This study concerns the transmission of political concepts from Western Europe and the United States to Japan in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The specific concepts that I examine in this book—liberty, rights, sovereignty, people, and society—were introduced to Japan in a largely English context of “liberalism” and its enlightenment model of civilization. The political terrain marked by liberal terminology is familiar to readers of a text such as John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859): the people join together in opposition to the despotically monarch, force upon him the law that transforms his privileges into their rights of individual freedom and participatory government, and thereby reconstruct themselves as a self-governing society of citizens. As this civil society and body politic develop, those rational individuals of superior understanding—who rightly rule—undertake the education of their social inferiors, granting the political franchise to greater numbers. As participation expands, so too does the potential advancement of all humankind.

This ideal scenario, however, was not a predetermined and simple undertaking. One purpose of this study is to demonstrate, for the case of Japan, that...
westernization was not a linear process—unlike the tree that arrives with its roots secured in soil and burlap, there was no transplanting of the West in a neat package. The concepts that defined the content of westernization did not translate well; they did not have a natural fit with existing Japanese concepts. Hence the adoption of a new and Western political discourse in Japan necessitated the invention of new terminology with which to engage in the new political discourse. Japanese efforts to translate the West must be understood both as problems of language—the creation and circulation of new concepts—and as problems of action—the usage of new concepts in debates about the policies to be implemented in a westernizing Japan.

Accordingly, a second purpose of this study is to clarify the connections between translation and political practice as westernization was introduced into nineteenth-century Japan. Japanese political, educational, and intellectual leaders were much more enthusiastic about translating political concepts than they were about practicing them; like their European counterparts, they were cautious about establishing liberal institutions. As in Europe, where older republican theories informed nineteenth-century interest in liberalism and democracy, the majority of Japanese leaders advocated a constitutional system with guardedly representative institutions. The people required political and moral tutelage before they would be capable of representing themselves; and such a perspective has informed perhaps all national variations of westernization in the past century.

Hence this study offers a new lens for looking at Western liberal theory and its transmission in the nineteenth century. Central to my argument is the difference between westernization and modernization. By westernization, I draw attention to the early Meiji phenomenon of bunmeikaika: the Japanese effort to create a strong and wealthy Japan after the example of the West—from industrial technology and scientific knowledge to the educational system informing a self-governing entrepreneurial society. As I explain in Chapter 2, bunmeikaika came to mean both westernization—becoming more like the West—and development, the active work of attaining that Western state of enlightened civilization. In this book I focus on the adoption of political language and modes of reasoning that informed Japanese efforts to reproduce Western political structures.

But “becoming civilized” or more like the West does not necessarily mean to become more modern. My focus on bunmeikaika is a deliberate alternative to modernization theory, which problematically conflates a historiographic theory and the process of “becoming modern.” The former, an explanation

2 Translating the West
of how societies changed as they industrialized, can be described and debated. The latter, however, is extremely contentious because of its implicit values and assumptions: who or what determines “being modern”? Prominent among the assumptions of modernization theory is a mode of idealism that seeks a common pattern of development for modern and modernizing nations; the experience of England persistently serves as a normative point of comparison in examining capital accumulation, bureaucratization, and rational methods of production, transportation, and communication—phenomena that modernization theory evaluates as modern, progressive, and socially good.

Here I am less interested in identifying the modern or Western content of bunmeikaika than I am motivated to examine the intellectual dynamics of the scholars and educators who conceptualized bunmeikaika and engaged the political and moral conflicts it raised. Hence a specific shortcoming of the idealism of modernization theory has been its inability to grasp the contingencies and differences of meaning between European and Japanese descriptions of “being Western,” particularly in regard to political concepts. Modernization theorists have persistently presumed that a liberal democracy duly follows in the wake of industrial capitalism; although Japan was initially slow to institute a liberal order, its progress has improved markedly since 1945. But as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, “liberty,” “law,” and “right” are not stable terms with meanings common to Dutch, English, French, German, and Japanese: they have been as highly contestable in Japanese as in English. This study engages Japanese translations of the West not in terms of an ideal liberalism but in terms of the historical Western models selected by Japanese westernizers. A model like Mill’s On Liberty, for example, is not a timeless representation of liberalism—most self-styled liberals in the United States today would not endorse Mill’s elitism and his skepticism of democratic institutions. Where previous scholars have tended to interpret, say, the Meiji Japanese debate over freedom of the press as an instance of liberalism and its opposite, I insist on a careful reading of the debate to see how “liberty” is constructed in the process of debate, with reference to both European arguments about freedom of the press and Japanese claims about appropriate moral behavior. I seek to replace the political idealism assumed in modernization theory with an account of Japanese historical development.

If this study thus returns our attention to debates over nineteenth-century European political theory that formed the ground of Japan’s engagement with westernization, it also returns to the fundamental issues of the ethical choices that accompanied Japan’s westernization. Indeed, the materials I examine force
us to put values at the forefront, because Japan’s leaders deliberately emphasized the moral content of political thought. Much of the earlier scholarship on Japan’s westernization assumed that constitutional democracy and industrial capitalism contain a universally credible and implicitly superior ethics. But in fact the individualism and freedom of action advocated by nineteenth-century English liberalism were specifically contested by Japanese intellectuals, educators, and politicians. In translation, a word like “liberty” connoted a measure of selfishness that restricted its ready acceptability; in the arena of political action, liberty posed an anarchic threat to social stability—thus the ethical decision to restrict liberty seemed reasonable.

This is not to argue that key elements of political relations in Japan continued uninterrupted through much of the nineteenth century. My point is not that restrictions on personal freedoms were a constant condition from the “feudal” or “early modern” Tokugawa regime (1603–1867) into the westernizing Meiji regime (1868–1912). Rather, in the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji, a new vocabulary for describing political relations was invented and used to interpret the new social and political relations under construction. This book shows how the new vocabulary, borrowed largely from English liberalism, was both transformative and transformed in the process of translation.

To some extent, of course, Western political theory and language were transformed because the Japanese setting differed from its European counterparts. From the demise of the Tokugawa shogunate, the Meiji Restoration produced a political confrontation that necessarily transformed the liberal paradigm. The point of political argument from the 1860s through 1880s was not royal privilege but government power in the hands of a self-appointed oligarchy. Precisely because of the overlordship of the Tokugawa shoguns, the imperial sovereign was never perceived as a despotic monarch against whose arbitrary rule the people contended. Rather, the dominant confrontation that reappears between the 1860s and 1880s was that between the oligarchic government and the people; most often, it was specified as the government’s administrative power and authority versus the people’s autonomy and right to constitute a government. In this struggle, the emperor proved to be a key to political solutions. As many scholars have demonstrated, with the emperor’s granting of the Meiji Constitution in 1889 the people were given a share of administrative right to be actualized in an elected national assembly. But in the interests of the social unity that signified their imperial subjecthood, the people had to relinquish sovereignty to the emperor and civil rights to the government. A key development facilitating this transaction was the new concept of soci-
Introduction

I.ety: the enlightenment model, which justified the political tutelage of the people on the basis of the greater rationality of their enlightened superiors, was replaced by an evolutionary model that justified political tutelage on the basis of natural developmental stages of society.

Nonetheless, this study is more than a contribution to Japanese political history, for its focus is the way in which the translation of European political concepts constituted a social infrastructure for Western political thought in Japan. The liberal paradigm and its constituent concepts were transformed in translation, and my initial point is that between 1860 and 1890, as Japanese versions of concepts like rights, liberty, and society were under construction, both their form and meaning were unsettled. Scholars, educators, officials, journalists, regional parties, and local associations—the various segments of literate society—debated the meaning of words and their inherent claims to authority and action. This work of translation and debate thus involved both the description of a received world and the construction of a new one. If intellectuals like J. S. Mill in nineteenth-century England believed that one could discuss “individuals” as if they were separate from “society,” we must remember—as Norbert Elias pointed out in his pathbreaking work, The Civilizing Process—that such an intellectual was reflecting his own experience in a given social position and, moreover, that such a representation was nonetheless contestable. The class basis of political constructions such as the liberal paradigm deserves careful examination, particularly in the Japanese setting where, in the absence of a bourgeoisie, several coalitions of former samurai—the elite class privileged by the Tokugawa shogunate—and commoners were struggling over the meaning of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the creation of a political structure to replace the Tokugawa regime.

Accordingly, this book pursues two parallel lines of argument. One, I examine Japanese translations of Western concepts largely from the perspective of semiotics, which theorizes translation as the problem of transcoding material from one linguistic context into another. Rather than understand meaning as a fixed attribute of words, independent of language or usage specificity (the problem of semantic transparency), I examine the processes whereby new words (and new uses of existing words) generate meaning. As I describe in Chapter 3, there were two basic forms for generating meaning in 1860s and 1870s Japan: loanwords (phonic transcriptions or phonic translations), which attempted to reproduce the sound of foreign words; and translation words, which attempted to render the meaning of foreign words into Japanese signs—and Chinese characters were the standard vehicle for translation words.
during the nineteenth century. To give an example: when Japanese scholars translated the English word “liberty,” they produced both the loanword *riberuchi* and the translation word *jiyū*. (The latter is still the standard translation for “liberty.”) Quite often, however, both loanword and translation word were juxtaposed together in a form unique to Japanese, which I call the “compound sign” or “analog”—in effect, a sign form that instructed the reader to understand *jiyū* as *riberuchi* (liberty).

This semiotic approach critiques the widespread assumption of semantic transparency operating in nearly all historical studies of this period of Japanese history. In criticizing semantic transparency, I draw attention to the fact that previous studies of this material have not problematized the language of concepts; intellectual and political historians of Japan have been satisfied to discuss texts written by European authors and to assume that language is not bound by its historical context—that what a text meant to a nineteenth-century reader, European or Japanese, is what it means to anyone reading it today. This cannot be. Take, for example, a concept central to the Japanese translation of German constitutional thought, *soziale Recht*. In what is still the best study of the intellectual construction of Japanese constitutionalism, its author makes no mention of how *soziale Recht* was translated into a Japanese idiom or whether its translation had any consequences for the meaning of the concept. Instead, language stands outside its historical context, so that *soziale Recht* has a universal and fixed meaning for—i.e., semantically transparent to—German advisers to the Meiji government, their contemporary Japanese advisees, historians writing in the early 1960s, and those of us considering the issue today. As any commentator on the German tradition of *Recht* would admit, an understanding must begin by unraveling the difference between traditions of legal conceptions, since *Recht* encompasses what in English we know as both “law” and “right.” In other words, we cannot make transparent references to “the impact of Western thought” and assume that Japanese unproblematically absorbed an assortment of alien intellectual traditions in foreign languages. We cannot hold meaning constant and note “mere” shifts in forms of expression and, in an abstract manner, their accuracy or inaccuracy. For such an analysis offers only the unsatisfying but prevalent conclusion that when a scholar or translator did his work well, the Japanese acquired knowledge of some concept or text. If he did his work badly, then Japanese misunderstood as a result of mistranslation. These conclusions not only attribute an inordinate measure of political power to intellectuals, but also ignore the concrete problems of transmitting and reconstructing meaning from one language context to another.
As a second line of argument, because words do not exist in isolation (the dictionary perhaps the one exception), I examine this new terminology as it was used in Japanese political debate in order to understand the pragmatic meaning asserted in textual records. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I examine specific usage of words in a number of political debates: the nature of Japanese sovereignty, the appropriateness of popular rights, the acceptability of freedom of religion, and so on. This process necessitates a close examination of context, for the meaning of words is produced not in a dictionary but in usage. This study emphasizes the fact that attempts to transmit to Japan European theories about the relationship between society and representative institutions, for example, were problematic for two reasons, both of which deserve our attention. Not only was there no Japanese word for an English abstraction like “society,” but if Europeans were not unanimous about what they meant by “society,” then the Japanese too would have to work at constructing some meaning for “society” themselves.

In relating these two lines of argument—the work of translation and political debate with translation words—I have benefited from the insights of the interdisciplinary historiographic approach developed in Germany, *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history). *Begriffsgeschichte*, which combines lexical field theory (from historical linguistics) with the histories of philosophy, political thought, and society, identifies multiple temporalities in the rise of modernity: the parallel development of political and epistemological changes. In the words of Melvin Richter, *Begriffsgeschichte* relates conceptual history to social history—in particular, it relates thought, once social or political change has been conceptualized, to changes in the structure of government and society. Reinhart Koselleck, director of the multivolume historical dictionary of political concepts that best exemplifies the work of *Begriffsgeschichte*, has organized the work around the rise of modernity in Germany, defined as a *Satellzeit* or “watershed” between 1750 and 1850. He argues that, with modernity, the tensions between experiences and expectations generate a new, modern sense of historical time, and, in the process, political concepts become more abstract and more oriented toward the future. Of particular relevance to my project is the shift in political categories, traceable to the French Revolution, that opened up new spaces of experience and new horizons of expectation: Aristotelian forms of rule—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—were replaced by a compulsory alternative: despotism or republicanism. About the new concept, republicanism, Koselleck notes: “Whatever constitution might be in force, it was necessary in the long run to displace the rule of men by
men with the rule of men by law; i.e., to realize the republic.” Modern humankind invoked political concepts that promised political forms dependent on future action.5

Such a description of new horizons of expectation opened by, and opening, new spaces of experience fits the introduction of Western political thought to Japan. For in describing Japan’s aspirations to Western civilization, Japanese writers frequently employed a spatial metaphor that recalled Japan’s relation to its earlier model: Chinese civilization. All the related expressions for Western civilization discussed in Chapter 2—bunmei, kaika, kaimei, and so on—were paired with the spatial expression iki, as in bunmei no iki: the region or borderland of civilization, which extends metaphorically to mean the stage or level of civilization. As with Japanese modeling after the example of China, this spatial metaphor necessitates a peculiar shift of perspective. In terms of territory or borderland, one approaches such an iki from a posited center; iki lies at the edge of civilized space. In antiquity, when Japan borrowed much of Chinese civilization, Japan was such a borderland from the point of view of China. Japan entered Chinese civilization from its edges. Hence in terms of level or stage, the metaphor commonly used in the 1870s, the standard or point of reference was again elsewhere—in Europe—and Japan approached this new center again from afar: Japan was a borderland on its way to becoming westernized space. This fractured gaze, with which Japan regards itself in relation to others, is the opening for new space of experience, a space filled with the new horizons of republicanism, industrial wealth, and technological power.6 Koselleck’s example would urge us to attend to at least two temporalities at play in nineteenth-century Japan: on the one hand, the chronological developments of political action in the name of westernization; on the other hand, the epistemological changes taking place with the incorporation of Western political concepts.

**Japanese Westernization in the Nineteenth Century**

When the U.S. Navy arrived in Edo Bay in 1853, Japanese officials were not surprised by the appearance of the West, for some Japanese had undertaken careful study of Europe for well over a century. Even though the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) had decreed a policy of seclusion in 1641, to prohibit contact between Japanese and foreigners, interaction persisted on the island of Deshima (or Dejima) in Nagasaki harbor, where Chinese and Dutch merchants continued their exclusive trade with Japan for more than two centuries.
Communication between the Dutch and their Japanese hosts was facilitated by a guildlike hereditary corps of “Nagasaki interpreters”—Japanese who cultivated the ability to speak Dutch but who were initially prohibited from possessing texts in the Dutch language and hence unable to study the written language. Because of the potentially seditious effects of Christian texts brought to Japan by Portuguese and Spanish Catholics during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the shogunate banned European books in 1641, except those concerning pharmacology, surgery, and navigation. The necessity of linguistic competence, however, meant that officials turned a blind eye to the gradually increasing circulation of Dutch dictionaries and grammars. Finally, in 1720, the eighth shogun Yoshimune (r. 1716–1745) allowed the importation of Dutch books.  

In addition to Dutch medical knowledge, to supplement the work of his doctors trained in Chinese medicine, Yoshimune was motivated by an interest in Dutch mathematics for its applications in astronomy and the related work of producing accurate calendars. He commissioned scholars to study the Dutch language, to collect Dutch books, and to develop the expertise to translate them, thereby sanctioning a nucleus of scholarly activity in his capital, Edo (now Tokyo); by the end of the eighteenth century, this set of studies became known as “Dutch learning.” Apart from mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, Japanese students of Dutch learning pursued knowledge of world geography, natural history, perspective painting, and other related crafts and branches of learning. Although Dutch learning in the eighteenth century was markedly amateur, it became increasingly professional in the nineteenth century with the establishment of an official Translation Bureau in 1811 under the auspices of the shogunate’s Observatory. During the first half of the nineteenth century, as American, British, and Russian ships encroached into Japanese waters, the shogunate added military science, gunnery, and ordnance to the content of Dutch learning.  

Great Britain’s Opium War with China (1839–1842) and the Perry intrusion into Japan (1853–1854) created a new set of circumstances for Japanese officials and scholars interested in Europe. First, Japanese realized that not all Westerners spoke Dutch—that, in fact, Japanese must quickly master the English and French languages—and, second, the shogun and his advisers realized that they must immediately engage their scholars in studies specific to managing the Americans and Europeans: international law, diplomatic protocol, and the professional work of interpreting. It is largely on the basis of this immediately practical orientation of the study of the West after 1854, along
with the reconstruction of the shogun’s Translation Bureau as the Bansho shirabesho (Institute for the Study of Barbarian Books) in 1856, that historians identify a second phase of Japanese study of the West in the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (the Bakumatsu period, 1853–1867): a shift from Dutch learning to “overseas” or “Western learning” (yōgaku). Western learning expanded quickly after 1856, and its primary official institution (renamed the Yōsho shirabesho or Institute for the Study of Western Books in 1862) participated in official visits to the United States and Europe, sent students abroad for extended periods of study, trained a younger generation of scholars fluent in Dutch, English, French, and German, and sponsored the translation of a number of key texts discussed in Chapters 4 and 5—including Henry Wheaton’s Elements of International Law and a trilogy of books based on the Dutch lectures of Simon Vissering regarding international law, constitutional law, and natural law. The Bansho shirabesho, whose personnel increased from about two hundred in 1860 to fifteen hundred by 1866, produced a nucleus of reform-minded officials, many of whom figured as educational and intellectual leaders in the early Meiji period and served prominently in Meiji government positions.

In 1868, the Meiji Restoration was proclaimed. Largely the work of a self-appointed oligarchy composed of members of the imperial court in Kyoto and samurai from southern domains, the two groups united in opposition to the overlordship of the Tokugawa shogun. Thus the Meiji Restoration was in fact a revolution carried out in the name of the Meiji emperor and intent on utterly altering the political structure of Japan. Within the first decade of “restored” imperial rule, the lords were divested of their domains and the samurai of their hereditary stipends and exclusive military function; the peasants were freed from the land and the townspeople from their guild associations. To replace these institutions, the new central government in Tokyo established a prefectural system with a centralized bureaucracy as well as a national and conscript army; it instituted the free sale of land and a national land tax; and it removed restrictions on occupational choice and domestic trade and travel. “Public administration,” a major slogan of the day, meant government by public discussion as opposed to the exclusionary habits of the former regime. Although the Meiji oligarchs, in overthrowing the Tokugawa shogunate, wanted especially to replace the political principle of hereditary hierarchy with the potentially more egalitarian principle of rewarding talent and ability, they left open the question of whether or not public discussion implied a national representative assembly.

10 = Translating the West
Foremost in the minds of the Meiji revolutionaries was the failure of Tokugawa policy toward the foreign powers, which they judged to have been guided by weakness and ultimately disrespectful of imperial rule. Given the international political situation in the second half of the nineteenth century—marked by an expanding European capitalism and colonialism based on aggressive military policies—the oligarchy emphasized national unity under the Meiji emperor. At the same time that the oligarchs struggled both to centralize political power and to acquire the political legitimacy necessary to a revolutionary regime, they were repeatedly assailed by samurai complaints and regional demands for exceptions to the ongoing centralization. Kido Takayoshi, one of the leaders of the restoration, recounted in his diary his frustration over the embattled position of the oligarchy; particularly galling to him were the divisions among his fellow oligarchs, which destabilized the first decade of the Meiji reign with a number of political crises and military conflicts.10

The first irreparable fracture among the oligarchy occurred at the end of 1873. And in due course it prompted not only a heated debate over whether or not a Western constitutional government was necessary but also the most serious military rebellion against the authority of the oligarchy. Disgruntled over its failure in promoting an invasion of Korea (to chastise the Koreans for their rudeness in diplomacy), one faction resigned their government offices in protest; they had imagined the military adventure an appropriate solution to declining morale among segments of the samurai and preferred external expansion to the majority’s policy of internal development. Some of this faction, led by Itagaki Taisuke, issued a “white paper” in January 1874 urging the establishment of a national assembly to check the authoritarian power of the oligarchy. Although Itagaki and his allies are sometimes dismissed as samurai spoilers, their action inaugurated what was at the time known as the movement to establish a national assembly. The movement, which lasted somewhat over a decade, first spawned an urban and regional exercise in petition drives and the formation of political parties; in some regions, it soon joined ranks with an increasingly violent set of rural protests for tax justice and local rights. The first phase was partially co-opted in 1881 with the oligarchy’s promise of a national assembly to convene in 1890; the second phase, which peaked in 1884, was thoroughly repressed with military force. Others of the resigning faction took to military uprisings; the gravest challenge to the oligarchy, the Satsuma Rebellion, erupted in 1877 under the leadership of former oligarch Saigō Takamori, who had been central to planning the frustrated military expedition to Korea. Saigō led an army of ex-samurai disgruntled with
the loss of their stipends, privileges, and livelihoods, and only after months of protracted battle did the new government troops defeat the rebels. To Kido and the majority in power, this was yet another plot by dissidents and malcontents to foment opposition and destroy the government.\(^{11}\)

Scholars have long debated the degree to which the oligarchy was committed to the kind of popular participation inherent in a national assembly. Certainly Kido Takayoshi imagined such a development, but it was tempered by concern for the security of the monarchy and the well-being of the people. He saw the role of government in the light of Confucian paternalism—to combine centralization with responsibility for the people. Hence he repeatedly expressed concern for the hardships of peasants and samurai and understood that the oligarchy’s goal should be a “people’s government,” made capable and responsible through the promotion of men of talent. After his trip to Europe with the Iwakura Mission (from December 1871 to July 1873), an official delegation sent abroad to investigate both Western technology and political, economic, and scientific institutions, Kido concluded that the best way to counter regional or other divisions among the people was “to cultivate a respect for law in the public mind,” because such a “spirit of law” (referring to Montesquieu) would ultimately protect the people. He noted that a system of law must be based on a “despotic” fundamental law (a constitution), especially to maintain discipline in education and military institutions. But it must also include local assemblies and, gradually, a national parliament—and most important, it must be committed to impartial administration in order to eliminate the favoritism that marked the first decade of Emperor Meiji’s rule.\(^{12}\)

Central to the political and social restructuring of Japan was the work of cultural change or westernization. Given the widespread alarm over Japan’s international vulnerability, the oligarchy and its supporting intellectuals were determined to create a strong and wealthy Japan after the example of the West, a new Japan capable of resisting the Western aggression reported in China, India, and Africa. This new program of westernization, or, as it was called at the time, “enlightened civilization” (bunmeikaika), included not only the industrial technology necessary for manufacturing ships and guns and mechanizing Japan’s cotton industry but also the scientific knowledge informing that technology. The problem facing such a Japanese undertaking was the expansiveness of nineteenth-century European science. At a time when the formal divisions among academic and technological disciplines were only beginning to be established in Europe and the United States, science was inseparable from metaphysics, political economy, and industry—and those in turn insep-
arable from religion, ethics, and politics. Each thread in the weave of westernization led to the synthetic whole, and Japanese intellectuals spent a great deal of mental effort discussing one or another causal sequence that might enable them to replicate the Western pattern. If some insisted that Christianity was the starting point for Western civilization, others insisted it was science. Clearly, all agreed, industrialization and a Western university system were imperative for Japan’s progress.

The most famous site of public discussion over cultural change was the Meirokusha or “Meiji Six Society”—so named after its founding in the sixth year of the Meiji emperor (1873). This group of self-styled educators, most of whom were samurai, saw their task as threefold: to advance learning and morality, to establish patterns of leadership (that is, to assert a role for themselves in the new Japan), and to develop a forum for public speaking and debating that would serve as an example for their unenlightened peers and commoners. In the manner of a European or American scholarly society, the Meirokusha would encourage both the discussion of ideas and the propagation of these ideas through the publication of their proceedings as the Meiroku zasshi or “Meiji Six Journal”—the first such scholarly journal of opinion. The society included many leading philosophers, educators, legal scholars, and political economists, all of whom had started their careers in the Tokugawa schools for Western learning. One of these men, Katō Hiroyuki, had been the first to systematically introduce the theory of constitutional government in 1861. Two others, Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nakamura Keiu, had introduced Anglo-American liberal theory through several popular works—in particular Nakamura’s widely read translations of Samuel Smiles’ Self-Help and John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty. Among the countless issues first debated by the Meirokusha were religious liberty, the need for a popularly elected assembly, the equality of women, the free travel of foreigners in Japan, and freedom of the press. Hence the writings of the Meirokusha constituted a significant political agenda in laying the groundwork for public discussions of social and political questions.13

As I explain in Chapter 2, an initial argument among the Meirokusha concerned the starting point for the educational work of promoting enlightened civilization. Some members, led by Nishi Amane and Shimizu Usaburō, urged that the society concentrate on reconstructing the Japanese language so as to facilitate communication among Meirokusha members and the people at large, who were divided by regional dialects, class differences, and a cumbersome system of writing. But a vocal majority felt that such a project was too grandiose; they instead identified the people’s ignorance as the main obstacle to progress—

Introduction # 13
a diagnosis that conveniently placed society members in a position to undertake the education and civilization of the people. Implicit in this analysis, of course, was an assumption of class differences. With the telling exception of Shimizu, the son of a sake brewer, these men were all former samurai and objectified the “people” as an inferior class. They typically looked upon the lowly people—composed, in the Tokugawa formulation, of farmers, craftsmen, and merchants—with an often arrogant paternalism that had accrued to their commanding position. While they understood that theoretically all men of all classes were free and equal, and nearly all of the Meirokusha scholars would have agreed that the authoritarian Tokugawa shogunate had unfortunately encouraged servility among the people, this sympathetic argument could not alter the fact of existing conditions.

Nonetheless, to the credit of these former samurai, two points should be borne in mind. In the first place, they were able to include a commoner like Shimizu among their ranks because they generally did share a belief in the principle articulated by Nakamura Keiu in his translation of Smiles’ *Self-Help* and by Fukuzawa Yukichi in his *Encouragement of Learning*: since heaven did not create men above or below each other, high and low in human society were entirely a product of education and self-improvement. All men were capable of bettering themselves. In the second place, these men did not often represent themselves in their writings as former samurai. Rather, based on a key element of their shared samurai upbringing—that the samurai had been the politically privileged class—the word typically used in their debates is “government” (*seifu*). In texts like the *Meiji Six Journal*, these scholars represent Japan as an opposition between the government and the people, and the Meirokusha scholars implicitly speak on behalf of government. Indeed, numerous connections linked the Meirokusha and the oligarchy: Fukuzawa Yukichi was a personal friend of oligarch Kido Takayoshi; Mori Arinori, Kanda Takahira (Kōhei), Katō Hiroyuki, and Tsuda Mamichi were members of the “steering committee” of the Kōgisho (Gijisho), an early “public assembly”; Kanda also served as governor of Hyōgo prefecture and in that capacity played a central role in the Prefectural Governors’ Assembly; Katō served as tutor to the emperor; and several of these men later in their careers served as central government officials—Mori as minister of education; Katō as president of Tokyo Imperial University and minister of education; Nishi Amane as minister of the army.

These men spoke on behalf of the government because, given their knowledge of civilization and participation in government, it was they who were
best qualified to represent the government’s position publicly. The work of westernization, in other words, proceeded with the help of a powerful sympathy linking the elite social standing of the former samurai and the meritocratic elite imagined by Western liberalism. Hence when the ruling oligarchy decreed an extensive press censorship law in 1875 to curb the people’s meddling in government affairs, the Meirokusha demonstrated its solidarity with the government by voluntarily ceasing to publish its journal. Within two years, other deliberately apolitical journals resumed the work of the *Meiji Six Journal*. Most prominent of these were *Gakugei shirin* (Annals of Science and Art, 1877–1885), published by the faculty of the new Tokyo Imperial University, and *Tokyo gakushi kaiin zasshi* (Journal of the Tokyo Academy, 1880–1901), the publication of the new honorary society of scholars established by the Ministry of Education. Both of these journals included articles by the same nucleus of Meiji educators.¹⁴

At the same time, the strong identification between the Meirokusha scholars and the government and its goals meant that the former supported the latter during the political conflicts of the 1870s and 1880s. In a word, the Meirokusha and the government oligarchy were united in a policy of gradualism: the preference for social stability over political participation and the maintenance of elite rule over expanding popular representation. I show in Chapters 4 and 5 that a majority of the Meirokusha and their allies valued loyalty over liberty and the state’s right over personal rights. By the mid-1880s, I argue in Chapter 6, a new explanation of social evolution justified continued political tutelage on the basis of developmental stages of society, and gradualism became more firmly rooted in the putative certainty of scientific ground.

**The Historiography of Bunmeikaika**

Virtually every scholar who has commented on the early Meiji phenomenon of *bunmeikaika* has treated it as an aspect of “the rise of modern Japan”—as a moment within Japan’s national history or the history of Japan’s modernization. Perhaps the earliest systematic treatment of *bunmeikaika* was that of Japanese Marxists working in the 1930s and 1940s. In this perspective, which sought to write the history of the Meiji Restoration as a bourgeois revolution, scholars like Hattori Shisō, Miyagawa Tōru, Tōyama Shigeki, and, in English, E. H. Norman worked to explain the peculiar development of Japan’s revolution. Most often they identified the error of “Meiji absolutism,” that expansion of bureaucratic powers after 1885, such that the imperial bureaucracy
became the main arm of an autocratic state with wide powers and unaccountability to the electorate and legislature. Along with the slogan “enrich the country, strengthen the military,” Marxists treat *bunmeikaika* as a bourgeois policy employed by would-be reformers in their efforts to transform Tokugawa society along the path of development suggested by modern European civilization. Unfortunately for the liberal reforms usually connoted by *bunmeikaika* civilization, these reformers were more committed to industrial capitalism and its ideology of progress than to civil liberties and elected institutions; hence would-be reformers became the very absolutist officials responsible for misdirecting the revolution toward the fascism of the 1930s.\(^{15}\)

Modernization theorists, who engaged Japanese historiography in the late 1950s in direct opposition to Marxism, treated *bunmeikaika* in much the same way as Marxist historians. In modernization theory, *bunmeikaika* is again a slogan that publicizes the policy and programs intended by the government to introduce the technological innovations of the modern West. Unlike Marxism, however, modernization theorists narrate an ultimately successful triumph, for they see continuous and beneficial development from Meiji to the 1960s—an interpretation that begs the question of 1930s “fascism.” Most modernization theorists treat the unfortunate period of fascism and war as an aberration; some construe a positive interpretation by suggesting that Japanese nationalism offers lessons for broadly defining patterns of modernization.\(^ {16}\) The rare contributions to modernization theory that express some unease over the trajectory of Meiji development point to a “reactionary” response in the 1880s by Meirokusha intellectuals like Nishimura Shigeki, who perceived a lamentable absence of attention to standards of behavior in the “civilization and enlightenment” programs.\(^ {17}\) In any case, this largely positive approach to long-term trends is marked by the fact that modernization theorists routinely equate civilization (*bunmeikaika*) and modernization (*kindaika*)—a conflation that reduces the problem of explaining *bunmeikaika* civilization to an account of intellectual factors in the modernization process, particularly the rationality and scientific thought characteristic of “enlightenment.” In the same way that political institutions become secondary phenomena, so too the issues of meaning and translation become secondary to the development of industrial capitalism.\(^ {18}\)

Both Marxism and modernization theory have contributed to what is now a standard treatment of *bunmeikaika* in Japanese intellectual history, exemplified by such seminal works as Carmen Blacker’s *The Japanese Enlightenment*, Carol Gluck’s *Japan’s Modern Myths*, the many publications of eminent historians Ōkubo Toshiaki and Matsumoto Sannosuke, and the 1979 studies pro-
duced by Hayashiya Tatsusaburō and the Tokyo University Humanities Research Institute: Bunmeikaika no kenkyū. Most historians now comfortably equate civilization and modernization (or modernity), both of which refer to the technological progress achieved by Japan during the Meiji period—in particular the intellectual and sociological underpinnings sponsored by bunmeikaika: rationality, utility, science, a modern educational system, and the promise of national unification provided by common language habits and textbooks. Above all, bunmeikaika represents the practical impetus for modernizing Japan. As I describe in Chapter 2, references to the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment suggest a Japanese parallel and essentialize “enlightenment”—albeit anachronistically—as keimō shisō (enlightenment thought), whose setting and manpower can be cleanly chronicled during the early Meiji period. To Blacker, for example, the “enlightenment movement” in Japan signifies the acquisition of a scientific worldview, which is thus the occasion for rethinking traditional knowledge in the manner of the French philosophs.19

A majority of historians of Japan follow Marxism in closing the period of bunmeikaika around 1884 with the demise of the popular rights movement and the intellectuals’ putative abandonment of liberal values as they rallied behind oligarchic leadership—echoing what Marxists identified as the rise of Meiji absolutism. Indeed, it is difficult today either to treat as aberrant or to remain silent about the joint development of Japanese capitalism and authoritarianism—a linkage that has been central to the development of modern industry throughout the non-Western world. Hence while most Japanese historians working on the Meiji period today would agree with modernization theory that Japan is the beneficiary of successful industrial development, they must at the same time acknowledge the issue of value judgments made by Meiji oligarchs and would-be reformers. Tetsuo Najita has described Meiji enlightenment as a “highly pluralistic” set of ideas indicative of the tensions “between radical and unexpected disruption in history . . . and the continuing psychological attachment to loyal action as a social value”; Carol Gluck judges “civilization and enlightenment” a temporary diversion from a long-standing and more compelling interest in kokutai, Japan’s unique body politic defined by the imperial line; and Yamamuro Shin’ichi describes bunmeikaika as an international and systemic “indoctrination” on behalf of the construction of a Japanese nation-state.20 But rather than locate bunmeikaika in a national history of Japan, I am instead interested in describing the dynamics of “civilization” as Japanese intellectuals created the linguistic material needed to represent the Western model and worked out its meaning in translation,
scholarship, and debate. It is the characterization that *bunmeikaika* represents a liberal movement, followed by a conservative reaction, with which I take issue here. For rather than portray early Meiji intellectuals beginning their careers as liberals and undergoing some middle-aged conservative reversal, my position in this book is that theirs was a nineteenth-century liberalism committed more to an elite republicanism than to populist democracy and more to law and order than to personal freedoms and rights. As a self-appointed elite, they chose rational and state control instead of popular initiative. In this book I examine the conceptual and semantic bases for these choices.

**The Problem of Semantic Transparency**

The primary difficulty with previous studies of the conceptual foundations of Japan's westernization is, as I stated above, the error of semantic transparency. While I am certainly not the first historian to draw attention to this problem, readers are perhaps familiar with earlier critiques that phrased the problem differently. Semantic transparency was assumed in the practice of “the history of ideas” as normalized by Arthur O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being*, a mode of historiography that both John Dunn and Quentin Skinner criticized thirty years ago as unduly abstracting ideas from their contexts and turning the activity of thought into “reified reconstructions” too often embedded in biographical approaches to thinkers or simplistic classifications of ideas intended to impart to them universal themes.²¹ Although intellectual historians have in recent decades substantially revised their methodologies, the problems that Dunn and Skinner associate with “the history of ideas” linger in studies of Japan’s westernization. At the risk of belaboring this perhaps familiar issue, I would point out two significant ways in which the historiography of ideas has impeded a better understanding of the conceptual foundations of Japan’s engagement with Western civilization: the abstraction of ideas from their contexts and the simplistic classification of ideas, both of which contribute to this central problem of semantic transparency.

Joseph Pittau’s *Political Thought in Early Meiji Japan* merits close scrutiny because it remains the single best discussion of the development of constitutionalism in Japan despite methodological shortcomings typical of an earlier generation of scholarship. In his introduction, Pittau observes that ideas, as they “unfold in history,” are by nature abstract; they are expressed in a more concrete fashion in institutions (which is one purpose of leaders).²² Accordingly, the tension that ideas face in their reified existence as historical agents
is the disjunction between their position in a political philosopher’s system, where they are whole or original, and their selected and rationalized position as politicians use them in one or another living system. Pittau’s understanding of ideas is committed to the continuity and identity of ideas over time. Or, to put the point another way, Pittau is committed to a principle of the semantic transparency of words—it does not much matter when or in what language an idea is expressed. To Pittau, a German idea like Rechtsstaat in the philosophical system of Rudolf von Gneist is the same idea when used by Itō Hirobumi in his selective adaptation of Gneist for the Japanese constitution. Any non-German reader (let alone non-Japanese reader) who might not understand Rechtsstaat must resort to Pittau’s parenthetical note (“legal state”)—even if another translator might render it “constitutional state.” Instead of explaining how Gneist’s meaning of Rechtsstaat was translated into Japanese and how Japanese statesmen interpreted it, Pittau simply presents Rechtsstaat in the context of Gneist’s system and asserts that Gneist’s “doctrine” exerted its influence on Itō. Rechtsstaat is abstracted from its historical context and treated as a timeless idea.\footnote{23}

A variation on this abstraction of ideas from their concrete contexts of translation has been the reduction of ideas to values—a problem that arose from the engagement between modernization theory and sociology, largely under the example of Talcott Parsons.\footnote{24} In the service of a systemic study of values, concepts are abstracted from their immediate contexts in order to identify, first, those values that have been generally conducive to policies of modernization and, second, the degree of commitment to such values on the part of their advocates. Democracy, for example, is understood less as a political institution than as one of several presumably modern values that motivates individuals and societies in the modern and modernizing worlds.\footnote{25} As such, democracy is best studied for its ability to foster social mobilization, and thus its key function is the election, the means by which societies engage in the rational choices that guide policies.\footnote{26} Because this modernization approach to values is largely informed by functionalism, which identifies the functional parts of posited systems, ideas are reducible to maxims operational according to instrumental reason. The consequence for historiography is that, again, with intellectual history written as a history of ideas, concepts are reified and removed from their historical context and questions instead address, at one level, the relation of values to the systemic changes wrought by modernization and, at a second level, the understanding or intentionality of agents in a position to rationally choose some value and its corresponding policy.\footnote{27}
Robert Bellah and Robert Scalapino, for example, describe Japan as having a rather fixed “value-institutional structure” that facilitated Japan’s modernization. Where Bellah sought to identify a “central value system” in Japan and to chart the integration of central values such as loyalty among the political, religious, and economic spheres in order to explain how such central values of the Tokugawa period encouraged Japan’s modernization, Scalapino identified stages of modernization in terms of a series of “ideologies” that are animated by a persisting structure of values. Scalapino’s first stage, national unification, corresponds to the Meiji period and to the ideology of liberalism; together this nexus of stage, period, and ideology—national unification, the Meiji period, and liberalism—fostered nationalism, mass mobilization, and modern economic development. Even though this stage of national unification was beset by an internal division between so-called radicals (like Itagaki Taisuke) and moderates (like Fukuzawa Yukichi), the key value of imperialism, supported by both groups and motivating national unification, persisted throughout the other stages of Japan’s modernization.

As one of the few modernization theorists willing to note the problem of conceptual or semantic differences, Scalapino is confident of the Japanese ability to understand and make use of foreign ideology—a process that, in his view, depends mainly on the adequate selection of keywords. Perhaps because Scalapino is aware that “these words will bear different connotations from those in the place of their origin” and that there exists an “omnipresent gap between ideas and the social environment to which they had been brought,” he focuses not on meaning but on the use that Japanese politicians made of foreign ideas. When Meiji intellectuals “diverged in terms of emphasis or interpretation, it was ordinarily a conscious or unconscious effort to meet the demands of indigenous conditions.” For Scalapino, the force of ideas matters in situations that call for political action whereas the meaning of ideas—because they refer to a modern and Western standard—is temporarily problematic and of secondary concern. Japan, a “follower nation,” was forced to follow the universal stream, for which it was aided by its ideological proclivities. Because Japan emphasized a traditional way of life, “its relatively higher particularist quotient” of values like Japanese imperialism assisted the introduction of “the purely technological facets of Westernism.”

But this “sociology of values” generates an interpretive problem that is based on an internal contradiction between the universal and the particular. When modernization is construed as a linear process determined by universal values—especially rationalization—the particularity of Japan’s success, in light of par-
ticular Japanese values such as imperialism, prevents Japan from attaining the ideal and universal state defined by modernization. One difficult point of interpretation, for example, was whether or not authoritarianism, as a particular Japanese value that facilitated Japan’s successful modernization, was “good” for modernization—to reason instrumentally. How were scholars to evaluate Japan’s successful modernization if it had been attained by means presumably neither ideal nor universal?

This conundrum is expressed in histories of Japan’s westernization in a peculiar fashion: misplaced apologies on the part of postwar historians for “anti-democratic” attitudes among Meiji intellectuals. As it figures in modernization historiography, Parsonian sociology redefined the significance of ideas as the degree of commitment on the part of those who give voice to them. Simply put: sociology diverted attention to the question of intentions. As Pittau asked in his study of constitutionalism, was the imperialist ideology of the 1930s really what intellectuals of the early Meiji period wanted? To few readers’ surprise, Pittau’s answer is no, but this reader is troubled that so many scholars of Japanese intellectual history in the 1950s and 1960s felt compelled to apologize for “illiberal” ideas in the works of their subjects. Clearly Pittau’s asking a question that holds little interest for scholars today—“is this really what they wanted?”—reflects the ideological conundrum central to modernization theory as the United States entered the Vietnam War: it seemed contradictory that the model of modernization being offered to Third World leaders was Japan’s joint program of industrialization and political authoritarianism. Japanese historians betrayed their complicity with Cold War policy by keeping silent about modernization theory’s propensity to defer the goals of liberalism and democracy—putting themselves in the odd position of having to apologize for the untoward attraction of values like authoritarianism by invoking the reverse, the unintentionality of their subjects. As Pittau puts it, modernization was the Meiji leaders’ goal—a good goal even if it was the occasion for authoritarian methods whose consequences were unintended. This is an especially peculiar conclusion when we remember, as I show in this book, that liberalism in the nineteenth century confidently asserted the authority of a social and educational elite.

Apart from this problem of abstracting ideas from their contexts, semantic transparency is implicit too in the simple classification of ideas. One common habit is the identification of contrastive elements in a man’s thought: traditional versus modern, Japanese versus foreign, or conservative versus progressive. Surely the most problematic manifestation of such simplification
in relation to the topic of this book is the confusion of an ideal definition of liberalism with the actual construction of liberalism in Japan during the early Meiji period as well as the substitution of this history with a false and anachronistic opposition between liberalism and conservatism. The liberalism of J. S. Mill, for example, who was central to the Japanese construction of liberalism, was essentially libertarian in its commitment to both minimal government and the leadership of an educated elite. As a number of scholars have pointed out, drawing on Michel Foucault’s exposition of “governmentality,” the political reason of liberalism is best defined by the rule of law and the participation of the governed in the elaboration of that law; at the same time, liberal law is committed both to general forms of government intervention exclusive of individual or exceptional measures and to limiting government intervention in a social economy best left to a self-governing civil society. Graham Burchell has aptly concluded: “To the extent that the objective of government is to provide the regulatory framework which will secure the more or less automatic functioning of civil society, the state’s exercise of governmental power can be seen as in continuity with, or as grafted onto, society’s immanent relations of power.”

Society’s immanent relations of power in the nineteenth century, in England as well as Japan, emphasized the principle of tutelage on the part of an educated elite over their social inferiors. As Uday Singh Mehta has persuasively argued, tutelage informed both British liberalism and imperialism and rendered the two entirely compatible. The same is true of Japan.

Take, for example, Fukuzawa Yukichi, who has been praised as a “liberal unto the end” and criticized for supporting “policies that were in conflict with the liberal ideas [he] had earlier espoused”—policies like oligarchic rule and government control of the press. Fukuzawa and his Meirokusha associates are said to exemplify liberalism because they embodied these ideas in their personal lives. For evidence, one often reads the now hackneyed anecdote about Fukuzawa’s encounter with a peasant on a horse: On vacation at the beach near Kamakura, Fukuzawa encountered a peasant riding a horse, who, oblivious of the new elimination of class differences, dismounted and knelt before Fukuzawa, mortified to be riding in the presence of someone clearly a samurai. As Mikiso Hane, Ivan Hall, and others have interpreted the story, “Fukuzawa reprimanded the peasant for his servility and made him get back on the horse.” Observe how Fukuzawa told that part of the story:

The poor fellow was afraid to mount before me.

“Well, get back on your horse,” I repeated. “If you don’t, I’ll beat you.
According to the laws of the present government, any person, farmer or merchant, can ride freely on horseback without regard to whom he meets on the road. You are simply afraid of everybody without knowing why. That’s what’s the matter with you.”

I forced him to get back on the horse and drove him off.\(^{39}\)

Although scholars rightly read this passage as evidence of Fukuzawa’s commitment to the new equality of classes under the Meiji government, they ignore the fact that Fukuzawa invokes both the force of law and the threat of personal violence in order to make another do what he arrogantly knows is best. This is evidence of the liberalism that insisted upon paternalistic tutelage in promoting enlightened civilization. But Hane and others have instead excised tutelage from liberalism, explaining instead a demise of liberalism in terms of a biographical shift; they suggest that early Meiji intellectuals embraced liberalism in their progressive youth and then underwent middle-age transformations to conservatism.\(^{40}\) In a similar but larger context, Hane sees liberalism in early Meiji as “losing its popularity” with the ugly but necessary and simultaneous rise of nationalism.\(^{41}\) Indeed, Japanese interest in liberalism and constitutionalism was matched by the need for Japanese strength and wealth, and I would agree with Hane that these men were committed to supporting the government and of course fell into line with changing policies. But one can explain their rather consistent perspective without invoking simple oppositions or a false biographical shift.\(^{42}\) The concepts supplied by liberalism and its enlightenment project separated both politics and epistemology from the hereditary forms of the Tokugawa regime and placed them in the new categories of Western knowledge. But liberalism in Japan was concerned less with democracy or equality than with the work of reconstituting political power in the hands of a broader but still elite group.

We must take care, then, in identifying a Japanese “liberalism” of the 1870s, when “liberty” so strongly connoted selfishness that, in the interests of social stability, intellectuals close to the ruling oligarchy defined liberty as pertaining not to public speech, assembly, or the press but to the internal domain of thought and religious belief. This is one reason why I insist on repositioning the so-called popular rights movement in its Meiji context in Chapters 5 and 6. Twentieth-century scholarship has tended to see a democratic movement—which, for the most part, it was not. During the 1920s heyday of “Taishō democracy,” Japanese scholars and activists sought precedents for their own activities in what they called the Meiji “freedom and popular rights movement.” And
in the postwar period, a subsequent generation cited this Meiji movement as a precedent for the “democratization” of Japan under the postwar constitution. But to contemporaries in the 1870s, the movement was known as the movement “to establish a national assembly.” In print media descriptions of agitation for “popular rights” through the 1880s, “freedom” is increasingly—but “democracy” never—part of the description. Aside from occasional activists in local political societies and branches of national parties, Ueki Emori seems to have been alone on the national (Tokyo) stage in suggesting that all the people deserved some role in political decisions. Instead, as in Europe, the majority of intellectuals advocated a constitutional system with guardedly representative institutions.

That postwar American scholarship has thus framed a study of Japan in familiar but misleading terms—liberal versus conservative—is especially evident when we look at nineteenth-century commentaries on Japan. In an editorial printed in 1881 in the Japan Weekly Mail, for example, the English writer identified Japan’s political conflict in terms of conservatism versus nationalism. By nationalism, he meant the specific form that Japan’s would-be reformers had advocated in calling for reform: a national assembly that would “multiply the bearing points of responsibility.” The danger that Japan faced, according to that writer, was not some demise of liberalism as its followers turned conservative; rather, he worried that nationalism would cease to be seen as an honorable patriotism and be redefined as treason. That is, would the conservative government honor the nationalist sentiments of patriots’ calls for reform, or would it label them traitors? In either case, the Meirokusha intellectuals sit in the conservative camp, for in the eyes of the Japan Weekly Mail, the nationalists were the reform-minded local organizations largely allied with Itagaki Taisuke’s Liberty Party.

Rather than succumb to a discussion of commitment to liberalism or whether Japanese values are conducive to liberalism, I would instead examine concepts and their evaluations. Or as Dipesh Chakrabarty phrased the issue in a recent discussion of the “ideological” and the “political,” rather than differentiate what is real from what is merely ideological, I would engage political concepts as they are involved in historical debate over meaning and policy. What passes through these earlier studies of Japan’s modernization as “central values” is better examined in terms of what Japanese at the time called “moral character”—the persisting problem of ethics. As Kido Takayoshi noted in his Diary in late 1868, the technology at the basis of the change required by Japan’s national emergency called for a change of attitude, but...
the cultivation of moral character was still most essential for families throughout the land.  

The Historicity of Concepts in Translation

In seeking to reposition Japanese westernization within the historicity of "enlightened civilization" and its translated terminology, I have taken my lead from both Begriffsgeschichte and intellectual history "after the linguistic turn," which William J. Bouwsma once described as a history of meaning that seeks to link intellectual history to cultural and social history. Although the new intellectual history is well represented in the study of Tokugawa Japan, particularly through the "Chicago school" of H. D. Harootunian and Tetsuo Najita and their students and associates, there have been few contributions to the intellectual history of Meiji Japan apart from prominent works by Carol Gluck and Stefan Tanaka. The new directions in research represented by the 1994 Meiji Conference at Harvard University do not engage westernization or intellectual history; rather, these papers pursue nation building instead of modernization and local resistance instead of the imposition of elite prerogatives.

In Japan, the new intellectual history of Meiji Japan is perhaps best represented by Ishida Takeshi, whose analysis of Japan’s importation of Western political concepts traces the work of prominent intellectuals in introducing key ideas to Japanese political debate. As the mechanism by which translation coordinates “Eastern” or Japanese culture and that of the West, Ishida borrows the notion of language symbols from Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, which problematically opens the door to language universals—concepts semantically transparent to cultural and temporal differences. In this book I undertake a concrete study of words in translation in order to bring linguistics back into an intellectual history after its turn.

Perhaps most prominent in the Anglo-American practice of new intellectual history is Quentin Skinner, whose work is exemplary for its effort to engage historical process. Skinner examines word usage in order to grasp the intentions of past contributions to political thought—an intentionality he describes in terms of action. Skinner wants to be able to describe what “authors were doing in writing” texts, for then we can begin to see not merely what arguments they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudi-
ing, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions
and conventions of political debate.  

In theory, Skinner provides a sophisticated alternative to R. G. Collingwood’s
understanding that history is the history of past thought and that the way to
study it is to understand what questions thinkers were asking in the past. But
in addition, Skinner not only corrects the idealism implicit in both Colling-
wood’s insistence that one can rethink the thoughts of the past and Lovejoy’s
abstract method of isolating the unit ideas of universal themes, but he also
potentially remedies charges of reductionism leveled against the new intel-
lectual history—that in keeping with a long-standing Euro-American assump-
tion that meaning explains action, the new intellectual history reduces
experience to meaning. Rather than study political events by referring to
political texts, Skinner would have us study the words in which ideas are rep-
resented and the ways in which they are used in the past argument that con-
stitutes political event.

It is precisely upon this methodological point that advocates of Koselleck’s
*Begriffsgeschichte* assert common ground: they all share a commitment both
to treating thought within its context and to addressing “the question of what
historical actors thought was at stake when they disputed the meanings and
uses of abstract terms.” The prominent degree of abstraction in Koselleck’s
idea of “basic concept,” however, risks reproducing the idealism of conven-
tional history of ideas. According to Koselleck, concepts are to be detached
from their situational context so as to order them according to a temporal
sequence. Hence Koselleck differentiates concepts from words: “A word pre-
sents potentialities for meaning; a concept unites within itself a plenitude of
meaning.” Although one might argue, in support of Koselleck, that this
abstraction of concepts is in fact the nature of modernity—that this recog-
nition of experience in concepts is precisely an effect of modern temporality—
I am struck that his focus is this reified notion of meaning:

The meaning of the word always refers to that which is meant, whether
a train of thought or an object, etc. The meaning is therefore fixed to
the word, but it is sustained by the spoken or written context, and it also
arises out of the situation to which it refers. A word becomes a concept
if this context of meaning in which—and for which—the word is used,
is entirely incorporated into the word itself. The concept is fixed to the
word, but at the same time it is more than the word.
That is: as linguistic signs, the conceptual signification of a word exceeds its material signifier; concepts are abstracted from multiple significations and thus can be considered thought detached from the material sign. Or as Hans Erich Bödeker represents the point: Koselleck distinguishes the meaning of a word from its referential relation and introduces the word-to-thought relation as the third pole of a triangle of meaning. Hence a concept is defined by three points: the word, the object(s) to which it refers, and the meaningful content intended by thought. It is perhaps this aspect of Koselleck’s theory that has led Melvin Richter to the idealist conclusion that “an individual or group may possess a concept without having a word by which to express it”—a surprising position that mimics the abstract idealism of semantic transparency.

A more materialist way to understand this relation between concept and word is the semiotic relation between type and token—a word in its abstracted and general existence (as in a dictionary) and the word as it appears in a particular instance of usage. As I explain in Chapters 2 and 3, a sign type like *bunmei* carried with it the meaning of “universal (Chinese) civilization,” which enabled Fukuzawa Yukichi to use the word (a sign token), by metaphorical extension, to mean “universal (Western) civilization.” In the process, the type began to assume the new meaning derived from the new token; the meaning of *bunmei* shifted from Chinese to Western civilization. To Koselleck, concepts are abstract summations of meaning—like sign types—whereas words present ambiguous or potential meanings—actualized in use, like sign tokens.

My own reliance on type and token corresponds to the terminology of the materialist linguist V. N. Voloshinov, who describes this relation as meaning and theme—respectively, the abstract word (type) and the word in use (token). But like Quentin Skinner, Voloshinov insists that these two aspects of words remain united in the singular word. This insistence forces two conclusions: first, we are dealing not with a material word and its mental or ideal meaning but a material word whose meaning is “multi-accentual” and depends on usage and user; second, language must be considered as a synchronic totality available to users, whose language usage—in the form of “utterances” or “statements”—is examined in terms of what both Skinner and Voloshinov call “understanding.”

We understand words by examining how they are used in a language context.

But Koselleck does not enlist the language of sign type and token; rather, he explains his work—with a structuralist vocabulary—as a combination of synchrony and diachrony (or structures and events), which produces a curious combination of materialism and idealism. Koselleck resolutely grounds...
his work in the animal materiality of human life, from which he generates a fascinating description of different levels of reality (or multiple temporalities) moving at different speeds: on the one hand, the repeatability and circulation of linguistic phenomena; on the other hand, unique sequences of events. The fact that the two series change independently of each other, at different rates, produces multiple ways of understanding changes that involve both linguistic and sociopolitical phenomena. At times this materialist grounding may be located in the word—as when he asserts that *Begriffsgeschichte* addresses the “ever-present diachronically pre-existing language” in relation to the “spoken word in a specific, synchronic, case.”

Hence:

A new term may be coined which expresses in language previously non-existent experiences or expectations. It cannot be so new, however, that it was not already virtually contained in the respective existing language and that it does not draw its meaning from the linguistic context handed down to it.

The materiality of words appears to govern the capacity of language users to create new concepts or expand existing concepts in new directions—my position in this book.

Koselleck’s recent interpreters, however, remind us that the linguistic grounding of *Begriffsgeschichte* is derived from the largely structuralist study of semantic or lexical fields. This includes a number of different attempts by historical linguists to examine the (synchronic) structure of a language (what Saussure called *langue*) in order to compare onomasiology, the study of different terms available for designating the same or similar concepts, to semasiology, the study of all the different meanings of a given term, in order to identify the semantic field pertaining to a set of related terms. Although historical linguists are divided as to whether or not a semantic field is lexical or conceptual, Koselleck’s interpreters repeatedly settle on the idealist interpretation that a concept is a position within a semantic field and not a lexical item. Indeed, Koselleck recently grounded his linguistic views in semantics, which, when treated analytically by linguistics, typically reifies meaning as elemental markers, features, or components of words that are somehow associated with words and hence provide meaningful distinctions among words. It is this analytic procedure of identifying components that affords the reification of concepts—as a pure semantics—indeed of their material basis in words. Hence the project of *Begriffsgeschichte* appears to emerge from material social history to engage in the philosophical mentalism of
It is this potential independence of concepts from their linguistic contexts, I believe, that most divides Begriffsgeschichte from the work of intellectual historians such as Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock, who insist on grounding an analysis of political thought in discourse and language. According to Iain Hampsher-Monk, Skinner in particular attempts to avoid this pitfall by attending to the multiplicity of the meanings of words in circulation among a given society of language users. Pocock himself has recently stated that he would find it more appropriate to proceed from the history of discourses and the people who have used and been used by them to a history of concepts, rather than the reverse, which he understands to be the method of Koselleck and his followers. Begriffsgeschichte runs the risk of imposing an ideal construct upon history when it ascribes “the same concept, or the components of variations of the same concept, to the same word or cognates of the same word wherever they occur in the historical record.”69 Similarly, Dutch conceptual historian Willem Frijhoff has recently stressed the link between conceptual history and social history in order to advocate a renewed focus on “how semantic changes were rooted in new forms of social representation, in changing social relations, or in the updating of old schemes of perception or cultural models of social organization.”70 And Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink has advocated extending interest in concepts to their materiality of communication, their use by political or social groups, and their intercultural transfer through processes of translation.71

This book is meant to contribute to such efforts. At the same time, the need in Begriffsgeschichte for a long-term view of conceptual development is displaced, in my case, by the action of translation, which occurred within two to three decades but which nonetheless established the “horizon of expectations” on the part of Japanese intellectuals and activists and began to work the changes theorized by Koselleck and followers as having occurred during Europe’s modernity. Koselleck notes in a discussion of the different approaches toward democratization in Britain, France, and Germany: “The concrete concepts around which the political debate turned were bound to the historical experiences that had made their way, at one time or another, into these concepts.”72 Here I engage that process of mediating concept and experience with three different examples. Chapter 4 examines jīyū, the quickly standardized translation word for “liberty” and “freedom,” whose perhaps easy standardization was accompanied by a series of debates over the proper meaning of
“liberty.” Chapter 5 examines *ken*, a term used to translate “right,” “sover-
eignty,” “power,” and many other words; hence *ken* posed the problem of cre-
ating meaningful distinctions in Japanese for such distinctions perceived in
the source languages. And Chapter 6 examines “society,” a new and borrowed
concept for discussing the people of Japan, which necessitated the creation of
a neologism, *shakai*.

But I am also moved to note the claims of *Begriffsgeschichte* to serve as a
critique of the present by affording a point of entry to actual historical dis-
continuities, which are reflected in language and shifts in semantics. As Melvin
Richter and Terence Ball have argued, conceptual history has consequences
for the present; if history helps us to perceive how available concepts push us
to think along certain lines, this history may enable us “to conceive of how
to act on alternative and less constraining definitions of our situation.”73 Two
conclusions follow: first, the critical impulse of *Begriffsgeschichte* urges us to
free historical scholarship from the idealist anachronisms of, for example, mod-
ernization theory; second, as Koselleck has argued, it makes us aware that the
translation of concepts into other languages extends conceptual and political
structures elsewhere—precisely the subject of this book.74