

from
FIFTY YEARS OF NEW JAPAN
1909

Sakutarō Fujioka

As European nations expanded into Asia, Western culture spread there as well. Although Japan remained politically independent, it could not escape the influence of the West. The Japanese were fascinated by Western culture and began to imitate it. In the following essay, a Japanese professor describes the changes that took place during a period of 50 years in Japan.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying

According to Fujioka, why did the Japanese so heartily adopt European culture?

Supposing that a man born fifty years ago returned to Japan after a wandering life in a foreign country without any news from his fatherland, how many of the scenes before him would resemble those of his childhood? Very few indeed. To commence with: he would find no trace of the Shōgun [military dictator], the real ruler of his childhood, and no *daimyō* [feudal landlord], except as peers, and these of little higher standing than the commoners, except in name. The castles of the *daimyō*, once so magnificent, would now show themselves to him as a mass of crumbling ruins; the spears, swords, and other implements of warfare, which he regarded with awe as a child, he would only find preserved by amateurs as objects of historic interest. What were then poor seashore hamlets, with only a few fishermen's cottages lying scattered about, would now be transformed into great naval ports or prosperous towns. . . . Would he be able to believe that this is the self-same country wherein he was born and spent his young days? . . . The scientific progress of the nineteenth century has brought about general improvement, and produced a great metamorphosis in all European countries, but this metamorphosis, remarkable as it is, is as nothing when compared with what Japan has undergone in the past fifty years. . . .

That Occidentalism was the main cause of the recent changes we need hardly say. Up to half a century ago, the nation, avoiding all intercourse with foreigners, indulged in the happy dream that the Japanese were the mightiest nation under the sun. What was their surprise, then, when they were brought face to face with the civilization of the West? An ignorant man, born in a mountain village and suddenly taken to the seashore and shown the boundless expanse of water and the rolling of gigantic waves, could not be more astounded than they were. Western civilization, which was the fruit of Christianity and of the scientific progress of the nineteenth century, seemed a marvel of marvels to them. But soon wonder gave

place to admiration, which, in its turn, became a desire to import this civilization into their own country. As a reaction from their former pride, they now passed to the other extreme, namely, a sense of humiliation, and they became keenly anxious to take in everything Western. Thus politics, economics, natural science, and art—everything was taken from the West with insatiable avidity, and the customs and usages of the people underwent a complete change, so complete that those alone who witnessed it can believe it.

Naturally most of these changes originated in Government offices, companies, and other public concerns, and then gradually found their way to the people at large. To cite some instances of the change: European clothes were at first used by officials as ceremonial costumes; then they were found very convenient to work in, and consequently came into popular use. Formerly holidays were limited to the five *sékku* festivals and a few other occasions, but now Sunday has been made a day of universal rest. To-day even private people, who can afford it, live in large European houses, and many in the middle class furnish one or more rooms of their Japanese houses in European style and use them as studies or drawing-rooms. Foreign restaurants are met with almost everywhere, and often the tourist finds European dishes served in a Japanese hotel. Indeed, there is no Japanese homestead wherein one does not find some marks of Western influence.

What determines the mode of women's dress is, in all countries, beauty of appearance rather than practical convenience; and since each nation has its own fancy, any change in female costume is naturally not so rapid as in that of men's. Nevertheless, the now popular use of the European style of hairdressing cannot fail to strike any observer, as also the prevalence of the *hakama* or skirts among the school-girls. . . .

Until fifty years ago people did not know that the flesh of pigs and cows was eatable, or that coal was combustible; they had no petroleum lamps and no wag-gons drawn by horses. They had only black-and-white drawings and paintings in light colours, and they pleased their ears with the *koto* (harp) and *samisén* (three-stringed guitar). But to-day foreign oil paintings and water colours have many admirers, and the piano and the violin are more fashionable than the native instruments. Formerly novelists and dramatists received no honour, while actors were despised as an inferior class of men, but now the drama is recognized as the highest form of art.

Source: Excerpt from *Fifty Years of New Japan*, Volume 2, compiled by Shigenobu Okuma (London: Smith, Elder, 1909), pp. 443, 445–50.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

For centuries, the Japanese avoided contact with foreigners, and “indulged in the happy dream that the Japanese were the mightiest nation under the sun.” Once trade opened with the West, the scientific progress of the Westerners seemed miraculous to the Japanese. Suddenly, Japanese pride turned to humiliation, and they scrambled to import as much Western culture as they could.