The Roots of Modern Japan

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The Roots of Modern Japan

Jean-Pierre Lehmann

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For Françoise

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Preface

As Western-style capitalism faces its worst crisis since the Great Depression and Eastern European-style socialism appears manifestly bankrupt, Japan seems to offer a dynamic alternative to a post-industrial society. Not only has Japan in the last twenty-five years or more, with the brief exception of the year 1974, been able to sustain an enviable degree of economic growth, but certainly in the last decade or so she has also proved a paragon of social stability and national cohesion.

Arising out of the seemingly incurable cancer which is affecting most, if not all, Western societies on the one hand and Japan's comparative success on the other, there has occurred, not surprisingly, a certain curiosity and indeed admiration in the West towards Japan. To the historian there is an element here of *déjà-vu*. As Europe in the eighteenth century faced severe political, economic, social and moral crises, there developed a tendency among some of the *philosophes* to portray China and more specifically certain elements of her political philosophy as a viable model for European societies to emulate. In the meantime, as is well known, Europeans managed to do rather well, conquering a good deal of the world, while any talk of emulating foreign societies would have appeared ridiculous at a time when, on the contrary, authors ranging from Marx to Macaulay and others preached that the only road to salvation for non-European societies was to undergo a thorough process of occidentalisation. The Western sense of self-confidence has, for obvious reasons, waned. Now, in the 1980s, some two centuries after the Chinese mirage, it is Japan which has become the focus of attention. Reflecting at least one of the differences in the later eighteenth and later twentieth centuries, however, on this occasion it is not philosophers seeking a political solution to European problems, but their modern counterparts, namely the gurus of business studies, seeking to unravel with a view to transplanting the secrets behind Japan's commercial and industrial success.

The objectives of this book are somewhat different. It is above all an historical study. While the first two chapters seek to develop and illuminate some of the more significant patterns in Japanese history and principally in

terms of the formation and nature of the Japanese nation, the subsequent chapters address themselves to the causes and consequences of Japan's transformation to modernity. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Japan first came into contact with the West, correspond to a period of conception. The two centuries and more of isolation which followed in the course of the Edo era are a period of incubation, but in a manner in which the incubatory process should be perceived not as stagnant, but dynamic. In other words, the foundations for transformation to modernity were being laid and certain characteristics which were to mark the more advanced society that Japan became in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in the process of formation. This last period is that of full-scale modernisation, illustrated by the rate of economic growth, the process of industrialisation, the development of political and administrative modes of organisation and behaviour in response to the challenge of modernity, Japan's absorption into the international economy and diplomatic relations, and the intellectual and social ferment which these forces give rise to. In assessing the particular Japanese historical development, efforts have been directed towards distinguishing between those elements which may be deemed peculiar, or unique, to Japan and those which can be more readily understood in a universal or comparative context. Similarly, the process of modernisation should be perceived as arising out of a combination of external stimuli and internal responses. The term occidentalisation or westernisation appears inappropriate as it implies a comprehensive and linear process. Rather, external forces and internal reactions provided Japan with a dynamic and dialectical process of more or less constant change. Another major theme has been to seek to contest the perception of Japanese history in terms of a dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Japan's history in this respect is no different from that of other nations: it is an evolutionary, occasionally revolutionary, process, where different forces mesh together; these can, often do, give rise to contradictions, but that is something different from seeking to establish contrasting and conflicting forces between that which is allegedly traditional and that which is supposedly modern. In other words, something 'traditional' can, under certain circumstances, be very 'modern'.

The scope of the book is extensive. The objective was to try to cover a broad canvas with a view to presenting as full a picture as possible. The economic, political, social, intellectual and moral dimensions of Japanese society are generally given equal distribution throughout. A major aim here was to seek at least to avoid falling into the pitfall of either economic determinism or cultural determinism. A major theme in this book is to underline the extent to which culture and economy have exerted reciprocal influences but without giving overall a greater predominance to one or the other.

While Japan's success may be worthy of admiration in the 1980s, concern has been expressed here to show to what extent the actual process of modernisation, the laying of roots, was brutal. To that end, the angle has been double in that history is perceived both from above and from below. There were some remarkable entrepreneurs in Japanese history – indeed without them the country would never have successfully industrialised – but this should not be allowed to mask the realities so far as the workers were concerned. Japanese society, at least until recently, was highly exploitative especially in regard to poor peasants, to the minority *eta* people, to women in general and to most members of the industrial labour force. Among other things, a proper appreciation of these facts should prevent people from speaking of contemporary Japan's highly harmonious industrial relations and social stability as being embedded in Japanese culture and traditions.

Japanese history, like that of all nations, can only perhaps be written in terms of exploitation and conflict. This should not, it should be stressed, imply that history as it is studied in this book is presented from a Marxist optic. It is rather an admittedly subjective impression, but arising from what are objective facts, that history is no more than the evolving reflection of human nature. Exploitation and conflict, as they are portrayed here, exist not only in terms of managers and workers, landlords and tenants, men and women, Japanese society in general and the *eta* people, but also exploitation and conflict between nations. While the Japanese in the course of modernisation may have justifiably felt aggrieved that they were or risked being exploited by the predatory Western imperialist nations, this did not prevent the Japanese themselves from exploiting others, namely the Chinese and Koreans to begin with, later most of the societies of South-east Asia.

A degree of exploitation persists in Japanese society to this day, although it is admittedly minimal when compared to most other countries, at least for the time being. The fairly high degree of social cohesion and egalitarianism which exist in Japan today, however, are needless to say born from the experience of the past, and in this case total defeat in 1945 ultimately proved an extremely salutary lesson. Even then, however, as the history of post-war Japan would show, success has been achieved not because of the absence of conflict, but rather the extent to which compromises were made in the face of conflict, compromises which arose out of necessity. While Japan and the Western powers are unlikely to be at war with one another in the foreseeable future, a sense of conflict nonetheless remains. The cultural chasm between Japan and the West is still substantial.

The conflict arises partly out of ignorance. No historian can delude himself that his voice is likely to be heard – and indeed it may not necessarily be a voice worth hearing. Nevertheless the aim in writing this book was partly as a

means and in the hope of achieving a greater diffusion of knowledge and understanding about the evolution of the modern Japanese nation. Japanese readers may object that the history of their nation is written here from a biased Western perspective. They may also object that certain elements, perhaps especially the *eta* problem, which are rather black spots in the Japanese record, are given disproportionate importance. The bias of one's culture in studying that of another is inevitable, though the degree of the bias may vary; thus the same problem faces the Japanese historian in writing about another culture but surely this should not prevent him from so doing. Given the cultural chasm which does exist, however, it may be in fact more beneficial for the sake of a reasonably wide Western audience, that is, not the small circle of Japanological specialists, to have a Western interpreter. Other tendencies in this book may not simply reflect the angle of perception of a Westerner but that of a Westerner writing in the early 1980s. Questions ranging from the status and role of the female in society, of minority groups, of industrial relations are ones which are posed pretty much throughout the world. Many social and economic problems are of a universal character, though the solutions to these vary between cultures. Hence it was felt that the approach to Japanese history should consist of a fairly universal perspective even if the detailed assessment provides a more peculiarly indigenous colour.

In summary, therefore, the purpose in writing this book was to present a solid historical framework for modern Japan. It will be clear that certain features of this process have been retained. The first chapter, for example, sets out the extent to which Japan developed a highly cohesive and homogeneous society. Geographic, linguistic and ethnic factors of unity were reinforced by historical experiences, whether the extended period of isolation during the Edo era or the sense of national vulnerability and identity which occurred as the country was opened and faced the challenge of the militarily and economically far superior Western powers. In subsequent chapters it is stressed how all of these forces combined to witness the development in Japan, as in no other country, of a strong and sustained nationalistic policy. While Japanese policies and attitudes in the contemporary age could not be described as being overtly nationalistic, the sense of national cohesion accompanied by that of exclusivism remain strong: out of a population today of close to 116 million, just about three-quarters of a million are foreigners and more than 90 per cent of these are Koreans. Japan remains open to numerous foreign influences – in dress, food, art, and so on – and therefore in that sense it is a highly international country, while on the other it is still very much of a closed society – witness, for example, Japanese policies in regard to the 'boat people' arriving on their shores. Another strong pattern of continuity is the prestige and power accorded to the bureaucracy: Japan in the 1980s can still be

described as a highly bureaucratic society. The influential role of the bureaucracy throughout the Edo era and during the transformation to modernity and the initiatives it took in laying the infrastructure for economic development can account for, among other things, the close relationship which persists between government and business. The all-powerful MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Industry) is a post-war creation, but the aura that surrounds it and the power that it wields can be traced back for centuries.

Japan possesses a truly unique history; it is long and it is rich. It goes without saying that this powerful historical tradition has deeply influenced the character of contemporary society and will no doubt continue determining the nature of the future. At the same time, however, that which is perhaps most remarkable about Japanese history – and also unique – is the degree to which on important occasions and in the course of major turning points the past has been discarded in favour of entirely new directions. Although obviously this is a matter open to debate and in any case impossible to prove, one could nevertheless seek to argue that no society, all the while maintaining a certain respect for a traditional order, has altered so profoundly as has Japan over the last two centuries or more. As is suggested in Chapter 5, the Meiji Restoration was in its consequences far more revolutionary than the events following 1789 in France or those following 1917 in Russia. The remarkable propensity for adaptability in the face of new circumstances has been both a feature and a great strength of Japanese society. The institutional innovativeness of Japan is perhaps the key factor lying behind her present success. The sources of innovativeness invariably include a combination of borrowings from abroad with certain indigenous traits. The current and much vaunted system of industrial relations in Japan is perhaps the best and most dynamic example of this process. The weaknesses in the West today are in a large measure due to excessive europocentrism and an inability to break the chains of the past, hence a preoccupation, possibly an obsession, with fighting yesterday's battles. If there is anything at all that should be learned from Japan it is this: the study of external models and a certain institutional and social radicalism can bring a great deal of vitality to society.

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NOTE

Japanese personal names are given, as is the custom in Japan, with the family name first.

Macrons, the sign which when placed above a vowel in a Japanese word indicates that it is long, have not been used in the text; they are, however, used in the Glossary of Japanese terms.

Full publishing details of works cited in the text will be found in the Bibliographical Note.