

Taishō Democracy and the Creation of Words : An Etymological Analysis of Japanese Translations for the Western Term "Democracy" from 1900 to 1920

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"Taishô Democracy" and the Creation of Words: An Etymological Analysis of Japanese Translations for the Western Term "Democracy" from 1900 to 1920

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1. Introduction

The phenomena of "Taishô Democracy" was not coincident with the reign of the Taishô Emperor (1912-26). Most Japanese historians date it from the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 to the enactment of universal suffrage in 1925. However, "Taishô Democracy" is difficult to delimit chronologically and its beginnings should be traced back to the time before the Russo-Japanese War, when essays containing social democratic thought were written by socialists like Kôtoku Shûsui (1871-1911) or Abe Isoo (1865-1949).(1)

"Taishô Democracy" can be distinguished into three different study fields: party politics, citizens movements and movements of intellectuals. Most studies are treating at least two of the three fields, mixing up different subjects without giving a definition of what is actually meant by "Taishô democracy." This easily deceptive term wrongly indicates that the whole Taishô era was colored by democracy. The ambiguity of this catch-phrase made it possible to attach social movements of a completely different character like the first campaign "to protect constitutional government" of 1912-13, the rice riots of 1918 or the liberation movement of the *burakumin* to the "spirit" of "Taishô democracy." The indistinct phrase "Taishô Democracy" already appears in the titles of almost every important historical study about democratic movements and thought in

prewar Japan.(2) Most of those studies are actually collections of articles published previously in university journals or other periodicals. In consequence, they are more or less fragmentary studies about incomparable aspects, containing topics of the political as well as the social and intellectual history of the Taishô era. As another consequence, no clear structure or conception can be recognized in those studies. Heterogeneous research objects are treated without providing methods or criteria of analysis.

The lack of a proper theory is particularly conspicuous in the field of the movements of intellectuals. Consequently, it is necessary to mark off this study field from other historical aspects of the late Meiji and the Taishô era and to search for distinct methods to analyze the democratic thought of intellectuals during that time.

Since the beginning of the Meiji period in 1868 there was a great need of translating foreign technical terms which did not yet exist in the vocabulary of the Japanese language. Western terms were either adopted phonetically or translated with two or more Chinese characters. During the Meiji period up to the Taishô period, most translations of Western expressions were compound words consisting of a pair of Chinese characters (*kanji*). Yet, approximately since 1920, most foreign words were phonetically adopted and written in *katakana* characters. During the Meiji era, intellectuals such as Nishi Amane (1829-1897) or Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) made a great contribution to Japan's modernization by translating Western technical terms into the Japanese language. Since they still had a detailed knowledge of the Chinese classics, they were able to create Sino-Japanese equivalents of foreign words. A great number of those translations written in *kanji* is in use even today. The Japanese expression *ginkô* for the English "bank," for example, was composed by Fukuzawa Yukichi.

During the Taishô period, a good many of translations for the Western term

"democracy" were in use. Since this was the key word for the democrats of the late Meiji and the early Taishō era, they created several equivalents and conceptions of the English "democracy," the German "Demokratie" and the French "démocratie." Those Western words stem from Classical Greek *demokratia* (*demos* = "people," *kratos* = "power"/"rule"). In modern times, "democracy" was defined by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) in his famous Gettysburg Address as the "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

How was the expression and concept of democracy translated and interpreted by Japanese scholars? The aim of this paper is to present an etymological approach in order to analyze the various translations of "democracy" being in use during the late Meiji and the Taishō era.

2. Various Translations of the Western Term "Democracy"

2.1 The Term *minshushugi* 民主主義

The most frequent translation of democracy even today is *minshushugi*. The term existed already in the early Meiji era. Statesman Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830-1878), an advocate of the autocratic Tennō system, used the expression's first pair of *kanji* (*minshu*) in an official letter to Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909) in 1875: "In general, there are two different concepts of government: monarchism and democracy [*minshu seiji* 民主政治]." (3)

Abe Isoo used the term *minshushugi* frequently in his writing *Chijō no risōkoku - Suisu* ("Ideal State on Earth - Switzerland") of 1904:

Politics in Switzerland consists of pure democracy [*minshushugi* 民主主義] based upon the representation of the people. [...] If mankind is willing to follow the course of liberty and equality with the aid of democracy [*minshushugi* 民主主義], the road inevitably leads to socialism. [...] In Switzerland, it is willingly accepted that the main burden of taxation has to be borne by the rich. Without doubt, this is directly an effect of

democracy [*minshushugi* 民主主義].(4)

The expression *minshu* is borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. This compound word already appears in the writing *Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan* (*Shunjū Sashi den*, "Commentary of Zuoshi about the Chunqiu writing," fourth century B.C.): "Those words [those lies] are not appropriate for a sovereign [*min shu* 民主, Chinese: *min zhu*]." (5)

This term was also used in another Classical Chinese writing, entitled *Guoyu* (*Kokugo*, "Narrative of the [Chunqiu-]Kingdoms," fourth century B.C.): "Our ruler is not capable of anything and lost the ability of *ruling over the country* [*min shu* 民主]." (6)

Therefore, the original meanings of the term *minshu* were "sovereign" and "ruling over the country," which is quite the opposite to the meaning, in which the term was used by Japanese intellectuals since the beginning of the Meiji era. The compound word *minshu* was taken from Classical Chinese writings, given a new meaning and connected with the suffix *-shugi* ("-ism").

In 1904, when Abe Isoo wrote his book about Swiss policy, the expression *minshushugi* was already established as an equivalent of the English "democracy." Abe used the term in a general meaning without giving any definition of his understanding of it. In the following, I will point out some translations of "democracy" which appear as interpretations and conceptions of the Western term.

2.2 The Term *minponshugi* 民本主義

The expression *minponshugi* was besides *minshushugi* the most frequently used translation of "democracy" during the first half of the Taishō period. The term became well-known through a number of writings by Yoshino Sakuzō (1878-1933) which helped to establish his reputation as the foremost theoretical exponent of the new democratic movement to protect constitutional government and party rule. In an article of 1915 entitled *Ôbei ni okeru kensei no hattatsu*

oyobi genjō ("The Development and Status Quo of Constitutional Government in Europe and America"), for the first time, Yoshino gave a proper definition of the term:

The Japanese word *minponshugi* 民本主義 is of very recent use. [...] I think [the Western word] "democracy," as used in the fields of law and political science, has at least two distinct meanings. In one sense, it means that "in law the sovereignty of the nation resides in the people." In the other it is used to mean that "in politics the fundamental end of the exercise of the nation's sovereignty should be the people." [...] I should like to use *minshushugi* 民主主義 and *minponshugi* 民本主義, respectively, as the suitable translations for these two senses of democracy.(7)

Yoshino made a clear distinction between the term *minshushugi*, meaning that "in law the sovereignty of the nation resides in the people," and the term *minponshugi* meaning that "in politics the fundamental end of the exercise of the nation's sovereignty should be the people." In other words, he used the term *minshushugi* as equivalent to the idea "government of the people, by the people" and *minponshugi* as expression of the notion "government for the people." Yoshino classified the Western term "democracy," being a complex of ideas, into two different senses and stated that only the concept of "government for the people" was suitable for Japanese constitutionalism. His interpretation of democracy was an adaptation to Japanese circumstances taking into consideration the absolute sovereignty of the emperor according to the Meiji Constitution of 1889.

The expression's first pair of *kanji* (*minpon* 民本, respectively *min/hon*) is also a borrowing from Classical Chinese sources. It appears in the aforesaid writing *Guoyu*: "Justice and morality are the *base of the people* [*min no hon* 民之本, Chinese: *min zhi ben*]." (8) The original meaning "base of the people" is quite similar to the sense, in which Yoshino Sakuzō used the expression

minpon, a compound word which stems from the phrase *min no hon*. Though being a well-known slogan during the Taishō period, today the term *minponshugi* is not in use anymore.

2.3 The Term *heiminshugi* 平民主義

The word *heiminshugi* was used already in the middle of the Meiji era by Tokutomi Iichirō (also Sohō, 1863-1957) in his book *Shōrai no Nihon* ("Future Japan") of 1886. Tokutomi was defining *heiminshugi* as freedom of the press, political and religious liberty as well as economic freedom and equality.⁽⁹⁾ Obviously, he used the term as a translation and conception of democracy.

Later on, *heiminshugi* became a key word of early socialism in Japan. The expression's first pair of *kanji* appeared in the title of the *Heimin shinbun*, and the compound word *heiminshugi* was used in the manifesto of its first number, written by Kōtoku Shūsui:

Freedom, equality and brotherhood - those are the three principles of human life. In order to realize freedom, we respect the idea of democracy [*heiminshugi* 平民主義]. Class distinctions between people of different origins, possessions and families shall be abolished and all suppression overturned.⁽¹⁰⁾

In this case, the expression *heiminshugi* was used in the sense of freedom and democratic rights in general. This shows how close early Japanese socialism was to democratic thought.

The expression *heimin* was also borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. This compound word already appears in the writing *Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan*: "Justice and loyalty are of great advantage. This advantage makes it possible to rule peacefully over the people [*hei min* 平民, Chinese: *ping min*]. This is the basic principle of politics."⁽¹¹⁾

Today, the word *heimin* only means "the common people" or "a commoner,"

and is not used anymore as a translation of "democracy."

2.4 The Term *minshūshugi* 民衆主義

The expression *minshūshugi* was mostly used at the beginning of the Taishō period. In his article *Minshūteki keikō to seitō* ("Democratic Tendencies and Political Parties"), Maruyama Kandō used the adjective *minshūteki* as a translation for the Western word "democratic":

To put the current democratic [*minshūteki* 民衆的] tendencies into practice, party rule has to be installed to break the overall power of the bureaucrats.⁽¹²⁾

Ishibashi Tanzan (1884-1973) used the noun *minshūshugi* in his article *Keizaikai to minshūshugi* ("The Economic World and Democracy"):

Since last year [1913] we have witnessed that in politics democracy [*minshūshugi* 民衆主義] is advancing and the call for reform is getting stronger every day.⁽¹³⁾

The compound word *minshū* is also borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. It appears in the *Guoyu* meaning "people" or "the masses": "To fill the stores and make the people [*min shū* 民衆, Chinese: *min zhong*] rich is the best way to avoid riots."⁽¹⁴⁾

Even today the adjective *minshūteki* means "democratic" or "popular," but the noun *minshū* is only used in the meaning of "the people" or "the general public."

2.5 The Term *minseishugi* 民政主義

In 1892, the jurist Tsuzuki Seiroku wrote a book entitled *Minseiron* ("An Essay on Democracy"). He translated "democracy" as *minsei* and defined it as

the establishment of civil rights and the participation of the majority of the people in national policy.⁽¹⁵⁾

At the beginning of the Taishō era, the terms *minsei* and *minseishugi* were used by Oda Yorozu in his article *Kokutai to minsei* ("Form of Polity and Democracy"):

Democracy [*demokurashī* デモクラシー] is not at all the opposite of monarchism but merely a form of government. Therefore, it is misleading to translate democracy [*demokurashī* デモクラシー] with the expression *minshusei* 民主制. To avoid misunderstandings, I prefer the term *minsei* 民政 as a translation. [...] Belgium and England laid down even in their constitutions that they are based upon democracy while, at the same time, remaining monarchies. This shows that from the view of constitutional law there is no opposition between monarchism and democracy [*demokurashī* デモクラシー]. [...] Constitutionalism therefore is equal to democracy [*minseishugi* 民政主義] and today's policy always has to reflect the will of the people.⁽¹⁶⁾

Oda Yorozu avoided the risky question of sovereignty, acknowledging the Tennō system and the governmental power of the emperor. Yet, he tried to prove that monarchism and democracy are not paradoxical. He believed that constitutionalism and democracy are identical, if democracy is defined as the principle of consulting and respecting the will of the people. Oda's notion of *minseishugi*, like Yoshino Sakuzō's concept of *minponshugi*, signified "government for the people" rather than "government of the people, by the people."

The compound word *minsei* also was borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. It appears in the *Song shi* (*Sōshi*, "The History of the Song"), written around 1100 A.C.: "It is forbidden that a high official of the emperor leave the palace to *rule over the people* [*min sei* 民政, Chinese: *min zheng*] himself."⁽¹⁷⁾

Today, the expression *minsei* is no longer used as a literal translation of

"democracy," but still means "civil administration," which in fact is very close to the usage of this term during the Meiji and Taishô eras.

2.6 The term *gasshûshugi* 合衆主義

The term *gasshûshugi* was in use only for a very short time and appeared in an anonymous article entitled *Fuan to kôan* ("Fear and Insecurity") of the *Yorozu chôhō* ("General Morning News") in 1912:

The democratic [*gasshûteki* 合衆的] consciousness is one of the main reasons for the frequent occurrence of strikes in Europe. That is why democracy [*gasshûshugi* 合衆主義] is often compared with the little child of a giant: Though aware of his future power, the baby-boy is not yet able to stand on his own feet.(18)

The compound *gasshû* was also borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. It was already used in the *Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan*: "I [Hui Gong, leader of the Jin-Kingdom, one of the Kingdoms during the Chunqiu period (770-403 b.C.)] am not able [of leading a war]. Yet, we have to *gather many people* [*gasshû* 合衆, Chinese: *he zhong*] and can not leave from here [before giving the battle]." (19)

Today, the term is only used within the expression *Amerika gasshûkoku* ("United States of America").

2.7 The term *minjûshugi* 民重主義

The term *minjûshugi* appears in an article of Ogura Sohō entitled *Yoshino hakase no kenseiron o yomu* ("Reading Dr. Yoshino's Theories on Constitutional Government," 1916):

In our country there is no democracy [*demokurashi* デモクラシー] like Dr. Yoshino was translating it as *minshushugi* 民主主義 and *minponshugi*

民本主義. [...] Instead, in Japan, the idea of 'respecting the people' [*tami o omonjiru*・*omonzuru* 民を重んずる・重んじる = *minjūshugi* 民重主義] can be found. The people are acting in assistance of the Government.⁽²⁰⁾

Ogura Sohō delivered a new conception and adaptation of the Western notion of "democracy" to Japanese circumstances.

The compound word *minjūshugi* does not exist in Classical Chinese sources and therefore is a new coinage or a newly-coined word. Today, this term is no longer in use.

2.8 The term *jinponshugi* 人本主義

The term *jinponshugi* appears in an article by the psychologist Anezaki Masaharu entitled *Jinponshugi no jikkō* ("About the Realization of Democracy," *Chūō kōron*, 1918):

Also the state is part of the experiences called human life and every politics has to contribute to the realization of an overall democracy [*jinponshugi* 人本主義].⁽²¹⁾

Anezaki used the term *jinponshugi* in a very broad meaning as an equivalent to "democracy" in the fields of politics, education, economics, military and social life. The expression *jinponshugi* is a newly-coined word, since it was not used as a compound in Classical Chinese sources. The term is no longer existing in today's usage.

2.9 The term *minseishugi* 民生主義

The term *minseishugi* was used by the philosopher and politician Kita Reikichi (1885-1961) in his article entitled *Kokka minseishugi o teishōsu* ("Proposing National Democracy," *Chūgai*, 1918):

I am using the word *minseishugi* 民生主義 as a synthesis of political and economical democracy. [...] Since the existence of the state depends on the contribution of every individual, democracy [*minseishugi* 民生主義] appears to be the basis of the nation. (22)

The compound word *minseishugi* was borrowed from Classical Chinese sources. It appears in the *Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan*: "Virtue and morality are ensuring *welfare* [*minsei* 民生]." (23)

The term can also be found in the *Guoyu*: "Since *human life* [*minsei* 民生] is not too long, I beg You, your Majesty [the King of Yue, a kingdom of the Chunqiu period (770-403 B.C.)], please do not die!" (24)

The expression *minsei* means "welfare" or "human life" even in today's usage, and was only during the Taishō period used in the meaning of "political and economical democracy."

3. Conclusion

Astonishingly, there is no Japanese research so far exploring the origin and usage of the neologisms mentioned above. It was the aim of this paper to give the first etymological study of the various translations of "democracy" being in use during the Meiji and Taishō eras.

The most important task was to distinguish between those words that are newly coined and those that are borrowed from Classical Chinese and given a new meaning. For this reason, expressions which already exist in Classical Chinese sources had to be traced to their origins and compared with their modern usage. The following table gives a survey of the Japanese translations for the Western term "democracy" being in use during the late Meiji and the Taishō era:

- Etymological Category: 1 = borrowing of Classical Chinese sources
2 = newly-coined word
- Meaning: a = literal translation
b = partial interpretation
c = new conception
d = expanded usage ("economical democracy," "social democracy," "mental democracy")

Term:	Etymological Category:	Meaning:	Representative(s):
民主主義 <i>minshushugi</i>	1	a	Abe Isoo, Yoshino Sakuzô
民本主義 <i>minponshugi</i>	1	b	Yoshino Sakuzô
平民主義 <i>heiminshugi</i>	1	d	Tokutomi Iichirô, Kôtoku Shûsui
民衆主義 <i>minshûshugi</i>	1	b	Maruyama Kandô, Ishibashi Tanzan
民政主義 <i>minseishugi</i>	1	b	Tsuzuki Seiroku, Oda Yorozu
合衆主義 <i>gasshûshugi</i>	1	a	anonymous
民重主義 <i>minjûshugi</i>	2	c	Ogura Sohô
人本主義 <i>jinponshugi</i>	2	d	Anezaki Masaharu
民生主義 <i>minseishugi</i>	1	d	Kita Reikichi

Except for the established translation *minshushugi*, all those terms do no longer exist in today's usage. Most of those neologisms are borrowings from Classical Chinese sources. Only the terms *minjūshugi* and *jinponshugi* do not exist in the Classical Chinese vocabulary. One third of the translations for the Western term "democracy" are partial interpretations of its concept, another one third are expanded usages with broad meanings like "economical democracy," "social democracy" or "mental democracy." Only *minshushugi* and *gasshūshugi* are literal translations. *Minjūshugi* ("respecting the people") is a completely new conception and adaptation of the Western idea of "democracy" to Japanese circumstances.

The neologism *demokurashī* デモクラシー, written in *katakana* characters was not mentioned in the above table. Unlike the compound words written in Chinese characters, this phonetic loanword is of less expressiveness, since it was mostly used as a literal equivalent to "democracy in the West."

Japanese scholars did not yet study the derivation of the equivalents to the Western notion of democracy, though this should be considered as the starting-point of all research about the introduction of democratic ideas in prewar Japan. Research projects about the history of ideas of a certain era should be connected with an etymological approach. However, etymological studies of key words and important concepts in combination with historical analysis of its authors and its usage are still extremely rare in Japan. Hopefully, interdisciplinary research methods will be accepted in the near future in order to deepen our understanding of the movements of intellectuals during the late Meiji and the Taishō era.

Notes

- (1) See sections 2.1 and 2.3 of this report.
- (2) See for example Kinbara, Samon, *Taishō demokurashī no shakaiteki keisei* [The Social Formation of Taishō Democracy] (Tōkyō: Aoki shoten, 1967), Matsuo, Takayoshi, *Taishō demokurashī* (Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten, 1974), Mitani, Taichirō, *Taishō demokurashī ron* [Essays about Taishō Democracy] (Tōkyō: Chūō kōronsha, 1974) and Ōta, Masao, *Taishō*

- demokurashî kenkyû* [Studies on Taishô Democracy] (Tôkyô: Shinsensha, 1975).
- (3) Quoted from Sumiya, Etsuji, *Demokurashî yakujî kô* [Studies about the Translation of Democracy]. In: *Kenkyûshitsu no uchisoto*. Kyôto: Ôsaka fukushi zaidan Kyôto hodôsho, p. 43.
- (4) Abe, Isoo, *Chijô no risôkoku - Suisu* [Ideal State on Earth - Switzerland] (Tôkyô: Daiichi shuppan, 1947 [1904]), 5, 23, 26.
- (5) Kamata, Tadashi (ed.), *Shunjû Sashi den* 3 [Commentary of Zuoshi about the Chunqiu writing, Vol. 3]. Shinshaku kanbun taikai, 32 (Tôkyô: Meiji shoin, 1977), 1172.
- (6) Ôno, Takashi (ed.), *Kokugo ge* [Narrative of the (Chunqiu-)Kingdoms, the Last Volume]. Shinshaku kanbun taikai, 67 (Tôkyô: Meiji shoin, 1978), 493.
- (7) Yoshino, Sakuzô, Ôbei ni okeru kensei no hattatsu oyobi genjô. Minponshugi I. [The development and Status Quo of Constitutional Government in Europe and America. Minponshugi I.]. In: *Kokumin kôdan* 2 (July 1915), pp. 16-18.
- (8) Ôno, Takashi (ed.), *Kokugo ge*, 511.
- (9) Tokutomi, Ichirô, *Shôrai no Nihon* [Future Japan] (Tôkyô: Keizai zasshisha, 1888 [1886]), 105.
- (10) Kôtoku, Shûsui, Sengen [Manifesto]. In: *Heimin shinbun* 1 (November 1903), p. 1.
- (11) Kamata, Tadashi (ed.), *Shunjû Sashi den* 3, 674.
- (12) Maruyama, Kandô, Minshûteki keikô to seitô [Democratic Tendencies and Political Parties]. In: *Nihon oyobi Nihonjin* (January 1913), 713.
- (13) Ishibashi, Tanzan, Keizaikai to minshûshugi [The Economic World and Democracy]. In: *Tôyô keizai shinpô* 667 (April 1914), 8.
- (14) Ôno, Takashi (ed.), *Kokugo ge*, 813.
- (15) See Sumiya, Etsuji, *Demokurashî yakujî kô* [Studies about the Translation of Democracy], p. 49.
- (16) Oda, Yorozu, Kokutai to minsei [Form of Polity and Democracy]. In: *Taiyô* 19/8 (June 1913), p. 67.
- (17) Tuo, Tuo (ed.), *Song shi* [The History of the Song] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 153.
- (18) Anonymous, Fuan to kôan [Fear and insecurity]. In: *Yorozu chôhō* 6811 (July 1912), p. 1.
- (19) Kamata, Tadashi (ed.), *Shunjû Sashi den* 3, 318f.
- (20) Ogura, Sohô, Yoshino hakase no kenseiron o yomu [Reading Dr. Yoshino's Theories on Constitutional Government]. In: *Kôsui igô* 3, 21 (January 1916), p. 12.
- (21) Anezaki, Masaharu, Jinponshugi no jikkô [About the Realization of Democracy]. In: *Chûô kôron* 33,1 (January 1918), p. 57.
- (22) Kita, Reikichi, Kokka minseishugi o teishôsu [Proposing National Democracy]. In:

Chūgai (April 1918), p. 51f.

㉓ Kamata, Tadashi (ed.), *Shunjū Sashi den* 3, 785f.

㉔ Ono, Takashi (ed.), *Kokugo ge*, 793f.

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