

FUKUZAWA YUKICHI AND KARL MARX ON THE ‘STAGNATION’ AND THE ‘OPENING’ OF ASIAN SOCIETIES¹ AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH OF COMPARATIVE RECEPTION HISTORY

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the initial results of a research project investigating the reception of China by Japanese thinkers and their European contemporaries. First, I will elaborate on certain challenges of comparative intercultural analyses (1) and introduce my methodological approach of ‘comparative reception history’ (2). Then, I will use the comparative analysis of Fukuzawa Yukichi’s 福沢諭吉 (1835-1901) and Karl Marx’s (1818-1883) views on China in an experimental application of this methodology (3). The examination is grounded on the resemblance between Fukuzawa’s and Marx’s views on Asian ‘stagnation’ but, as I will argue, it is the differences of their interpretation that help us to interpret their ideas from innovative perspectives, as well as shedding light on how differently the ‘same’ notions appear in different cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Keywords: Fukuzawa Yukichi; Karl Marx; Asian stagnation; Japanese reception of China; European reception of China; comparative philosophy.

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1. Introduction³

Since the second half of the 20th century, a continuous growth in the importance and popularity of intercultural comparative research in human and social sciences has occurred. This tendency is particularly apparent in the case of comparisons between the intellectual history of Asia and European history of philosophy. The comparison is sometimes motivated by superficial resemblances; e.g., an overlap in time such as in the case of Confucius and Socrates (see the famous topic of “Confucius, le Socrate de la Chine”, to be found as early as 1642 in the work of La Mothe Le Vayer). However, as Smid notes, “the greater historical and cultural distance among the

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traditions represented” makes a case even more interesting from a perspective of comparative philosophy (Smid, 2009: 2), and the reasons for attempting a comparison between thinkers divided by centuries (or millennia) vary widely.

First, many comparisons are founded on the conviction that in a rapidly globalising world that is, at the same time, suffering from an insufficiency of means of communication, from disintegration, and the lack of solidarity, there is a need for universally understandable truths as means to create better societies. In 1982, Sandra Wawrytko wrote in a comparative examination of Kant and Confucius,

Delineating a theory of ethics which entails successful practical applications has long been a challenge to the best philosophical minds of both East and West. Thus, it is encouraging to note that two of the most outstanding ethical philosophers, although from diverse times and backgrounds, set forth doctrines for positive social interaction with a common foundation. (Wawrytko, 1982: 237)

This common foundation would be, to use Wawrytko's term, “the ethics of respect”, and the reason why such a common foundation is to be sought is the *encouragement* one can find in discovering similarities between thinkers from different ages and cultures standing on a “common foundation”. Maybe the most famous historical example of this kind of comparative heuristic stemming in the detection of universal truths was G.W. Leibniz finding the link between his binary arithmetic and the hexagrams of the *Yijing* (Cook-Rosemont, 1994: 8) – except for the difference that in his case, he himself stood on one end of the comparison. (For an approach similar to that of Wawrytko in the context of Kant and Confucius, see the 2006 special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* on the topic, especially Chung-ying Cheng's introduction: Cheng, 2006; see also Hashi's critical comments [2016: 267-268]).

Second, the comparison is usually motivated by an attempt to explain certain occurrences or phenomena in Asia by finding their counterparts in Western (intellectual) history. This technique is not necessarily applied by Western scholars but the texts of non-European thinkers using this approach usually “present an example of how European theory is reproduced in a non-European context” (Conrad, 1999: 375). In his examination of Tokugawa Confucianism, Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 (1914-1996) argued that there was a similarity between the 18th century dissolution of Song Confucianism in Japan and 14th century European scholastic thought (Maruyama, 1974: 179-180). The framework of the comparison was provided by his frequent use of the terms ‘natural’ (*shizen*) and ‘man-made’ (*sakui*), the separation of which, with the emphasis on the latter, characterised later Tokugawa thought in his interpretation. In a 2002 critique, Shōgimen Takashi argued that Maruyama's understanding was influenced by a Marxist interpretation of history that expected to find the appearance of the same formations in different countries and cultures. That being said, Shōgimen's critique also introduced a comparison, i.e.,

between Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666-1728) and the 14th century Italian thinker Marsilius de Padua (1275-1342), pointing out that there were similarities between their interpretations of the operation of their societies. This was the “awareness that human diversity and the realization of the communal goal are not incompatible”; what Shōgimen called “communal functionalism” following Cary Nederman (Shogimen, 2002: 507). Without examining the arguments in detail, this case of one Japanese thinker criticizing the Japanese–European comparison of another Japanese thinker through another Japanese–European comparison is symbolic in terms of the importance of the comparative approach in non-European self-interpretation. Of course, we can easily find cases of European self-interpretation applying a similar perspective, e.g., by looking at Max Weber’s studies on Asia (see Takó, 2022).

Third, in many cases the comparison is linked to a technique that explains certain notions, most often central technical terms, by defining them with terms from Western (philosophical) traditions. Such comparisons are usually aimed not only (or not mainly) at discussing *both* of the compared traditions but at interpreting *one* of them from a new perspective by detecting elements in it that seem to resemble elements in another one that is more familiar to the interpreter or to the presumed audience (Yu, 2007: 3 discusses the same issue in an introduction to a comparison between Aristotle and Confucius). In Blocker and Starling’s *Japanese Philosophy*, for example, we read that the

most interesting [thing] about Japanese followers of Zhu Xi (Shushi) is their complete rejection of his notion that the ultimate reality of the world is the abstract, immaterial, eternal, and unchanging li. Korean Confucianists, by contrast, took this ‘Platonic’ element in Zhu quite seriously, actively debating for centuries whether both li and qi existed (that is, as in the debate between Plato and Aristotle, whether the abstract li could exist independently of the material qi), and if so, which of the two was primary. (Blocker-Starling, 2001: 70)

Here even the grammatical formulation implies that Plato and Aristotle were, in fact, debating about *li* and *qi*, while the aim of the interpreters was, of course, to explain the Confucian debate on *li* and *qi* by using the Platonic belief in the existence of form without matter and Aristotle’s objections of that belief as a parallel.

While I agree with Tagore, who argued that a distinction should be made between “comparative philosophy whose task is to decipher sameness and difference across traditions and the idea of world philosophy” (Tagore, 2017: 536), it is not my intention to criticize *any* kind (or a particular case) of ‘comparative’ or ‘intercultural’ philosophy as the realm of “mediation between the particularity of the individual philosophies” (Mall, 2000: 1). The previous examples were only intended to draw attention to the fact that these most diverse cases of comparison have one common feature, namely that the starting point of the argumentation, the link between the compared objects, the ‘common denominator’ that enables the interpreter to compare

them at all, is already a consequence: the result of an interpretative process in which one or more element(s) present in one of the examined objects was found to resemble some elements of the another one. Such overlaps might be plausibly argued for, but it is hardly deniable that they must indeed be argued for by the interpreter who 'discovered' them. (The means applied in such argumentation are usually anchored in Western philosophy, but the eventual West-centrism of such approaches will not be discussed here.) This problem is, of course, not new in the realm of 'comparative philosophy': Hashi, for instance, stressed the strict requirement that the focus of meaningful philosophical comparison "must unequivocally be on *one and the same thematic subject* of two philosophers" (Hashi, 2016: 272). However, regarding Hashi's example, i.e., the concept of 'Being' (*Sein*) in Western and Asian thinkers (Plato-Nāgārjuna; Heidegger-Nishida; Hegel-Dōgen) the question can still be raised: how much interpretation is needed to identify a certain term or idea in Nāgārjuna, Nishida or Dōgen as 'Being' (*Sein*) – which is only a *prerequisite* of a comparison with a Western thinker's concept of 'the same'. The absence of an undeniable common ground does not falsify the comparative endeavour, but the challenges rooted in it may encourage us to ask whether it is possible to create a framework in which intercultural comparisons are based on a *factually* common ground between the two elements compared and, if it is, what may be the 'strengths' of such a method and what are its limitations (regarding the reflection on various comparative methods see Smid, 2009: 10-12). In the present paper, I will discuss a methodological approach to comparative analysis grounded in an existing common denominator, meant to provide an undebatable common ground between two concepts or ideas, offering an alternative way of carrying out comparative examinations on the realm of philosophy or intellectual history.

2. Comparative reception history – the methodological approach

The present experimental investigation started with the question of *whether* and *how* it would be possible to apply a comparative method that is based on *one* truly common element of the thought of two thinkers or schools, one of them representing Japanese intellectual history, the other one representing European history of philosophy. The main principle of the present approach is to ground the comparison in one undeniable link that connects the two selected thinkers, thus providing a secure starting point for the examination without prioritising either of the compared objects.

One thing that connects many figures in the Sino-centric cultural sphere and Europe is that they reflected, in some way, on China, i.e., on Chinese thought and/or social structures, represented in many cases by Confucian teachings. My thesis is that certain thinkers' ideas can be compared based on the overlap between their views manifested in their reflection on China and Confucianism. I will argue in the present

paper through an example that such a comparative examination can lead to new insights with regard to the thought of both thinkers.

One might call this method ‘comparative reception history,’ and in that sense it is, of course, not without precedents if we think of works such as *The Comparative Reception of Relativity* (Glick [ed.], 1987), or literary studies such as Casanova’s examinations of the reception of Ibsen (Casanova, 2007). These are, however, reception histories written from a comparative perspective, so to speak, cases of writing *reception history by comparison*. In the present case, my intention is not to examine the reception of Chinese thought or society: on the contrary, China and the Chinese intellectual tradition serve as a means to compare certain ideas of two thinkers, using their reflection on that tradition as a common segment of their thought, and a starting point for the comparative analysis. What happens here is, in this sense, *comparison by reception history*. Recently, Okada Yōsuke (2023: 74-75) took an approach to a comparative analysis of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 and Friedrich Schleiermacher from the aspect of their “romantic Spinozism” that shares certain features with the framework of the present research. Okada linked his method with a project from the 1980s centred around Spinoza’s reception in various countries (see Henrich [ed.], 1985).

Of course, when I say that the individuals whose thought is compared reflect on the ‘same’ tradition, social order, teachings etc., this can only be understood *cum grano salis*. Japanese thinkers of the Edo period, for instance, knew incomparably more about Confucianism than their European contemporaries who had to rely solely on the strongly biased interpretation of Jesuit missionaries (Jones, 2001: 14-33). However, the overlap of the depictions of Chinese society and Confucianism by the various thinkers should only provide the ground for a comparative examination that will then shed light on the related similarities and differences between them (on the importance of difference in comparative philosophy see Yu, 2007: 8). This consideration is the reason why the terms ‘China,’ ‘Chinese society,’ ‘Confucianism’ etc. will be applied somewhat broadly – but not vaguely – in the first instance. Furthermore, in the case of Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1835-1901) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) examined below it must also be stressed in this respect that the fact that they were contemporaries also means that it is not simply ‘China’ or ‘Chinese society’ in general that they both discussed and I can consider ‘the same,’ but also certain occurrences and processes happening in China during their lifetimes.

Since the prerequisite that the compared parties reflected in some way on China is intended to serve as the starting point for the comparison, I considered it useful to define some very broad ‘categories’ of the reflection on China and Chinese thought and select thinkers who belong to the same approach. I argued elsewhere (Takó, 2024a, following Millar, 2010) that the traditional categorisation of ‘sinophilia’ and ‘sinophobia’ is insufficient to examine certain 19th-century interpretations of China and suggested a less schematic approach to the European reception of Chinese

thought. In order for the categorisation to become applicable to non-European thinkers, the definition of categories had to be further broadened. The result is the following taxonomy:

1. Affirmation – handling China as a model, arguing in a certain way for the adoption of certain practices, teachings etc. from China. As an example of this category, I examined Ogyū Sorai's (1666-1728) and Voltaire's (1694-1778) interpretations as affirmations of Confucianism (Takó, 2024b).
2. Criticism – a critique of China and Confucianism and a rejection of adopting (or even accepting) models they provide. An analysis of the related ideas of Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) is ongoing at the time of writing the present paper.
3. Change-based view – an approach exploring the possibility of changing social structures rooted in ancient Chinese social models (propagated mainly by Confucianism). The comparison of Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1835-1901) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) carried out below belongs to this category.
4. Scholarly interpretation – handling Confucianism from a 'scholarly perspective' yet with certain (philosophical) (pre)conceptions. An examination of Maruyama Masao (1914-1996) and Max Weber (1864-1920) as an example of this approach is being prepared. (While the above three comparisons have, to my knowledge, not yet been attempted, Maruyama and Weber have been discussed together – see, e.g., Takimura, 1987).

To put the present examination in a broader context, it is important to mention that many of the above thinkers in Japan and Europe also reflected on each other and can be considered significant representatives of a particular realm of thought. This realm can be broadly defined in the present research framework as 'historical thinking,' i.e., interpreting changes affecting a country or a society in the broadest sense. In this regard we can find the links between Ogyū–Motoori–Fukuzawa–Maruyama on the one hand (Maruyama, 1974), and Voltaire–Hegel–Marx–Weber on the other (Song, 1972; Davis, 1983).

In the present paper, I will limit myself to the analysis of some representative works of the thinkers I examine: in the case of Fukuzawa, his *Outline of a Theory of Civilisation* (*Bunmeiron no gairyaku* 文明論之概略); in the case of Marx, his articles and brief comments on China. First, I will provide an overview of how China and Chinese thought are depicted in these works, then I will turn to their comparative analysis.

3. *Fukuzawa Yukichi and Karl Marx on China and Confucianism*

3.1 *China and Japan in Fukuzawa's theory of civilization*⁴

While the Meiji-era (1868-1912) can rightfully be considered one of the most significant periods of change in Japanese history, it is characterised by various internal tensions between the 'old' and the 'new' as well as between the 'own' or 'native' and the 'strange'. First, the era was meant to bring almost 700 years of shogunal rule to an end, but instead of grounding this break with the past in "new principles that override the existing order and its basic principles of legitimation" (Eisenstadt, 1996: 271), the foundation of the new era was the 'restoration' of the power of the *tennō* and, conducted *from above*, the creation of a new state structure, making the 'revolution' of the Japanese social order different from all Western and Asian examples (Jansen-Rozman, 1988: 10). Japanese intellectuals – most of whom also held important government positions – were making efforts to follow examples of nation-building from the West, leaving behind what they saw as the backwardness of their own past, even being warned by Western thinkers such as Herbert Spencer that a connection to the native past is a strong prerequisite for building a nation (Duncan, 2014: 161). Second, Japan's relationship with the West was no less ambivalent, as it will become clear through the example of Fukuzawa Yukichi. Although efforts were made, particularly in the early years of the Meiji-era, to import Western achievements, soon fear of the West surpassed admiration and a central aim of Meiji leaders and intellectuals became the avoidance of dependence on the West (Beasley, 2000: 96-101; Oguma, 2002: 9-11). Third, while Japanese intellectuals were systematically importing ideas from the West and turning away from the Chinese tradition in which they saw one of the reasons why Japan had not been able to make progress like Western countries, they were naturally applying Chinese (in many cases Confucian) concepts together with the written Chinese characters when introducing Western notions to Japan. Thus, "there was less of a radical break with the Confucian intellectual tradition in mid-nineteenth century Japan than we tend to believe" (Wakabayashi, 1984: 491). These ambivalences of Japan's relationship with itself, with the West, and with China are well depicted in Fukuzawa Yukichi's oeuvre.

Fukuzawa Yukichi's (1835-1901) works were enormously popular in the early Meiji period (Jansen, 2000: 460), and his influence on the intellectual transformation of this era is undeniable (Craig, 2009: 1). With regard to his early years, he is usually considered a liberal reformer, turning towards imperialistic nationalism near the end of his life. These aspects of his thought were, however, even if in different

⁴ I wrote more broadly in a Hungarian article about the topics of this sub-section (Takó, 2024c).

proportions, all present in his writings in the 1870s (Uemura, 2016: 10), as will be seen in the analysis of his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* 文明論之概略 (1875).

The *Bunmeiron* starts by defining Western civilization as a goal for Japan, then goes on to define civilization, before engaging in an extensive discussion on the relationship between civilization and the “knowledge and virtue” of the people. At the end of the work, Fukuzawa contrasts the origins of Western and Japanese civilization, and defines the final goal for Japan as national independence (for overviews in English, see Craig, 2009: 100-143 and Seifert, 2021; in Japanese, see Maruyama, 1996, Koyasu, 2006). Here I will focus on the elements of the work related to Fukuzawa’s views on history and the Chinese influence on Japan’s past and future.

As an object of the theory of civilization, Fukuzawa defines the “development of the human spirit” (*hito no seishin* 人の精神), understood not only with regard to individuals but to “everyone under heaven” (*tenka shūjin* 天下衆人, Fukuzawa 2008: 1/ FYZ: 1292). This spirit

is a people’s spiritual makeup [kifū 気風]. This spirit can be neither bought nor sold. Nor again can it be readily created through use of manpower. It permeates the entire lifestream of a people and is manifest on a wide scale in the life of the nation [or country, koku 国]. [...] In respect to time, it may be called the ‘trend of the times’ [jisei 時勢]. In reference to persons, it may be called ‘human sentiments’ [jinshin 人心]. With regard to a nation as a whole, it may be called ‘a nation’s ways’ [kokuzoku 国俗] or ‘national opinion’ [kokuron 国論]. (Fukuzawa, 2008: 22 / FYZ: 1311-1312)

This interpretation may remind us of the concept of *Volksgeist* in German philosophy of history (see, e.g., Herder, 1989: 228, Hegel, 1961: 118). There is, however, no traceable connection between Fukuzawa’s ideas and German idealism (Seifert, 2021: 53, n. 6). Fukuzawa was, at the same time, well versed in British social thought, and Mill’s *On Liberty* had a clear influence on the *Bunmeiron* (Hane, 1969: 262, 265), so it is probable that Mill’s concept of the spirit of the age influenced his central views cited above (see, e.g., Mill, 2003: 88-89; however, Fukuzawa was probably not familiar with Mill’s essay series *The Spirit of the Age*).

Fukuzawa’s main concern was not to define civilization but to point out the practical aspects of Japan’s progress towards it. He saw Japan as a representative of “semi-civilized” (*hankai* 半開) countries, hoping that it was possible to “elevat[e] Japanese civilization to parity with the West, or even [to] surpass it” (Fukuzawa, 2008: 2 / FYZ: 1293). While the categorisation of civilized–semi-civilized–barbarian was grounded in Western authors such as Samuel Augustus Mitchell and John Hill Burton (Craig, 2009: 103), it was most important for Fukuzawa, as Seifert (2021: 51-52) rightfully stressed, that it was only a question of eventuality which country stood in

which stage. Thus, for Fukuzawa, it was mainly a question of decision and effort whether Japan could catch up with the West *or even surpass it* – a minor comment already showing the spark of the nationalism that would permeate Fukuzawa's thought later.

While only semi-civilized, Japan was, in Fukuzawa's opinion, in a particularly fortunate position to make the decision to become fully civilized, particularly in comparison with China. There, in fact, authority based on the relationship with the divine (*shinsei* 神政) had never been separated from military power, while in Japan these were divided due to shogunal rule. This division was the source of a third notion, the presence of a certain 'order,' 'regularity' or, to use modern terms, 'reason' or 'logic' (*dōri* 道理) behind this order. From the fact that neither of these factors has priority over the others, "naturally followed a spirit of freedom [*jiyū no kifū* 自由の気風]" (Fukuzawa, 2008: 28 / FYZ: 1318). True, in the 1870s Fukuzawa saw Japan as semi-civilized, just like China – by the end of the century he came to see Japan as civilized compared to a barbaric China. Still, already in the 1870s he saw Japan as first among semi-civilized equals, the one that had the chance to break out of its current state.

The reasons for Fukuzawa's opposition to Chinese tradition are detailed in the framework of the origins of Japanese civilization. In particular, an element central to his critique of Japan is the complete monopolization of scholarship by the government that went hand in hand with despotism rooted in the Confucian teaching.

For who were the ones teaching government absolutism [or a 'centralised system [of power], 'sensei 専制]? Even if in essence all government contains an element [genso 元素] of absolutism, were not those who were helping that element develop and encouraging it none other than the Confucian scholars [kanjusharyū no gakumon 漢儒者流の學問]? Of all the Confucianists who have ever been in Japan, those who enjoyed a reputation as most talented and most capable were the greatest experts on absolutism, and the greatest tools of the government. In regard to absolutism, then, the Confucianists were the teachers and the government was the pupil. Alas, we Japanese of today are their descendants! (Fukuzawa, 2008: 197 FYZ: 1484, see Maruyama, 1996: 188-189; Koyasu, 2006: 240-241; Beasley, 2000: 98)

At the same point, Fukuzawa mentions two other causes of the stagnation of Japan: the lack of autonomy and freedom (*jishujiyū* 自主自由) of the samurai (Fukuzawa, 2008: 200/ FYZ: 1487), and – as the main factor – the lack of equality between the government and the people. While in the West, he says, governmental actions are manifestations of the will of the people, in Japan the relationship between the two is like that between enemies (Fukuzawa, 2008: 208/ FYZ: 1494). There is a similar gap in the economy between those who participate in production (*seizaisha* 生財者) and those who do not (Fukuzawa, 2008: 215/ FYZ: 1501-1502). These practical

considerations seem to be inseparably connected with his opinion about the Confucian influence on Japanese power structures described above. In this regard, Fukuzawa speaks in the very same spirit when recalling the establishment and development of his school, Keiō Gijuku 慶應義塾, in his autobiography at the end of the century. With regard to a lack of knowledge of “studies in number and reason [sūrigaku 数理學]” and “a lack of the idea of independence [dokuritsushin 独立心]” he writes:

I reasoned that Chinese philosophy as the root of education [kangaku kyōiku 漢学教育] was responsible for our obvious shortcomings. [...]

It is not only that I hold little regard for the Chinese teaching, but I have even been endeavoring to drive its degenerate influences from my country. (Fukuzawa, 1960: 215-216 /FYZ: 814-815 – translation slightly altered)

Thus, while Fukuzawa admitted in the *Bunmeiron* that the level of civilization reached by the countries of Asia is grounded in the Confucian teachings (besides Buddhism – Fukuzawa, 2008: 197/ FYZ: 1482), he vehemently rejected this tradition. At the same time, there are obvious traces of Confucian influence in his works. In the four central chapters of *Bunmeiron*, Fukuzawa discusses “knowledge and virtue” (*chitoku* 智徳), relying mainly on Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* (Maruyama, 1996: 294-295). The characters of *chi* and *toku* have a long history in Chinese thought: *chi* (Ch. *zhi*) meaning ‘to know,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘wisdom’ (Karlgrén, 1996: 863b) is one of the Confucian ‘virtues’ (*toku*, Ch. *de* 徳), i.e., features possessed by men from birth that are to be refined by paying continuous attention to oneself. But Fukuzawa also uses these terms in another sense: he defines *toku* by the English term ‘morals’ (*moraru* モラル) which is then explained as follows: they “refer to a person’s interior good behaviour; they enable a person to feel ashamed of nothing within his heart[-mind, *kokoro* 心] and to do nothing shameful even when alone” (Fukuzawa, 2008: 99/ FYZ: 1389). This formulation is but a reference to one of the most important Chinese classics, a frequent reference point of the Confucian tradition, the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經, Daya 大雅, Yi 抑, 7, see Maruyama, 1996: 370). Thus, by identifying ‘morals’ with *toku*, Fukuzawa introduces a concept that, at least in its contemporary Western meaning,⁵ had not been present in the intellectual traditions of Japan, but he does so by creating the impression that it was present in the earliest Confucian texts. This example is characteristic of how Fukuzawa, like many Meiji-era thinkers who were educated in a Confucian atmosphere, explicitly rejected the Confucian tradition while still thinking in its categories in a tacit way (Kurozumi, 2003: 218; Ou, 2016: 65, 70).

⁵ It is not possible in the framework of the present paper to examine the most difficult meaning complexes of ‘ethics,’ ‘virtues’ and ‘morals/morality’ which are also problematic within the Western philosophical tradition (see, e.g., Annas, 1992; Lee, 2017), and probably even more so in a Confucian context (see, e.g., Chan, 2002).

3.2 China (and Asia) in Marx's views on history

Marx held the view that historical progress is primarily determined by the continuously re-evolving tension between powers of production and relations of production. Changes in human societies are governed by needs and their fulfilment, making space for new needs and so forth.

Thus it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a "history" irrespective of the existence of any political or religious nonsense which would especially hold men together. (Marx–Engels: *The German Ideology*, MEW 5: 43)

This approach to historical progress is the reason why Marx's thoughts on Asia – to be found in brief references in his main works, short newspaper articles on India and China, and his excerpts of Vladimir Kovalevsky's studies on Asia – most rarely mention religious and philosophical aspects of Asian cultures. Corresponding to his general interpretation of history, his approach to Asia was also in sharp contrast with early 19th-century interpretations of similar topics – such as that of Hegel – that described history as a process of conflicting ideological factors and, consequently, explained the state of China in terms of its intellectual traditions. In the framework applied by Marx, periods of history – from the early transformation of land ownership until the appearance of capital – followed each other and were decisively influenced by modes of production: the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the capitalistic. The phase that is of central importance in my current investigation is the so-called Asiatic mode of production, which sparked serious debates in 20th century literature on Marx (see Bailey–Llobera [eds.], [1981] 2019; Dunn, 1982).

The first time Marx wrote about the East was in 1853 when he examined the role of the British East India Company in the transformation of the Asia Pacific region (Hobsbawm, 1965: 21–22). It is obvious from his early texts that Marx was convinced that property relations had not gone through significant changes since the earliest form of society (Tōkei, [1981] 2019: 250). "The broad basis of the mode of production" in India and China, he writes in the third volume of *Capital*,

is formed by the unity of small-scale agriculture and home industry, to which in India we should add the form of village communities resting upon the common ownership of land, which, incidentally, was the original form in China as well. (Marx: *Capital*, Vol. III, MEW 37: 332)

The *Grundrisse* explains the tension between such "common ownership of land" and the power structure of "Asian despotism" as follows. It is typical, on the one hand, of Asian communities that although individuals "relate naively to [earth] as the

property of the community” in which “[e]ach individual regards himself as a proprietor or owner only qua member of such a community,” this, however,

does not contradict it at all, for instance, that, as in most Asiatic fundamental forms, the all-embracing unity which stands above all these small communities may appear as the higher or as the sole proprietor, and the real communities, therefore, merely as hereditary occupiers. Since the unity is the real proprietor, and the real precondition of common property, it is quite possible for it to appear as something distinct over and above the many real, particular communities. The individual is then in fact propertyless, or property – i.e. the relation of the individual to the natural conditions of labour and reproduction as belonging to him, as the objective body of his subjectivity present in the form of inorganic nature – appears to be mediated for him through a concession from the total unity – a unity realised in the despot as the father of the many communities – to the individual via the particular commune. (Marx: Economic Manuscripts, MEW 28: 400–401)

Thus Marx, like 18th century European admirers of China such as Voltaire, describes the foundation of Asian power structures as ‘patriarchal.’ However, similarly to late 18th and 19th century historical thinkers, he labels the structure of power as ‘despotism.’ That ‘patriarchal despotism’ is preserved, as described by Marx, throughout the history of the countries of Asia by the co-effect of various physical-climatic and historic factors. The most important of these is the stationary nature of Asiatic social structures, which is determined by the lack of individuality in the sense of individual freedom and independence. As we read in *Capital*,

In the ancient Asiatic and other ancient modes of production, we find that the conversion of products into commodities, and therefore the conversion of men into producers of commodities, holds a subordinate place, which, however, increases in importance as the primitive communities approach nearer and nearer to their dissolution. [...] Those ancient social organisms of production are, as compared with bourgeois society, extremely simple and transparent. But they are founded either on the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellowmen in a primitive tribal community, or upon direct relations of subjection. (Marx: Capital, Vol. I, MEW 35: 90, see Tōkei, [1981] 2019: 250-251)

It is important to note at this point that despite all Marx’s criticisms of Hegel’s interpretation of history, their views are much in agreement regarding the lack of individuality as the main cause of Asian ‘stagnation’ (on Hegel’s views on China, see Kim, 1978, more recently Heurtebise, 2019).

Marx did not only consider Chinese social structures the earliest form of *economic* structures (that, at the same time, preserved ancient clan relationships), but declared in various texts that this status had not significantly changed until the 19th century.

At the same time, he did not think that this state could not be changed, but was convinced that change could only be the result of external factors. These aspects of his views will be examined in comparison with Fukuzawa's interpretation in the next chapter.

4. Fukuzawa and Marx on (opening) Asia

As I mentioned in the first section, the simple fact that two thinkers talked about China is not in itself sufficient to compare their thoughts. In this chapter I will argue, however, that Fukuzawa's and Marx's views on China share one feature that is highly significant in their general understanding of the relationship between 'East' and 'West,' and this is their views on the potentiality of *changing* the social structures symbolised by China. Before turning to the comparative approach, I will examine some obvious differences based on the above overview.

4.1 Marx and Fukuzawa: obvious differences

From what has been said so far, it is clear that Fukuzawa's and Marx's interpretations of China were similar in the sense that they both argued that China was at a kind of 'standstill'. Still, the *reasons* they adduced for this were different. Fukuzawa explained historical processes basically as being determined by the power-relations of a country, mainly by the relationship between the ruling elite and the people, and he saw the nature of this relationship as essentially spiritual, influenced by the level of intellectual advancement of the masses. This has an effect on economic and technical development, but spiritual factors seem to have permanent primacy in Fukuzawa's understanding of history. Marx, on the other hand, held that historical progression is governed by relations of production which are rooted in the naturally given needs of men; everything that happens, so to speak, in the 'spiritual sphere' of human communities, is secondary to those factors which directly affect the daily, material life of the people. This does not mean, of course, being 'secondary' in significance, it only means that historical explanations must always *start* with the material circumstances of the community in question as they precede everything else *in time*.

With regard to the Chinese tradition, while Fukuzawa explicitly blamed Confucian scholarship for the stationary character of Japanese society, Marx, to the best of my knowledge, never discussed 'Confucianism' by name. He mentioned "patriarchal authority," which he called "the only moral link embracing the vast machinery of the [Chinese] State," stressing that "[c]omplete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China" ("Revolution in China and Europe," *MEW* 12: 94-95), but he did not consider such isolation to be the result of patriarchal authority itself, and particularly not of the intellectual frameworks of that authority. On the contrary,

he saw patriarchal authority as a consequence of the most natural unit of production, i.e., the clan-tribal community.

Considering such differences, one must be careful when comparing how Fukuzawa and Marx described the Chinese tradition. When Fukuzawa uses the term *sensei* 專制 (Fukuzawa, 2008: 197/ *FYZ*: 1484), he refers to a structure of functions and relations very similar to what Marx calls 'despotism' – but Fukuzawa referred to that structure far more in its role as a *cause* of spiritual nature than as an effect. Marx stressed, in contrast, that the "idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism" ("The British Rule in India," *MEW* 12: 132), stressing the role of economic causes in the evolution of social structures.

It is, however, not only because of world views and motivations, but also because of different knowledge frameworks, cultural traditions, and scholarly or knowledge backgrounds that Fukuzawa and Marx applied such different tools in their investigations. Fukuzawa relied on his broad knowledge of Chinese and Japanese history and Confucian teaching, complemented by works of Western, mainly Anglo-Saxon and American historical and political writers. Furthermore, and maybe most importantly, Fukuzawa was socialised in the *bushi* class of Tokugawa Japan (true, in its lowest level – Craig 2009: 8), and was already in his thirties by the time social structures of his country started changing rapidly and significantly due to Western influences, a change very different in its nature from the 'revolutions' of Europe. Marx was born and raised in the European 'age of revolutions,' and already by his early twenties engaged in intellectual movements related to the elimination of the injustice of social inequalities. His ideas were formed by his reaction against German idealist interpretations of history, basically those of G.W.F. Hegel, while being heavily influenced by those very interpretations. While he possessed a clear social vision and was a very conscious participant in a process of global transformation of production relations, he had only a very limited insight into the changes happening in the Asia Pacific region. At the same time, Marx had a great expertise in political economy and historical theory, realms that Fukuzawa studied through the European books he could get hold of, but from an absolutely different and necessarily limited angle. Still, as I will argue based on the next chapter's comparative approach, there are much more interesting differences between their views than these rather obvious ones.

4.2 The comparative approach: Fukuzawa and Marx on 'opening' Asian societies

As I said, Fukuzawa and Marx both held that Asian societies are in a state of stagnation. Of course, when writing about this, Marx referred to India and China, while Fukuzawa talked mainly about his own country – however, Fukuzawa saw Japan, in those respects relevant to that 'stagnation,' as being very much under the

influence of China. The theory of ‘Chinese stagnation’ did, of course, appear in the works of many European thinkers of the 19th century, and Uemura argued that Fukuzawa’s acceptance of that cliché reflects his “Euro-centrism” (Uemura, 2016: 9). However, most Western thinkers who agreed with the cliché also thought that this ‘stagnation’ could not be altered. Some thinkers in the mid- and late-19th century, in contrast, including Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx, argued that this state could be changed, and considered that the catalyst of such a process could be the opening of Asian countries *from outside* (Takó, 2024a). This is the first point where Fukuzawa’s interpretation shows a most interesting parallel with the explanation of the mentioned thinkers. In *Bunmeiron* Fukuzawa wrote:

The physical force of the government and the intellectual power of the people are direct opposites. [...] If the ports had not been opened, not even a learned man could have predicted when the power of human intelligence would finally have tipped the scale in its favour. Fortunately, Commodore Perry’s arrival in the 1850s provided the favourable opportunity for reform. (Fukuzawa, 2008: 85-86)

This approach reminds one much less of propagators of the theory of Chinese stagnation such as Hegel, who held that China would remain for the rest of its existence in the ‘childhood’ state of history. It is much more similar to the ideas of 19th-century social thinkers such as Tocqueville, Mill and Marx. As Marx wrote in 1862,

[...] China, that living fossil, began to revolutionise [...] The immediate causes giving rise to the movement were evident: European intervention, the opium wars, the resultant undermining of the existing regime, outflow of silver abroad, disturbance of the economic equilibrium by the importation of foreign goods, etc. (“Chinese Affairs,” *MEW* 19: 216)

However, while Tocqueville and Mill followed the process of China being ‘opened’ by the British with excitement and with an attitude of general approval (Takó, 2024a: 261, 269), Marx, while also assigning great importance to the events, showed considerably more sensitivity towards the fact that the interplay of such external factors has crucial ethical implications. This is where his ideas come close to those of Fukuzawa, while they are shared only to a very limited extent by Marx’s Western contemporaries. ‘While the semi-barbarian stood on the principle of morality, the civilized opposed [to that] the principle of pelf,’ he wrote, calling the conflicts over opium

a deadly duel, in which the representative of the antiquated world appears prompted by ethical motives, while the representative of overwhelming modern society fights for the privilege of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets—this, indeed, is a sort of tragical couplet, stranger than any poet would ever have dared to fancy. (“History of the Opium Trade,” *MEW* 15: 16)

Fukuzawa, at the same time, wrote about the conditions of Western trade in Japan as follows:

individual Japanese may be dishonest in making silkworm-egg cards to make a fast profit [...]. Western merchants, by contrast, appear to be exact and honest in their business dealings. [...] However, a careful consideration of the facts reveals that Westerners are not necessarily more sincere in their dispositions than Japanese. [...] Because they are afraid dishonest dealings will jeopardize long-range profits, they have to be honest. This sincerity does not come from the heart, but from the wallet. (Fukuzawa, 2008: 159)

The ethical condemnation shared by Fukuzawa and Marx is most striking in the case of the British colonisation of India. Writing about the relationship between the essence of Japan, the *kokutai* 国体, and the imperial family as the symbol of that essence, Fukuzawa says:

kokutai is like the entire body, while the imperial line corresponds to the eye. [...] [I]f the vitality of the whole body weakens, the eye, too, will naturally lose its light. The worst thing that can happen is to think the body is alive simply because the eyes are open, when in reality life has already terminated. The history of Britain's Far Eastern colonies provides many examples of the British killing the body and keeping the eyes. (Fukuzawa, 2008: 45)

Marx, at the same time, writes about the British rule in India already in 1853 that "[t]here cannot [...] remain any doubt [...] that the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before" ("The British Rule in India," *MEW* 12: 126). Thus, due probably to both Marx's objectivity with regard to the colonial activities of European countries in the East and the peculiar kind of nationalism paradoxically coloured by 'Euro-centrism' that fuelled Fukuzawa's thought, we find that they evaluated European approaches to opening Asia as tragic *and* necessary at the same time.

At this point, however, I must return to the question of differences, now on a different level. For it is here that a less striking, but probably more important difference between the thoughts of Fukuzawa and Marx becomes visible. While Marx admits the morally reprehensible character of the deeds of the British, these become, for him, a part of a comprehensive historical process of change.

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of

England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (“The British Rule in India,” *MEW* 12: 132)

While replacing Hegelian idealism with an interpretation of history grounded in a socio-economic approach, Marx did not break with a view of history as a progression that reaches, step by step—through the tensions Marx described as governing history—every part of the globe. This is indeed a tragic process, but its tragic character is not in contradiction but in harmony with its historical significance. This significance is not limited to Asia.

It may seem a very strange, and a very paradoxical assertion that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire, – the very opposite of Europe, – than on any other political cause that now exists [...]. (“Revolution in China and in Europe,” *MEW* 12: 93)

Fukuzawa also believed that Asian cultures were morally superior to those of the West. When he stressed that the foreign forces that opened up Japan were the same powers that Japan should learn from, he also made it clear that such learning should happen only in the field of intellect; that is, not with regard to morals. “Now, a person does not have to be very smart to see that in Japan there is no dearth of morality [*tokugi* 徳義, lit. ‘virtue and righteousness’], but at the same time there is no surplus of intelligence [*chie* 智慧 lit. the ‘beneficial (character) of wisdom’] either” (Fukuzawa, 2008: 127/ *FYZ*: 1417). Furthermore, “if we go from theory to reality, we might find more morally superior individuals among us unenlightened Japanese than we could find in the West” (Fukuzawa, 2008: 128). Fukuzawa, thus, saw Japan’s present state as *morally* parallel with the West, lagging behind it only *intellectually*. However, while he held that Japan could be pushed out of that impasse only by external factors, he did not in the least consider it a historical necessity for Japan to become, as a consequence of that external influence, subordinate to the West. On the contrary: as he argued in the closing chapter of *Bunmeiron*, the main goal of the civilising process that is grounded in learning intellectually from the West is to become independent – *particularly from the West*. This must be placed above everything else until Japan becomes equal with the countries of the civilized world (see Howland, 2002: 149). This, he adds, does not concern superficial habits but the “independent intention [*dokuritsushin* 独立心]” (*FYZ*: 1535) that must characterise the people of the country:

the way in which to preserve [...] this independence cannot be sought anywhere except in civilization. The only reason for making the people in our country today advance toward civilization is to preserve our country’s independence. Therefore, our country’s independence is the goal, and our people’s civilization is the way to that goal. (Fukuzawa, 2008: 254/ *FYZ*: 1540)

Thus, Fukuzawa's approval of the arrival of Perry's black ships did not signify approval of the West forcing Japan to change its firm traditions in general. What he welcomed was an opportunity provided by the arrival of Western powers for Japan to *voluntarily* adopt the intellectual knowledge of these powers in order to successfully oppose them.

The same ideas were present in Fukuzawa's *Encouragement of Learning* (*Gakumon no susume* 學問のすすめ, 1872), which started with the famous sentence propagating the Western notion of equality through a paraphrase of the first sentence of the *Declaration of Independence* but, characteristically, referring to the Creator as *ten/tian* 天 'heaven,' a central notion of Chinese thought: "Heaven, it is said, does not create one person above or below another", Fukuzawa, 2012: 3). In the first section of that work, he wrote – using a terminology also rooted in Chinese thought – that Japan and the countries of the West

should associate with one another following the rules of heaven and the way of men [tenri-jindō 天理人道]. Such an attitude, based on those rules, implies acknowledging one's guilt even before the black slaves of Africa; but it also means, based on that way, standing without fear of the warships of England and America. It further implies that if this nation is disgraced, every Japanese citizen, to the last man, must sacrifice his life to prevent the decline of her prestige and glory. National independence entails all of these things. (Fukuzawa, 2012: 6/ FYZ: 141 – translation slightly altered)

It is the same idea about the connection between independence and the obligation of self-sacrifice—true, with much stronger emphasis on the latter—that dominates several late writings and speeches of Fukuzawa (see, e.g., Fukuzawa's *Shūshin yōryō* 修身要領, Fukuzawa, 1985: 273, FYZ: 425); texts that were frequently referred to in 20th century Japanese imperialistic propaganda.

As we can see, there is an internal tension in Fukuzawa's thought between celebrating the opportunity for change and, at the same time, warning against the dangers this change might cause if the Japanese do not use the opportunity properly. This tension is, however, only a reflection of the internal tensions of Fukuzawa's time: at the end of the 19th century Japan was in a situation where it had to change in reaction to the influence of external powers, particularly in order to avoid being forced to change in a way favourable (only) to these external powers. In the same section of *Gakumon no susume* cited above he continues:

In contrast, nations such as China have behaved as if there were no other countries in the world but their own. [...] Without calculating the power of their own country, they have recklessly attempted to banish the foreigners, only to be rebuked by the foreigners in return. (Fukuzawa, 2012: 6)

Meanwhile there is also an internal tension in Marx's texts where he expresses how tragic he considered the damage done to Asian societies by British aggression, *while* considering the British the "unconscious tool of history" opening up stagnant Asian countries. Marx's tensions, very like Fukuzawa's, reflected tensions that were present in the writer's own time: an era in which European supporters of liberty and democracy had to find justifications for the fact that their countries destroyed cultures and colonised people obviously more ancient than their own.

With this we have arrived at the most interesting question: if Fukuzawa and Marx actually lived in the same century, and the internal tensions of their thought reflected the tensions of their time, how much were they reflecting (or: were they reflecting at all) on the 'same' thing when they wrote about Western attempts to 'open' Asian societies? Of course, in terms of the facts, they reflected on the same series of events when, for example, they talked about what the British were doing in India. However, as the above analysis has shown, they stood on very different theoretical grounds in their conclusions. For Marx, historical progression seemed to be stronger than 'morality' when it came to the colonisation of 'stagnant' Asian countries; for Fukuzawa, *toku* 徳, which he, at the same time, identified with the Western notion of 'morals,' *moraru* モラル (see above) was the guarantee of Japan's ability to use the 'fortunate opportunity' of the arrival of Western powers to overcome stagnation without being colonised. For Marx, the "contact of extremes" ("Revolution in China and in Europe," *MEW* 12: 93) meant that the most advanced countries in the world force those lagging behind to enter global commerce (*Weltverkehr*); for Fukuzawa, the arrival of Western powers provided the opportunity for Japan, lagging behind the West, to claim its place amongst the independent powers of the world. For Marx, the 'success' of Europeans in their attempts to open up Asian societies had world-historical significance but was not an existential question concerning European countries; for Fukuzawa, the world-historical significance of the deeds of Europeans was of less importance but they were, indeed, a question of life and death as far as Japan was concerned. As he wrote at the end of *Bunmeiron*, "The first order of the day is to have the country of Japan and the people of Japan exist, and then and only then speak about civilization! There is no use talking about Japanese civilization if there is no country and no people" (Fukuzawa, 008: 254-255). On this, at least, Marx would most probably have agreed with him.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, while both Marx and Fukuzawa expected Western aggression to 'open up' Asian social structures for change, the frameworks in which they saw that change were different. Marx meant by it a change that *eliminates* the special character of these countries, i.e., the lack of transformation through history – Fukuzawa meant by it a change that adapts selected (mainly spiritual) elements of Western civilization to *preserve* the special character of Japan against the West. Fukuzawa was anything

but a naïve spectator of the colonisation of his own country – while Marx was anything but a triumphant representative of the colonisers.

From a methodological point of view, the investigation showed that comparative reception history in the sense of an analysis based on one common element between the views of two thinkers can provide firm grounds for a comparative examination. As it could also be seen, despite this shared ground, it is very likely that the similarities thus revealed would be accompanied by significant differences. However, these differences, *because* they are revealed through an examination based on an existing common denominator, can shed light on the ideas of the individual thinkers from new perspectives. Through this approach, thus, one can analyse the thinkers or ideas in question through a method that is grounded in comparison but leads to 'differentiation,' and can thus also be called an approach of '*differentiative*' reception history.

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