

5-26-2015

A Comparative Analysis of the Civilizations of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Sun Yat-sen

Matthew Jones

Pepperdine University, mjones@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Japanese Studies Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Matthew (2015) "A Comparative Analysis of the Civilizations of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Sun Yat-sen," *Global Tides*: Vol. 9, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol9/iss1/2>

This Humanities is brought to you for free and open access by the Seaver College at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Tides by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Fukuzawa Yukichi and Sun Yat-sen were two pivotal Asian political philosophers who wrote during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period when mounting pressures from the Western civilizations threatened to collapse their respective countries: Japan and China. In response to these pressures, both Fukuzawa and Sun proposed their ideal models of civilization to provide a course that would ensure the future of their nations and avoid succumbing to the colonization efforts of the Western hemisphere. Both courses towards an enlightened civilization conclude that in order to mount a substantive defense against the imperialism of the Western nations, their countries would have to develop a strong sense of nationalism, democracy, and industry. While both men draw from Western and Eastern traditions, they develop different conclusions concerning the course of civilization. Fukuzawa's understanding is based on the premise that the progress of man is due to improvements in social conditioning while Sun's foundational premise is seated in Darwin's theory of evolution and attributes the progress of man to the forces of nature and survival of the fittest. Because of their different perspectives, the trajectories of Fukuzawa's and Sun's ideal civilizations follow different arcs. Throughout the course of this essay I will analyze the components of democracy, livelihood, and nationalism that make up Fukuzawa Yukichi's and Sun Yat-sen's models of civilization, and contrast how their differing views regarding the role of social and natural forces affected their conclusions.

Fukuzawa had an innate perception for the "Trend of the Times"¹ in Meiji Japan, and strategically addressed issues in accordance with these trends to amplify his writings. This ability can be likened to how a grandmaster chess player understands the flow of the chess game. An amateur player must think through the process of events and determine the best move by running through pre-practiced algorithms. The grandmaster, however, reads the game and understands its

¹ Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An outline of a theory of civilization*, trans. David A. Dilworth and G. Cameron Hurst III (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 69.

ebb and flow; he has a complete understanding of the pieces and can predict the outcome of a game far before most people are even aware an imbalance of power has ever taken place. This ability to predict the trend, or spirit of the times, is what sets Fukuzawa's writings apart from the other political philosophers of Meiji Japan. Additionally, Fukuzawa's life was perfectly positioned at the cusp between feudal and westernized Japan which has a profound impact on his philosophy of government and civilization. Had he grown up during any period before the transitional Meiji period, he would have been confined to a life of discontent. However, just as he truly began to feel the pressures of the restrictive Neo-Confucian system, he was released into the world to travel and expand his understanding of Western civilization.

Sun Yat-sen was primarily a revolutionary and politician; his theories of civilization contain less theoretical ambiguity than Fukuzawa's because they were designed around the single intention of stirring up the masses and uprooting the Manchu dynasty. Sun Yat-sen's ideology employed devices of propaganda to increase their palatability in order to take root in the minds of the Chinese people.² The greatest of his propaganda was his *San min zhu yi*, or Three Principles of the People, which discusses nationalism, democracy, and livelihood (communism). The foundation of these three principles is seated in the evolution of man. For Sun, these three principles formed the essence of a civilized nation, and he had faith in their ability to guide China towards her salvation from imperialism and restore her glory as the center of civilization.

Fukuzawa's most comprehensive work is *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, and is centered on the principle that "Civilization ultimately means the progress of man's knowledge

² Sun Yat-sen, *San min zhu yi: The three principles of the people*, trans. Frank W. Price, ed. L. T. Chen, (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1928), 4.

and virtue.”³ Although few in words, this statement forms the seed of his entire philosophy, and as from the simple seed grows the composite flower, so can from this statement be drawn the bulk of the content of his work. The “pursuit of knowledge and virtue” is centered on the social forces that shape humanity. Improvements to these socializing forces give birth to four tangible results whose progress in a nation can be easily observed. The four results that stem from the pursuit of knowledge and virtue are the concept of the individual and freedom, the equality of rights, a higher standard of living, and an identity that drives community.⁴ All four results must remain in a constant state of progress to constitute an advanced civilization. In other words, even if a country has a relatively advanced understanding of knowledge and virtue, if it is stagnant in furthering that understanding, it cannot be said to be a civilized country.

To contrast Fukuzawa’s civilization with Sun’s, I will compare Fukuzawa’s four principles of civilization with Sun Yat-sen’s three principles. The organization of my comparison will be the following: Fukuzawa’s concept of the individual and freedom and equality of rights with Sun’s democracy; Fukuzawa’s higher standard of living with Sun’s livelihood; and Fukuzawa’s identity that drives community with Sun’s nationalism.

Democracy

Fukuzawa’s direct experience under the Neo-Confucian system of Tokugawa Japan is what drove his argument for a more liberal political atmosphere. The caste system predetermined the course of life for its citizens and bequeathed power and responsibility to those of proper lineage rather than to the meritorious. For Fukuzawa, this practice was anathema — not only did it restrict the freedom of the individual, but it stunted economic and academic growth. Universal freedom and equality of rights were entirely incompatible with this old system. Fukuzawa sensed

³ Fukuzawa, *An outline of a theory of civilization*, 48.

⁴ *Ibid.* 46-48.

the waning influence of the Tokugawa regime and responded by unleashing a salvo of propositions designed to undermine the legacy of feudal Japan. His ideal model for individual liberty followed John Stuart Mill's theory of limited freedom: that people be allowed uninhibited freedom so long as they do not infringe upon the rights or freedoms of another.⁵ Under this system, the interstitial space between bodies would be left to the government, but the space inhabited by persons could be considered sovereign to the individual.

According to Sun, China already possessed an excess of Fukuzawa's ideal atmosphere of individuality. He states that the reason for this is that China did not have the same history of feudal oppression as Japan and Europe. As long as the individual was not seeking to overthrow the emperor, the two spheres remained relatively uninvolved with each other. However, in the Japanese and European feudal systems, the constrictions of social immobility were drastically more apparent to the people of the lower classes, leading to the near-religious emphasis on the word "liberty." Sun described China as a loose sheet of sand in need of cement. Because of the surplus of individual liberty in China, the word itself does not carry the same motivating power as it does in the West, resulting in a lack of identity within the Chinese population.⁶ Sun attributes this lack of identity as the chief cause for China's "hypocolony" status: She is "the colony of all nations and the slave of all,"⁷ easily manipulated and pitted against herself by the colonizers.

Fukuzawa's advocacy for the equality of rights between men—and to a certain degree he also extended this to include women⁸—evolved from his personal beliefs about human nature and his practical observations of the Japanese people. Fukuzawa held a very idealistic view of

⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An encouragement of learning*, trans. David A. Dilworth, (<http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=1574733>, 2012), 5.

⁶ Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 204-205, 210.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸ Fukuzawa, *An encouragement of learning*, 95.

human nature and frequently cited a far-off future in which civilization, through its state of constant progression, would reach perfection and men would no longer sin against other men. He held the belief that man's continuing existence today is ample evidence that man is disproportionately inclined to do good, or else man would have brought about his own extinction long ago. Fukuzawa further stated that the origin of man's good is internal and cannot be largely affected by the efforts of others to shape it.⁹ Because of this problem, Fukuzawa castigated the moral hierarchy of feudal Japan that placed the greatest claim to moral superiority in the hands of the upper-class elites¹⁰ and decried the notion that benevolent rulers should be praised for simply fulfilling their duties of governance. Fukuzawa observed that the moral hierarchy of Japan led to an imbalance of power and rights between the people and those who ruled over them and that this imbalance, which permeated every level of social interaction, was the reason the Japanese naturally develop an inferiority complex in the presence of social superiors and a superiority complex in the presence of social inferiors.¹¹ Fukuzawa's solution to remedy this infirmed mentality was to abolish the psychological remnant of the Neo-Confucian caste system that vertically stratified Japan and to instill a sense of individuality to dissolve the coagulated relationships between clans that had extended along the horizontal plane of society, thereby curtailing all lord-subject, superior-inferior relationships and establishing an atmosphere of universal equality.

⁹ Fukuzawa, *An outline of a theory of civilization*, 121

¹⁰ Fukuzawa, *An encouragement of learning*, 82-83; *An outline of a theory of civilization*, 185.

¹¹ Fukuzawa, *An outline of a theory of civilization*, 177, 202-203. The structure of the Japanese language also probably served to further embed this mentality into the Japanese people. Spoken Japanese is heavily affected by the social status of one's company, for any given verb there can be easily six to nine different conjugations that denote the relationship in status between the speaker and listener. Usually the more indirect one's speech is the more formal it sounds. Indirect address is so characteristically Japanese that when the causative form of a verb is used by itself, it is impossible to distinguish whether it means "to force" one to do something, or "to allow" them to. I believe that this mentality was deeply culpable for propagating the lack of guilt found in the Japanese soldiers during WWII. Because of the degree of indirection, personal blame can be so far removed from the context that it becomes possible to pass the guilt onto someone else entirely. Thus the blame passes down the moral ladder of subservience to the next socially inferior man until it falls onto the one who was victim of the very treachery for which he is now being blamed.

Sun refers to the evolutionary progress of man as the origin for democracy. He breaks the history of man into four periods: The struggle between man and beast; the struggle between man and Nature; the struggle between faction's (man verse man, state verse state, and race verse race); and finally the struggle between men and their governments. Sun felt the world had just emerged from the rubble of autocracy into this new age: the age of democracy.¹² Sun is very critical of the Western precedents of democracy due to their relatively short-lived existences. He holds different foundational claims about the nature of the people to be governed and their relationship with the state. For example, Sun refutes the theory of natural human rights and Rousseau's social contract theory because, following his study of the evolution of man, nowhere can it be found that rights are endowed by Nature. Instead, they are seized only through social movements and events (products of socialization cannot be trusted as fact).¹³ Hobbes' theory about the equality of men is scrapped for the simple reason that Nature does indeed create men of superior and inferior faculties of mind, and that, in being different, they cannot be deemed equals.¹⁴ Sun proposes that the former should govern the latter in a condition of political equality¹⁵ on the basis that, because the superior men are the holders of ability, the inferior men should trust them with their sovereignty to administrate the functions of government for the benefit of the people.¹⁶ The ministers of government, however, while given authority to exercise their abilities, are subject to the control of the people they govern. In this way, Sun's system is a social contract, but one rooted in man's inherent inequality rather than his equality. Sun likens this contract to the relationship between the engineer, the foreman, and the carpenter. Each man

¹² Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 164-166.

¹³ Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 174,178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 314. How Sun can believe that this system would not soon degenerate into the superior man's oppression of the inferior man I have no idea. It seems very logical that the superior man will be in a position to naturally engender class stratification.

is essential for the completion of whatever project is being constructed, but they depend upon the guidance of those who oversee them. The engineer in his deeper understanding of the principles of mathematics and mechanics oversees the foreman, the foreman then, with his greater experience of economy and supervision oversees the carpenter, and the carpenter, with his experienced understanding of practice builds the vision of the engineer.¹⁷

Livelihood

Of the four measurable results of the pursuit of civilization, Fukuzawa was least concerned with directly increasing the standard of living in Japan, and most concerned with the concepts of individual freedom and equal rights. This is a stark contrast to Sun Yat-sen, whose chief concern was the standard of living in China, and who believed that China had an overdeveloped sense of individual liberty that was in need of a reduction. Fukuzawa was not concerned with increasing Japan's standard of living for two reasons. First, by addressing his chief concerns of individual liberty and equal rights, he intended to relegate the issue of the Japanese standard of living to the power of the people. In other words, he recognized that a positive externality of increased individual freedom and equality is a higher standard of living; the latter will result from the pursuit of the former. The second reason was that he did not find poverty to be dangerous to political stability.¹⁸ The opening to Fukuzawa's *An Encouragement of Learning* supports this statement.¹⁹ Because he knew what the Japanese people desired, his natural sense of the trend of the times led him to emphasize the other categories over

¹⁷ Ibid., 298-299.

¹⁸ "Therefore I say that, in themselves, wealth and high station are not the objects of anger, nor are poverty and low station necessary cases of discontent." Fukuzawa, *An encouragement of learning*, 95.

¹⁹ "Heaven, it is said, does not create one person above or below another. This signifies that when we are born from Heaven we all are equal and there is no innate distinction between high and low. It means that we humans, who are the highest of all creation, can use the myriad things of the world to satisfy our daily needs through the labors of our own bodies and minds and, as long as we do not infringe upon the rights of others, may pass our days in happiness freely and independently." Ibid., 3.

improvements to the standard of living in Japan. In a similar fashion Sun Yat-sen addressed the issue to which the Chinese would be most receptive: poverty.²⁰

Sun was perturbed that while the population of China was the greatest in number in the world, her productive capacity ranked among the least. To Sun, this abhorrent waste of potential was the single most detrimental factor to the prospect of independence for China. Sun, however hoped the Tocquevillian foundation of relatively universal poverty would form an excellent base for socialism.²¹ Sun used the term Livelihood in place of socialism to avoid arguments between the different schools interpretations regarding the word “socialism.” Sun’s intention was to disassociate his form of communism from Marx’s theory of materialism. Marx believed materialism was the central driving force of society, but Sun believed Livelihood rather than materialism drove society. Livelihood encapsulates the supreme desire of man to ensure his own survival and originates from the word Maurice Williams used in his *Social Interpretation of History*: “subsistence.” According to Williams, social rather than material forces form the key driving force behind society.²² Sun promoted communism as the economic policy of China but stressed this substitution as the difference between his communism of the future and Marx’s communism of the present.²³ Sun desired economic equality for all Chinese despite their natural inequalities and encouraged a strong government infrastructure to provide sustenance for the people.²⁴ The infrastructure he wanted the government to control consists of communication, transportation, industry, and taxation.²⁵ With these sectors out of the hands of possible capitalist

²⁰ Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 417.

²² *Ibid.*, 383.

²³ *Ibid.*, 429, 434.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 430-431.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 385, 438. Sun, Yat-sen, *10 letters of Sun Yat-sen, 1914-1916* (Stanford Univ.: Stanford University Libraries, 1942), 5.

ventures, the economic equality of China would remain relatively stable and protected from extreme fluctuations in the value of commodities, privatization, and class-based disparity.

Nationalism

Fukuzawa saw that, after Japanese society is successfully disseminated to individuals and the social status of all men are equalized, it would be necessary to create a national identity to serve as the adhesive bond to solidify the nation. This nationalism, however, can only be achieved after individual liberty and equal rights lay the foundation. He writes, “In a nutshell, national independence must follow from personal independence.”²⁶ If it does not, the nation’s independence will be like a poor forgery hanging among a display of renowned works: from a distance, the forgery may escape suspicion, as superficially it displays all the qualities of the other masterpieces, exploiting the facets of depth, color, and technique. Yet, under even the lightest scrutiny, the piece’s masquerade will be discovered and the supposed value will collapse immediately. Without personal independence, a citizen of a nation has no incentive to concern himself with the matters of national independence because there will be no relatable basis to give cause for his concern.²⁷ If there is no sense of patriotism, it will be impossible to export a culture or send representatives of the nation,²⁸ and finally, if there is no sense of personal responsibility to the nation, there will be no suitable government to rule the people but one steeped in despotism.²⁹ Without individual liberty to serve as the building block for the nation, the country will not only be built on a foundation of sand but it will be built out of sand. Even a mighty castle, if constructed with sand, can hardly defend itself from a child. Fukuzawa hoped the accomplishments wrought from capitalism would serve as symbols of the success of the national

²⁶ Fukuzawa, *An encouragement of learning*, 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

spirit, and in turn, the increase in national spirit would preclude capitalism from becoming the scepter of the elite.³⁰

Sun's principle of nationalism is "the doctrine of the state." Nationalism is based on the "Way of Right" as opposed to the "Way of Might."³¹ The way of right develops nationality and race through the influence of natural forces, while the way of might is driven by the military and establishes the geopolitical boundaries of a country. The five bonds that Sun says develop naturally over the course of time and cement the nation are blood kinship, common language, common livelihood, common religion, and common customs.³² These five elements are important because they can be equally applied to the family unit as they can to the nation. Family and nation together are an important theme of Sun's nationalism because of the process to achieve nationalism that he envisioned. "The Chinese people have shown the greatest loyalty to family and clan with the result that in China there have been family-ism and clan-ism, but no real nationalism."³³ Sun held the hopeful prospect that, rather than dissolving the family-ism and clan-ism of China to create nationalism from a base of individuals, it would be possible to expand and amalgamate the two 'isms' until they completely encompassed China. The result would be national identity with the solidarity of a family unit.³⁴ The fulfillment of this dream is the true optimization of the Confucian saying, "Cultivate one's moral character, then regulate the family, rule the state, and create a prosperous and peaceful country." Sun argued that China's nationalism was only lying dormant, and that it was fully manifest during her prior glory before the infiltration of Western imperialism. Once reawakened, though, Sun thought the only way to

³⁰ While the rapid implementation of the railroad system in Japan exemplified this hope, the supposed safety net of the capitalism-nationalism relationship was quickly undermined by the Zaibatsu conglomerates.

³¹ Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114-115, 125.

maintain its impetus would be to cultivate the moral character of the Chinese.³⁵ Sun's vehicle for moral character would be the studies of Confucius revitalized through the spirit of Western inquiry.³⁶

Conclusion

The foundational differences between Fukuzawa's and Sun's theories of civilization greatly affected their implementation in practice. Because Sun's theories were based on the tradition of Darwinism and natural selection, his implementation relied heavily on infrastructure to dissuade men from their natural tendencies to exploit other men. Fukuzawa, however, placed a great deal of faith in the efficacy of social conditioning. As a result, education became his primary bearing for success. An example of these differences can be seen in the different ways Fukuzawa and Sun advocated improving the technology in their respective countries. Fukuzawa focused on the momentum that drives sustainability: "Only when there are many professors and many merchants, when laws are in order and trade prospers, when social conditions are ripe—when, that is, you have all the prerequisites for a thousand warships—only then can there be a thousand warships."³⁷ Whereas Sun instead attempted to slingshot China immediately into the modern world:

"If China wants to learn the strong points of the West, she should not start with coal power but with electricity ... This way of learning may be compared to what military men call a frontal attack, 'intercepting and striking at the advance force,' If we can learn

³⁵ Ibid., 124.

³⁶ The concept of extending high moral character to state-to-state interactions was at the time of this writing, very progressive, perhaps too much so. Today though, we call this soft power. It is very interesting that Sun equated the longevity of a state to how it maintains its moral character; only recently has soft power politics been gaining momentum in International Relations theory, but in the case of the US political influence following the invasion of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan, there is truth in Sun's words.

³⁷ Fukuzawa, *An outline of a theory of civilization*, 253.

from the advance guard, within ten years we may not be ahead of other nations, but we will be keeping step with them.”³⁸

With regards to government infrastructure, Fukuzawa’s policy appears to be the more idealistic of the two, and Fukuzawa’s methods have historically been more steadfast than Sun’s. While the differences in culture and geography between Japan and China play heavily into this outcome, the difference between positive incentives and negative prohibitions is important to note.

Fukuzawa understood capitalism’s constant drive towards expansion and efficiency, while Sun focused only on the avarice to which it can lead. Fukuzawa focused on the social conditioning of the Japanese to instill values of community and nationalism to guide capitalism to the benefit of the nation, whereas Sun structured his communism and political equality to suppress capitalism and prevent the stratification of China. The result was that Japan’s economy and technology naturally grew stronger and less dependent on foreign products, while China, attempting to implement a comprehensive panacea by importing foreign capital, quickly overextended itself.

³⁸ Sun, *San min zhu yi*, 144-145.

Works Cited

Fukuzawa, Yukichi. 2009. *An outline of a theory of civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fukuzawa, Yukichi, David A. Dilworth, and Shunsaku Nishikawa. 2012. *An encouragement of learning*. <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=1574733>.

Sun, Yat-sen. 1942. *10 letters of Sun Yat-sen, 1914-1916*. Stanford University, Calif: Stanford University Libraries.

Sun, Yat-sen, Frank W. Price, and L. T. Chen. 1928. *San min zhu yi = The three principles of the people*. Shanghai, China: Commercial Press.