

Identity change, anxiety and creativity: How 19th century Japan sought to leave Asia and become part of the West

Karl GUSTAFSSON

Associate Professor, Stockholm University, Department of Economic History and International Relations & Senior Research Fellow, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Stockholm

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E-mail: bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr

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Identity Change, Anxiety and Creativity: How 19th Century Japan Sought to Leave Asia and Become Part of the West

Karl GUSTAFSSON

*Associate Professor, Stockholm University, Department of Economic History and International Relations & Senior Research
Fellow, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Stockholm*

E-mail: karl.gustafsson@ekohist.su.se

Orcid: 0000-0001-9897-9891

ABSTRACT

Identity change is an important phenomenon in international politics. It can radically alter how states orient themselves and act internationally. But how does identity change occur? For some, it is merely an epiphenomenal result of changes in the international distribution of power. Others highlight domestic factors, while still others see it as occurring through a social process of interaction with other states. There are also explanations that combine these and other factors. While existing accounts have pushed the debate on identity change forward, this article suggests that incorporating anxiety into our understanding of identity change would help us better understand two important aspects of it: how an existing identity comes to be doubted and how a new one becomes thinkable and eventually accepted. Drawing on the work of psychologist Rollo May, this article explores the link between identity change, anxiety and creativity. The argument is illustrated through reference to 19th century Japan. For much of its history, Japan was part of the Sino-centric order and looked up to China as a “teacher in the ways of civilization”. However, in the 19th century, Japan radically redefined its identity in relation to China, and Asia more broadly, and rejected the Sino-centric world view as it sought to become a “civilized” state similar to the Western countries.

Keywords: East Asia, existentialism, Fukuzawa Yukichi, ontological security, Rollo May

Kimlik Değişimi, Kaygı ve Yaratıcılık: 19. Yüzyıl Japonya’sı Nasıl Asya’yı Terk Etmeye ve Batı’nın Bir Parçası Olmaya Çalıştı?

ÖZET

Kimlik değişimi uluslararası siyasette önemli bir olgudur. Devletlerin kendilerini nasıl yönlendirdiklerini ve uluslararası alanda nasıl hareket ettiklerini kökten değiştirebilir. Fakat kimlik değişimi nasıl gerçekleşmektedir? Bazıları için, kimlik değişimi sadece uluslararası güç dağılımındaki değişikliklerin ikincil bir sonucudur. Diğerleri yerel faktörleri vurgularken; bazıları ise kimlik değişiminin diğer devletlerle sosyal bir etkileşim süreci yoluyla gerçekleştiğini düşünmektedir. Tüm bunları ve diğer faktörleri birleştiren açıklamalar da vardır. Mevcut tartışmalar kimlik değişimi konusundaki tartışmayı ileriye taşırken; bu makale kaygıyı kimlik değişimi anlayışımıza dahil etmenin, kimlik değişiminin iki önemli yönünü daha iyi anlamamıza yardımcı olacağını öne sürmektedir: mevcut kimlikten nasıl şüphe duyulduğu ve yeni bir kimliğin nasıl düşünülebilir hale geldiği ve sonunda kabul edildiği. Psikolog Rollo May’in çalışmalarına dayanan bu makale kimlik değişimi, kaygı ve yaratıcılık arasındaki bağlantıyı araştırmaktadır. Argüman, 19. yüzyıl Japonya’sına atıfta bulunularak gösterilmektedir. Japonya, tarihinin büyük bir bölümünde Çin merkezli düzenin bir parçasıydı ve Çin’i “medeniyet yolunda öğretmen” olarak görüyordu. Fakat Japonya 19. yüzyılda Çin ve daha geniş anlamda Asya ile ilgili olarak kimliğini radikal bir şekilde yeniden tanımlamış ve Batı ülkelerine benzer “uygar” bir devlet olmaya çalıştığı için Çin merkezli dünya görüşünü reddetmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğu Asya, varoluşçuluk, Fukuzawa Yukichi, ontolojik güvenlik, Rollo May.

Introduction

Identity change is an important phenomenon in international politics. It can radically alter a state's entire outlook on the world and how it orients itself and acts internationally. But how do identities that have long been more or less stable radically change? Some theoretical approaches regard identity change as an epiphenomenal result of changes in the international distribution of power.¹ Others consider international processes such as interaction with other states most consequential.² Still others suggest that domestic factors matter most.³ While these and other existing explanations have pushed the debate on identity change forward, this article argues that incorporating anxiety into our understanding of identity change can help us better understand important aspects of this phenomenon: how the previously dominant identity comes to be doubted and how a radically new identity becomes thinkable and eventually accepted.

This is done by drawing on Rollo May's work on anxiety and creativity. Identity change is enabled, the article suggests, not as a direct result of anxiety, but through its links to creativity. It creates conditions that unsettle old identities and facilitate the construction of and receptivity to new ideas and self-understandings. The article approaches identity in terms of relational constructions of similarity and difference.⁴ Identity change thus involves the reconfiguration of identity in relation to a particular other in new ways.

The theoretical argument is illustrated through engagement with the case of 19th century Japan, a case that involved major and radical identity change. For much of its history, Japan had been part of the Sino-centric order and looked up to China as a "teacher in the ways of civilization."⁵ However, in the mid- to late 19th century (the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods), Japan radically redefined its identity in relation to China, and Asia more broadly, and rejected the Sino-centric world view. Whereas it had previously regarded China as "civilized" and the West as "barbaric", these roles were completely reversed. Japan sought to become a "civilized" state similar to the Western countries and different from China and other Asian states. This desire to become "civilized" eventually led Japan down a path toward imperialism.⁶

The next section discusses previous research on identity change in International Relations (IR). The section that then follows develops the article's theoretical account of how anxiety and creativity are implicated in identity change. The penultimate section uses the case of 19th century Japan to illustrate the theoretical points. It focuses in particular on ideas expressed by Fukuzawa Yukichi, often described as the most influential Japanese intellectual in the second half of the 19th century. The concluding section summarizes the article's findings.

1 E.g., John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, Norton, 2001.

2 E.g., Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

3 E.g., Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

4 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998; Bahar Rumelili, "Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No 1, 2004, p. 27–47; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, London, Routledge, 2006.

5 Joshua A. Fogel, "New Thoughts on an Old Controversy: Shina as a Toponym for China", *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No 229, 2012, p. 18.

6 Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society*, London, Routledge, 2009; Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Research on Identity Change in International Relations

Existing IR research on identity change has provided different definitions of state identity. Some understand it in terms of how states view themselves in relation to the international order, rather than in relation to particular others.⁷ However, this article approaches identity in terms of relational constructions of similarity and difference,⁸ and through its case study, it shows that an international order may very well be associated with one or several particular others so that how a state relates to a specific other is directly linked to how it relates to the international order. Such relational construction of similarity and difference can be either spatial or temporal. Understood spatially, self and other are viewed as entities currently existing in two distinct spaces. Temporal othering, by contrast, constructs identity by emphasizing how the self differs from a past other, that is some entity associated with the past. In this logic, one's own past may be treated as other.⁹ While they can thus be analytically separated, these two logics are often combined so that one differentiates one's own currently existing self from another entity existing in the present by associating it with the past. Those associated with the past tend to be seen as temporally behind, for example in civilizational development, values or political system.¹⁰

Existing scholarship also contains different positions on how easily identity changes. Some suggest that identity change might be common since identities are fragile and provisional,¹¹ while others argue that identity tends to be characterized by continuity.¹² While there may be theoretical reasons for believing that identities do not change easily, such different assessments may be due in part to differences in the particular identities focused on. Some identities may be deeply institutionalized while others are less so. Scholarship emphasizing continuity may have been concerned primarily with the former, while research that has highlighted change may mainly have analysed the latter.¹³ The latter by definition change more easily than the former. However, there may also be theoretical reasons for believing that identities do not change easily. Empirical cases of major and radical identity change, such as 19th century Japan, constitute "hard" cases that raise questions about how firmly institutionalized identities are unsettled and new ones become accepted and familiar.

There are also numerous accounts of how identity change occurs. Some theoretical approaches, most notably realism, view identity change as inconsequential and epiphenomenal. For such theo-

7 Jeffrey W. Legro, "The Plasticity of Identity under Anarchy", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2000, p. 37–65.

8 Campbell, *Writing Security*; Rumelili, "Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference"; Hansen, *Security as Practice*.

9 Ole Wæver, "The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-sovereign Security Orders", Morten Kelstrup (ed.), *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration*, online edn., London, Routledge, 2000, p. 223–263; Karl Gustafsson, "Temporal Othering, De-securitisation and Apologies: Understanding Japanese Security Policy Change", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 23, No 3, 2020, p. 511–534; Ulv Hanssen, *Temporal Identities and Security Policy in Postwar Japan*, London, Routledge, 2019.

10 Sergei Prozorov, "The Other as Past and Present: Beyond the Logic of 'Temporal Othering' in IR Theory", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No 3, 2011, p. 1273–1293; Andrew R. Hom, "Angst Springs Eternal: Dangerous Times and the Dangers of Timing the 'Arab Spring'", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 47, No 2, 2016, p. 165–183.

11 Cf., Jutta Weldes et al., "Introduction: Constructing Insecurity", Jutta Weldes et al. (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 16.

12 E.g., Glenn Chafetz, Michael Spirtas and Benjamin Frankel, "Introduction: Tracing the Influence of Identity on Foreign Policy", *Security Studies*, Vol. 8, No 2–3, 1998, p. 7–22; Taku Tamaki, "The Persistence of Reified Asia as Reality in Japanese Foreign Policy Narratives", *Pacific Review*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2015, p. 23–45.

13 Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, "Japan and Identity Change: Why it Matters in International Relations", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2015, p. 1–22; Bahar Rumelili and Jennifer Todd, "Paradoxes of Identity Change: Integrating Macro, Meso and Micro Research on Identity in Conflict Processes", *Political Studies*, Vol. 38, No 1, 2018, p. 3–18.

ries, identity changes as a result of changes in the international distribution of power and security landscape. It is these material changes, not changes in identity, that have explanatory power.¹⁴

“Thin” constructivist approaches that emphasize the role of norms and culture, by contrast, argue that identity matters, for example by determining interests. However, such approaches, which tend to view identity as relatively resistant to change, often present explanations for identity change that are quite similar to realist accounts as they suggest that if change occurs it is likely to be the result of some kind of external shock, for example a major change in the international system, realignment by an ally or the rise of a new security threat.¹⁵ This is how Japan’s identity change in the second half of the 19th century is often understood. Japan, it is believed, faced a new and frightening international environment as the Western powers encroached upon it. It thus feared for its survival as an independent nation and therefore sought to strengthen itself militarily.¹⁶ Even though it is certainly correct that safeguarding independence was a key priority, the Japanese turn to the West in the early Meiji period entailed much more than a mere embrace of modernization to strengthen Japan militarily and ensure its independence. The aim was not just to become militarily strong, indeed this was seen as insufficient. Instead, as outlined below in greater detail, there was a strong desire to adopt cultural elements and to become recognized by the Western powers as one of them.

Other constructivist accounts suggest alternative explanations. Some theorize identity change as occurring through interaction with other states. In such explanations, the ways in which states behave toward each other can influence and change how they view themselves and others.¹⁷ Other theoretical approaches instead emphasize domestic factors, outlining the intricate domestic processes through which identity changes.¹⁸ There are also accounts that combine elements that appear in the above-mentioned approaches.

Jeffrey Legro’s explanation is worth discussing in some detail both for theoretical reasons and because he applies it to 19th century Japan. For Legro, established policy ideas and their associated identities can be replaced by new ones when the old understandings no longer lead to desirable and expected consequences. In such a situation, there needs to exist a leading replacement idea, which is able to show its efficacy. Over time, if the new policy idea is successful, it can develop into an identity,¹⁹ as “[s]tates become what they do.”²⁰ However, an old identity can persist for a long time even when it appears to no longer deliver on its promises. For example, as Legro mentions, the Japanese “ideological orthodoxy” in the 19th century persisted for a long time and was so strong that it prevented “true creativity” and “made alternative ways of thinking unimaginable.”²¹ This raises several questions: How do old ideas come to be doubted? And how do new ideas become imaginable? Even though Legro’s theory is in several respects quite convincing, like the other approaches discussed above, it is not entirely obvious what prevents an identity from changing in a situation when it no longer delivers on its

14 E.g., Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*.

15 E.g., Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; Andrew Oros, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity and the Evolution of Security Practice*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008.

16 E.g., Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edn., Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 2000, p. 237.

17 E.g., Wendt, *Social Theory*.

18 E.g., Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms*.

19 Legro, “The Plasticity”.

20 Legro, “The Plasticity”, p. 41.

21 Legro, “The Plasticity”, p. 52.

promises. If an attachment to an identity can indeed become so strong that it prevents change in such a way, it appears that the attachment must somehow be emotional. In other words, it seems necessary to add a theoretical component that can account for the more emotional aspects of identity and the process of change, a component that helps highlight how ideological orthodoxies come to be doubted, alternative ways of thinking become imaginable and creativity becomes possible.

Some existing approaches to identity do propose that emotions and trauma destabilize and make possible the reconfiguration of identity.²² The role of emotions in identity change in general has been specified further in work that focuses specifically on ontological security, where anxiety often plays a key role. While ontological security research has been criticized for being concerned more with continuity than change,²³ this might to some extent be because of an empirical focus on continuity, but is perhaps also linked to the fact that such accounts have often focused on entrenched narratives and routines. Still, some scholars have suggested that as long as states are able to maintain a positive self-understanding, they may replace one identity with another one.²⁴ Others have highlighted that anxiety can facilitate change and enable peace by making possible the redefinition of previously stable antagonistic identities.²⁵ Some have suggested that such change can be enabled by critical situations that actors find it difficult to deal with. Such critical situations might question an actor's identity or destabilize routines, thereby increasing anxiety.²⁶ It has also been argued that because it is important to have an identity that is exceptional or at least different from others, the belief that the other has become excessively similar to or even overtaken oneself in a dimension central to one's identity can trigger increased anxiety, which is dealt with by refashioning an identity to make it more distinct.²⁷ While arguments about how anxiety enables identity change in some cases thus exist, further exploration of how it occurs, especially in cases of radical identity change, is arguably needed.

The next section seeks to begin to develop such an account by discussing how anxiety is linked to identity change. This is done by highlighting the difference between "normal" and "neurotic" anxiety, and how the former enables creativity, or "the process of bringing something new into being".²⁸

22 Hagström and Gustafsson, "Japan and Identity Change"; Emma Hutchison, "Trauma and the Politics of Emotions: Constituting Identity, Security and Community after the Bali Bombing", *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2010, p. 65–86.

23 Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, "Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 52, No 1, 2017, p. 31–47; see also Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No 3, 2020, p. 875–895.

24 Dmitry Chernobrov, *Public Perception of International Crises: Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation*, London, Rowman and Littlefield, 2019; Trine Flockhart, "The Problem of Change in Constructivist Theory: Ontological Security Seeking and Agent Motivation", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No 5, 2016, p. 799–820.

25 Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, London, Routledge, 2015.

26 Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, New York, Routledge, 2008; Karl Gustafsson, "Routinised Recognition and Anxiety: Understanding the Deterioration in Sino-Japanese Relations", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No 4, 2016, p. 613–633; Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Security: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

27 Kai Schulze, "Risks of Sameness, the Rise of China and Japan's Ontological Security", Sebastian Maslow, Paul O'Shea and Ra Mason (eds.), *Risk State: Japan's Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2015, p. 101–116; May Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No 3, 2016, p. 469–488; Patricia Greve, "Ontological Security, the Struggle for Recognition, and the Maintenance of Security Communities", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 21, No 4, 2018, p. 858–882.

28 Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1975, p. 39.

Anxiety, Creativity and Identity Change

Rollo May and several other anxiety theorists distinguished between “neurotic” anxiety, which was seen as pathological, and “normal” anxiety, understood as a necessary part of the human condition which cannot be escaped completely. This means that to be healthy is not to be completely free from anxiety, but rather to learn to face anxiety and use it constructively. For scholars like Rollo May and Paul Tillich, “normal” anxiety is not only experienced by individuals, but also by collectives.²⁹

Importantly, anxiety is different from fear. We fear specific dangers while anxiety is a more vague and general state.³⁰ May pertinently exemplifies this difference:

“Let us say that I am a college student walking to the dentist’s office to have a tooth pulled. On the way I meet a revered professor whose class I have been in this term and whom I have seen in his office. He does not speak to me nor nod nor give me any greeting whatever. After I pass him I feel a diffuse “gnawing in my breast.” *Am I not worth noticing? Am I nobody—nothing?* When the dentist picks up his pincers to pull my tooth, I feel a fear much more intense than the anxiety on the street. But the fear is forgotten as soon as I’m out of the dentist’s chair. The anxiety, with its gnawing, stays with me all day long and may even appear in my dreams that night.”³¹

This example illustrates that anxiety is not necessarily as intense as fear but considerably deeper. It threatens something that we see as related to the “essence” of who we believe ourselves to be, i.e. something that is key to our identity. As illustrated by the quote above, it can threaten our self-esteem. May thus defines anxiety as “the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his [*sic*] existence as a personality.”³² While this definition refers to the individual, the same principle applies to society as a whole, where May distinguishes “between a peripheral threat—i.e. a threat which members of the society can meet on the basis of the assumptions of their culture—and a threat on a deeper level—namely, a threat to the underlying assumptions, the ‘charter’ of the culture itself.”³³ It is “a threat to basic assumptions which have been identified with the existence of the culture, and which the individual, as a participant in the culture, has identified with his [*sic*] own existence.”³⁴ Anxiety thus threatens core values of not only individual but also collective identity and this matters to the individual as a member of that collective. As such, it is a threat to the faith, or confidence, in existing arrangements.³⁵ It follows that when anxiety increases and existing arrangements and core values become doubted—when we become uncertain—fundamental identity change can become possible.

In his case studies of patients, all of whom had been more or less rejected by their parents, May found a pattern. Those who showed signs of a high degree of “neurotic” anxiety interpreted that rejection based on their high expectations toward their parents. However, those who exhibited a low degree of anxiety basically accepted the rejection as just the way things were. In other words, those who

29 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1952; Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*. New York, W.W. Norton, 1977 [1950].

30 May, *The Meaning*, p. 189.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid, p. 189.

33 Ibid, p. 222.

34 Ibid, p. 223.

35 Ibid.

exhibited a high degree of anxiety also exhibited a contradiction, or a gap, between their expectations and reality. Those who were less anxious, however, did not exhibit such a gap. Their expectations fit with reality and there was therefore no repression and “neurotic” anxiety.³⁶

May argues that a similar gap between expectations and reality characterizes not only “neurotic”, but also “normal” anxiety. The difference is that in “neurotic” anxiety the gap cannot be bridged, while in “normal” anxiety it can. Because it is an inner function, it is not possible to run away from anxiety without restricting one’s personality. In case of “normal” anxiety, one appraises one’s situation more realistically and does not need to restrict one’s personality to the extent that those suffering from “neurotic” anxiety do. By facing anxiety and learning from it, one never develops the kind of repression that might later reappear as “neurotic” anxiety.³⁷ The gap between expectation and reality is significant because it is by bridging it that a creative act is carried out and that change can take place.

Creativity is “the process of bringing something new into being”.³⁸ Such creativity involves the crafting of a new way of understanding the world by bridging expectation and reality in a way that appears to make sense.³⁹ May exemplifies through reference to science, suggesting that: “every scientific endeavour consists of the scientist’s bringing to bear his [*sic*] own expectations—in this case, his hypotheses—upon reality, and when this process is successful he uncovers some reality which was not known in that way before”.⁴⁰ In this example, the ability to see a gap between expectations and reality as hitherto understood enables creative activity. The same principle that May uses to describe creativity in science applies to identity change. Anxiety makes it possible to doubt an already existing identity and enables the imagining of a new one. At this stage, the new identity has the same function as a hypothesis in May’s example referring to science.

For the newly imagined identity to be successful and for identity change to thereby take place, the new identity needs to become familiar.⁴¹ As May puts it, the gap needs to constantly be resolved by “bringing expectations and reality progressively into greater accord”.⁴² It becomes familiar not only by being repeated, but by subtly being adapted and repeatedly applied as an interpretive framework to make sense of ongoing events. In this way, “reality” is creatively transformed so that the new identity comes into being.

Importantly, and in accordance with the understanding of identity as relational described above, anxiety has a relational aspect since “each human being develops as an individual in a social matrix, a world of other individuals”.⁴³ This relational understanding of anxiety is evident in the example above where the lack of acknowledgement by the professor causes the student to feel anxiety and self-doubt. May also illustrates it when he states that: “In ethics, the person brings to bear his expectations—in this case, ideals of more desirable relations—upon the reality of his immediate relations with other people, and by this means some transformation of his interpersonal relations occurs”.⁴⁴ The

36 Ibid, p. 332–336.

37 Ibid, p. 356.

38 May, *The Courage*, p. 39.

39 May, *The Meaning*, p. 368.

40 Ibid., p. 369.

41 Cf., Chernobrov, *Public Perception of International Crises*, p. 49.

42 Ibid., p. 369–370.

43 May, *The Meaning*, p. 196.

44 Ibid., p. 369

gap between expectation and reality is bridged through the transformation of interpersonal relations. Anxiety thus makes it possible to redefine identities in relation to others.

Both May and Tillich suggested that the presence or absence of anxiety can characterize a society as a whole during a particular era. In times when we do not feel anxiety, or when we avoid it, continuity is likely and identity change is unlikely. If we are certain about who we are, change will most likely not occur. However, in anxious times, anxiety reduces certainty about who “we” are, and can enable new ideologies that redefine national identities.⁴⁵ If we experience “normal” anxiety and face, rather than avoid, that anxiety, we do not just worry, we also reflect on who we are and such reflection is necessary for us to imagine other ways of being and thus for radically refashioning our self-understandings. But not all ways of refashioning our identities are possible. They cannot be too far-fetched, as in the case of May’s “neurotic” anxiety. If they are, they will not fit with and help us make sense of the situations we find ourselves in. Or, as May puts it, the new identity will not bridge the gap between our expectations and reality. Instead, to be successful the new identity needs to, as in May’s “normal” anxiety, enable us to make sense of the world we find ourselves in, and to do so in new ways. In May’s words, the new identity needs to bridge the gap between our expectations and reality.⁴⁶ When identity is refashioned, it is done through the creative recrafting of an understanding of the self in relation to some form of otherness. New ways of articulating identity should have a greater potential for being widely accepted and successful in times of high degrees of anxiety than at other times. This article argues that the radical identity change through which Japan was reimagined as different from China and Asia more broadly and instead similar to the West was made possible by high levels of anxiety. For this argument to hold, it is important to show that anxiety was actually pervasive in the time period studied.⁴⁷ This will be done through discussion of heightened levels of societal anxiety in art,⁴⁸ as well as among intellectuals and in public discussions more broadly.

An additional methodological issue concerns empirical focus and material. I suggest that it can be useful to focus on the writings of influential intellectuals. Key thinkers are likely to have clearly articulated new influential ideas. In addition, if anxiety is linked to creativity, we should expect intellectuals who express anxiety to be among those who articulate creative ideas most clearly. For these reasons, the empirical analysis below focuses in particular on Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901). This is not to suggest that Fukuzawa single-handedly changed Japan, even though his ideas certainly were influential, but because he probably articulated the creative ideas that came to fundamentally alter Japan more clearly than most. He was “his generation’s leading intellectual and educator”,⁴⁹ and “his influence permeated every aspect of Meiji life”.⁵⁰ He was the “most popular and widely read intellectual of the Meiji period”.⁵¹ Several of his books became bestsellers. *An Encouragement of Learning*, for example, sold almost 3.5 million copies. It has thus been argued that “he, more than any other indi-

45 May, *The Meaning*, p. 11; Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1947, p. 245.

46 Ibid, p. 369.

47 Bahar Rumelili, “[Our] Age of Anxiety: Existentialism and the Current State of International Relations”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 24, No 4, 2021, p. 1020–1036; Karl Gustafsson, “Why is Anxiety’s Positive Potential so Rarely Realised? Creativity and Change in International Politics”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 24, No 4, 2021, p. 1044–1049.

48 May, *The Courage*, p. 22–23; May, *The Meaning*, p. 4–5.

49 Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 321.

50 Ibid, p. 322.

51 Varley, *Japanese Culture*, p. 242.

vidual, influenced the minds of a generation of Japanese in the early, formative years of the modern era”.⁵² Even though Fukuzawa himself was not a government official, he regularly met with influential officials who were thereby directly exposed to his ideas.⁵³

Anxiety, Creativity and Identity Change in Mid- to Late 19th Century Japan

In mid- to late 19th century Japan, struggles took place between Westernizers, such as Fukuzawa, and anti-foreign traditionalists. Some of the samurai who carried out the 1866 Meiji Restoration, through which the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown and imperial rule was “restored”, opposed Westernization and argued for a “return to antiquity” (*fukko*). This was a struggle from which the Westernizers eventually emerged victorious and “the zealots’ cries for death to foreigners gradually gave way to enthusiasm for ‘civilization and enlightenment’”. Consequently, Fukuzawa and other Westernizers “found themselves in an almost oracular position”.⁵⁴

Japan’s identity change and associated willingness to embrace modernization and learn from the West has often been attributed to the belief that it was all about Japan’s survival as an independent state. According to this argument, which echoes the realist understanding of identity change as epiphenomenal, the existence of external threats made it necessary to “Enrich the country and strengthen its arms” (*fukoku kyōhei*).⁵⁵ Yet, Japan’s identity change was much more far-reaching than what such explanations suggest. Fukuzawa and others were certainly concerned with survival, but it was not only about survival. Moreover, survival, Fukuzawa argued, could not be achieved by only strengthening the country materially. Indeed, Fukuzawa argued repeatedly that the material aspects of civilization were insufficient and less fundamental than the ideational ones. One would not win a war, he argued, only by having strong military capabilities. It was also necessary to reform people’s minds.⁵⁶ For Fukuzawa, becoming “civilized”, like the Western states, would not only improve Japan’s own capacity, but also enable it to become part of and gain recognition from the West. In other words, it was not just about fear. Had it only been about fear, strengthening the military would have been sufficient. It was because it was about anxiety, rather than just fear, that Japan’s identity came to be doubted and eventually changed. Differentiating Japan from what it was not became central to the process of relieving anxiety and constructing a new identity.

The Meiji leaders thus embarked on sweeping reforms. In the five-article Charter Oath they issued in 1868, they used the logic of temporal othering to differentiate the new Japan from its insular past and from the ideas propagated by those who wished to “return to antiquity”, stating that: “Evil customs of the past shall be broken off”, and proclaiming that: “Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen imperial rule”.⁵⁷ They abolished the class system and the previously

52 Ibid, p. 243.

53 Albert Craig, “Civilization and Enlightenment”, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck and Arthur E. Tiedemann (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two: 1600 to 2000, Part Two: 1868 to 2000, 2nd edn.*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 33.

54 Jansen, *The Making*, p. 322.

55 E.g., Varley, *Japanese Culture*, p. 237.

56 E.g., Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008 [1875], p. 22–23, 76.

57 quoted in Fred G. Notehelfer, “The Meiji Restoration”, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck and Arthur E. Tiedemann

dominant samurai class thereby lost its privileges. These reforms contributed further to increasing anxiety. While people previously knew their place, for many this was no longer the case.⁵⁸ Many were thus uncertain about who they were, what Japan was and where it was headed.

That it was indeed an age of anxiety is mirrored in popular art produced during the period. Societal anxiety, it has been argued, was reflected in motives in woodblock prints.⁵⁹ In addition, *Yōkai*, a form of monsters seen as embodying the “anxiety and fear associated with the uneasiness of change from known to unknown, from certainty to uncertainty”,⁶⁰ proliferated in the art of this period of high levels of anxiety.⁶¹

In addition, Fukuzawa described himself and other Japanese intellectuals as anxious and discussed the reasons for this anxiety:

“It seems to me that this “trouble” is not something that has come down to us from our ancestors but a sickness suddenly contracted in recent times, a sickness that is already affecting a vital part of Japanese life. Even if we tried to eliminate it we could not; if we tried to treat it we would lack sufficient medicines. Our old vital forces are unable to resist this sickness. The fact is that if Japan was the same as it has always been, we would have been completely calm. This proves that it is a new illness that is causing our anxiety. Even though the intellectuals among us must know that this is the illness that causes them such distress, what name do they give it? I name it “foreign relations.”⁶²

In particular, it was, as Fukuzawa saw it, foreign relations with the West that caused anxiety among his contemporaries: “They groan, they grieve; some are for learning from the West and imitating it, others are for going it alone and opposing the West.”⁶³ According to Fukuzawa: “Although these intellectuals do not label the illness clearly, their anxieties are identical to mine.”⁶⁴ The difficulty in labelling the problem indicates it was a matter of anxiety, rather than fear. In addition, the fact that there was much uncertainty about the West’s intentions, whether or not the West posed a threat and if so what kind of threat it was, as well as how to deal with it,⁶⁵ suggests that what they experienced was indeed anxiety, rather than fear. That much of the discussion focused on Japan, what Japan was in relation to the West and how it should relate to the West, further underscores that it was about anxiety and identity. Moreover, anxiety concerning interactions with Westerners went far beyond military affairs, extending to issues such as diplomatic protocol, including what and how to eat in diplomatic contexts. Western-style dining was seen as key to becoming “civilized”, and in this context Japan also

(eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two: 1600 to 2000, Part Two: 1868 to 2000*, 2nd edn., New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 8.

58 E.g., Varley, *Japanese Culture*, p. 238.

59 Yoko Haruhara, “Late Edo Period Villainy is Captured in Violent Ukiyo-e Prints”, *The Japan Times*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/06/12/arts/late-edo-period-villainy-captured-violent-ukiyo-e-prints/#.XQJLfC3M2CU> (Accessed 14 June 2021).

60 Zilia Papp, “Monsters Reappearing in *Great Yōkai Wars*, 1968-2005”, Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz (eds.), *Fear, Cultural Anxiety, and Transformation: Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Films Remade*, Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2009, p. 140.

61 Papp, “Monsters Reappearing”; Steve Wheeler, “A Proliferation of Monsters: Art of the Weird as Expressions of Anxiety in Britain and Japan”, *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*, Vol. 10, No 1, 2018, <https://hekint.org/2018/03/15/proliferation-monsters-art-weird-expressions-anxiety-britain-japan/> (Accessed 14 April 2021).

62 Fukuzawa, *An Outline*, p. 237.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 236–260.

sought to differentiate itself from China. Fukuzawa himself argued for the Japanese to start eating meat to become more “civilized”.⁶⁶

Overall, Fukuzawa argued that Japan should deal with this anxiety by becoming “civilized” like the Western states. His thinking on these matters developed over time, as he more and more constructed Japan’s identity as increasingly civilized and different from other Asian states, in particular China and Korea.

Fukuzawa’s books *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, published in 1875, and *An Encouragement of Learning*, first published as essays between 1872 and 1876, are heavily influenced by Western ideas that were influential at the time. Fukuzawa’s understanding of civilization is explicitly relational both spatially and temporally. Self and other are treated not only as entities currently existing in two distinct spaces, but the other is also associated with the past and ascribed traits that are associated with that past. Fukuzawa combines such spatial and temporal differentiation, both in how he describes the three stages of civilizational development (primitive, semi-developed and civilized) and in his discussion of states that he designates as being at these stages. At the primitive stage, far from civilization, “man is still unable to be master of his [*sic*] own situation; he cowers before the forces of nature and is dependent upon arbitrary human favor or accidental blessings”.⁶⁷ At the semi-developed stage: “They know how to cultivate the old, but not how to improve it. There are accepted rules governing human intercourse, and slaves of custom that they are, they never alter those rules”.⁶⁸ At the “developed”, or “civilized” stage, “men subsume the things of the universe within a general structure, but the structure does not bind them. Their spirits enjoy free play and do not adhere to old customs blindly”.⁶⁹ What is central to Fukuzawa’s understanding of civilizational development, then, is not material development, but how a society relates to customs and conventions.

Fukuzawa placed Japan among the semi-developed states, along with such countries as China and India. These states were, according to Fukuzawa, temporally behind the civilized ones. He argued that Japan needed to move from this stage and join the ranks of the civilized, where at the time of writing, only the Western states could be found. Japan, in other words, needed to become more like the West and less like China and India.⁷⁰ While at this point (the mid-1870s), Fukuzawa described Japan as belonging to the same category as other Asian states, he nonetheless argued that Japan was much better equipped for becoming civilized than for example China. This was because, in Fukuzawa’s opinion, Japanese and Chinese culture differed significantly. While both China and Japan had been autocratic for most of their history, China had been a theocratic autocracy where political and sacrosanct functions had been combined in the same person—the Chinese emperor. In Japan, by contrast, these functions had become distinct as political power was held by the shogun whereas the sacrosanct function was held by the emperor. Because of this distinction, the principle of reason had also been added in Japan. A balance between these three concepts emerged and, argued Fukuzawa, “since no single concept dominated, there naturally emerged a spirit of freedom”.⁷¹ In China, by contrast,

66 Barak Kushner, *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen: Japan’s Favorite Noodle Soup*, Leiden, Global Oriental, 2012, ch. 5–7.

67 Fukuzawa, *An Outline*, p. 18.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*, p. 18–19

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

“people looked up to one completely autocratic ruler and were credulous slaves to the idea that the most sacrosanct and the most powerful were embodied in the same person”.⁷² Therefore, concluded Fukuzawa, “China has never once changed and thus is not equal to Japan in her development. It is easier for Japan to adopt Western civilization than for China”.⁷³ In other words, even as he described Japan as behind the West, Fukuzawa constructed a Japanese identity as significantly different from China and other Asian states and described Japan’s prospects for becoming civilized as relatively good.

It is clear that in his understanding of civilizational development, Fukuzawa accepted a Western worldview in which Japan was considered temporally behind the West. However, he did not do so uncritically. He emphasized the importance of doubt, criticized those Japanese who in his view uncritically accepted everything Western and pointed out that Western states were far from perfect,⁷⁴ and that some, like Scotland and Sweden, were indeed “uncivilized”.⁷⁵ He also argued that the West had not reached the highest possible level of civilization. The civilizational stage of development in which the West found itself at the time might in the future come to be seen as relatively primitive.⁷⁶

The idea that Japan should leave Asia and join the West is often attributed to Fukuzawa, but he was not the only one to express it. For example, China’s defeat in the 1884–85 Sino-French War, was interpreted by Japanese intellectuals in accordance with the new identity construction according to which China was temporally behind Japan in civilizational development. The Japanese scholar Oka Senjin, who was in China at the time of the war, wrote that Japan must withdraw from the Chinese cultural world.⁷⁷ Similarly, Hinohara Shōzō wrote in a letter to his friend Fukuzawa, who had the letter published as an article in *Jiji Shinpō*, Fukuzawa’s newspaper: “Considering the fact that China is a country of the same Asia, it implies that both Japan and China are bound by a common destiny, sharing honour and disgrace together. If our dissociation from the Oriental countries can facilitate our entry into Europe, then we must discard China”.⁷⁸ Several intellectuals thus expressed anxiety over Japan being seen as “Asian” and participated in the process of altering Japan’s identity, hoping to be recognized by the Western states as a peer.

Fukuzawa’s view of Korea similarly changed in the early 1880s. In 1882, he argued in the *Jiji Shinpō* that “while Japan was advancing towards civilization, Korea was still a backward country”.⁷⁹ He suggested that Korea could change and advocated for Japan, which he believed had already developed significantly, to help Korea become “civilized”. Fukuzawa was a personal friend and supporter of Kim Ok-kyun, a Korean who wished to make Korea more modern and “civilized”. After attempts to bring about change in Korea were squashed by the Korean monarchy, however, Fukuzawa appears to have lost hope in the possibility for change in the country.⁸⁰

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid, p. 29.

74 E.g., Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012 [1872-1876], p. 112–117

75 Fukuzawa, *An Outline*, p. 132.

76 Fukuzawa, *An Outline*, p. 19–20.

77 Ibid.

78 cited in Sushila Narsimhan, *Japanese Perceptions of China in the Nineteenth Century: Influence of Fukuzawa Yukichi*, New Delhi: Phoenix Publishing House, 1999, p. 120.

79 Helen M. Hopper, *Fukuzawa Yukichi: From Samurai to Capitalist*, New York, Pearson Longman, 2005, p. 121.

80 Shunsaku Nishikawa, “Introduction: The Life and Works of Fukuzawa Yukichi”, Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012 [1993], p. xxviii; Hopper, *Fukuzawa Yukichi*, p. 121–124.

Korea and China—and in the past Japan—were held back, argued Fukuzawa, by autocratic Confucian thought, especially by what he termed the “theory of subordination”, which stipulated that the relationship between parent and child should be extended throughout society so that the leaders care for the people and in return get total subordination. The leaders would help the people out in difficult times, for example by providing them with food. In return, the people would be completely docile.⁸¹ To Fukuzawa, the problem with the theory was that the relationship between leaders and people differs from that between parent and child. The personal bond and feelings that exist between and enable the proper working of the latter do not exist in the former. The relationship between leaders and people, he argued, requires a social contract. Without it, people will be dependent on the government and will not care about the affairs of the state. Many consequently lack a sense of civic duty, and act corruptly behind their leaders’ backs.⁸² Society was corrupt because the “theory of subordination” prevented people from becoming independent and did not nurture responsibility and patriotism in them. As a result, the nation would suffer in its relations with other nations. National independence, argued Fukuzawa, required individual independence.⁸³ For Fukuzawa, Japan had been able to overcome this problem, but China and Korea were unable to break free from the customs that prevented them from becoming “civilized”.

The famous editorial *Datsu-A-ron*, often translated as “On leaving Asia”, was published in the *Jiji Shinpō*, on 16 March 1885. Because it was an editorial, the author’s name was not provided, but it has been attributed to Fukuzawa. The article repeated and further emphasized themes that Fukuzawa had long been preoccupied with. It argued that even though geographically Japan was located on the eastern outskirts of Asia, the Japanese “people’s spirit” (*kokumin seishin*) had accepted Western civilization. Japan’s two neighbouring countries, China (*Shina*) and Korea, however, while similar to Japan in some ways, were spiritually very different. In an age in which information was spreading and people were learning about civilization and international law, China’s and Korea’s spirits were stuck in the past and no different from a thousand years ago. Because Japan was geographically close to China and Korea, there was a danger that Westerners would view Japan in the same light as them and suspect that Japan was also despotic and believed in outdated and “uncivilized” ideas. Japan might also be unjustly suspected of disregarding international law and international manners without shame because China and Korea did. However, because China and Korea could not be expected to learn international common sense, Japan instead had to sever relations with them and move forward together with the developed nations.⁸⁴

Significantly, the editorial uses the term *Shina* to refer to China. The importance of this term for Japanese identity and Japan’s overall world view at this historical juncture cannot be overstated. Other terms used to refer to China, such as *Chūgoku* (Middle Kingdom, or Middle country), were based on a Sino-centric world view where China was the centre of civilization. *Shina* was considered a more neutral term that denied this Sino-centric world view and by extension an understanding of Japan as defined by China. While *Shina* was used by some Japanese scholars already in the 18th century, it was not until the second decade of the Meiji period (1877–1886) that the term began to be

81 Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement*, p. 79–81.

82 Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement*, p. 81–82.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 20–26.

84 Yukichi Fukuzawa, “Datsu-A-ron” (On leaving Asia), Yukichi Fukuzawa, *Fukuzawa Yukichi chosakushū dai8kan* (*Fukuzawa Yukichi’s Collected Works, Vol. 8*), Tokyo, Keio daigaku shuppankai, 2003, p. 261–265.

widely used in newspapers. By the mid-1880s, when *Datsu-A-ron* was published, *Shina* had “become entrenched” “in popular Japanese usage”.⁸⁵ That it had become entrenched at the very time that *Datsu-A-ron* was written, and that the “growing disrespect for Japan’s former teacher in the ways of civilization found popular expression” in this editorial,⁸⁶ is revealing of the significant identity change that had occurred: the Sino-centric world view had been rejected, and Japan’s “former teacher in the ways of civilization” was now looked down upon and no longer considered civilized. The new identity that constructed “civilized” Japan as drastically different from “uncivilized” China had become widespread and familiar. In May’s terms, the cleavage between “expectations” and “reality” had gradually been bridged over time, and “reality” had creatively been transformed.⁸⁷

This identity change involved a clear rejection of the Sino-centric world order and Japan’s place in it. It was creative in that it involved a new and radical rethinking of Japan’s identity and its corresponding place in the world. Even though some Japanese had begun to question the Sino-centric order already in the Tokugawa period, it was largely the case that: “Throughout the Tokugawa era, Japanese accepted a Confucian view of civilization—that China, Japan, and Korea were civilized and the rest of the world was barbarian. Fukuzawa took in Western ideas that stood this Confucian idea on its head”.⁸⁸ In seeking to become part of the West and join the ranks of “civilized” nations, Japan fundamentally altered how it constructed its identity in relation to “Asia”, “China” and “Korea”. To become civilized like the West, it needed to become less like “semi-developed” states such as China and Korea, states that were seen as hopelessly stuck in the past. That this radical identity change took place at this particular point in time, even though similar ideas had been expressed earlier, was arguably because it was not until this point in time that Japanese society was sufficiently permeated by anxiety for such creative views to be widely accepted. While Japan thus went from embracing to rejecting a Chinese world view and adopting a Western one, it creatively managed through this imagining, to remain “civilized”. It was first a civilized state in the Sino-centric system. When that world view was rejected, it constructed itself as a civilized state according to the Western world view.

Conclusion

Major identity change is an important phenomenon in international politics as it can reorient not only a state’s particular policies, but also the world view that structures such policies. This article has sought to shed light on the phenomenon of major identity change by exploring the case of Japan in the second half of the 19th century. Japan moved from an identity defined by it being part of the Sino-centric world order where it looked up to China as a “teacher in the ways of civilization” to an identity that rejected China’s centrality and even constructed it as uncivilized. The new identity instead regarded the Western countries as civilized, and Japan sought to join the West and become like these states while differentiating itself from China, Korea and Asia. This radically new identity was made familiar over time, not only through repetition, but by being adapted and repeatedly used to interpret ongoing events. In this way, the gap, as May puts it, between expectations and reality was bridged.

85 Fogel, “New Thoughts”, p. 16.

86 Ibid, p. 17–18

87 May, *The Meaning*, p. 369–370.

88 Craig, “Civilization”, p. 34.

This article has proposed that the kind of major identity change seen in this case can be understood as enabled by an increase in anxiety. By drawing on Rollo May's work, it has suggested that it is through its relation to creativity that anxiety facilitates identity change. The Japanese case illustrates how anxiety gives rise to doubt and enables questioning of an established identity, makes new identities thinkable and increases receptivity to creative ideas. Anxiety thereby makes possible the kinds of radical redefinitions of relational constructions of similarity and difference that we have seen in the Japanese case. While this article has applied these theoretical ideas only to one empirical case, it arguably still shows the argument to be plausible enough to warrant further exploration into how anxiety and creativity interact to make identity change possible in other cases.

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