The Making of a New Japan

For five years after his return from his travels, Fukuzawa mainly worked as a teacher and translator in Edo. This was a time of growing tension and threat to the old order. For instance, on one occasion he moved out of the city fearing a British attack. Because of anti-western sentiments, he avoided certain contacts. But his family grew and he settled into writing. In 1866 he published the first volume of *Seiyo Jiyo, Things Western*, which sold, in the end, over a quarter of a million copies. He was made a retainer of the Shogun and continued to work as a teacher. Then in January 1867 he went on his third and last overseas expedition, again to America, and returned six months later. Although he comments less on what he learnt from direct observation, he came back with other treasures.

On my second journey to America, I had received a much larger allowance than on the previous one. With all my expenses being paid by the government, I was able to purchase a good number of books. I bought many dictionaries of different kinds, texts in geography, history, law, economics, mathematics, and every sort I could secure. They were for the most part the first copies to be brought to Japan, and now with this large library I was able to let each of my students use the originals to study. This was certainly an unheard-of convenience – that all students could have the actual books instead of manuscript copies for their use.¹

This set the trend, he wrote, for the use of American books in Japan over the next ten years.

His innovation here was supplemented by others. In particular he introduced the concept of tuition fees from students, which he
had no doubt seen in the West, and this helped him to set up a
school, which, when it moved to a new site in April 1868, was the
foundation of the first Japanese university, Keio. He continued his
teaching and lecturing as the fate of Japan was decided around
him, for in 1868 the Tokugawa Shogunate, which had lasted for
two and a half centuries, was overthrown by the revived Imperial
power, and the Meiji Restoration was effected through a series of
pitched battles.

The Emperor partly won because of superior weaponry, and here
again Fukuzawa recognized an opportunity. He obtained a copy of
a foreign work on rifles which he hoped to translate, but wondered
‘Was I not too brazen to think of translating a book on rifles with-
out knowing anything of it? ’2 So with the aid of the book he
dismantled and put together a gun, and ‘with this experience, I
gained much understanding of the rifle and at once took up the
translation of the book and published it.’ It came out in 1866 and
sold many thousands of copies and he later learnt that his transla-
tion had helped one of the greatest of Japanese generals, General
Murata, who was later to become a world expert on ordnance.

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The restoration of the Meiji Emperor in 1868 did not, at first sight,
look likely to change Japan or Fukuzawa’s life very much. The
Emperor’s supporters had been, if anything, more xenophobic and
traditionalist than those of the Shogun. As far as Fukuzawa could
see at first, the new government looked like ‘a collection of fools
from the various clans got together to form another archaic anti-
foreign government which would probably drive the country to
ruin through its blunders’. 3 Yet there was a swift change and he
and others discovered that they were in fact ‘a collection of ener-
getic, ambitious young men prepared to build up a new Japan on
thoroughly western lines . . . ’4 Fukuzawa and his friends began to
feel ‘as though they were seeing enacted on the stage a play which
they themselves had written’. 5 There was now scope for new work
and for the widespread dissemination of the old.

There was also a chance to break finally with his clan. For a
while in the 1860s Fukuzawa remained, officially, a member of his
clan and drew a stipend and obeyed certain orders. His relations
with the clan became more strained over time and he started to
question the political views of some of his elders.