



Tanaka Shozō (1841-1913) and Early Meiji Democracy

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The seminar was centred around the evolution of democracy in Japan during the Meiji era, when the government adopted a new system and array of institutions and laws to transition towards a modern nation-state, following the promulgation of the Meiji constitution in 1889. Starting off on a personal note, the speaker talked about his experience of reading Tanaka Shozō's works while at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Nantes, stating that the main focus of the talk was the life and work of Shozō, a Japanese politician and activist, and his ideas about constitutional monarchy as a way to think about the adoption of democratic ideas and institutions in Japan and other parts of the world.

The speaker then moved on to give a background of Shozō's life, and how he came to be an important politician, looking at how Shozō's ideas about representing the people developed and evolved through his engagement in political struggles as a politician in the prefecture, Diet and later as the leader of a popular movement. He talked about how Shozō had remained a forgotten figure until the 1950s and 1960s, when Japan was suffering through a number of pollution problems and people began to look at the early history of modern Japan and found that Shozō had led a mass movement against the pollution caused by the Ashio copper mine in the 1890s and 1900s, and his understanding of the dangers of unregulated industrialisation spoke to the problems Japan was facing then.

He then went on to talk about what democracy meant to Shozō, stating that for him, democracy originally had meant to give a voice to the people through parliamentary representation and control over the government. However, Shozō gradually came to the conclusion that he had to go beyond an outside parliament, as the ordinary people had no control over their lives, and that to gain control they had to become the 'producers of knowledge'. He then realised that democracy was part of a struggle over creating a new type of knowledge, and that the state sponsored educational system offered a universal knowledge which didn't serve the interests of the people, but of those in-charge.

The speaker elaborated that it was important to look at major texts and the intellectual history of the movement of ideas from Europe to Japan, but also to look at the people, who he referred to as the 'second-hand dealers of ideas'. He mentioned that it was important to recognise both the similar trends amongst nations around the world, taking the similarities between the early democratic

functioning of Britain, France, Italy and the USA, while also understanding that these concepts were different by being put into a Japanese context. He also talked about the similarities between the impact of democratic thought across the world, showing the remarkably mirrored processes in the Cádiz constitution in Spain, British India's early democratic demands, and in the reforms carried out by Rasheed Pasha in Turkey, comparing these to how the Meiji era resulted in lots of alliances being formed with and against the emperor (most notably by the Satsuma and Chosho alliance).

The speaker then talked about how in this context, Shozō laid out his political career, going from a village headman to an important member of the Diet. In these newly created assemblies, Shozō was very active, speaking and making very specific demands to improve the lives of the poor and protect communities. He demanded that funds must be spent with care to improve teaching, and not just in building schools, advocating for local self-government. This was a period when liberal rights movement engulfs country, with various groups demanding representative governments, ranging from supporting oligarchy to very radical demands for toppling existing govt and bringing a revolution. A member of the Freedom Party, Shozō's ideas of political structure were defined by the idea that the people and the emperor ruled together. That is, people entrusted power to the Emperor, who should rule in their interest.

Furthermore, the speaker highlighted the problems in this system, such as a very limited electorate (a number around 1% of the population), and the curtailing of the rights of people like teachers, bureaucrats, and criminals to take part in political activities. He also mentioned that at the start, the main function of the Diet was mostly fiscal, and a very heated battleground for influence, which showed that democratic practice had to be developed through this. In this context, the Speaker then explained that Shozō advanced the idea of a 'dying nation', concluding that the government's modernising policies favoured a centralised government, capitalism and industrialisation, elite education and militarily expansionist policies that were financed by ever increasing taxes on the people.

With this, Shozō realised that along with the parliamentary battle to assert rights of political parties and control the administration, who controlled the production of knowledge was an equally important aspect for realising democracy. As a result, he took to leading a popular movement outside the Diet, as he understood the limitations of parliamentary democracy as it was functioning then.

From there, the speaker then moved on to discuss Shozō's environmental activism, especially surrounding the Ashio Copper Mines, and how the importance of research and surveys in Japan became a way for people to understand what was going on in their lives, and what the government was ignoring. During this period, Shozō began to lead a popular movement, with the core of his agitation being around creating an alternative system of knowledge (outside of the elitist, patriarchal university system). The speaker continued by stating that for Shozō, the success of Japan's modernising drive meant the death of Japan. He began his political life defending public interest against the political interests of the oligarchy, but gradually moved to basing his ideas in human rights, which in turn were based on the right to life to all.

For him, the Constitution had instituted a different form of repression that could only be fought outside the parliamentary system. However, while Shozō's appeal was framed within the ideas of power entrusted in the Emperor by the people, it could not appeal over the ideas of a state-centred nationalism based on a divine Emperor. To conclude, the Speaker stated that Shozō's intellectual legacy was carried out through the diverse movements that fought to address the problems of capitalist modernity and the nation-state, and that his thinking inspired others who thought of the 'village' as the site of struggle against modernity.

The discussion that followed focused, firstly, on the sources that Shozō based his work on, and whether they were Japanese or European concepts. The speaker explained that Shozō based much of

his early work heavily on local religions such as Fujiko (the worship of Mount Fuji), which was very strong in his area. He also elaborated that later in life he also read the Bible, which he also found interesting and appealing, and all of which played an important role in the development of Shozō's ideology. Secondly, the Speaker was asked about the legacy of Shozō's work, for which the Speaker talked about how he influenced groups such as environmentalists, Buddhists, and socialists alike, with some cooperatives that he supported during his time lasting till the present day. Thirdly, the Speaker was asked about whether Shozō ever proposed an alternative to the Meiji structure, to which the Speaker replied negatively, stating that Shozō tried to change the pre-existing system, and that it was hard to classify him as a traditionalist or a modernist, calling him a person of his time. He also remarked that Shozō reformed his ideas during his struggles, carving out a direction for his activism over time. Finally, the Speaker was asked about the communal solidarity in Japan, which created a social consciousness of the people, on the basis of which they tried to retain this old solidarity in new circumstances. In the context of the period, he finished by talking about how smaller leaders such as village headmen became radical leaders, trying to bring a rapprochement between modernisation and tradition.

This report was prepared by Aadil Sud, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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