

The “Japanese Miracle”: The Path to Modernity Taken by the Land of the Rising Sun

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(Translation, 1st, 4th, 6th und 10th subheading by MoneyMuseum)

Japan as an economic power has not existed for just a few decades. Around the turn of the century, when the industrial states of Europe were consolidating their colonies in Asia and Africa by military force, the Far Eastern island state was the only country with a non-Western civilisation to succeed in standing up to the major Western powers. Japan's rise to the status of a great power in the Far East was virtually unstoppable.

An awakening by force

"For your valuable advice concerning the skilled drafting of the newly concluded state treaties I must express my thanks. From now on we must all fulfil our duty as Japanese citizens, so that our fatherland will stand together on the same level as the other civilised states. But we are still afraid as to whether such a small, belatedly cultivated country can go in the right direction; so we continue to ask you for your kind advice in favour of our fatherland."

This letter, written in relatively fluent German, of which part is quoted here bears the date 14th February 1900. It was sent by Count Sano Tsunetami, a high-ranking official, diplomat and, incidentally, the founder of the organisation from which the Japanese Red Cross emerged. His letter was addressed to the Austrian Heinrich von Siebold, one of those foreign advisers who once put their diplomatic, legal, technological and administrative knowledge at the disposal of the Japanese Empire, so that "our fatherland will stand together on the same level as the other civilised states", as Count Sano put it.

Western foreigners working for the Japanese State – around the turn of the century this was not rare. At a truly breath-taking speed the Japanese then set about risking the leap from what was a traditional economic and social order, still largely determined by the classes and families of the empire, into the industrial age: with the help of Western advisers and advanced technology.

In order to make this leap successfully certain prerequisites were, however, necessary – and the prospects for the latter seemed to be extremely bad even 50 years before it was possible to write the letter quoted above. Japan's entry into the Western-dominated world order did not take place of its own free will, but was forced upon it by the West.

The opening of Japan by canon boats

On 8th July 1853 the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry landed at the Gulf of Edo, later renamed "Tokyo," with two steamships and two sloops. As harmless as this little squadron seemed to be by present-day standards, the "black boats" of the "Western barbarians" failed to have any effect, as did the request of their commander that a high-ranking Japanese official should accept a letter from President Fillmore of the USA. The letter contained the demand that American boats should be guaranteed provision with water, food, wood and coal in Japanese ports and that shipwrecked Americans should be treated well. Also, Japan should conclude a trading agreement with the USA as soon as possible.

In plain language, this meant nothing less than demanding that Japan should abandon its policy of seclusion pursued for over 200 years and grant foreigners free access to the interior of the country – from the Japanese point of view a quite incredible request, since the Tokugawa shoguns that had been ruling Japan since 1600/03 had once decreed that the country was to be closed to the outside world. ("Shogun" was originally the title of an imperial commander-in-chief: Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first ruler from the House of Tokugawa, who after centuries of civil war succeeded in uniting the country and establishing the Tokugawa Dynasty in the country, took this title for himself and bequeathed it to his successors.) Foreigners were not allowed to set foot on Japanese soil, the Japanese could not leave the country and trade with foreigners was prohibited – however, with two exceptions. While the Chinese were granted a limited right to trade in Nagasaki, the Dutch were permitted, under strict government control, to operate a trading post on the artificial island of Deshima in the port of Nagasaki.

Commodore Perry demonstrated that he was quite serious about asserting American interests by, among other things, sailing his ships into the capital of Edo (prohibited for foreigners, of course) instead of landing at the area reserved for them at Nagasaki. Accompanied by some heavily armed soldiers, the US commander went on land on 14th July, handed the news from the American president to two aristocratic envoys and announced that he would return before the end of the year to pick up the reply.

After his departure another uninvited guest added unintentional emphasis to this demand: some months later the Russian Admiral Putyatin turned up off Japan's coast with four ships – he, too, had come for the purpose of "opening" the country's economic policies for his government.

Trade as a tactical manoeuvre

Occurrences of this kind gave rise to agitated debates in Japan's ruling circles. What was to be done? Although a minority uncompromisingly favoured driving out the foreigners, an advance warning had been given: years earlier China, once regarded as an invincible great power, had had to give in to military humiliations inflicted by the "Western barbarians," and the pattern of Western power politics in East Asia was recognisable from the example of China. Opening the country to trade by military force was followed by the so-called "unequal treaties" guaranteeing the militarily and technologically superior foreigners trading privileges, leasehold territories and even indemnity payments, finally resulting in the progressive colonisation of the country. Was a similar development in Japan now under way?

Leading Japanese officials expressed the view that Japan was at least as unprepared and inferior in the matter of military arms as China. They therefore recommended that trade should be carried on with the foreigners and the profits thus made should be used to rearm the country. Nor should a war be launched as long as Japan had still not reached the same level of technology as the adversary.

In any event it was agreed that time was needed and that it was inevitable that certain tactical concessions would have to be made to the foreigners. When Commodore Perry did indeed return, as he had announced, with an enlarged squadron in February 1854 the Treaty of Kanagawa was concluded in March. This agreement opened up the ports of Hakodate and Shimoda to American ships for trade and for provisioning their ships and also guaranteed the humane treatment of shipwrecked Americans. An American consul was accepted in Hakodate.

The Western powers secure privileges

As early as October in the same year of 1854, the British signed a similar treaty with Japan. Four years later a trading treaty was also concluded. The treaties which Japan made with the USA, Russia, Britain, France and other Western states in the years that followed contained above all three conditions: the capital Edo and other important ports were opened to foreigners, a very low customs barrier was imposed on Japan for imports, and the citizens of the foreign nations concerned were exempted from the jurisdiction of Japanese courts.

The pattern of privileges being progressively secured by the Western powers, as previously practised in China, also seemed to continue in the course of the next few years: the murder of an Englishman by members of the Japanese samurai warrior class in autumn 1862 prompted the British government to demand a penalty. When this was ignored, British forces bombed Kagoshima, the capital of the powerful feudal clan of the Satsuma, and enforced the payment of indemnity. The attempt by the Imperial House to rid itself of the foreigners also failed. In 1862 Emperor Komei (ruled 1846-66) had issued the order that he did not wish to see any more foreigners in Japan as from 24th June 1863. On this day therefore the Japanese coastal batteries fired at an American warship, whereupon a united American, Dutch and Anglo-French squadron bombarded the Japanese coast: reason enough for the Imperial House to abandon its antiforeign attitude for the time being and to turn the foreign affairs defeat into a domestic power advantage. The shogun, apparently unable to cope militarily, was unceremoniously deprived of some of his privileges. A state crisis was brewing, and traditional power relations threatened to become shaky. But the actual crisis had emerged even before the arrival of Commodore Perry's "black boats" had attracted attention.

Samurai and captains of industry

Japan was a feudal state. Since the beginning of the 17th century political power had been in the hands of a single powerful family, the Tokugawa, whose respective head assumed the title of shogun. A role of only secondary importance was, in contrast, played by the Japanese Emperor: he possessed merely ceremonial authority and was in almost every respect dependent on the respective shogun residing in Edo. Some 250 domain lords, so-called "daimyo," had received their fiefs from the Tokugawa shogun and were divided into two classes. Those families whose ancestors had once supported the seizure of power by the Tokugawa were under an obligation to swear an oath of allegiance to every new head of the Tokugawa family and to spend half of their time at the shogun's court. On the other hand, the class of the so-called "outside" vassals was made up of the families whose ancestors had opposed the Tokugawa family. Their feudal territories, or domains, were situated outside the strategically important regions of the empire.

As for the rest, it was principally a strict social order that left its mark on Japanese society. Here the military nobility, the samurai class, acted as the ruling class. Its members were committed to a strict code of honour and were usually in the service of a domain – or feudal – lord, called "daimyo," who remunerated his supporters with the tribute paid by the farmer class. Unlike the samurai class, endowed with an awareness of their elite position, artisans and merchants were not groups held in very high regard. In the course of the long period of peace under the Tokugawa shogunate, however, it was particularly the despised merchant class that in fact gained in economic influence, while the notoriously idle samurai warriors were sinking further and further into debt. When a money economy was introduced their daimyo owed ever growing sums of money to the rich bankers of Edo and Osaka, and quite frequently they had no alternative but to pay off their debts by allowing their creditors, whom they actually held in low esteem, to rise up into their own warrior caste by adoption or marriage. At the same time the daimyo sought to improve their financial situation by other suitable means. They invested in lucrative industries or engaged in

wholesale trade. Here it was mainly the families of the "outside vassals" who reacted very flexibly and successfully to the needs of the domestic market, and in some cases even secured an economic monopoly.

Thus the above-mentioned Satsuma family, for example, acquired a profitable sugar monopoly on the Ryukyu Islands. It invested the profits made from it in various industries, for example in smelting plants and the production of guns, but also in the manufacture of porcelain. That the families which tended to oppose the ruling Tokugawa family used their economic power base to weaken the political and military power of the Tokugawa shogunate is obvious. The "coalition of yen and sword" also contributed to undermining the existing hierarchical social system. Those daimyo who continued to rely solely on their income from traditional agriculture inevitably fell behind, and their samurai vassals were frequently faced with economic ruin, threatening their very existence.

A crisis in power politics

A sword-wearer was not allowed to perform physical labour by reasons of his status. Many former samurai warriors therefore acted as administrative officials of the head of the family, while for others there only remained economic impoverishment, which produced growing dissatisfaction among the nominally highly-respected warrior class. At the time of Western expansionism in Japan, a crisis in power-politics also emerged. The more obvious the economic and military weakness of the Tokugawa shogunate became, the more strongly a kind of opposition movement arose. It was supported by the rebellious families, dissatisfied samurai and an educated elite which was largely made up of members of the lower ranks of the samurai. They were young, ambitious intellectuals who had gained influence in the individual domains, backed scientific and technological cooperation with the West and wanted to transfer the central political power to the Imperial House – a demand that was substantiated by some scholars as early as the 18th century with the restoration of the emperor's divinely legitimised rule.

When the relations between the shogun and the ruling Emperor Komei began to worsen, the major Western powers also intervened in the power struggle: Britain provided weapons and know-how to support those "progressive" families, like that of the Satsuma, of all people, whose territories it had just bombarded. France, on the other hand, apparently backed the wrong horse, as it soon turned out. In 1867 it concluded a secret treaty with the shogunate and financed for it the construction of steelworks and port facilities in the Bay of Edo/Tokyo. Emperor Komei died in 1867 and his 15-year-old son Mutsuhito, who was to enter the history of Japan's modernity as Emperor Meiji, ascended the throne. By now the power struggle was effectively decided. The four major families – Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa and Hizen – had already formed an alliance for action which was financed by some wealthy members of the merchant community in Osaka. It was especially the Mitsui family – later one of the four most important powerful industrial groups – that became one of the main financiers of future imperial policies.

The putsch by the Imperial Court

The Imperial Court assumed power within a few months. The last Shogun Keiki was deposed, the office of shogun abolished, and at the beginning of 1868 the restoration of the Imperial court's secular power was proclaimed. An attempt to rebel by shogun supporters failed. The era of the so-called "Meiji Restoration" began – an age of ambitious modernisation efforts, accelerated by a dynamic administrative elite which realised that its country had to catch up with the West's technological progress if it wanted to survive the power poker of foreign policy.

This first meant that an effort was made to learn from the West, an intention that was tackled with amazing determination. Thus the reform measures ordained from the top affected almost every aspect of everyday Japanese life. It included abolishing the traditional samurai privilege to wear swords and setting up primary schools throughout the country, in conjunction with general compulsory education. Britons, Americans, Frenchmen and Germans were called into the country to act in Japan as railway and ship-building engineers, tax and legal advisers, agricultural experts and university professors, military advisers and diplomats. At the same time Japanese students were sent to Berlin, London, New York and Paris.

High government offices were given to the former daimyo feudal lords. They mutated – after land reform and redemption of state annuities – into shareholders and industrialists. Factories were erected, railways built, fiefs dissolved and placed under the central authority of the emperor, prefectures created with a modern administrative structure, banks set up, a modern tax system established, telegraph lines were laid and the first armaments produced. It was this rapid assimilation of foreign influences that, in the coming decades, was intended to secure for Japan an economic and political lead over all other states in East Asia. While neighbouring China, for example, was finding it difficult to change societal structures and habits of life cemented over centuries for the sake of an increasingly urgent modernisation of the country, the Japanese reacted with that flexibility that had once served the island state well in previous centuries. In the early periods of Japanese history, too, Japan had not shied away from adopting a large measure of their own culture from foreign exemplars – especially from China – and to make it fruitful for their own requirements. The development of the Japanese writing systems from Chinese characters is only one of many examples that could be given.

Modernisation without democracy

The modernisation process in the Meiji epoch also claimed many victims, of course. Whole social strata were helpless when faced with economic and social ruin. Even if quite a few members of the old samurai class did make the leap into the new age as businessmen, civil servants, policemen or teachers, there were thousands of other former warriors left who could not adapt to the changed conditions of life. The small pensions granted to them by the state were hardly adequate to eke out a living. They had long before lost their old privileges. Dissatisfaction was also rife among the farmers, whose tax burden in the first years of the Meiji Era became even heavier. In these first years there were frequent uprisings by samurai deprived of their importance, farmers' revolts and rioting whenever it was a matter of enforcing new decrees and ordinances.

All these revolts could not, however, seriously threaten the power of the state, indeed the latter soon set about reforming itself. On 11th February 1889 Emperor Meiji handed over to his prime minister, Count Kurota, Japan's first written constitution in a solemn ceremony: a gift from the emperor to his subjects. As was to be expected, this imperial constitution was a far cry from democratic ideas. Japan, it said in this document, was to "be ruled and governed by a series of emperors uninterrupted since time immemorial." Nevertheless the emperor's power was curtailed in one important point: all imperial decrees were to remain null and void if the Imperial Diet withheld its consent. This Imperial Diet had also been divided into two chambers, as was customary in Western countries. The upper house consisted of members of the entire aristocracy, some representatives of the highest taxation class and a few persons appointed by the Emperor. The lower house was made up of generally elected representatives. But as only those persons possessing a certain wealth were to be enfranchised this effectively meant that only just over one per cent of the Japanese population was entitled to vote.

The treatment of "rights and duties of the subjects" was also dealt with in a similarly ambivalent fashion. The Japanese people was guaranteed such rights as the freedom of speech, of the press and assembly in the new constitution as well as protection from arbitrary acts of state authority. But all these rights were restricted by revealing riders like "...except as regulated by law."

Prussia as a model

The German Empire at this time exerted an influence on the state constitution which should not be underrated. The first Japanese government delegation to travel to Europe was received in Berlin by Bismarck, the chancellor of the German Empire, in March 1873. The latter recommended his Japanese guests Prussian military policies as an example worth following for the career of a country that wanted to become a major international power. In Japan people were impressed, and in 1879 Jacob Meckel, an officer in the German general staff, was engaged to reorganise, along Prussian lines, the military in Japan, where conscription had been in force since 1873. Another German, the constitutional lawyer Hermann Roesler, undertook to legally underpin the outstanding position of the Japanese military within the newly created constitution. And in 1855 the Japanese education system was even structured into primary school, grammar school and university in accordance with the authoritarian Prussian model. Even the study of history at the Imperial University of Tokyo followed German exemplars: Ludwig Riess, a pupil of Ranke's, familiarised his Japanese students with German criticism of sources.

The imperial reform politicians' enthusiasm for Germany in the years before the turn of the century did not come about by chance. What especially impressed the Japanese was the authoritarian, even militaristic, features of Prussian domestic and foreign policy in Germany. The endeavours in education in line with military disciplining, the efforts to stabilise the Emperor's position of power by venerating the tenno as a divinity in public – all this reveals parallels with the authoritarian state of Kaiser William II of Germany.

Reforms to counteract the loss of sovereignty

There could be no doubt as to the goal of the reform policies: Japan was aspiring not only to make good the loss of sovereignty suffered as a result of Western dominance in East Asia, but also to become a great power itself. The prelude to this was offered by the war against China in 1894 in the dispute over Korea. The Kingdom of Korea was nominally one of China's most important tributary vassal states. A revolt, in the course of which Chinese troops invaded Korea to support the Korean King, supplied Japan with a welcome opportunity for armed intervention. After declaring war the Japanese drove the Chinese out of Korea, destroyed a Chinese squadron off the mouth of the River Yalu, took Port Arthur and the Liaodong Peninsula in Southern Manchuria and occupied a port on the coast of the Chinese province of Shandong. In the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in April 1897, Japan dictated the terms to its defeated adversary: it had to cede Taiwan, Port Arthur, the Pescadores Islands and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, to guarantee war indemnity and recognise the "independence" of Korea.

Such robust conduct in the manner of the Western colonial powers, however, called the Europeans into action. In the so-called "Triple Intervention," a joint diplomatic action by Russia, France and Germany, Japan was given the more or less well-meaning "advice" to drop its claim to the Liaodong Peninsula and to Port Arthur. Japan complied – for the time being. But even so, successes at war of this kind accelerated the revision of the "unequal treaties" which Japan had once reluctantly concluded with the Western powers in the course of its enforced "opening". In 1894, an agreement was signed in London with Britain which was to rescind the "unequal" clauses of the earlier treaties with Britain after a period of five years. Agreements with other Western states

followed. And again some years later Japan became the first Far Eastern state to succeed in rising to the position of an equal partner in an alliance with a leading Western great power.

Japan becomes a great power

On 30th January 1902 Japan concluded an alliance with Britain that was directed against a common rival, Russia. Tsarist Russia had expanded its spheres of influence in Chinese Manchuria and was now noticeably exerting political influence by military means on Korea, which the Japanese government regarded as an illicit encroachment on its own interests. In the years 1903 and 1904 it still appeared as if Russia and Japan could reach agreement on the division of their spheres of interest. But as early as 4th February 1904 the Japanese government ordered all diplomatic negotiations to be halted. Two days later Japanese naval forces set sail for Southern Manchuria and Korea. On 8th February 1904 the last Russian Tsar telegraphed to his governor in the Far East, Admiral Alexeyev: "It is desirable that it is the Japanese and not we who initiate military operations... But should the Japanese naval forces cross the 38th parallel on the west coast of Korea with or without landing I hereby authorise you to attack them, without waiting for the first shot to be fired by the Japanese side. I am relying on you. May God help you." The Tsar's pious wish was not fulfilled. Without any prior declaration of war, Japanese canon boats opened a bombardment of the Russian fortress in Port Arthur, trounced the Pacific squadron of the Russian Far Eastern Fleet at Port Arthur in August 1904 and crushed the Russian land forces in Manchuria in February 1905. Even the Russian Baltic Fleet, which was sent to the Far East, could no longer stave off defeat: it was destroyed in the naval Battle of Tsushima.

The peace treaty signed on 5th September 1905 with Russia, where in the meantime the first revolution had broken out, gave Japan far-reaching territorial rights on the Chinese mainland. "By replacing Russia in Southern Manchuria Japan joined the community of Western nations in their exploitation of a prostrate China," the British historian and former colonial officer, Richard Storry, commented sarcastically in his "History of Modern Japan."

The further course of Japan's foreign policy seemed to be marked out. Japan's ruthless expansionism was continued under Tenno Hirohito, the grandson of Emperor Meiji: in the Second World War and in the war crimes committed by Japanese troops in China – a heavy burden, which in Japan itself is still suppressed to this day.

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