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Late 19th Century Japan; Eastern Teutons

Traditional Eurocentric historiography attributes Japan's ascendance as a powerful actor on the international stage at the end of the 19th century as being the result of an adoption of Prussian and German paradigms regarding politics and the military. However, a more in depth analysis reveals that Japan's ascendance stems from the desire to keep Japan Japanese, and that the story of Japan's modern history is one of a Japanese struggle for sovereignty in a time and region dominated by Western imperialist practices.

The Japan that American Commodore Matthew Perry forcibly "opened" in 1853 stood in stark contrast to the Japan that would unilaterally defeat Russia in the Russo-Japanese War just over half a century later. What Perry encountered was a Japan consisting of thousands of semi-autonomous feudal entities, or *daimyos*, loosely under the control of a *shogun* who served as warlord maintaining peace between the *daimyos*. At the turn of the century, Japan would have a centralized government, industrial economy, and a military on par with, or superior to, Western militaries in the area. This progression towards modernity occurred more swiftly than at any other time in history before or since (Palmer 582). Not only is this impressive in its own right, but Japan managed to transform to a Western style government and military entirely on its own terms in the heyday of European imperialism. Not only was Japan able to avoid this yoke

of imperialism but by the early twentieth century Japan would be able to force it upon its neighbors.

Initial successes by the West that exploited the Japanese market provided the impetus for Japanese modernization. Measures taken towards greater autonomy were taken by 19th century Japan to prevent Japanese markets and people from being further exploited per European *modus operandi* in the imperialist era. Japan opened up to Commodore Perry only reluctantly. Some pressure for trade with the West among the economically disenfranchised nobility combined with fear of American bombardment of Japan caused the Tokugawa shogun to accept unfavorable treaties with America and soon after, other European powers (Palmer 580). Per these treaties, Japan was required to maintain low import tariffs, and foreigners living in Japan were not subject to Japanese law. These injustices angered two particularly nationalistic *daimyos*, the Choshu and Satsuma. When the *shogun* was unable to prosecute the murderer of an Englishman in Satsuma, England bombarded the capital as a punishment. In a defiant show of nativist and nationalist sentiment, Choshu fired on foreign vessels in their harbor. Once again, the *shogun* was unable to prosecute those guilty, so British, American, and French ships destroyed the Choshu ports and exacted an indemnity of \$3 million as punishment. The embarrassment of the unfavorable treaties further provoked the nativist sentiments and actions in both Choshu and Satsuma. Their boldness combined with exposure to Western ideas forced the last of the Tokugawa *shoguns* (the signatory of the unfavorable treaties) to abdicate, and a new system of government was set up under the emperor whose reign became known as Meiji (Palmer 585). Realizing that the West was able to manipulate Japan through economic and military superiority, the new leaders of Japan sought to

adopt a Western model in order to unify, modernize, and deal with the Western world as equals.

Prevailing wisdom of much of the 20th century regarding this adoption of Western tradition by Japan teaches that Western, and particularly Prusso-German systems modernized Japan. However, Japan's political system modernized independently. Unlike many non European powers of the day, Japan adopted aspects of Western (German) government only insofar as they were conducive to existing tenants of Japanese statehood. As circumstances in 19th century Japan often paralleled those in Germany, Japan adopted a German style government. However, this government was not purely German, was not imposed by Germans, and called heavily on existing Japanese political paradigms. Likewise, the modernization of the Japanese military relied heavily on German teachings, however Japan still maintained its sovereignty and decision making capabilities throughout the process and major Japanese victories occurred long after Western military instructors had left. Herein lies the key to late 19th century Japanese exceptionalism: Japan's maintenance of sovereignty throughout the process of modernization allowed it to progress both politically and militarily unimpeded by the restrictions most other non European peoples were subjected to.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for Japan's independent political modernization and rise to power is that Meiji political theory first took a serious look at Western liberalism before finally independently deciding to emulate German conservatism. *Bunmeika*, or the Japanese study of Western liberalism, similar to that found in the United States, England, and France was what gave rise to the calls for a constitution in the first place (Grimmer-Solem 194). The liberalism embraced by many of

the *daimyos* allowed finally for the ending of feudalism in Japan which gave way to a modern economy and military. However, this liberalism was not a carbon copy of that found in the Western world. As Japan would do time and again with Western philosophies, “liberal thought was rendered into familiar Confucian terms and modified to suit Japanese perceptions and conditions” (Grimmer-Solem 194). The desire for a centralized authority caused Japan to first look into the Code Napoléon and French system, not the German one. The constitution that was finally drafted and adopted was similar to Germany’s in that it was “not so illiberal . . . [but] much depended on the spirit in which it was applied” (Sansom 363). The Meiji constitution was liberal in the Western sense because provided for an independent judiciary, checked imperial power, guaranteed basic rights, and formed legal equality; provisions praised by powers like the United States but criticized by Germany (Grimmer-Solem 200).

Japanese attitudes toward political theory shifted from the liberal to the conservative due to the greater emphasis on central authority and state building. Faith in liberal societies faltered in Japan with the bloody American Civil War, and study of France’s unstable political history that had led to three revolutions between 1830 and 1871 (Grimmer-Solem 198). Liberalism helped spur the Meiji restoration and lift Japan out of feudalism, but it could not help Japan achieve the sovereignty that it desired. The problem with liberal thought in Japan at the time was that liberal thought emphasizes the individual over the state. While liberalism precipitated the fall of some impediments to modernization such as the feudal system and the *shogunate*, ultimately conservatism was needed for nation building. As G. B. Sansom puts it in his analysis of the Meiji constitution, “a nation cannot be made without nationalism, and the cultivation of a

nationalistic spirit is rarely compatible with the encouragement of liberal thought” (364). The rise of liberalism, albeit short-lived, in Japan illustrates the independence from German thought and Japanese desire to forge their own destiny. The fall of liberalism in Japan is traced still to Japanese decisions based on what best would facilitate an autonomous centralized Japanese political authority, not to direct foreign influence.

As the need for conservatism was realized, the Meiji emperor sent the conservatively leaning Ito Hirobumi to Europe to observe different forms of government in practice. Though Ito wanted Japan to modernize, he did not believe necessarily that it meant “Westernizing” (Grimmer-Solem 197). For the conservative Ito, Germany became in some ways a convenient paragon for Japanese state building. The fact that Germany had only just recently unified like Japan, and consequently had a very conservative government under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck appealed to the aims of Ito and the Meiji emperor. The need for conservatism was critical in both countries. In Germany the national spirit or *volksgeist* ran parallel to the conservative practices of the Imperial Japan. Both Japanese and Prusso-German governments were structured around nationalist sentiment. In Germany, Bismarck called upon a common language, history, and culture to justify unification of Germanic peoples under Prussian rule. In Japan similar nationalistic appeals were made, but this time with the emperor serving as a convenient figurehead having maintained a respectful standing for centuries. With these similarities it is not surprising that there was a shift in the focus of Western studies from *bunmieka* to *doitsugaku*, or study of German institutions. Both German and Japanese despots wished to combat liberalism in order to preserve central authority. Bismarck’s passage of legislation that limited representation by the liberal Social-Democratic party in German

parliament emboldened Ito's fondness of the German system. Though the Meiji constitution had liberal provisions, as was the case with Bismarck, it was applied conservatively in Japan with the emperor and those close to him wielding the real power. The emperor had even more sway than the German sovereign, and the Japanese Diet was elected under stricter regulation and granted fewer powers than the German Reichstag (Grimmer-Solem 201). The liberal divergences from German political beliefs criticized by Germany, and those to the right that granted the emperor unprecedented legal authority further illustrate a Japan willing and able to form its own government outside of the parameters of existing Western governments.

Unlike a government that has been imposed or copied, the Japanese government maintained several key quintessentially Japanese characteristics following their adoption of a Western model. Confucianism and other Eastern philosophies were retained. Richard Minear analyzed the Meiji constitution and how it conforms to, or diverges from Western political tradition. He quotes Hozumi Yatsuka, a leading Japanese legal scholar and professor of public and administrative law at the Tokyo Imperial University at the time as saying "Prussia has its legal principles. Our country should have its own" (Minear 85). Most strikingly is the room given to the emperor to act as he sees fit. Though Germany had a royal family in the Hohenzollerns, this royal family had not ruled as long or as continuously as the Japanese imperial family. Moreover, the Japanese emperor was seen as an almost spiritual entity—even more divine than the European belief in the "Divine Right of Kings" of centuries past. The implications of this divergence from Western tradition cannot be understated. In Europe as Minear put it, "[state] and religion, law and

ethics are not one.” (Minear 144) In Japan, the emperor was both a spiritual and legal authority, thus blurring the line between the ethical and the legal.

For Japan’s unification and modernization to reach a level respected by the rest of the world, it needed a military that could protect, project, and enforce its new system from outside influence. The Japanese were well aware of how China had been carved up by European powers, and feared also an expansionist Russia. The modernization of the Japanese military was critical to deterrence of imperialist agendas in the area. While it is true that ultimately it was the Prussian model Japan adopted, it still approached the issue of modernizing its army with delicacy and looked at more than just the Prussian system as potential models for its own armed forces.

The first Japanese experience with the Prussian model of military training occurred in 1869 when the *daimyo* of Kishu ordered several thousand German rifles to help modernize their army. With the rifles came Sergeant Karl Köppen of the Prussian army who insisted that through his training he could modernize the *daimyo*’s military and that is precisely what he did. He established a shoe and aluminum factory which helped turn out military supplies at a faster rate than area military forces had grown accustomed. As per the Prussian model, he abolished distinction among the ranks: samurai and commoners fought side by side. His approach was indeed successful as the military became a formidable enough threat that it was disbanded by the *shogun* and the soldiers were dispersed into the ranks of the regular army (Presseisen 23).

The first system looked at and eventually adopted by Meiji Japan was the French military system. Japanese officials were often more familiar with French than German which allowed for easier communication. This is due to the fact that the French military

had served as a model since the mid 1860's under the *shogun*, because at this time France was beyond question the most powerful army in Europe. Because Japan's army at the beginning of its modernization was "militarily in no condition to meet the challenge of European imperialism," the issue as to which European military to emulate was not as important as the task of simply creating a modern army in a feudal society (Presseisen 1). France's military power at this time lay in the size of its army, largely due to conscription. Consequently, it was not just western liberalism that precipitated the fall of feudalism in Japan, but the imperial desire to institute a modern army using conscription which is wholly infeasible in a class system (Presseisen 28). The adoption of a Western model in conjuncture with conscription provided a double edged sword. First, the Japanese military would be able to brought to modern standards; second, conscription would no longer permit the feudal system that inhibits economic growth. The Japanese Military Academy began to seek out and employ French instructors. Cadets were taught French and French military systems were instituted. On October 2, 1870 Japan announced its official adoption of the French military system. This would serve as the Japanese model for years to come, even after the defeat of France at Prussian hands one year later.

A number of circumstances led to the eventual adoption of the Prussian military system in Japan over that of France. Omura Masujiro, a leader in the undertaking of Japanese military modernization and proponent of the French system was assassinated by a band of *samurai* in 1869 due to his advocacy of conscription. Following his death, Yamagata Arimoto took his place after years of studying militaries in Europe. It is widely known that Yamagata preferred the Prussian model to the French model, though he did

not advocate it or act to institute it for years to come. Contention among European powers for influence on the fledgling, yet strategically located, Japanese army also provided the transition to a Prussian system. Upon the departure of a longtime French instructor from the Military Academy in Japan it appears that the Germans in Japan who had been gaining influence of late staged a coup resulting in reforms that made new French instruction inconsequential (Presseisen 111).

Perhaps the most influential individual on the modernization and adoption of the Prussian system was Prussian Major Klemens Wilhelm Jakob Meckel. Employed first in 1885 he immediately drew attention from his lectures and military knowledge. His use of real world examples and application of military tactics was not used in the French teachings, but fascinated Japanese cadets. As Presseisen notes in his account of European influence of the Japanese military, “[the] method began to make converts almost at once” (114). What Meckel provided was application of military doctrine in scenarios that Japan was likely to find itself in Asia. Meckel was eventually promoted to advisor to the General Staff, a duty that superseded his job as instructor. The council he gave to Japanese Generals shaped Japanese military doctrine until their defeat at the end of the Second World War (Presseisen 116). Meckel, among others, presided over the overhaul of existing (French) infantry practices, and changed them to be more Germanic. After his departure from Japan, a statue of Meckel was erected outside of the Military Academy where it stood to express Japanese gratitude for their Prussian instructor until it was removed following defeat in the Second World War.

Though it was Europeans who taught the Japanese the tactics and methods of modern warfare, as with their constitution, the Japanese retained sovereignty of these

decisions. European desire to militarize Japan existed due to the fact that Japan represented a potential strategic ally in the age of imperialism located in the lucrative markets of East Asia. As such, Japanese independence from European influence was necessitated by European policy in East Asia. Not only was Japan's independence formed by a counter-imperialist paradigm, but it was also created through the ever changing and unreliable system of alliances that Western powers most influential in Japan were a part of. For example, while Meckel is quoted as saying to his Japanese students that a Korea governed by a third party represented a "dagger at the heart of Japan," Kaiser Wilhelm II in correspondence with Tsar Nicholas II of Russia wrote that if Russia were to desire a warm water seaport, "it is evident to every unbiased mind that Korea must and will be Russian" (Morley 12, 286). This incongruity in German foreign policy stems from the fact that for the first time Germany took up an active imperialist interest in East Asian affairs following the ascendance of Wilhelm II and forced resignation of Bismarck. Among these interests were to obtain a naval base on the coast of China, and to keep Russia bogged down in Eastern affairs. German relations with Japan took a back seat to the quest for imperialist holdings. Consequently, the amicable relations enjoyed between Tokyo and Berlin cooled during this period and Japan was left to its own devices for security.

Evidence of Japanese sovereignty stemming from isolation from Western support became abundantly clear in the fallout of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Undisputed unilateral Japanese successes in the War prompted Germany, Russia, and France to form "The Triple Intervention" designed to halt Japanese advances on or acquisition of the strategic Liaotung Peninsula (Morley 278). In fact, according to S. C. M. Paine of the

U.S. Naval War College, it is most likely that Germany was the mastermind behind the Triple Intervention (Paine 287). Feeling betrayed by their one time ally, Japanese sentiments trended to be more anti-German. Following the Triple Intervention, Japan found itself relatively alone in East Asia. China had been carved up into European spheres of influence, and German-backed Russian hostility necessitated Japan to realize its independence entirely--not just in which Western entity to use as a model. Because of the signing of an Anglo-Japanese treaty in 1902, open hostility and the threat of war between Japan and Germany became imminent. With German presence in Japan almost gone, Germany took it upon itself to provoke Russia to war with Japan in order to keep Russia busy in the east. Wilhelm II wrote to Tsar Nicholas II about the anathema of a “yellow peril” in the east and structured his arguments for aggression around racist and religious sentiments and harkened back to Russia’s victory over the Eastern Mongolian invaders of Europe (Paine 288). Unfortunately for, and unexpected by Russia, at this point the modernization of the Japanese military had been achieved and Japan had industrialized. The result was devastating for Russia, who was summarily defeated in the war.

The Russo-Japanese War provides the strongest case for independent Japanese success in modernization and militarization. On the surface, Japan was able to check the imperialist advances in the region of Russia. Deeper still was the fact that an Eastern power defeated a Western one. While Russia at this point was by no means militarily superior to Europe, rarely had any European powers suffered defeat at the hands of non Europeans. In addition, this bolstered Japanese nationalism and faith that Japan could contend with European powers on an equal footing.

The modernization of Japan provides a fascinating account of how a society, backwards by European standards, mired in feudalism, and militarily insignificant could in half a century both resist imperial suppression and rise to the level of global importance. Though Japan had to adopt European systems of government and war, they were able to do so without subjugating themselves to foreign rule or influence and without abandoning existing Japanese cultural norms. The impacts of this transformation would be felt throughout the world, as Japan then became an actor on the world stage that would greatly influence world politics in years to come.

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