

Taishô democracy

Emperor Taishô ruled for a brief period between 1912 and 1926, when the Shôwa emperor, who would reign until his death in 1989, succeeded him. For many historians, the Taishô period appears like a small window of calm in the middle of a century of war and struggle for Japan. Intellectuals and activists such as Yoshino Sakuzô advocated a kind of democracy called *minponshugi* (rule for the people), which he argued was compatible with Japan's constitutional monarchy. At the same time, constitutional lawyers such as Minobe Tatsukichi argued that the emperor might best be considered an 'organ' in the overall structure of the state, rather than as coterminous with the nation as a whole. Meanwhile, internationalists like Nitobe Inazo placed their faith in the emergence of a new world order that would recognize diversity and multicultural membership; Nitobe himself was an undersecretary-general of the League of Nations from 1920 and a founding director of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (the forerunner of UNESCO).

Against this background, a new middle class was emerging in the rapidly growing urban centres. This was the birth of the so-called salaryman (*sarariman*) – the ubiquitous, white-collared worker. But this period also saw a new class of white-collared women working as 'office ladies' or as attendants in shops. In general, women in these jobs were very poorly paid, but they featured in popular culture as icons of modern life: flashy and fashionable, immersed in the consumerism of products and fads, and often represented as morally liberal, selling kisses as well as Western clothes to their customers. These were the *moga* or *modan gaaru* (modern girls). The new middle class (which contrasted with the 'old middle class' of former samurai families) was represented as liberal and free, moving regularly between different jobs at different companies and enjoying the trappings of modern life.

This new way of life cohabited with a new culture, and the Taishô period saw the Japanese enthusiastically embrace many American pastimes: baseball and jazz being the most pervasive. But there were also developments in Japan's own artistic ferment, with arguably modern Japan's greatest authors, such as Akutagawa Ryûnosuke and Tanizaki Jun'ichirô, writing darkly beautiful short stories and novels that contemplated questions of individual and cultural identity in Japan's rapidly changing society. At the same time, there was a flourishing of avant-garde poetry and art. The advent of the 'one yen' book, the further development of national and local newspapers, and the establishment of rental stores for novels, magazines, and manga (graphic fiction) brought these materials to an ever wider and increasingly educated public.

Of course, this middle class image of Taishô Japan was not the whole story. The working class factory workers that so characterized the Meiji period found their conditions largely unchanged. Again, it was young women who bore the brunt of this, with men toiling under similarly harsh conditions in heavier industry. However, the Taishô period also saw the working classes becoming increasingly conscious of their plight and their power: workers began to organize into unions and 'friendly societies', even the *burakumin* began to participate in social activism in the form of the *Suiheisha* (Levellers' Association). Local disputes and strikes increased in number throughout the 1920s, as activists started to embrace liberal and even communist ideas.

The image of the Taishô period as a war-free haven is at least partially premised upon the economic boom that Japan experienced during the years of the Great War in Europe. During the war years, Japanese industrial output increased by a factor of five as it sought to supply European and domestic demand, and its exports surged (especially textiles).



Overcoming and overcome by modernity: Japan at war

9. Modernity at the crossroads, c.1928

For the first time in modern history, Japan became a net creditor nation.

Historians often overlook Japan's role in World War I: it joined the war at the request of its ally, Great Britain, on 23 August of 1914, and then quickly occupied the German territories in East Asia, including Shangdong and Tsingtao. The Imperial Navy

proceeded to occupy a string of Germany's island colonies in October, including the Marshall Islands. Furthermore, Japan used the instability in the region to consolidate its position in Manchuria and to assert itself against a weakened China – issuing the so-called Twenty-One Demands for economic and territorial concessions. Elsewhere, Japan was involved in a joint campaign with the USA to attempt to bolster the 'Whites' in the Russian Revolution, which erupted in 1917, and it also sent a naval squadron of 17 ships to the Mediterranean to help escort British vessels based at Malta. Indeed, Japan's involvement in World War I earned it a seat amongst the Big Four (Britain, France, USA, and Italy) in Versailles for the negotiation of the peace treaty in 1919, and also a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations – an achievement that postwar Japan has not accomplished in the United Nations.

This recognition by the Western powers was met with enthusiasm back in Japan. However, the Japanese delegation at the conference did not get everything that it wanted. Although they successfully lobbied to keep their territorial acquisitions in Asia, their second goal – the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the Preamble to the Covenant of the League of Nations – was thwarted. Former prime minister and *genrô* Saionji Kinmochi led the Japanese delegation, which proposed the following clause to the conference:

The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.

In fact, a majority of the seventeen delegations present voted to support this clause, including all of the non-European representatives (except the USA). In principle this meant that the motion could be carried. However, US President Woodrow

Wilson, who was chairing the session, overthrew the decision, stating that although a majority carried the motion, opposition to it was so serious that it should require unanimity for this proposal to pass. In practice, Wilson was talking about opposition from the British, for whom such a measure would spell the end of its empire, and Wilson realized that the emergent League of Nations needed British support more than it needed Japanese support (especially after the USA itself failed to join).

This failure at Versailles was not well received back in Japan, where protests erupted in the streets. For many commentators at the time (and since), this looked like another example of Western racism, echoing the duplicity that the Japanese perceived at the time of the Triple Intervention. The feeling of injustice was severe, especially since Japan at the turn of the 1920s had become a modern, constitutional democracy with an imposing empire and a flourishing economy: it had met all of the objective criteria to join the club of modern nations, but it was still being refused entry. It seemed, finally, that being modern was not enough: modern Japan would never be considered an equal partner in international affairs for as long as it was Japanese. This was the one thing that Japan could do nothing about, and indeed it was becoming increasingly assertive about the importance of maintaining its distinctive identity. Events at Versailles added fuel to the fires of Japanese romantics and chauvinists who were striving to rediscover, reinvent, or simply protect 'Japaneseness' in the modern state.

Only two years later, Britain allowed the Anglo-Japanese alliance to lapse and instead proposed a five-way naval agreement involving the USA, France, and Italy. The so-called Washington Naval Treaty of 1921, one of a number of such treaties to be signed over the next decade or so, obliged the signatories to maintain a fixed ratio of naval power (measured in tonnage of capital ships and aircraft carriers). As far as Japan was concerned, the key ratio was Britain:USA:Japan, which was set at 5:5:3,

meaning that Japan would always be less powerful than the two nations that thwarted its racial equality clause. But, perhaps the last straw for those in Japan who saw a systematic racism at work in the Anglo-American world was the enactment of the 1924 immigration laws in the USA, which specifically prohibited the immigration of East Asians.

Unfortunately, this perception of an unsympathetic international environment coincided with economic collapse in Japan, which followed the wartime bubble, and natural catastrophe in the form of the great Kanto earthquake of 1923, which left 150,000 people dead or missing and about half a million residences in Tokyo levelled. By the end of the Taishō period, Japan was in depression, the *zaibatsu* conglomerates (such as Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and Sumitomo) were beginning to take over the economy as private banks failed, and they were cultivating ever-closer connections with the political parties and the military. This meant that wealth was being concentrated into fewer hands, and more of the urban population was struggling to maintain their way of life. Hence, by the start of the increasingly militaristic Shōwa period, Japan was ripe for change once again: the democratic window appeared to be closing.

Early Shōwa and war in the Pacific

Following the collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929, economic depression swept the globe. Japan took the yen off the gold standard in 1931 and watched its value slump by 50% against the dollar. Unemployment rose dramatically, quickly reaching over 20%. In the urban centres, where the modern life of Taishō had seemed so exciting, the darker underside of the modern condition became readily apparent. Intellectuals started to write about the crisis of capitalism and the angst of modern life. Despite being illegal after the 1925 Peace Preservation Law, the communist movement simmered in the universities. The emblems of urban chic – the *moga* waitresses and shop attendants – gradually became