". It is not very difficult to find his positive reference to Confucianism in his works.

For example, he appreciates some developments of the Confucianism in the later half of Edo periods in '*Popular Discourse on National Rights*', as follows.

"In the course of Tokugawa's peaceful reign Japanese scholarship made considerable progress. They studied Chinese classics to be superior to Chinese themselves. Particularly the school of Jinsai Itô and his son Tôgai or the school of Sorai Ogyû threw suspicion on the Neo-Confucianism, Chu Hsi philosophy, to advocate the revived learning of the classics. We should regard their intellectual insights as matchless, though there are positive or negative opinions about their schools. In the long course of Tokugawa's 250 years, not only Jinsai or Sorai schools but also various Confucians, Buddists monks, writers and doctors filled all over Japanese Society. There were nobody who didn't know the titles of

*Lun-yü* or *Great Learning (Daigaku)* even in a lonely or remote village, except extremely stupid or poor people.”

In *'An Outline of The Theory of Civilization'* Fukuzawa wrote that the spirits toward the Meiji Revolution were growing up potentially under such intellectual circumstances since the third quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as follows.

“Even in all that stagnation there actually was some progress, and by the end of the Tokugawa period antipathy to lineage started fermenting.”

### 3. Fukuzawa's thoughts and the Confucianism in Edo periods.

It might be difficult to explain the Confucian learnings in Edo period, conceptualizing in only one word “Confucianism” because there were many kinds of Confucian schools. It would be impossible here to examine all influences of those many schools with Fukuzawa's thoughts. Therefore here I would like to consider about the most typical three schools, to which Fukuzawa referred in *'Popular Discourse on National Rights'* as cited above. Those are Chu Hsi philosophy, Jinsai School and Sorai School.

#### (1) Neo-Confucianism: Chu Hsi philosophy

Neo-Confucianism has a strong message for individuals to control their moral by themselves. In spite of the popular image of Fukuzawa as a radical critic against Confucianism, it is not very difficult to find any sentences just like as Neo-Confucian's. For example, in Fukuzawa's *'Autobiography'* he said his view about the moral as follows, succeeding an augment that he tried to co-ordinate all the physical actions of human beings by natural sciences.

“In spiritual or moral training, I regard the human being as the most sacred and responsible of all orders, unable in reason to do anything base. Therefore, in self-respect, a man cannot change his sense of humanity, his justice, his loyalty or anything belonging to his manhood even when driven by circumstances to do so. In short, my creed is that a man should find his faith in independence and self-respect.”

It is not strange even if a Neo-Confucian said the second sentence cited above, though the words “his faith in independence” in the last sentence symbolize Fukuzawa's new modern idea.

In Fukuzawa's letter of 1869, there is also an interesting sentence as

follows.

“I dare to say that an independence of each parson is the basis of independent family, which is then the basis of independent local area, which is further the basis of the independent nation. For the independence of each parson there is no way beyond the enlightenment of his own knowledge.”

The rhetoric and logic of this sentence are very similar to the following sentence in ‘*Daigaku*’ ( ‘*Great Learning*’ ) by Chu Hsi. That is, “The virtue of the ruler is the basis of virtuous vassals, which is then the basis of virtuous local area, which is further the basis of the virtuous nation.”

As mentioned above, there is something in common between Chu Hsi philosophy and Fukuzawa’s thoughts. Their common thought is that a parson of strong subjectivity is the basis of all matters. But there is, of course, the great difference between these two thoughts. In the case of Chu Hsi philosophy, the moral to train individually is the eternally established moral cords. And it is considered that a moralistic ruler should guide the stupid people into the right path. On the contrary Fukuzawa didn’t regard morals as unchangeable. He thought that each independent parson should consider by one’s enlightened knowledge what to attain moralistically. He had no idea that the men of high standing should guide the lowers but the assembly of the people who can stand alone moralistically will realize a civilized society.

(2) Jinsai School: Jinsai Itô (1627-1705) and Tôgai (1670-1736)

According to the ‘*Autobiography*’, Fukuzawa’s father had a particular respect for Tôgai Itô and his father’s ideas survived him in Fukuzawa family even after his death. In fact, it seems that a kind of equalitarianism included in Jinsai School flew into Fukuzawa’s thought.

For example, also according to the ‘*Autobiography*’ when the Meiji government tried to award Fukuzawa a prize, he said as follows.

“What is remarkable about a man’s carrying out his own work? The cartman pulls his cart; the bean-curd maker produces bean-curd; the student reads his books. Each one follows what is his obligation. If the government wants to recognize the ordinary work of its subjects, let it begin with my neighbor, the bean-curd maker. Give up any such ideas about my special work.”

I think, everyone who has read some of Jinsai's works would be aware of the remarkable similarity between this Fukuzawa's insistence and Jinsai's, because Jinsai considered that each ordinary man is able to walk along "the way", the moral way, carrying out his own work.

But what Jinsai and Tōgai pursued was the virtue that made the existing common society work smoothly and ideally. On the contrary Fukuzawa thought that human society should make progress toward the new civilization, changing the existing society. On this point we must not forget the great distance between them.

### (3) Sorai School: Sorai Ogyū (1666-1728)

Sorai was the Confucian who believed nothing but confirmed empirically or positively. Also in his opinion man should work upon its society actively and it might be necessary to make over the society depending on the circumstances. In these respects many researchers are regarding Fukuzawa like as Sorai.

By the way Fukuzawa's teacher about Chinese literature, Shōzan Shiraishi, was the Confucian under the influence of Sorai School. Even if apart from this matter of academic belonging, the expressions and ideas similar to Sorai's are found in many paragraphs of Fukuzawa's works. For example, in '*An Outline of The Theory of Civilization*' there is such a paragraph as argues that morals are developed according to the existing society, and not vice versa.

"This is why I say theory or moral should be based upon fact, and not vice versa. One must do violence to the facts by proposing theories or morals based on sheer conjecture."

Just like as this Fukuzawa's insistence, Sorai attached importance to the facts and said about the method to consider real conditions and the morals in ancient Chinese society, as follows.

"*The Six Classics* are its facts. *Li-ji* and *Lun-yü* are its theories. Theories should be based upon facts and then morals are built up. Therefore if man ignores facts and considers only theories, there is scarcely a man but confuses its idea."

Though these two thinkers have many ideas in common, of course there is also great difference between them. In the case of Sorai, the ideal society is

in ancient China before Confucius. But Fukuzawa regarded the modern Western civilization as ideal. In Sorai's opinion it should be an excellent ruler who make a proper social system recognizing the circumstances objectively. But Fukuzawa claimed each ordinary parson to grasp the reality objectively and to establish one's own independent life.

As mentioned above it is difficult to characterize Fukuzawa's thought as a descendant of only one Confucian school, whichever school of Chu Hsi philosophy, Jinsai School or Sorai School. But it could be said that those schools had prepared some components of Fukuzawa's thought.

#### 4. Intellectual circumstances since late 18<sup>th</sup> century

Since late 18<sup>th</sup> century Confucianism became to be learned by not only professional scholars but also many common intellectuals. According to this change of the circumstances, new problem came out, that every school seemed not suitable for the contemporary reality of Japanese society. Man felt only Chu Hsi philosophy, Jinsai School or Sorai School insufficient for itself. It is why the tendency to pick up and combine the useful parts from different Confucian schools developed since around then. That is so called 'Secchûgaku'. But this tendency of 'Secchûgaku' had not matured easily as one systematized thought by the end of Edo period. Man could not find any clear answers how to organize the philosophical components from various schools. Therefore in the history of Japanese thoughts the days of 'Secchûgaku' in the latter half of Edo period were the days of trail and error.

For example Fukuzawa wrote the mind of intellectuals in the latter half of Edo period as follows, in '*An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*'.

"Since about the end of the eighteenth century, the learned men didn't realize clearly their ambitions or complaints in society. They made only any ambiguous complaints in their literary works that had no reasonable theory. But their works expressed the dissatisfaction with their contemporary days between the lines."

Namely Fukuzawa thought that the learned men did not grasp their own insistences truly but only made their complaints

But around the end of Edo period there were already some components for new thoughts. It was such period when Fukuzawa turned from Confucianism

to Dutch or English learning and then met with the thoughts of the Western civilization, for example, Henry T. Buckle, François P. G. Guizot, Francis Wayland, John S. Mill and so on. When Fukuzawa read the books by those thinkers, he might feel to have his eyes opened. That time he understood what “the learned men didn’t realize clearly”, that is, the predecessors had been groping. Fukuzawa could understand the Western civilization very clearly; because there was a long groping years of many learned men in the latter half of Edo periods. There were some components at hand to understand the new civilization. The task of Fukuzawa might be how to systematize those components under a reasonable theory. According to the view above mentioned, it is not strange that a thinker like as Fukuzawa appeared quickly just after the Meiji Revolution.

#### 5. Conclusion: what distinguished Japan from Ch’ing dynasty and I dynasty?

Why did not such a parson like as Fukuzawa appear in China under Ch’ing dynasty or in Korea under I dynasty just after the Western impact? I think the difference was caused by the diversity of the culture in the latter half of Edo period. In those days many clans not less than 200 adopted almost freely various schools of Confucianism, Japanese classics or even Dutch learning as the educational course for their samurais. Furthermore, many private schools offered various learnings or educations. That is to say, there was almost no unified or forced educational policy for the whole of Japan. To borrow Fukuzawa’s own words, there were “heterodoxy and rough opinion” or “discussions in eventful society”. It seems the reason why such a parson like as Fukuzawa appeared in early Meiji Japan.

On the other hand in China or Korea, luckily or unluckily, there was the classical examination system for the government service, ‘Kakyo’. And the subjects for the ‘Kakyo’ examination were almost exclusively Chu Hsi philosophy, which painted the culture of learned men all in one color of this philosophy, with some rare exceptions. The “discussions in eventful society” didn’t developed there and therefore the various thoughts did not appeared, like as Jinsai school or Sorai School which prepared the components for the thoughts of the later generation. Or there was not any groping years by many learned men, preceding the Western impact. I think, it is these matters which distinguished Japan from these two countries.