

Master's Thesis

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SHAPING MODERN JAPAN THROUGH KANGAKU:
THE CASE OF NISHI AMANE

Introduction

Kangaku, or Chinese learning, was the cornerstone of literature, education, and intellectual thinking in Japan for over a thousand years, even up to the end of the 19th century. In just a few decades after Japan opened to the West, however, it had receded into the background as a discipline that was considered old-fashioned and archaic (although it experienced a few revivals). What role, if any, did it play in the modernization of Japan? Was *kangaku* merely an obstacle to modernization, or perhaps an incidental condition of the times? Many scholars have passed it over in their studies of modern Japan. I believe, however, that if we are to truly understand the transformation Japan underwent in the late 19th century, we must examine the ways in which the Meiji Period was heavily colored by Chinese modes of thought. The purpose of this paper is to show how *kangaku*—especially as a contributor to the Japanese language—provided an intellectual framework for absorbing the alien ideas of the West while preserving and consolidating Japan’s cultural identity.

We are familiar with the fact that the Meiji Period was a time of massive integration, in which Japan not only incorporated foreign customs (such as eating beef) but also scientific concepts, political institutions, and technology over a short period of time. The West—the source of these ideas—had few commonalities with Japan in terms

of language, customs, or religion. China, on the other hand, had had significant intellectual and cultural exchange with Japan throughout its 250 years of supposed isolation. The *sakoku* of the Tokugawa Period, as scholars like Marius Janson have indicated, was mainly directed towards the West and intended to block out the disruptive effects of Christianity¹. Fukuzawa Yukichi compared this great wave of ideas to the importation of Chinese institutions in the sixth century AD, in which Japan appropriated foreign writing systems, religion and political structures². But the Meiji transformation of Japan was likely on an even greater scale for two reasons. One was that the country had to incorporate radical ideas of science and modernity (which had developed in Europe over 200 years) in the span of decades. The other was that this modernity was linked to a culture (and to the Japanese, the West appeared to be “one” culture) that they had had minimal contact with for hundreds of years. In this respect we should examine the psychological effects of incorporating radically foreign concepts, and see what tools facilitated this transition.

It was altogether possible that ordinary Japanese may have shunned, ignored or rebelled against this great wave of ideas and institutions—as much of Qing China did upon early contact with the West. Yet somehow the new nation managed to adopt modern ideas while still forging a strong sense of distinct nationhood that exists to this day. How did they do it? Often, the age of *bunmei kaika*, or “Civilization and Enlightenment” of Japan is portrayed as an enthusiastic, unadulterated appropriation of

¹ See the chapter “Foreign Relations” from Jansen, Marius, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000)

² Dilworth, David and Rimer, J.Thomas, *The Historical Fiction of Mori Ogai*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), p.12

all things Western and new. But such a simple understanding blinds us to the elements that helped keep Japan's cultural identity. Cultural sovereignty is just as important as political sovereignty in fashioning a modern nation, and in this respect we must ask what sub-surface constructs protected this sovereignty. In this paper, I will argue that *kangaku*, or traditional Chinese learning, was in fact the essential tool in helping Japan interpret and adopt Western ideas while helping to retain its cultural integrity.

First I will focus on the pragmatic solutions that *kangaku* provided as a traditional discipline. I will examine how Chinese writing or *kanji* enabled effective translation of Western terms that became essential building blocks of modernity. In order to demonstrate the utility and importance of *kangaku* during this period, I will take the case of Nishi Amane (1829 - 1897)—an avid promoter of Western ideas—and his interpretations of the European idea of aesthetics. His manipulation of Chinese concepts in order to interpret Western ideas demonstrates not only the utility of *kangaku* but also the psychological role of intellectual “prism” that it provided. I will try to show that, although *kangaku* waned as a discipline after the mid-Meiji, it still holds significance in modern Japan to this day because of its inextricable linkage to the Japanese language and intellectual tradition, and therefore to its institutions.

What is Kangaku?

Kangaku (or literally “Chinese learning”) is the broadly defined discipline concerned with learning and texts derived from China. It differs from 20th century *shinagaku*, or Sinology, which examined China from an empirical, Eurocentric perspective. (This transformation from a discipline *derived* from China to an exterior gaze examining

China can be observed in the way departments at universities were reorganized during the Meiji Period.³) In traditional *kangaku*, China was considered the primary and sometimes exclusive source of learning. Texts were often written in *kanbun*, a system of writing solely employing Chinese characters (often with notations to indicate word order or inflections and particles). They comprised the teachings of Confucius, histories of China, Chinese poetry, and other ancient texts. *Kangaku* is often defined in contrast to *kokugaku* (nativist learning) and *yogaku* (Western learning). Yet when addressing these various disciplines we must be aware of two things: one is the overwhelming dominance of *kangaku* as the standard mode of learning up to and during the Tokugawa Period, and the other is the dependence of other disciplines (like *kokugaku*) on *kangaku* as the foundation for studies in literature, history, philosophy and even medicine.

China began to have a great impact on Japanese culture, religion, and writing systems beginning around the sixth century (partly due to the importation of Buddhism), and this intensified with the preeminence of Tang China in the seventh and eighth centuries. Around the same time, a Chinese system of law known as *ritsuryo* was established in Japan. In 660, China conquered the Korean kingdom of Paekche, and a flood of refugees educated in Chinese learning arrived in Japan⁴. During the Nara Period (710-794), numerous embassy missions were sent to the continent to actively learn more about Chinese culture. *Kangaku* became especially important for government officials,

³ In his lecture “Shinagaku no Tanjo,” (Columbia University, September 23, 2011) Saito Mareshi described the process wherein *kangaku* as a broad discipline was divided into various units of *shinagaku* at the literature departments at Tokyo University and Kyoto University.

⁴ Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.86

who studied the Chinese classics in preparation for serving the Emperor⁵. Confucianism, and by extension *kangaku*, was strongly linked to Japan's political system because it was primarily concerned with social stability in the real world instead of the afterlife or other metaphysical concerns. One thousand years later, the Meiji Period rulers and thinkers would also look to Confucianism to inform their policies and ideas.

Chinese characters, or *kanji*, provided the basis for Japan's writing system (in a country where there had been no written language before). Instead of drastically altering the language through direct importation of Chinese words, however, the Japanese initially utilized the *kanji* to represent Japanese words or sounds. A particular kind of script called *manyogana* (used in Japan's most famous collection of poems, the *Manyoshu*, c.759) utilized *kanji* in a completely phonetic sense, detaching the characters from their original meaning in order to formulate Japanese text. This later developed into *hiragana* during the Heian Period, where journals and literature like the *Tale of Genji* were written in a cursive, phonetic script. But *kanji*-based script like *kanbun* (Japanese written in Chinese word order) remained the primary mode of writing. Through most of the thousand years extending from the sixth century to the Tokugawa Period, Chinese characters were the primary script for court nobles and warriors, and the main method of writing official documents and public records⁶.

Kangaku took on many forms during much of Japan's history, but for the purposes of this paper I would like to focus on its relevance during the time period

⁵ Smith, Warren, *Confucianism in Modern Japan*, (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1973), p.7

⁶ Kurozumi Makoto's chapter "*Kangaku: Writing and Institutional Authority*" in Shirane, Haruo and Suzuki, Tomi, *Inventing the Classics (Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 205

immediately preceding the Meiji Period. Although Confucianism (embodied in classics by Confucius or Mencius) has not always been a strong ideology in Japan and indeed at times was not linked to *kangaku* at all, it did have strong influence during the Tokugawa Period. The *bakufu* believed Confucianism would help maintain order in society, and so it was a strong proponent of its tenets. From the Emperor to the Shogun, the rulers of Japan took up the commentaries that developed in China during the Song Dynasty, in particular of Chu Hsi⁷. This mode of Neo-Confucianism, called *Shushigaku* 朱子学 in Japanese, not only influenced political administration, but also had a greater metaphysical context that tied together all of society and indeed the physical world. *Shushigaku* asked people to participate in the “investigation of things,” laying out universal principles of the metaphysical world that would help in this intellectual pursuit.⁸

Where Chinese poetry and Confucian texts had once been “outer classics” (*geten*) taught within a Buddhist context, during the Tokugawa Period they began to be seen as exemplary tools for teaching Confucian values to the people.⁹ The Kansei Reforms of 1787-93 spurred education by forming a state-run Confucian school (the Shoheiko) and selecting men to important offices based on skills and knowledge rather than hereditary privilege.¹⁰ A population that had largely been illiterate at the beginning of the Tokugawa Period became one of the most literate in the world near its end.¹¹

⁷ Smith, p.9

⁸ Jansen, Marius, *The Making of Modern Japan*, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), p.192

⁹ Kurozumi Makoto, “*Kangaku: Writing and Institutional Authority*,” from Shirane, p.210

¹⁰ Jansen, p.188

¹¹ Jansen writes that Japan was likely only behind two or three Western countries in literacy and “well ahead of all other countries, in the percentage of its people with access to education and literacy.” Jansen,

Although samurai families originally used the services of Buddhist priests for their education at the start of the Edo, by the 1800's, numerous fief schools had been established and the numbers were still on the rise in 1868. In many ways Japan was in the midst of an education revolution.

Although by the late Edo period Confucianism dominated the intellectual realm, it did not completely reject other religions like Buddhism or Nativism, or condemn other disciplines like history and Japanese poetry. Instead there was an open attitude of syncretism and dialogue with other disciplines, something which was to remain with men of the Meiji period. At the same time that it was resisted by those who called it conservative and oppressive, it also gave birth to and informed new disciplines. For example *kokugaku* developed into a nativist reaction to Chinese learning, and yet it was initially not even a separate discipline. It began as pure literary study of ancient Japanese texts (which would have been written in *kanbun*) in the seventeenth century and was even sponsored by shogunal houses.¹² It was later *kokugaku* scholars like Motoori Norinaga (educated extensively in Chinese studies) who strove to separate their discipline from *kangaku*. In fact, it could be said that the discipline of examination and investigation that *kangaku* encouraged gave birth to new polemic disciplines. Thus we must consider criticisms of Chu Hsi thought in the mid- to late- Edo from a larger perspective, as these thinkers based their philosophies on the rational and applicable tools that *kangaku* provided.

Another discipline that fully took shape during the Meiji Period was *rangaku*,

p.190

¹² Jansen, p.205

or Dutch learning. During the 18th century, Dutch books on everything from medicine to painting filtered into Japan through the port of Nagasaki.¹³ But rather than developing into a discipline that opposed *kangaku*, its practitioners were mainly conformists who merely looked to supplement more traditional learning. The benefits of certain aspects of Western medicine (such as surgery) did prick some holes into the ascendancy of Chinese medicine.¹⁴ But by the 1800's respected scholars like Sakuma Shozan (1811-64) were advocating the syncretism of *yogaku* with Confucian principles: "I say since the learning of the West is flourishing, the nourishment of the teachings of Confucius gains these resources. Now the learning of the West is science, [while] the teaching of Confucius is morality."¹⁵ But it was not just in the realm of morality that *kangaku* would provide invaluable reference, as we shall see when it came to interpreting Western philosophy, politics, and art.

Kangaku in the Meiji Period

It is possible to think of the early Meiji Period as the tail end of a boom in *kangaku* as much as a time of wholesale importation of Western ideas and institutions. It is true that in order to modernize, Japanese intellectuals, politicians, and even ordinary people sought to absorb customs from the West with a zeal that was remarkable. But perhaps Western culture was being painted onto the consciousness of the nation with Chinese brushstrokes. Official documents continued to be written in Sino-Japanese, and various

¹³ Jansen, p.211

¹⁴ Jansen, p.213

¹⁵ Smith, p.27

intellectuals and public officials kept diaries or wrote poems in classical Chinese.¹⁶ The Japanese did not immediately abandon Chinese culture in order to take up Western customs—at least not as readily as the manner in which they changed their dress. In fact, *kangaku* continued to be the intellectual grounding of every educated person in Japan, whether they were politicians, Confucianists, or the many well-known *yogakusha* who went abroad to study, like Fukuzawa Yukichi. These men had been raised in the Tokugawa Period and were now entering the “Westernizing” Meiji Period as fully matured thinkers.

This is not to say that there was no initial attack on *kangaku* and all forms of Chinese influence. In 1866, Maejima Hisoka called for the abolition of Chinese characters completely from the Japanese language. (His petition, called “Kanji Gohaishi no Gi,” or “Proposal for the abolition of Chinese Characters,” was incidentally written in *sorobun*, which heavily uses Chinese characters.¹⁷) In many cases, the outward, politically correct attitude toward *kangaku* was one of disdain. Fukuzawa Yukichi’s series of books *Gakumon no Susume* (The Encouragement of Learning) (1872-76), which pushed normal citizens to take up the study of Western science, economics and even ethics, sold incredibly well. In it, he harshly criticizes traditional forms of study, which includes *wagaku* and *kangaku*, in favor of Western learning:

Learning is not just knowing difficult characters, reading ancient texts that are hard to decipher, enjoying *waka* poems, writing poems, or in any way the study of literature itself, which has no practical use in the world. Even though literature can allow one to cheer others and is useful in such ways, it is not something as admirable as the scholars of Confucian and Japanese learning may have you think. We have seen that in the past,

¹⁶ Twine, Nanette, *Language and the Modern State*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.44

¹⁷ Twine, p.50

there have been plenty of *kangakusha* who are not so good at managing their household affairs, and there are not so many townspeople who can make a living from knowing waka poems.¹⁸

Fukuzawa's concern was the utility of learning, which he saw as lacking in all modes of traditional learning, but especially in the ethics and literature-based *kangaku*.

Fukuzawa, along with the many other public officials who were eager to modernize Japan, felt that Western learning would have to be taken up for Japanese people to become useful members in a newly emerging capitalist economy. From an economic perspective at least, *kangaku* was seen as incompatible with utilitarian ideals. This was part of a national effort with the clear objective of "catching up to the West." The government prepared the masses for a transition into a modern economy, but the efforts to centralize and standardize an education system were not so simple. The Education Law (*Gakusei*) of 1872 established a new system of public schools and stipulated that existing schools (which mostly taught some form of *kangaku*) were to be closed.¹⁹ But this was not always enforced, and new *juku* were often opened. Samurai families continued to send their children to private Confucian tutors, even if they attended public elementary schools.²⁰

In point of fact, *kangaku* was not a hindrance to education but a highly compatible discipline that had prepared the population for active learning. An education revolution had essentially begun before the Meiji Period. Due to the emerging wealth of

¹⁸ Fukuzawa, Yukichi, *Fukuzawa Yukichi Choshashu*, vol.3 (*Gakumon no Susume*), (Tokyo: Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppan Kaisha, 2002), p.7

¹⁹ Mehl, Margaret, *Private Academies of Chinese Learning in Meiji Japan*, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), p.43

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45

the merchant class, not only samurai but also ordinary people had been going to *terakoya* to learn rudimentary reading, writing and calculation. Although this kind of basic learning would not be classified as *kangaku*, it was the bottom rung of a string of Confucian-style education centers extending all the way down from the Shoheiko at the top and including *juku* fashioned on that school. In addition, Japanese intellectuals had been influenced by Ming texts that advocated women's education, and wrote books encouraging women to study reading and writing, as well as bookkeeping.²¹ By the time of the Meiji Period, although education was not standardized, it was an accepted notion that anyone could educate themselves. Confucian notions of self-cultivation and eagerness to learn were in harmony with a period in which the country was forced to learn in order to catch up with the West. In exemplary fashion, the Charter Oath of 1868 declared (in Sino-Japanese) that "Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule."²²

Learning was seen as a matter of national importance and therefore the most learned men were gathered by the government for its express purpose. Although this has been known as the age of "Civilization and Enlightenment," (*bunmei kaika*), we must remember that it was mostly a government-sponsored campaign to borrow institutions from the West and transmit them to Japan. Rather than an age of original, intellectual flowering (which may have happened during the Tokugawa Period), it was a time of extremely important and careful cultural negotiation with the West. I say "negotiation"

²¹ "Women's education achieved a new level of importance with the rise of the Song learning and its Neo-Confucian extensions in the Ming, marked by the great spread of printing, literacy, and schooling." De Bary, Theodore, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Second Edition Volume 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) p.820

²² De Bary, Theodore, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Second Edition Volume Two: 1600-2000, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p.672

because the process involved more than simple appropriation of Western ideas. On top of the ultimate goal of strengthening the country to counter foreign powers, Japan had to successfully *integrate* aspects of an alien culture without being completely subsumed by it. I believe that, consciously or not, a great number of the *yogakusha* were more adept at this crucial aspect of the *bunmei kaika* than others.

The *yogakusha*, who were first schooled in *kangaku*, and then one form of Western learning or another (usually Dutch learning) were the likes of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Mori Arinori, Nishi Amane and Nakamura Masanao. Many of them were hired by the *bakufu* even before the Meiji Restoration with the specific objective of learning more about the West so that Japan could protect itself.²³ In fact, other than Fukuzawa Yukichi (who criticized the other scholars for participating in administrative jobs) the careers of these *yogakusha* took shape under the employment of the government and exhibited a high sense of moral responsibility toward educating the people. All of these scholars would later play a central role in the Civilization and Enlightenment movement.

These intellectuals, who were at the cutting edge of learning at the beginning of the Meiji Period, would have been influenced by *kangaku* scholars who had already started to challenge traditional notions of Confucian learning. By the mid-18th century (contemporaneous or perhaps even earlier than European Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hegel), intellectuals had begun extolling the importance of philology and rational examination of texts. For example, Ito Jinsai and Ogyu Sorai emphasized direct textual interpretation of Confucian texts. When Sorai read Chinese texts, he did not

²³ Ibid., 696

transliterate *kanbun* as scholars often had, but decided to read in the original Chinese.²⁴

In addition to creating an awareness of Chinese as a foreign language (which amazingly had not existed), this kind of scholarship encouraged students to question commentaries and think directly about the source. Because of intellectual predecessors like these, a translator of Western texts like Nishi Amane would have understood the importance of correct terminology. Not only that, he would have been influenced by a Confucian belief that the right definition of terms was indispensable for good governance—a notion that would have cast weight on his task of translation.²⁵

When he was 18 years old, Nishi was introduced to an entirely new realm of intellectual understanding through the works of Sorai. He wrote an essay entitled, “Explaining My Interest in Sorai’s Learning,” and recorded how he was amazed there could be a different way from Chu Hsi Learning for understanding the world.²⁶ As he would later expound in his work, *Hyakuichi Shinron* (One Hundred and One New Theses, 1874) the purpose of Confucianism was not self-cultivation, but rather the construction of sound polity. For Nishi, morality needed to be separated from politics. This kind of utilitarian world-view would eventually draw him to the works of John Stuart Mill (whose *Utilitarianism* he would later translate).

Though someone like Nishi would criticize Chu Hsi learning, we cannot say that he abandoned *kangaku* or even that he rejected Confucianism as a whole.

²⁴ Karatani Kojin’s article “Edo Exegesis and the Present” in Marra, Michael, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), p.291

²⁵ In *Hyakuichi Shinron*, Nishi refers to Confucius’s quote: “If something has to be put first [in administration of the state] it is, perhaps, the rectification of names . . . When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success, etc.” *Analects*, 13:3

²⁶ Tucker, John A., *Ogyu Sorai’s Philosophical Masterworks*, (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai’i Press, 2006)

Significant disruptions in intellectual thought had already been occurring within Japan, and though these various schools of thought were meant to challenge authority, they were all based on a foundation of philological discipline embodied by *kangaku*.

Translating the West

A number of recent scholars have pointed out the peculiar nature of “translation” in Japan, in effect outlining its difference from the Western notion of translation and pointing towards its importance in the modernizing process. Indra Levy believes that due to Japan’s complex history of negotiating Chinese characters (through writing systems like *kanbun kundoku*, which effectively must be “translated” in order to be read), translation essentially creates a “tertiary” language that occupies a realm that is neither purely the source language nor the native target language. Unlike the traditional process of translation, in which a foreign text is converted into a native context, Japanese translation diverts the text into an intermediary form. She writes, “translation can be usefully redefined as a range of strategies for making available the meanings, values, and/or techniques of one language in another that may not be native to anyone in the usual sense of the term.”²⁷ She does not explicitly define why this phenomenon has played such a constant role in Japan’s modernization, but I believe it has to do with protecting Japan’s cultural integrity and “unique” nature.

Yanabu Akira, a scholar who has written extensively on translation theory, also believes that “translation” in Japan is meant more to preserve the original quality of the source language rather than to understand its true meaning. He gives the example of

²⁷ Levy, Indra, *Translation in Modern Japan*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.3

Buddhist priests who recite the scripture in *ondoku* (Japanese approximations of Chinese pronunciation) rather than in Japanese readings that could be more easily understood by people.²⁸ The purpose is to preserve the aura and prestige of the original source language. But Yanabu believes that this process of translation has “undergirded” the Japanese peoples’ reception of foreign culture. I would like to look at the process as a positive, protective method that mitigated the effects of Japan’s extreme immersion into Western culture. As I will try to show, interpreting and transmitting the West was a complicated and overwhelming process that could easily have created an adverse reaction in the Japanese people. The peculiar nature of translation at this time, and in great part its reliance on Chinese characters, eased the introduction of this great wave of words.

In modernizing the country, Japanese intellectuals not only had to understand Western texts and concepts, but be able to articulate and transmit those ideas to its people so that they would be accepted. Intellectuals saw this as a matter of national importance, because their ability to educate the public would affect Japan’s modernization. After the first unequal treaties were signed in 1858, scholars at the Tokugawa Institute of Foreign Studies were asked to start systematically translating the terminology of European law and political institutions.²⁹ But it was no easy task. Even 15 years later, as the influx of Western texts intensified, Nishi Amane simply stated, “The present trend to introduce the manifold ways of Europe is like a flood.”³⁰ We can get a sense of the urgency he felt from this quotation.

²⁸ Ibid., 49

²⁹ Howland, Douglas, *Translating the West*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), p.124

³⁰ Braisted, William, *Meiroku Zasshi. Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.5

How, then, would they go about this task? We can consider the options that were at their disposal. One of the simplest would have been to phonetically appropriate words into the Japanese language, retaining the Western term. For example, words like *tonneru* for tunnel, or *hankachi* for handkerchief.³¹ But as one might guess from these examples, this method was best suited for concrete objects that had been newly imported from the West. The transference of these words fulfilled a certain need in vocabulary, but would not have worked as smoothly for abstract intellectual ideas, which required more ready understanding from people. In addition, if direct transference had been used for *all* words imported into Japan, the great number of homophones in the Japanese language would likely have created confusion between terms.

Nishi, hoping to be as faithful as possible to the original words, first used a combination of Western words, Chinese characters and *kana* to give as well-rounded a representation of terminology as possible. For example, the word “philology” would be aligned next to its Chinese compound equivalent, 語原学. Douglas Howland has called the constructions Nishi used “analogs” and writes that his system was based on a centuries-old tradition of juxtaposing Chinese characters and *katakana* transliterations.³² But this was a ponderous method that was unusable for longer texts and could confuse the reader because of its multiple renderings. In the first article of the influential *Meiroku Zasshi*, Nishi Amane famously suggested that the Japanese go so far as to adopt Romanized letters to write Japanese. Yet we know this did not happen and in fact, Nishi was one of the most prolific creators of neologisms using Chinese characters.

³¹ Howland, p. 87

³² *Ibid.*, p.81

Nishi was not entirely comfortable with the idea at first. In the preface for his translation of Joseph Haven's *Mental Philosophy*, he wrote:

. . . I do not know what to appropriately follow in the matter of translation characters. Even if I tried to match my terms to those which the Chinese learning scholars and Confucians expound, the problem is not simply that their distinctions of "nature of mind" are tremendously minute; but because the names indicated by their terms naturally have other significances, I have necessarily and expressly selected alternative characters and created my own words. Accordingly, although certain terms conform to those that existed previously—such as "perception," "memory," "consciousness," and "imagination"—other items are primarily new constructions, and the reader may very well have a difficult time formulating the meaning of those terms . . . ³³

Nishi knew that he was departing from the traditional meanings of Chinese words, and therefore taking a giant leap—or expecting the reader to take that leap—towards a new understanding of things. Nevertheless, he found this method of "translation" to be the best method, and so did most other *yogakusha*. There are a number of reasons for this. First, *kangaku* provided an intellectual basis, a foundation upon which to interpret Western ideas. It was the common language of intellect in Japan up to the end of the Tokugawa Period, far more so than Latin was in the West at this time. As previously mentioned, all intellectuals were schooled in *kangaku*, and thus if they wanted to transmit ideas to other scholars, this was their common language. The fact that Japanese as a national language had not been unified at this time lends weight to this theory. Second, Chinese characters' nature as particles of meaning meant that they could be combined in various ways as compounds to create neologisms. Through previous knowledge of character meanings, new worlds—at least roughly—could be instantly conveyed to readers. Native Japanese, or *wabun*, could not be manipulated in this way.

³³ Ibid., p.82

In her essay on scientific terminology during the Meiji Period, Juliette Yueh-tsen Chung quotes Kato Shuichi in explaining the methods of translation available, all of which involved Chinese characters in one form or another.³⁴ The first method was to reference what Dutch scholars (*rangakusha*) had adopted in their translations of Western medicine. For example, the word *shinkei* for “nerves” had already been coined. Secondly, one could refer to preexisting Chinese translations of Western terms. Thirdly, one could go to the Chinese classics to borrow terms directly (and disassociate them from their original meaning). One example of this is the word *jiyu* to mean freedom, which originally meant “doing things freely and without restraint.” Fukuzawa adopted it to stand in for the Western term “liberty,” a word with vastly different connotations. The last option was to create neologisms using Chinese characters.

Chinese characters have often been misconstrued as being ideograms, or characters that convey meaning through visual representation. Although they have elements of this nature (for example the radical 木 does seem to pictorially represent a “tree”) their meanings must be memorized one by one. Essentially, they are particles of meaning, from which character compounds may be constructed that convey another meaning. For example, the neologism *shakai* 社会, which came to be a translation for “society” used a character (社) that implied a society of men, and a character that meant “to meet.” (会) So the meaning of 社会 could be inferred from the characters used. We must also consider the fact that reconceptualizing modern ideas using concepts of the past is a fantastic way of enabling understanding and acceptance. The use of *kango*

³⁴ “Eugenics and Scientific Terminology” in Fogel, Joshua A., *Late Qing China and Meiji Japan, Political and Cultural Aspects*, (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2004)

provided a seamless way of connecting Japan's own history with its new era as a modern nation.

So why did translators not use Japanese words to translate Western terms? Fukuzawa Yukichi, for one, was determined not to use the “block-shaped characters” of *kanji* (which he had no love for) and instead wanted to translate terms directly using the “gentle words” of Japanese. But most translators found this method impossible.³⁵ If equivalent Japanese words were not available, existing words or parts of words could not be manipulated to create new words. Instead, they found that Chinese characters were far more convenient in translating foreign words.

Yanabu Akira describes some of the other qualities that *kanji* provided in comparison to native Japanese. For one, they carried a vagueness of meaning that solved the problem of directly conveying the meaning of a foreign word. He calls this the “cassette effect,” in which Chinese characters are comparable to jewel cases that are attractive because of their intellectual weightiness, but in fact hide the exact meaning of a term.³⁶ They therefore express an idea, but an idea that can be interpreted in various ways. With a word like “individual,” translated as *kojin* 個人, the concept was difficult for Japanese to understand at first, but they could accept it because of the “cassette effect.” As a result, there might be different interpretations of a single term. For example, in the early Meiji Period, the term *shakai* was interpreted in various ways, many of which would seem strange to Japanese today. A work called *Zokumu Kyoudan (Popular Dreams and Incredible Tales, 1876)* used the term to describe an upper class “*shakai*”

³⁵ Yanabu, Akira, *Honyakugo Seiritsu Jijyo*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1997), p.35

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37

and a lower class “*shakai*,” as if they were different strata of society³⁷ This understanding of the word *shakai* could now be called a misinterpretation of the original Western concept, but we could also say that it was one step in the evolution of the Japanese usage of the word.

Yanabu’s interpretation says that Chinese characters were appropriate for conveying heavy Western concepts because they have a stronger intellectual attraction to Japanese than their native characters—something altogether hard to prove. But it can be agreed that the vagueness of meaning of Chinese characters—due to their foreign origin, multiple meanings, and interchangeability—may have provided a simple solution to conveying Western terminology. Though Japanese people may have not understood the term immediately, the words would have been incorporated into dialogue as familiar terms and used in debate. This delayed impact of new ideas and concepts may have created a buffer that gave Japanese time and leverage to negotiate these newly adopted concepts.

An Example of Interpretation: Nishi Amane and Aesthetics

The intellectual and public official Nishi Amane was a tireless translator and proliferator of Western philosophical ideas in the early Meiji. Born in 1829 in the village of Tsuwano in present day Shimane Prefecture, Nishi was the son of a minor samurai who also worked as a physician to the local lord.³⁸ His family had in fact long been

³⁷ Levy, p.60

³⁸ The following details on Nishi’s life are taken from Havens, Thomas R. H., *Nishi Amane and Modern Japanese Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p.20-56. Havens details are in turn based on Mori Ogai’s biography of Nishi, *Nishi Amane den*.

familiar with Western medical knowledge through Dutch textbooks. But Nishi was not raised on Western learning. He started the traditional path of Confucian learning at age four with the *Book of Filial Piety*, and continued on at the *han* school with Neo-Confucian teachings. After briefly taking up medical studies, he was ordered by the domain lord to enter the bureaucracy and become an instructor in Confucian learning. In 1853, the crucial year of Perry's arrival, Nishi was transferred to the Tsuwano domain school in Edo where he came into contact with early Western scholars. He began learning Dutch, and then made the decision to break ties with his *han* and devote himself to Western learning.

In 1857, Nishi was hired as an instructor by the *bakufu*-sponsored Bansho Shirabesho (Foreign Books Research Institute). For the next thirty years, he would remain an instructor and translator who worked for the national government with the specific duty of studying the West and transferring its teachings. In 1862 he became one of the first intellectuals sent abroad by the government specifically to study the cultural and intellectual aspects that made the West superior to Japan. During the next two crucial years he studied in Leiden, Holland, where he absorbed European economics, law, and—out of personal interest—philosophy. It should be noted that the British Empire was a dominant power at the time, so that Nishi was particularly attracted to English thought, due to his belief that England would make a good model for Japan.

Upon his return to Japan, Nishi became one of the most preminent intellectuals of the *bunmei kaika* movement, and was involved in such influential groups as the *Meirokeisha*. Although the *bakufu* would fall, Nishi remained in the service of the government for the rest of his career (for many years he was in the Military Department

of the Meiji government and then later served in the Diet). In addition to compiling dictionaries of Western terms and translating important works of Western thought, Nishi gave lectures and wrote essays. Some of his key works are *Hyakugaku Renkan* (Links between All Science, 1871), which was an encyclopedic attempt to classify Western scholarly disciplines, *Hyakuichi Shinron* (which I have already mentioned), his essays in the *Meiroke Zasshi*, and finally, *Bimyo Gakusetsu* (Theory of Aesthetics, 1878).

Although some scholars paint Nishi as a progressive thinker who broke away from traditional modes of thought, it cannot be denied how heavily he relied on *kangaku* to interpret Western ideas. In this sense, he is the quintessential Meiji man—enamored of the West and scornful of ancient ways, yet still seeing through a prism of its ideas in order to conceptualize modernity. He often used the Chinese classics to create new terms, many of which were later adopted by the Ministry of Education as official terms. He developed terms like *bungaku* 文学 for “literature”³⁹, *ishiki* 意識 for “consciousness”⁴⁰, and *kyakkan* 客観 for “objectivity.”⁴¹ He created the word *tetsugaku* from *kitetsugaku* 希哲学, or “to seek clarity.”⁴² This was derived from a saying by the Chinese Confucian scholar Zhou Dunyi (1017-73) that expressed the gentleman’s pursuit of virtue and talent.⁴³ Nishi abbreviated the term to come up with *tetsugaku*, and used it in a different context from the original phrase.

In this manner, Nishi translated upwards of 1,400 English terms into Japanese,

³⁹ Fogel, Joshua A., *Late Qing China and Meiji Japan, Political and Cultural Aspects*, (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2004), p.171

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.171

⁴¹ Havens, p.106

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.106

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.171

half of which he adapted in one form or another from Chinese classics.⁴⁴ Many had completely different meanings from the original Chinese. Nishi was first employed by the *bakufu* in the years after Perry's arrival, and then later by the new Meiji government. In the first essay of the *Meiroku Zasshi*, Nishi wrote, "[I]t is naturally the responsibility of those in authority in good time to guide the people tenderly by the hand from ignorance to the level of enlightenment . . ."⁴⁵ While he criticized Japan's feudal past, he still felt a Confucian-inspired notion that the enlightened few held the responsibility of leading the "common people."

Among Nishi's various translations and texts on Western thought can be found texts about aesthetics, culminating in his essay *Bimyo Gakusetsu* 美妙学説. This essay was based on a series of lectures he gave on the subject in the presence of the Meiji Emperor and various members of the newly established government.⁴⁶ Aesthetics was not initially considered an essential subject of study by the government, but we can see that Nishi placed high importance to its societal aspects. He essentially saw it as a way to make up for the system of Confucian ethics and ritual that was being supplanted by the introduction of Western law. The Ministry of Education would later heed his call to pay attention to this discipline, and invite foreign scholars like Ernest Fenollosa to teach at Tokyo Imperial University.⁴⁷ The concept of aesthetics was itself a modern idea: the term was coined by Alexander Baumgarten, a German philosopher of the 18th century who tried to apply rational, objective principles for judging beauty. It came to be seen as

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.171

⁴⁵ Braisted, William, *Meiroku Zasshi. Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.4

⁴⁶ Marra, Michael, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), p.2

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.2

a way in which the national “community” could come together through common conceptions of beauty and notions of taste.

In time, “aesthetics” came to be translated as *bigaku* 美学 in Japan (by Nakae Chomin), but before this final neologism Nishi fashioned several translations that came to form the basis for Japanese understanding of the word. Nishi first translated it as *zenbigaku* 善美学 in his *Hyakuichi Shinron*, reflecting the belief in the West that beauty and goodness are related. Although this was a Platonic and utilitarian idea,⁴⁸ it also reflected his knowledge of *rinrigaku* (study of ethics) in Confucian thought.⁴⁹ In explaining *bizengaku*, he refers to a quotation in the *Analects* where Confucius explains how to discern the quality of music:

The Master said of the *shao* [the music of Shun who came to the throne peacefully] that it was both perfectly beautiful and perfectly good, and of the *wu* [the music of King Wu who came to the throne through force] that it was perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good.⁵⁰

This is close to the idea of *kalokagathia* in Greek thought, which links physical beauty with nobility in character, especially in the context of the ideal warrior. The exact characters 善 (good) and 美 (beautiful) are used in this quote from the *Analects*, so we may consider the possibility that it informed Nishi’s construction of his neologism 善美学. But this was an early interpretation of aesthetics that would be further developed. In his *Bimyō Gakusetsu*—which constituted an attempt to systematically analyze aesthetics—Nishi used the characters *bimyogaku* 美妙学, literally meaning “the study of

⁴⁸ Marra, MJA, p.91

⁴⁹ Shimane Kenritsu Daigaku Nishi Amane Kenkyukai, *Nishi Amane to Nihon no Kindai*, (Tokyo: Pelican Press, 2005), p.267

⁵⁰ Lau, D.C., *The Analects*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002) , p.27

beauty and wonder,” to represent “aesthetics.”

The purpose of *Bimyo Gakusetsu* (which was essentially the first study of aesthetics in Japan) is to outline some of the “science” of beauty. For example, Nishi explains how “sameness in difference and difference in sameness” are essential to the elemental beauty of an object or art form: a musical piece has a variety of instruments but there must be some harmony between them to be pleasing.⁵¹ This, however, seems to be an analogy that differs little from similar explanations of beauty by Confucian lecturers during the Tokugawa Period.⁵² The popular Edo Confucian lecturer Hosoi Heishu (1728-1801) would expound the following analogy to commoners to explain the concept of harmony: “A *samisen* has three strings and each makes a different sound. The first string makes a low and heavy sound. The second is a little higher and lighter. The third is very high and light. Each makes sounds of a different quality from the others. But when the strings are in tune, they achieve a beautiful three-toned harmony. We humans can do the same.”

Despite the fact that many of his ideas on beauty were based on Mills or Kant, Nishi does not frame aesthetics as a concept derived from the West. He opens the essay with this sentence: “There is a branch of philosophy called ‘aesthetics’ that is related to the fine arts and thoroughly investigates its underlying principles.”⁵³ Where did this philosophy come from? Is it related to Eastern thought? His neglect of specifics could be justified by the fact that he was explaining a new concept to an audience unfamiliar with

⁵¹ Marra, MJA, p.34

⁵² Lecturers were often paid by the *bakufu* to put on simplified Confucian “sermons” for commoners. From Aoki, Michiko and Dardess, Margaret, “The Popularization of Samurai Values: A Sermon by Hosoi Heishu,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, XXXI, 4 p.405

⁵³ Marra, MJA, p.26

Western thinkers. But the tone of the essay suggests that ownership of the concept does not belong to the West, nor is it foreign in any way. In fact, through the entire text, he does not mention a single contemporary Western philosopher.

The continuing text is rife with references to Chinese classics to explain the concept of *bimyogaku*. When explaining how the aesthetic doctrine is related to society, he explains it in the following manner, quoting *The Great Learning*:

Even though a petty person may possess great beauty, his vulgarity will come out of its own accord, marking the man's foolish demeanor, so that you will easily spot the man's violent nature. That is, whether one is a gentleman or a petty person, what he carries inside will eventually reveal itself to the outside world. He cannot conceal his true heart, nor can he avoid "what ten eyes behold, what ten hands point to."⁵⁴

Another key part of Nishi's lecture involves explaining the concept that aesthetics by nature is not concerned with practical objectives. Nishi goes to great lengths to explain how the words "interesting" (*omoshiroi*) and "funny" (*okashi*) are the only adjectives in the Japanese language that express purely aesthetic emotions because they are not related to personal interest. Words like "happy" "pleasurable," or "hateful" do not fall in this category because they are in one way or another related to a person's gains or losses in life.⁵⁵ But at the end of his lecture, Nishi's sense of social responsibility seems to conflict with the Western concept of autonomy regarding aesthetics.

It goes without saying, then, that art fosters the flourishing of civilization; it elevates the human world into a lofty realm. Naturally, the ministers and officials appointed to legislate laws and govern society must not neglect it. Although it is not the purpose of

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.26

⁵⁵ Marra, MJA, p.35

the fine arts to have a direct bearing on policies, they nevertheless are an indirect objective of political tactics.⁵⁶

Here, Nishi is clearly struggling with the contradiction that although art is expressive of goodness, it cannot be created with the purpose of creating goodness. After all, according to Western ideas of aesthetics, art must not be created for personal interests. (Kant says in his four moments of the judgment of taste: “Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose.”⁵⁷ We know that Nishi was trying to convince government officials to incorporate aesthetics into the education system, and yet his very act of making this suggest seems to point toward a belief in its *usefulness* for the new nation.

At so early a stage in the cultural opening of Japan, we cannot have expected a purely Western understanding of such a complex idea as aesthetics. Not only do the translators of Western thought have to understand and accept the concepts, but the listeners and students also have to be able to digest them. Therefore it is no surprise that an essay like *Bimyo Gakusetsu* is so steeped in Chinese learning. And yet, we also see that there was an advantage to so deeply codifying these alien and potentially intimidating ideas. Nishi grafts his understanding of Mills and Kant onto a largely Chinese understanding of morality, law, and beauty in order to create his own “theory” of beauty. The audience accepts this as the most up-to-date understanding of beauty among civilized nations. It is a very safe and pragmatic absorption of foreign ideas. Of course, the digestion and interpretation of Western “aesthetics” had only just begun.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.37

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.4

Japanese artists and scholars would continue to refine their understanding of aesthetics throughout the Meiji Period, and some scholars would counter Western ideas. But what Nishi provided them with was the vocabulary to debate with their Western counterparts and develop new theories within the realm of contemporary academics.

The Significance of “Bigaku”

So what are we to make of this method of introducing modern words to the Japanese language? How did they influence the evolution of Japan? Let us follow the course of the word *bigaku*. According to Yanabu Akira, there was no concept of “beauty” in Japan before the Meiji Period, as an ideal notion in the Western sense. “A beautiful flower” existed, but “the beauty of a flower” was not a familiar concept. Japanese artistic concepts such as *wabi*, *fuga*, *sabi* and *mononoaware* all have similar aspects to “beauty” in terms of their abstract nature, but they were far more specific in contrast to the unifying, overarching notion of “beauty” that informs virtually every known form of Western art—from sculpture to painting to music.⁵⁸ It was Nishi’s *Bimyo Gakusetsu* that first attempted to introduce this new concept to Japanese thinkers. Such a foreign and intellectually different understanding of art would not be so readily accepted, nor even quickly sink in as a fully comprehended idea. Was this due to the intermediate, ambiguous nature of Nishi’s essay? Did he fail in correctly conveying the ideas of Western aesthetics, or did he succeed in giving ownership of the concept to the Japanese? I think that in terms of the modernization process of Japan, where entire fields of art had to be radically transformed, his method was an effective way of smoothing

⁵⁸ Yanabu, p.67-70

over the process.

As we know, Nishi Amane did not create the final translation for “aesthetics,” which became “*bigaku*” through Nakae Chomin’s translation of Eugene Veron’s *L’Esthetique*.⁵⁹ But it was Nishi’s musings on the nature of aesthetics that had the greatest impact on future generations of thinkers—in a rather delayed fashion. In particular, the writer Mori Ogai—in fact a former student of Nishi’s and the writer of his biography—deftly took up the development of *bigaku* in Japan. What is significant to note is the evolution that takes place between Nishi’s understanding of aesthetics, which is more based on Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism, to Ogai’s German idealistic understanding. In 1890, a dispute about the nature of Japanese art erupted between Toyama Masakazu, a professor of Tokyo University, and Mori Ogai. The debate was taken up by journalists and caught the interest of people across the country. Toyama had given a lecture titled “Nihon Kaiga no Mirai” (The Future of Japanese Painting), in which he argued that Japanese painters should move away from purely decorative themes towards more conceptual themes.⁶⁰ Ogai took issue with Toyama’s understanding of “art” and based his arguments on Hartmann’s theory of aesthetics to effectively silence Toyama (who shied away from debating against German idealistic theories that he little understood).

The following year Ogai became involved in another debate with Tsubouchi Shoyo (professor at Tokyo Senmon Gakko) over literature.⁶¹ To somewhat simplify the debate, Tsubouchi denied the existence of the “ideal” in literature, while Ogai argued that literature embodies the ideal. “*Bi*,” of “*bigaku*” or “beauty” came to be a crucial

⁵⁹ Marra, *Japanese Hermeneutics*, p.110

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 111

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 112

word in the argument between these two scholars. Ogai maintained that what came first was not “a beautiful flower,” but “the beauty of the flower.” The basis of literature, a form of art, was the pursuit of the ideal of “beauty.” Once again, Ogai’s superior knowledge of German idealism overwhelmed the opposition. In the end Tsubouchi realized his mistake and conceded defeat to Ogai.

I bring this up not to show how Nishi’s theory on aesthetics informed Ogai in his debate, but to show how the initial, rather “fuzzy” interpretation of the theory set the stage for deeper understanding and defining of the concept. One could argue that Nishi confused intellectuals with his explanation of aesthetic theory. But he also allowed the participation of future thinkers in the shaping of its understanding. There were 12 years between *Bimyo Gakusetsu* and these debates, during which time most Japanese intellectuals likely had no clear, unified conception of the meaning of “*bigaku*.” And yet this span of time gave them leeway to define the concept on their own, and claim ownership over it. Meanwhile, Japanese art and literature scrambled to modernize under the influence of the West, while at the same time retaining some semblance of a “native” substance. However, the blurriness of Japanese understanding of *bigaku* allowed for debate, instead of passive acceptance. In this case, through Ogai, the debates of 1890-91 resulted in the selection of an aesthetic closer to German idealism than Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism.

Conclusion

Since the Meiji Period, numerous words have entered the Japanese language. Many have become new words through direct conversion from English into *katakana*, or

abbreviated from English words. Words like “sentimental,” センチメンタル, “impact,” インパクト, etc. By the 1890’s, most European words were in fact being transliterated directly into Japanese phonetically.⁶² This reveals the decline of *kangaku* as a discipline in Japan and the view of English as the language of intellect within the Japanese education system (especially after World War II). Thus *kangaku* has not always been an essential tool for interpreting the West. But at the crucial time of the early Meiji Period, where the country faced great pressure to modernize, it served as an invaluable way to convert modern ideas into easily understandable, open-ended, and seemingly familiar notions. *Yogakusha* like Nishi created the lexicon that would be the foundation of modern Japanese thought. If Japan had not had this tool to preserve an identity separate to the West, it would have failed to become a nation-state in the true sense of the word.

Ironically, it also ended up providing China with a conduit to modernity. The country that had provided so much learning to Japan had failed to modernize as well as its student. Confucianism in China, instead of providing a buffer or ideology that could be readily manipulated and contorted to interpret the West, instead set up an intractable dichotomy to Western thinking. Japan had been able to preserve its native spirit while wielding the knowledge of Chinese learning, but for China contorting its native culture in this manner would have meant betraying itself entirely. Under the idea of *Tongwen zhi guo* (a country sharing language)⁶³ China eventually appropriated many of the terms the Japanese created using *kangaku*. Even though Japanese translators had used different signification for these Chinese terms, the Chinese were able to accept them after they

⁶² Havens, p.107

⁶³ Fogel, p.183

suffered defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895. In this way, China benefitted from a “reverse-importation” of modern terms derived from its own ancient culture.⁶⁴

Kangaku was a pragmatic, not ideological, tool for Japanese to interpret the West. Certain *yogakusha* may have disparaged Chinese learning in order to move Japan forward, but at the same time they were using it to understand, translate, and transmit Western ideas. In many ways, the tradition of *kangaku* gave Japan an advantage both because it provided a reference for understanding sophisticated ideas but also because it was at its root a *foreign* discipline. It provided a psychological barrier that enabled and allowed the absorption of foreign ideas. It existed in the realm of external intellectual thinking that would gradually be overtaken by Western thinking (but not completely).

Nanette Twine contends that the classical writing of China and Japan was “an obstacle to modernization by virtue of its difficulty, relative inflexibility, and aura of elitism.”⁶⁵ She seems to think that despite its lack of utilitarian value, the elite simply clung to *kanji* because of its aura of erudition and culture. Yet as we have seen, the classical elements of *kangaku* at least allowed for flexible, easy-to-comprehend, universal reform of the *lexicon* of Japanese language in the face of Western ideas. Syntactically, in the early Meiji Japanese still needed to be unified to spoken language and unshackled from classical writing. However, it is clear that classical knowledge played an important part in reforming the language to adapt to new Western concepts.

We must not forget that many of the neologisms coined during the early Meiji remain in

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 184

One compiler of a bibliography of Japanese books, to justify appropriation of Japanese neologisms, wrote, “Since the Japanese have already briefly translated the essential parts of Western learning, we can appropriate their translations. Using the West as an ox and Japan as the farmer, we can sit and enjoy the harvest.”

⁶⁵ Twine, p.16

the Japanese language today and are more easily comprehensible to Japanese than various Western loan words, which now permeate the language (and are often used in an erudite fashion). In addition, the *bunmei kaika* words—such as *shakai*, *kojin*, *bunka*, *tetsugaku*—are some of the most highly used and important words in the language. In contrast to direct loanwords written in *katakana*, it is impossible to tell that these words were not in the language from before the Meiji Period, thereby creating unity and a sense of ownership of these concepts in the language.

There can be no doubt that *kangaku* as it existed in the Edo period could not be a “useful” discipline in a capitalist nation-state. Rote learning of difficult texts and the need to study nearly 10,000 kanji do not make for utilitarian society. Through various reforms the language was streamlined and simplified, so that by the end of World War II, only around 2,000 kanji were prescribed to be the ones needed for basic reading, as the *toyo kanji*.⁶⁶ But those who encountered, interpreted, and conveyed the alien and advanced concepts of the West on the front lines—the *yogakusha*—were extremely educated men who used their understanding of difficult Chinese concepts to advance *bunmei kaika*. Compared to intellectuals of other time periods, they are unusual in their understanding of both Eastern and Western intellectual thought, and in that respect are truly remarkable.

Japan by no means had all the trappings of a modern nation state by the time the age of “Civilization and Enlightenment” was over around 1890. The institutions of a modern government and society had been established in name only. However, the scholars who had been educated in an earlier time of *kangaku* had laid the groundwork

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 250

and created the vocabulary that would be used by all peoples—high and low—to form and become conscious of the nation. Movements like the People’s Freedom Movement used the term *jiyu*, or “Freedom” in their name and fought for personal liberties. Cities tried to figure out how to deal with *shakai mondai*, or societal problems. The language of modernity began to be wielded as the language of Japan, despite its both Western and Chinese roots. This then is the ultimate sign of modernity—the seamless integration of universal ideas into a strong sense of nation. The role that *kangaku* played in this development should not be discounted.