



## Japan and the West

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## JAPAN AND THE WEST

*Facing Japan; Chinese politics and Japanese imperialism, 1931–1937.* By Parks M. Coble. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991. Pp. xxi + 492.

*Group psychology of the Japanese in wartime.* By Toshio Iritani. London: Kegan Paul International, London and New York, 1991. Pp. xi + 322.

*The Cambridge history of Japan*, Vol. iv: *early modern Japan*. John Whitney Hall (ed.) and James L. McClain, assistant editor. Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. 28 + 831. £65.00 or \$99.50.

Parks M. Coble in *Facing Japan* sets out his aim as follows. 'I hope to provide new insights into the political development of modern China and the nature of Kuomintang rule', claiming that 'no existing work of Western scholarship comprehensively evaluates the Japanese issue in Chinese domestic politics during the 1930s' (pp. 8, 9). In terms of this aim the book is largely a success. This is a clearly written, balanced and scholarly work based on considerable archival research. It provides a useful descriptive account of political and military events between 1931 and 1937 in northern China. One of the central arguments is that Chiang Kai-shek reacted as he did because he felt that China 'could not equal Japan militarily and must go to extreme limits to avoid conflict' (p. 54), a policy of 'first internal pacification, then external resistance' (p. 241). The study is focused on 'political change in three areas, within the Nanking government itself, among the regional leaders, and in the rise of public opinion' (p. 360).

The book will no doubt be useful to specialists, even if they are left frustrated by the absence of any evidence which would allow a 'real inside look at policy formation by either Chang or Chiang' (p. 17), or any real feel for the Chinese or Japanese as people. Nor is there any attempted explanation of two central curiosities implicitly exposed by the book, namely, how it was that the Japanese became powerful enough to invade the Asiatic mainland and take on China and other countries far larger than itself, and secondly why it should want to do so.

With the title of *Group psychology of the Japanese in wartime*, a reader might turn to Toshio Iritani's book with the hope that at least some hint of an answer to the question of the motivation for Japanese imperialistic aggression would be provided. Such hopes are disappointed. The theme of the book is an attempt to account for what the author describes as the extraordinary cruelty and aggressiveness of the Japanese nation. 'During the Pacific War, what makes us want to cover our eyes is the ill-treatment and the atrocities committed by the Japanese military on the native, British, American, Dutch and Australian prisoners of war and innocent citizens...' (p. 199). Unfortunately, apart from a nod in the general direction of the dangers of group conformity and unquestioning obeying of orders (pp. 217, 236), there is little real help here. It may be that something was lost in the translation, but on the whole the work seems somewhat jejeune. Dr Frankel, a prisoner in Auschwitz, is approvingly quoted as reaching the conclusion 'that there are two classes of human beings; one is dignified and kind-hearted and the other, malicious and ill-natured' (p. 211). We are told that 'the whole nation had descended into the valley of darkness' (p. 38). We are informed that the

Japanese national character is 'sincere but simple-minded' (p. 114). The author admits honestly that 'the problem still has to be answered by a proper investigation of national character among Japanese and Europeans' (p. 211).

Some interesting facts are noted; that the 'people were deeply impressed by photographs, posters, music and colours', that it was shameful for the Japanese to surrender, that the Emperor was 'a person with no spontaneous opinion, a living robot' (pp. 162, 159, 239). Yet we are still left puzzled, with no attempt at an explanation of these features.

The failure at explanation probably stems mainly from the attempt to apply some fairly old-fashioned and individualistic psychological theories to a set of national and international events which are much better comprehended through a wider approach.

Two problems may be drawn out of these books. On the one hand, how did this relatively small island off the coast of Asia become in such a short period one of the most powerful military-industrial states in the world? Secondly, why did it lurch towards imperialism and fascism, and why did a people who are so renowned for their gentle, tactful and artistic temperament become at periods so vicious and aggressive?

Although it cannot provide full answers, the splendid new fourth volume of the *Cambridge history of Japan* does fill in some of the picture. Naturally it is impossible to do real justice to a book of 859 pages, covering many aspects of a complex civilization over two hundred and fifty years. In general the volume can be welcomed as a model of its kind. The chapters are uniformly well written and translated; they are all based on recent archival and secondary literature.

As the editors admit, they could not cover everything; for instance 'topics such as the history of art and literature, aspects of economics and technology and science, and the riches of local history would have to be left out' (p. vi). Yet an enormous amount is covered, as is most simply indicated by listing the chapter headings. There is an introduction by the general editor John W. Hall; Asao Naohiro on the sixteenth-century unification of Japan; Wakita Osamu on the social and economic consequences of unification; J. W. Hall on the *bakuhau* system; Harold Bolitho on the *han*; Jurgis Elisonas on Japan's relations with China and Korea and the same author on Christianity and the daimyo; Bito Masahide on thought and religion, 1550-1700; Tsuji Tatsuya on politics in the eighteenth century; Furushima Toshio on the village and agriculture during the Edo period; Nakai Nobuhiko on commercial change and urban growth in early modern Japan; Tetsuo Najita on history and nature in eighteenth-century Tokugawa thought; Susan B. Hanley on material culture, standards of living and life-styles; Donald H. Shively on popular culture.

Any reader, specialist or general, will learn a great deal from this extremely useful survey of 'the state of the art' in early modern Japanese studies and every chapter contains treasures. It may be that some will quibble at a slightly too easy use of the concept of 'peasants' in Japan; others might have wished for more on the effects of the geography and the effect of being an island; more use of outside observers' views on Japan during this period would have given a greater sense of the peculiarities; it might be argued that there is something of a bias towards politics and economics and away from religion, culture and society, which reflects an older historical tradition; there is very little on the large majority of the population who lived outside the cities and did not belong to the samurai estate, perhaps reflecting the paucity of sources; there is not a great comparative sense, even in relation to China. Yet these are quibbles when one sets them against the achievement. So what does the work tell us in answer to the questions posed above?

If we look for features which are to be found in both Tokugawa Japan and north-western Europe (and particularly England) as they developed towards industrial capitalism, many are to be found. There is firstly an agricultural revolution in each. The volume documents graphically the massive growth in agricultural production which, for instance, 'doubled the area of cultivated land during the Tokugawa period' and meant that by the early eighteenth century 'Japan's agricultural production was roughly 60 percent more than it had been a century earlier' (pp. 207, 449). This development led towards a highly commercialized agriculture, similar to that in north western Europe and particularly England (p. 510).

Such agricultural processes provided the surpluses, and was in turn encouraged by, a second curious similarity, the massive growth of urban centres in Japan so that 'between 1550 and 1700, Japan became one of the most urbanized societies in the world' (p. 519). These urban centres were not only relatively very large, for instance Edo in the early eighteenth century had over a million inhabitants and was the largest city in the world (p. 565), but they had those peculiar characteristics which Weber singled out as special to north-western Europe, namely that they had a free, self-regulating citizenry. Somehow the merchants were able to rule their own lives (p. 710). There was a widespread acceptance of the profit motive and a positive attitude to trade (pp. 611, 631). It is significant that unlike any other world civilization, two out of four of the basic 'estates' into which society was divided were concerned with manufacturing and trade, namely craftsmen and merchants. It would seem that Japan was by the eighteenth century a nation of towns and shop-keepers. Thus, by the mid-eighteenth century 'there were more than five thousand wholesalers in over four hundred different kinds of businesses in Osaka alone' (p. 573).

These peculiarities were linked to a commercial revolution. There was an early development of a coinage, based on the fact that Japan 'may have accounted for as much as one-third of the world's silver output at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century' (p. 61). There was an early development of private property in land, the buying and selling of rights in land and housing. Thus while rural farmers were given what were legally 'user rights', 'in actual practice they amounted to a close equivalent of what we would style ownership rights' (p. 124). Local landholders 'possessed legally protected entitlements to their lands, including the right to buy, sell, and bequeath their holdings' (p. 479). During this period there was a vast development in paper currency, commercial banks, futures markets in rice and other commercial institutions. As in north western Europe the interest rate on loans was relatively very low, usually in the range of five to seven percent per year (p. 223).

This again was related to a rapid development of crafts, a proto-industrial revolution, again paralleling what happened in Europe. This was originally based, as in Europe, on textiles, though in this case cotton and silk. By the eighteenth century, round the cities, there was a hinterland of part commercial agriculture, part craft activities, which is very familiar for the same period in north western Europe. For instance, 'great numbers of villagers around Osaka... started to switch over to cotton cultivation while farmers in northern Japan began to raise horses and cattle for sale as draft animals. Individual rural households began to develop by-employments or simple rural industries... paper, charcoal, ink, pottery, lacquer ware, or spun cloth' (p. 544).

What is unusual, however, is that the increasing wealth created in this way was not drained away by the usual forces which have arisen so many times in history. One of these is the Malthusian rise of population. There is an extraordinary parallel between the pattern of population in Japan and England, though in Japan everything

happened about a century later. Population first grew rapidly in Japan in the seventeenth century as the agricultural revolution took hold; it then remained stationary for a century and a half while wealth built up; it then grew again in the early phase of industrialization. The mechanism of control was different; in Japan there was more emphasis on abortion and infanticide, rather than late and selective marriage. But the basic feature was the same, namely that the economic and the social had become separated. This led, for instance, to a situation where as wealth increased, completed family size in the late eighteenth century was only, on average, three and a half children (p. 699).

Indeed, both Japan and England seem to have escaped early from that famine and epidemic dominated Malthusian world several centuries earlier than anywhere else. This volume has fascinating material on the high expectation of life, the absence of serious epidemic disease, the relative infrequency of serious famines (p. 698). Indeed, estimated life expectancies 'are higher than many Japanese scholars find believable' and are similar to those in favoured parts of Western Europe (p. 699).

The second pressure which usually siphons off the growing wealth, whether of merchants or farmers, comes from the predation of state and landlords in the shape of taxes and rents. Here we find another curiosity. Despite the advice of Ieyasu that rural people should be kept in order by 'making certain they can neither live nor die' (p. 494), it would appear that in practice the rising wealth was not all creamed off by a central bureaucracy or its local agents. We are told that 'both farmers and merchants benefited by the inability of the samurai elite to tax commercial activities effectively or to capture the productivity of gains in agriculture' (p. 664). Historians 'now believe that, on average, daimyo collected only about 30 percent of the crop in most areas' (p. 107).

The evidence for this theory also lies in the rising standard of living of the majority of the population through the centuries. Just as in England, we see the development of better housing, clothing, nutrition, communications though, like England, this may have been interrupted by the early phases of industrialization (pp. 664 ff.). A mass market for goods was created in a relatively large group of people of middling wealth.

Furthermore, it was a sophisticated mass market and work force with high levels of literacy. There is only a little direct evidence for the literacy, which was probably higher than that in Europe, but plenty of indirect evidence. Thus 'writers have pointed to the accumulation of village archives, administrative and legal documents of all kinds, and commercial records' (p. 715). It was assumed that craftsmen and merchants should be literate and have mathematical skills (p. 718). By the end of the seventeenth century 'well over ten thousand books were in print, sold or rented by more than seven hundred bookstores' (p. 726). Furthermore, 'peddlers went about the streets and into the countryside with book frames on their backs piled high with books for sale or rent' (p. 732).

Not only was the population educated, but it was also unusually mobile. There is too little in this volume on social and geographical mobility and in particular on the effects of primogeniture, a speciality which again united England and Japan. Yet there is enough to suggest that behind the formal and strict division into the four estates, there was a great deal of mobility in practice. For instance, we are told that 'from the eighteenth century on, if not earlier, social class determined occupation, but it did not determine income', which helps to explain why 'Japan lost its class distinctions far more quickly and far more thoroughly than England did...' (p. 704). Furthermore, 'the meaning of class is diminished also by the vast differences in level within each

class', for instance 'farmers ranged from rich landowners and village headmen to tenants and agricultural servants' (p. 711).

If these are some of the social and economic underpinnings of the growth in the Japanese economy, we are led to wonder how far the modes of thought bore a resemblance to that in north-western Europe. Here again one is struck by the strange similarity. A most interesting chapter by Tetsuo Najita describes the development of 'open', rational, empirical thought in Japan. There was widespread curiosity, an acceptance of questioning and doubt, a belief in the susceptibility of the world to rational enquiry, and a desire to know and then to apply the fruits of that knowledge to practical problems which would have felt very familiar to a post-Baconian Englishman.

Thus we are told that neo-Confucianism scholarship in Japan 'contained an epistemology... as to how objective knowledge could be acquired and on the basis of which the flow of history would be managed in a predictable manner' (p. 599). There was a belief in an external reality, the 'Great Ultimate' and 'this cosmology could be verified through the diligent and disciplined observation of things close at hand' (p. 599). Ekken, for instance, argued that the 'human mind... takes part in an ongoing process of uncovering insights into nature as an inexhaustible source of knowledge. In this continuing process, knowledge once believed to be unshakably true will constantly be altered through the exercise of doubt' (p. 625). Baien argued that the 'fundamental approach to knowledge... must... introduce constantly an attitude of doubt, so that nothing could be accepted as unequivocally and self-evidently true' (p. 636).

Nor was this of merely abstract interest. Yasusada, for instance, wrote in 'the easily accessible language of the day about the fundamentals of scientific farming, the accurate assessment of seasonal weather, climatic, and soil conditions to maximize agricultural production' (p. 630). Books with titles which translated as 'A bagful of knowledge for merchants' or 'A bagful for peasants', contained a 'miscellany of ethical and practical ideas that ranged from nature, politics, history, language, custom, infanticide, and even to diet... ' (p. 630). Already Japan feels very different from the world which Joseph Needham has documented for China at the same period. Tantalizingly, there is not quite enough evidence in this volume to speak of a 'scientific revolution', yet many of the features are there.

This then takes us to the religious order, which is only briefly covered in this volume. There are hints that the 'this-worldly' orientation of Japanese religion, the separation of religion from politics, the fact that there were competing religions, most of which had that ascetic streak which is identified with protestantism, were all crucial as background factors in encouraging and liberating the rational pursuit of wealth. Certainly, there was no equivalent to the anti-trading sentiments of the catholic inquisition, no unholy alliance between state and church to throttle economic development or extract most of any hard-won surplus. Indeed, the smashing of the Buddhist orders at the end of the sixteenth century again reminds one of the destruction of the monasteries some fifty years earlier in Britain.

The most thoroughly explored theme in the book is politics. Here we are given an excellent account of recent debates on the development of that curious anomaly 'centralized feudalism', which lies somewhere outside all classifications. We learn how there was both a balance of power, so we cannot speak of absolutism, both because of the division between the ritual ruler (emperor) and the secular ruler (shogun), and because of the continuing dependence of the shoguns on the only partly tamed greater lords or daimyo. Thus, during the Tokugawa era, 'we think immediately of the balance

of power within the political structure – the remarkable network of checks and balances at almost every level’ (p. 23). Nor, however, can we speak of ‘dissolution of the state’ feudalism, for this was a unified and powerful nation where weapons, including the gun, were systematically destroyed, where the law was largely observed and peace maintained. The pre-conditions which Adam Smith famously stated as necessary for capitalist development, namely ‘peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice’, were in place.

Thus towards the end of the Tokugawa era, on an island that was largely unknown to the world, one of the most sophisticated and wealthy populations in the world had emerged. If we add the final ingredients of western technology and the opening up of the social structure through the destruction of the formal ranking system, it is perhaps not such a miracle that within forty years of the Meiji Restoration, Japan was able to defeat Korea and Russia and within a few more years was the most powerful country in eastern Asia.

The second question, namely why it was that such power was abused through aggressive attempts at conquest and conspicuous cruelty, is more difficult to answer, and there are only hints of an answer in this book. Firstly, it is clear that while repelling invaders, Japan had from time to time, without any justification, decided to try to annex parts of mainland east Asia, for instance Korea (pp. 265 ff.). Secondly, it does seem to be the case that there had never grown up any real tradition of a balance of powers within Japan except that given by accident, emperor against shogun, townsmen and rich farmers against samurai, shogun against those daimyo he could not control. The great difference here is that in England there was an early growth of a parliament representing the various orders and ensuring that decisions were debated and that the king was under the law.

If we combine the absence of an ancient parliamentary system with the well-known collectivities and vertical strands in Japan, it is not too difficult to see how at certain points in history it would be relatively easy for the whole nation to swing towards a new position. Absolute political loyalty upwards was one of the central features of the peculiar form of Confucianism in Japan. The concentration of power into the hands of the emperor and his servants with the destruction of the shogunate, and the uniting of church and state with the invention of state Shintoism knocked away the old checks and balances. Hence not only the willingness to do what the centre said in starting to fight, but also, miraculously, to cease fighting without a murmur when the emperor decreed.

Since Italy, Spain, Germany and other countries have lurched in a similar way, perhaps we should put the problem in reverse. How is it that a few nations (particularly those in north-western Europe and America) have managed to preserve their liberal and balanced constitutions?

Thus, even after this excellent book, we are left pondering the questions set by the first two works. Yet the rapid growth of first-rate historical scholarship in and about Japan which is represented in the *Cambridge history of Japan* is taking us a little nearer to some of the answers. Such work, as John Hall states, suggests that ‘the more we have come to know about Japan the more we are drawn to the apparent similarities with Western history’, even if we also need experts ‘to point out the dangers of being misled by seeming parallels’ (p. vii).