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Travels and Comparisons

As he reached the age of fourteen or fifteen Fukuzawa grew increasingly frustrated in the provincial atmosphere of Nakatsu. ‘Outwardly I was living peacefully enough, but always in my heart I was praying for an opportunity to get away. And I was willing to go anywhere and to go through any hardship if only I could leave this uncomfortable Nakatsu. Happily, a chance sent me to Nagasaki.’¹ He wrote that a particular event confirmed him in his decision to leave. Fukuzawa’s brother had written a letter to the clan’s chief minister for which he was reprimanded because it was not properly addressed. ‘Seeing this I cried to myself, “how foolish it is to stay here and submit to this arrogance!” And I was determined then to run away from this narrow cooped-up Nakatsu.’²

Fukuzawa’s chance to escape was one of the many effects of the first shock of the imminent revolution in Japan. In 1854 Commodore Perry had appeared with the American warships off the coast of Japan and this ‘had made its impression on every remote town in Japan’.³ Thus ‘the problem of national defense and the modern gunnery had become the foremost interest of all the samurai’.⁴ In order to study western gunnery one had to be able to read Dutch, so Fukuzawa volunteered to do that and, in 1854, at the age of nineteen was taken to Nagasaki to learn Dutch and gunnery. ‘The true reason why I went there was nothing more than to get away from Nakatsu... This was a happy day for me. I turned at the end of the town’s street, spat on the ground, and walked quickly away.’⁵

He set himself hard to work. ‘My chief concern was, after all, the Dutch language. I often went to the interpreter’s house, and sometimes to the house of the special physicians who practiced
“Dutch medicine”. And little by little, after fifty or a hundred days, I came to understand something of the Dutch language. Because of jealousies within the clan, it became difficult to stay in Nagasaki and the following February (1855) he left and ended up a month later as a student at the school of Koan Ogata in Osaka. Ogata was one of the foremost experts on the Dutch learning in Japan.

Fukuzawa gives a delightful and lengthy account of his life as a student with Ogata. Like many of his young contemporaries he became fascinated with western science and technology. For instance, he describes how

Of course at that time there were no examples of industrial machinery. A steam engine could not be seen anywhere in the whole of Japan. Nor was there any kind of apparatus for chemical experiments. However, learning something of the theories of chemistry and machinery in our books, we of the Ogata household [school] spent much effort in trying out what we had learned, or trying to make a thing that was illustrated in the books.

Learning about the new science was not easy. For instance, there was no good work on electricity. ‘All that we knew about electricity then had been gleaned from fragmentary mention of it in the Dutch readers.’ One day Ogata returned with a Dutch volume borrowed from his clan lord. ‘I took in the book with devouring eyes . . . here in this new book from Europe was a full explanation based on the recent discoveries of the great English physicist, Faraday, even with the diagram of an electric cell. My heart was carried away with it at first sight.’ He and his fellow students proceeded to work day and night to copy out the whole long chapter on electricity before returning it. ‘This event quite changed the whole approach to the subject of electricity in the Ogata household. I do not hesitate to say that my fellow students became the best informed men on the new science in the entire country.’

Fukuzawa learnt the basics of western chemistry and physics during the years 1856–60. This partly explains his increasing dislike of Chinese Knowledge. ‘The only subject that bore our constant attack was Chinese medicine. And by hating Chinese medicine so thoroughly, we came to dislike everything that had any connection with Chinese culture. Our general opinion was that we should rid our country of the influences of the Chinese altogether.’ He came, as he explained later, to see Chinese misinformation as a