

Caught in the vortex of Imperialism: the emergence of Modern Japan

Giacomo Puccini composed his tragic opera, *Madama Butterfly* (*Chōchō Fujin*), in 1904. At this time, Japan was striving to establish itself as an imperial power. Indeed, the nineteenth century was the era of imperialism, dominated by the Western Powers. In the latter half of the century, Western imperialists not only established colonies but also developed more covert and sophisticated ways of controlling 'non-civilised' countries. Forcing those countries into unequal treaties was one example. In 1840, Britain, the inventor of the treaty port system, had forced China to sign a series of unequal treaties and open its ports for trade. It was only a matter of time before the Powers knocked on Japan's door, but it was the US that forced Japan into foreign trade a decade later.

The arrival of the Black Ships led by American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 brought an end to more than 200 years of *sakoku* (Japan's seclusion policy). At the time, Japan was an agrarian, feudal country ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), one of whose responsibilities was to keep *iteki* ('barbarians,' i.e., foreigners) at bay. The seclusion policy was associated with the Shogunate's ban on Christianity, which was viewed as a politically subversive and socially disruptive force. The Shogunate also monopolised diplomacy and trade, which was limited to Dutch, Chinese, Koreans and Ryūkyūans (today's Okinawa) on a fan-shaped artificial island called Dejima in Nagasaki.

Despite these measures, in 1858, the Shogunate were pressured into signing an unequal treaty with the US and other Powers. This act – undertaken without Emperor Komei's approval – outraged dissident samurai who saw it as proof that the Shogunate was unable to lead Japan against Western imperialists. Following a decade of political instability and social unrest, lower-ranking samurai from Satsuma and Chōshū domains, together with certain progressive courtiers, carried out a coup d'état in 1868 and overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate. With this coup, more than 250 years of Tokugawa hegemony ended, and rapid modernisation – dubbed the Meiji Restoration – began.

The ultimate goal of the newly-established Meiji government was to establish Japan as a modern nation-state on a par with the Western powers. They began by dismantling the feudal system and implementing a series of radical decrees that brought sweeping political, economic, social, military, ideological and juridical reforms.

The Meiji government believed that learning from the mighty and civilised West was imperative. To that end, they sent the Iwakura Mission – a delegation of leading Japanese statesmen and scholars led by prominent oligarch Iwakura Tomomi – to the US and European nations in 1871. The delegation was unsuccessful in its attempts to revise the unequal treaties because the Western Powers did not yet recognise Japan as a 'civilised

nation.’ However, the delegation members were not discouraged: quite the contrary. They became more determined to modernise their country than ever before and carried on with their extensive observation of modern Western technology, institutions, and education systems. Upon returning to Japan in 1873, they utilised the knowledge they had learned in the West to enact further modernising reforms, transforming Japan into the first industrialised nation-state in Asia.

Simultaneously, Meiji Japan turned to external expansion for economic, strategic and geopolitical reasons. Ironically, in order to liberate itself from exploitation by the Powers, Japan also resorted to creating an empire in East Asia. The advent of Western imperialism and the rise of Modern Japan changed the power balance in East Asia. Previously, through the tribute system, China had been the suzerain state, and countries such as Korea and Ryūkyū paid tribute to China, which in return recognised them as the king (ruler) of their respective country. Tokugawa Japan was outside of this system.

With the collapse of this Sino-centric World order, East Asia became the arena of battle between imperialists. Escalating tensions between China and Japan over the question of Korean ‘independence’ led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. At the turn of the twentieth century, the tussle for the contested territory of Manchuria erupted into the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Japan was victorious in both wars and emerged with two major colonies – Taiwan and Korea. The Western Powers could no longer deny Japan’s ascendancy. By signing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, Britain recognised Japan as an equal partner, and by 1911, Japan had liberated itself from all unequal treaties.

Until the late 1920s, Japan participated fully in international cooperation with Anglo-American-led ‘peaceful’ diplomacy. However, divisions widened between the civilian government and the military, which was vehemently against this new diplomacy. The military took matters into their own hands and carried out a series of political assassinations at home and launched military conquests abroad in the 1930s. In 1931, the Japanese Kwantung army instigated the Manchurian Incident, creating a puppet regime. Condemned by the League of Nations as an aggressor, Japan withdrew its membership in 1932 and became internationally isolated. This time, international isolation meant hostility towards the West, once the source of inspiration for civilisation and enlightenment.

In the nineteenth century, imperialism was conducted by nation-states. In the process of nation-building, gender equality was not typically a main concern. In Japan’s imperial hierarchy, women were placed below men. They were expected to stay at home and play the role of *ryōsai kenbo* (‘good wife, wise mother’) for the benefit of the nation. Women were excluded from participating in politics and in 1900, under the ‘Peace Police Law’, they were banned from getting involved in any political activities or discussions.

Yūjo (female sex workers) received different treatment. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, prostitution was legal within the designated pleasure quarters, including the Maruyama complex in Nagasaki. There, its customers included overseas traders residing in Dejima. As Dutchmen were not allowed to bring their families to Dejima, it was not uncommon for them to form a relationship with Maruyama sex workers, and some even had children with them. Such liaisons were convenient for the Tokugawa government, too, as Maruyama *yūjo* played an important role as ‘ambassadors’ of Japan between Japan and Holland.

In 1872, as part of the Meiji modernisation efforts, the government issued a decree, *The Liberation of Geisha and Prostitutes*. This edict also banned human trafficking, but it failed to address the basic human rights and rehabilitation of the women concerned. Despite subsequent efforts to outlaw prostitution, it was re-endorsed by the state in World War Two. Japanese women, including those from the colonies of Korea and Taiwan, were mobilised as *ianfu* (‘comfort women’) to serve the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers, who were fighting a ‘sacred war.’ The abolition of public prostitution had to wait until after World War Two.

The character of *Chōchō Fujin* lived in a time of complex and contested issues, encompassing imperialism, colonialism, racism and sexism. These issues are still unresolved today and remain important themes for all of us to reflect upon, with every performance of the opera.