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Modernity as Continuity: The Samurai and the Merchants in “Post-historical” Tokugawa Japan

Roman PAŞCA

Abstract:

In this article, I will briefly discuss the reinvention of the samurai and of the merchants, which began in the Tokugawa and then extended into the Meiji period; my assumption is that both samurai and merchants played a crucial part in the advent of modernity in Japan, and that the thoroughness of the process through which they were reinvented is accounted for by developments from pre-modern (“post-historical”) Japan.

Keywords: Japan, modernity, samurai, merchants, Tokugawa

1 . Japan as post-history

In an ironic footnote to Hegel, Alexandre Kojève (1980) defines Japan after 1945 as a post-historical realm, as a nostalgia-free society with values completely empty of all human content in the historical sense; these values, he claims, were lost in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Miraculously, Japan emerged intact out of the atomic ashes — out of dead, or empty life — as a nonhistorical being, a creature without a history. However, at the same time, this creature has great learning potential and strength, and is possessed of a sensitivity greater than any other country’s, in part because of its sense of difference and insecurity about its historical identity.

According to Akira Asada, Jean Baudrillard, Francis Fukuyama¹ and others, there can be identified three periods of ‘post-historicity’

(or, ‘end of history’) in Japanese history. The first period is the Tokugawa 徳川 era (1603–1868), especially after the 1630’s, when the Christian missionaries were banned out of Japan, thus marking the beginning of the *sakoku* 鎖国 (‘closed country’) policy, when contact with the outside world was officially banned and limited to trade with the Dutch at Dejima 出島, a small island outside Nagasaki. Thus, Japan was left (or, rather, she left herself) *outside* the general flow of world history and became a post–historical realm. The second period is August 1945, when the atomic bombs were dropped upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the devastating effects of nuclear power made the whole world realize that the end may be very near. This moment of post–historicity is relevant for the whole mankind. The third period is in the 1990’s, after the end of the ‘bubble economy’ period in Japan, when what happened in Japanese society became a clear indicator of the fact that consumer societies had reached a level of boredom and passiveness that prevents the occurrence of any dynamic historic event, as if history had come to a halt and nothing could jolt it back into motion.

But was Japan in the Tokugawa period indeed a ‘post–historical’ realm? Actually, I would argue that it depends on the perspective:

¹ Fukuyama theorizes the concept of ‘the end of history’ in his seminal book (1992) by picking up on Hegel and Kojève — as a matter of fact, he cites Kojève’s remark about Tokugawa Japan as a posthistorical territory. Fukuyama makes several specific references to Japan, not only to the Tokugawa era, but also to the period after World War Two.

In 1999, Akira Asada publishes *‘Rekishi no owari’ wo koete* (“Beyond the ‘end of history’”), a collection of dialogues with some of the most prominent intellectuals of the West — he also talks to Fukuyama, precisely about the ‘hot’ issue of the end of history in Japan. Asada is, in fact, the one who identifies the third instance of ‘end of history’ in Japan — the contemporary one.

Baudrillard, on the other hand, in his dialogues with Guillaume (2002), links the end of history with the so-called ‘archetypes’ that the West uses to interpret Japan. These archetypes include, for example, *snobbery* — the ability of the Japanese to develop and promote totally contentless art forms such as Nō theatre or tea ceremony, *perpetual alterity*, and the *deletion of borders between man-made and natural*.

for one looking at the map of the world on a ship set out to travel the seas — yes, Japan was outside the accessible realm; for one immersed in the map of Edo — no. Things were completely different, in the sense that many social, cultural and political developments were under way, that would prove to be crucial in the modernization of the country, to such an extent that one might even claim that modernization had already begun in 17th century Tokugawa Japan.

2 . The samurai reinvented

Reinhard Bendix (1999) claims that the ‘vocabulary of modern sociology’ may have originated in a few countries of North-West Europe, but it is utterly irrelevant outside the area in which modern technology and the modern processes of social and political change started. In that particular area of Europe, it was only natural that change should be seen as immanent and, at the same time, steady and permeating enough to influence all aspects of the social structure and of the cultural life. In Japan, however, when development started after 1868, the theoretical and social premises were different (Bendix 1999: 471): “Every industrial country retains features of its preindustrial society, and the forms of industrial societies are likely to differ widely depending on their earlier traditions.”

In other words, in Japan, the ‘symbiosis’ between tradition and modernity was destroyed, while political and social changes were brought about not by the gradual adaptation to the *terre-à-terre* frame of mind of technology, but by ‘conquest, military occupation, and partition’. In Japan, the move into modernity occurred through a sort of “aristocratic revolution” that went from top to bottom, which explains one of the main paradoxes of Japanese social life after the Meiji Restoration: the privileged position of the

aristocracy was in no way challenged by the shift in paradigm, and nor was the status of the samurai (officially, they did lose their privileges and were rather discontent with that, but in reality they had already become scholars and defenders of moral virtues rather than warriors). Again, the *sakoku* policy may have played a crucially important part in the absence of competing ideologies: since the country was secluded, there were almost no outside influences until 1868 — and if there were, their magnitude was completely negligible. The lack of ideological polarization, in its turn, caused resentment to never build up and become associated with any ideology whatsoever, which prevented the emergence of any large-scale social upheaval that would attempt to change things from the bottom up. Thus, the advent of modernity in Japan was not the result of a democratic movement that jolted the whole of society, but rather a smooth, downward, steady motion.

The samurai were unable (and, to certain extent, unwilling) to resist the mutation in their status and position within society for several reasons: first of all, they had all been removed from the land, which left them deprived of a feeling of belongingness which is essential in the crystallization of social unrest into a coherent project. Secondly, they had already gone through a process of relative demilitarization and increasing bureaucratization which had left them almost powerless and unable to organize in concerted resistance against anything, be it the pervasive influence of the shogunate and of the feudal lords during the Tokugawa period, or the swift industrialization and re-organization of society at the beginning of the Meiji era. Moreover, the removal from the land and a certain anti-rural bias had transformed the samurai into 'urban(ized)' individuals, more at home with the thrill of the city than with the rigours of war. As Bendix puts it (1999: 476):

In terms of their education, bearing, and ideas, the samurai certainly remained attached to their tradition of physical prowess and chivalric honor [...], but this was a militarism without war and above all it was an individualized military stance. [...] Thus Japan entered the modern world in 1868 under the leadership of a demilitarized aristocracy that was turning its attention to the promotion of education and economic enterprise as a necessary precondition of the country's eventual political and military renaissance [...].

In other words, in actuality, the ideal of the warrior (still associated with the samurai in some of the literature) had been gradually superseded by ideals of personal conduct more appropriate for a bureaucrat. In Tokugawa Japan, an 'ideology of merit' (= meritocracy) had developed — at least in principle — which stated that merit should be the criterion to govern appointment for an office. This ideology was very satisfactory for the samurai as it appeased their pride and aspirations. However, at the same time, it increased the already existing tensions between the feudal lords with their respective domains, and the shogunate in Edo. This meritocracy is the very reason why the samurai were capable to accept the shock — if there indeed was one — of the Meiji Restoration: they were now able to gain access to the highest positions, and that is precisely what happened. This is yet another instance in the modernization of Japan where traditional features embedded within society (i.e., the underscoring of status distinction and the preference given to merit) allow for modernity to move in very swiftly and thoroughly; in Japan, a 'rupture' view of modernity is almost impossible. There are, of course, other elements to support this proposition, and I will discuss them briefly in the following sections.

Another factor that facilitated the re-invention of the samurai as supporters and leaders of the new paradigm was the acute discrepancy between their high social rank (they occupied the first position in the official hierarchy of *shi-nō-kō-shō* 士農工商 in Tokuga-

wa Japan) and their lowly economic position. As a matter of fact, most of them could barely make ends meet and were highly dependent upon the money they received as loans, stipends or bribes from the wealthy merchants. This, along with their extremely low resistance to change — due mostly to the fact that they had been severed from the land — allowed them to be versatile and mobile. Another factor was the reality that most of them were highly educated: not only were they versed in the art of war, but they were also knowledgeable in Confucianist writings. Their (almost) aristocratic aversion to moneymaking, combined with the habits of frugality, made them dynamic and eager to act without much hope for a material reward. Moreover, the cult of action they had been inculcated with through the principles of *bushidō* 武士道 and the new ideology of aspiration derived from meritocracy actually transformed them in one of the most efficient vectors for the modernization of Japan. Their privileged status was abolished by the Meiji government through a series of reforms which instituted a system of conscription for a regular army — this move equalized society to a great extent and, at the same time, deprived the samurai of their exclusive right to bear a sword. However, far from being deterred by this, the samurai were very quick to adapt: they took the initiative and, during the first decade after the Meiji Restoration, they provided the majority of the key figures in the central government and in the local administration.

3 . The merchants reinvented

According to Marion J. Levy (1999: 432–434), the initial stage of modernity in Japan basically refers to a society in which no elements of modern industrial production are present and which is in fact self-sufficient to a high degree mainly because it is predomi-

nantly agrarian, with a clear-cut distinction between towns and villages. The vast majority of the people (including the samurai) were living close to the margin of subsistence, while the shogunate was constantly trying, by various means, to keep under control and minimize the possibilities for social change — thus, the governmental structure was a combination of highly centralized and highly decentralized elements. The Tokugawa shogunate was indeed one of the most tightly and effectively controlled feudal systems, and it worked in no mysterious ways: by emphasizing Confucian values such as loyalty and filial piety, the shogunate imposed the family system as one of the main repositories and guarantors of loyalty and, therefore, stability². This is precisely the reason why many of the administrative posts were determined hereditarily, and the same thing happened with samurai, merchants and artisans themselves. Merchants, for instance, would leave their business to their eldest son, and if they only had daughters, it was almost a sort of moral duty for them to find an heir through adoption³ — in this fashion, family life was closely connected with one's office or work, which made the idea of loyalty all the easier to enforce. Levy synthesizes the role of the family system as a vector of social control as follows (451):

[...] subjects of the Tokugawa both knew and, of their own will apparently, came to accept the tremendous emphasis placed on loyalty to the various positions in the feudal hierarchy. Every man's first duty was to his overlord. This obligation surpassed even the

² The emphasis placed by the Tokugawa shogunate on filial piety and on the family system eventually led to an emphasis on primogeniture as well, which, in time, led to the continued concentration of wealth in a single family line (as fortunes were usually not divided between several heirs), but also to the emergence of a whole new class of cadets, who — at least in theory — had a relatively higher degree of social mobility.

³ The commercial and financial conglomerates (*zaibatsu* 財閥) that appeared in Japan after the Meiji Restoration were actually based and functioned upon the same system of family values. Most of the first and biggest *zaibatsu* monopolies — Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Sumitomo, or Yasuda — in 19th century Japan actually developed directly out of Tokugawa merchant families.

In a class system that was theoretically completely closed, there was almost no mobility: no matter how rich and influential, a merchant could never become a member of the nobility. “He might become the power behind the throne of a daimyo, but he could not become one.” (Levy 455) Moreover, since merchants were not allowed to own land, their only hope for security remained their efforts to become more and more economically efficient and successful — in time, they became more and more cohesive and coherent as a group and, eventually, due to their steady accumulation of fortune, they became the sole *foci* of power apart from the Tokugawa themselves.

In Levy’s view, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 marks the beginning of a transitional period characterized by the intertwining of the old, traditional social order, with the introduction of new concepts and forces. Levy speaks of a ‘disintegration of the old order’ when referring to the premodern paradigm of Tokugawa times: as an example of such disintegration, she cites the ‘rise in actual power and importance’ of the merchants who were, economically, stronger than any of the other classes. She then claims that the merchants had grown to be a sort of middle class in their economic roles, because they were entrepreneurs, they traded, they offered financing for both production and consumption, they lent money and they finally created banks. Even though they were not very numerous, they came to play a quintessential role in culture as well, as they developed a theatre and a literature largely their own — the precursors of many of the forms of popular culture in contemporary Japan are to be found in Tokugawa developments associated with the culture of the *chōnin* in general, and with the merchants in

particular.

However, I propose that the rise in power of the merchants is not necessarily a sign of disintegration of the old order; many of the tenets of tradition were preserved and taken into modernity, but they became less conspicuous under the ceaseless avalanche of flashy new things imported from the West. The samurai, re-invented and disguised as bureaucrats, were the brains in Japan's entry into modernity, but the merchants were the muscle, as they carried the whole financial burden of such an enterprise. Things changed in the surface — dusty roads were replaced by railways, wood was supplanted by steel etc. — but the inner workings of society remained (almost) unchanged. The hugely powerful monopolies that formed after 1868 were still organized and run like a family, and they still relied on loyalty and other Confucian virtues in order to function — these values were simply pushed back on to a second, less visible plane. The 'disruption' is in fact nothing more than continuity.

Such gradual transformations in the very fabric of Tokugawa society — subtle yet thorough, slow yet pervasive transformations — actually prepared the ground for Japan's opening to the West. When Commodore Perry's ships arrived in 1853 and forced Japan to end the *sakoku* period, the Japanese were not unprepared for what followed; on the contrary, they understood very quickly the *enjeu* and the significance of this new challenge. The country had not been a Sleeping Beauty waken from her slumber by a prince, it had not been dormant within its boundaries. Paradoxically, the *sakoku* policy had created an environment which was more than fertile and prepared for modernity. As Levy puts it (460–461):

The Japanese feat came as close to being one of lifting oneself by one's bootstraps as the modern world has ever seen. They started close to bankruptcy, used almost no foreign

capital, established uneconomic heavy industries, organized and maintained a modern military and naval establishment, changed their governmental system radically, altered their system of production and consumption of goods and services to one in which modern industry was strategic, erected and conducted many highly profitable modern enterprises, made literacy of a sort virtually universal, and taught their people to operate effectively in terms of types of relationships that had been relatively unimportant and unknown in the Tokugawa period. They did it all with virtually no internal bloodshed or disintegration of major proportions, and they were very far along with the job in no more than five decades.

During this amazing feat, the merchants, who were, in a sense, 'liberated' by the new government, were allowed to do what they were already accustomed to do, but without restrictions, and this is where their power of influence eventually came from. They, along with the samurai, were among the 'happy few' whose traditional social roles and positions within society made adaptation to strategic roles in the new paradigm relatively easy. Even though the structure of Japanese society was changed radically — at least in the surface — there were some things/phenomena/social categories that remained virtually unchanged in the new context.

4 . Modernity as a Japanese model

My conclusion would be that, in Japan, modernity should not be viewed or perceived as a threatening entity involved in a life-or-death clash with tradition; on the contrary, the dynamic blending between the traditional and the modern is extremely telling with respect to the way in which modernity as a coherent project evolved within a different frame of mind. Japan had an (almost) unbroken tradition of the Emperor as the single source of legitimacy and figure of authority — with the restoration, the Meiji emperor became at the same time the keeper of tradition and the token and promoter of modernity. The lack of religious consciousness, or rather, the high degree of religious syncretism that

characterized (and still does) the Japanese way of thinking, accounts for the lack of ideological exaggerations, doctrinal disputes and desperate confrontations. The oligarchic rule of the ex-samurai newly re-invented as bureaucrats was undisputed because it derived its legitimacy and strength from the Confucian legacy of the Tokugawa system; loyalty was not dismissed, but redirected from the shogun to the emperor and, by extension, to everything that the emperor upheld, including abstract ideas such as modernity. As a consequence, the authority of the emperor was further strengthened, and the imperial government became the guarantor of order. Moreover, the advent of modernity was a rather smooth change because Japan had the opportunity of *brûler les étapes*, as it borrowed from the industrially more advanced countries a technology that was both ready-made and up-to-date for that time, thus skipping the whole process of trial and error that had led to the creation of those technologies. Last but not least, Japan also had the chance to witness 'the importance of political initiative in attempts to promote economic change and to cope with the intensified divisions of the population' (Bendix 1999).

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