Introduction

Writing Japanese History

THE RELEVANCE OF JAPANESE HISTORY

To this day, Japan's national ascendancy challenges many assumptions about world history, particularly theories regarding the rise of the West and why, put simply, the modern world looks the way that it does. It was not China's great Qing dynasty (1644–1911), nor India's sprawling Maratha empire (1674–1818), that confronted the US and European powers during the nineteenth century. Rather, it was Japan, a country, at 377,915 km² (145,913 mi²), about the size of the US state of Montana (Map 1). Not only did this small island country hold the Great Powers of the nineteenth century at bay, it emulated them and competed with them at their own global ambitions, as contemptible as those often were. Then, in the second half of the twentieth century, after the Pacific War, Japan rebuilt and became a model for industrialization outside the US and Europe, with wildly successful companies such as Honda and Toyota, now household names. Soccer mums in the US drive Toyotas, as do Jihadists in Afghanistan. But today, Japan finds itself in the eye of a different global storm. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Japan is embroiled in concerns over industrial economies and climate change because, as an island country with extensive coastal development, it has much to lose from rising sea levels and the increasing number of violent storms in the Pacific. Japan remains at the centre of the modern world and its most serious challenges.

1 Japan

To help us acclimatize to the pace of Japan's history, take the lives of two prominent figures. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), a prideful samurai born in Osaka and raised on the southern island of Kyushu, exemplified many of Japan's early experiences in the modern age. In one lifetime, he watched, not as a passive observer but as one of its principal architects, his country transformed from

a hotchpotch of domains to a nation with vast military reach and global economic aspirations. As a samurai urchin patrolling the dusty streets of Nakatsu domain, Fukuzawa entertained lofty dreams of shattering the chains of backward Confucian practices and travelling the world in order to discover what made the Western world tick.

At the mischievous age of twelve or thirteen, Fukuzawa stole a sacred paper talisman from his home, which supposedly protected his family from calamities such as theft and fire. He then did what to many would have been utterly unthinkable: 'I deliberately stepped on it when nobody was looking. But no heavenly vengeance came.' Not satisfied that he had done enough to irritate local Shinto deities, he then took the talisman and stomped it into the filth of the toilet. Still no divine Shinto retribution came. Always one to challenge Japan's beliefs, the recalcitrant Fukuzawa then tempted the deities even further by replacing the sacred stones at an Inari shrine in his uncle's garden with sundry stones of his own choosing. When the season of the Inari festival arrived, people came to the shrine to worship, putting up banners, beating drums, and chanting. Fukuzawa chuckled under his breath, 'There they are – worshipping my stones, the fools.' For most of his life, Fukuzawa had nothing but disdain for Japan's traditions, underpinned as they were by conservative Chinese philosophy rather than Western progressive individualism. But his rejection of tradition, exemplified by mocking Inari folkways, as well as his embrace of modernity, exemplified by rationally determining the Inari deities were not paying close attention, are emblematic of Japan's nineteenth-century experience.

In this fashion, Fukuzawa trampled over one sacred assumption after another and in his lifetime witnessed Japan's rise from a country run by sword-wielding men in skirt-like *hakama* pants and *chonmage* shaved pates to the only Asian country to successfully challenge US and European imperialism. When Fukuzawa departed Nakatsu domain for the last time, he 'spat on the ground, and walked quickly away'. In some respects, this is precisely what Japan tried to do in the mid-nineteenth century after the Meiji Restoration (1868): Fukuzawa and his entire generation spat on centuries of political and cultural assumptions and, with a rare

sense of national rebirth, charted a new course to global supremacy and, ultimately, national destruction and eventual post-war renewal. At present, Japan faces a new set of national challenges that even the clever Fukuzawa could never have foreseen. Some of these, such as climate change and rising sea levels, dwarf the threats of the US's nineteenth-century 'black ships'. But by studying Japan's past, perhaps we can gather how this island nation, so gifted at the art of rebirth, might tackle these new global threats. Perhaps Japan might find a model of rebirth for us all.

Ishimoto Shidzue's (1897–2001) life began where Fukuzawa's ended, at the beginning of the twentieth century; she had similar experiences, though she struggled with Japan's new brand of nationalism and the fascist 'emperor system ideology'. She lived in a different age of rebirth. Raised in a conservative family not quite prepared to spit on all traditions, Ishimoto was not only burdened with the legacies of samurai rule, but also with Confucian attitudes towards women. Like any well-heeled young woman, her mother dutifully taught her: 'man first, woman to follow'. Though she was raised in a 'purely Japanese fashion', she remembered that 'Western influences crept into our life little by little'. But a conservative reaction was growing in Japan. While in school, Ishimoto astutely detected that, whereas teachers taught boys to be 'great personalities', they trained girls to become 'obedient wives, good mothers and loyal guardians of the family system'. In the early twentieth century, women's bodies became battlegrounds on which political activists, public intellectuals, and government policy-makers fought pitched battles over the legacies of Meiji reforms. In one telling story, she recalled a visit to her school by the Meiji emperor. 'Being homogeneous in racial traditions', she remembered, 'we are one big family in the island empire with the imperial rulers at the head.' She mused: 'How could a girl like myself born in the Meiji era, when the restoration of the Emperor was the main political excitement, and reared under his spell, fail to be moved by the spiritual force which the Emperor symbolized?' When General Nogi Maresuke (1849–1912), hero of the Russo-Japanese War (1905), dutifully committed suicide, along with his wife, following the death of the Meiji emperor in 1912, Ishimoto showed quiet reverence. 'I sat in my own quiet room

where I had placed the general's picture on the table and burned incense', she remembered, 'praying to his noble spirit without a spoken word.' Like so many, Ishimoto sometimes rebelled against the spirit of Meiji nationalism, but she also worshipped at its altar.

Emperor worship anchored Japan's emergence as a nation in the early twentieth century, but so did forms of global engagement with modernity. While Ishimoto visited the US in 1920, she met feminist Margaret Sanger (1879–1966) and became an activist for women's causes, particularly reproductive rights. But the Pacific War (1937–45) temporarily derailed her campaign for women's rights. Ishimoto mused in the 1930s, on the eve of the catastrophic war, 'A nationalist reaction against liberalism has recently swept all else before it in the Island Empire. Fascism with its strong militaristic flavour is no defender of feminism with its strong humanistic flavour.' It was during Ishimoto's lifetime that Japan launched its battleships and aircraft carriers to wage a 'sacred war' against the US and its Allies, determined to create a 'new order' in Asia. At stake in the Pacific conflict, argued many Japanese thinkers, was the 'salvation of the world'.

Ishimoto was a little girl when Fukuzawa died, but she admired him. She saw Japan's empire crumble, its cities burned to the ground; she also saw, however, Japan embrace defeat and rise from the ashes to become an economic superpower. From *hakama* pants and *chonmage* hairstyles to the *Yamato* battleship and Toyota's full-sized Tundra pickup trucks, the rise of Japan has punctuated world history. Fukuzawa and Ishimoto, in their own ways, were architects of that world.

JAPAN IN WORLD HISTORY

By placing Japan in the context of world history this history displaces one persistent myth: that Japan has a special, non-intrusive, more subjective, and often-benign relationship to nature, one that views the natural world as alive with Shinto deities, interlaced with Buddhist continuums of life, and bounded by Confucian rites. The myth insists that the Japanese did not render nature as a lifeless, objectified resource for industrial exploitation. Rather, the Japanese conformed to nature by creating holism between cultural and

natural spheres. The natural environment sprang to life for Japanese, which limited soulless industrial development and shaped their rarefied national culture.

This stereotype has been centuries in the making. Early on, the sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that unlike European philosophy that sought to adjust the world to meet human requirements, Confucianism, the core philosophy of East Asia, sought 'adjustment to the world, to its orders and conventions'. In other words, Western Europe adjusted the natural world to suit it, while Confucian societies passively adjusted themselves to suit the natural world. As a Confucian society, early modern Japan, too, is often viewed as conforming to the natural environment, a society in harmony with nature rather than forcing the environment to bend to its economic needs. As a result, Weber insisted that, 'Systematic and naturalist thought ... failed to mature' in Confucian societies. For Weber, this predisposition to defer to nature retarded development and allowed Confucian societies to be victimized by Western predators.

As this history demonstrates, Japan's relationship to the natural environment was often intrusive, probing, exploitative, and controlling, similar to post-Enlightenment Europe. Satô Nobuhiro (1769–1850), an eclectic early modern thinker, understood nature to be driven by creative forces, ones animated by Shinto deities. But when describing the role of economics in the context of state development he sounded more like the Scottish economist Adam Smith (1723–90) than a native Shinto philosopher. When describing the role of government, for example, Satô pronounced, in *Keizai yôryaku* (Summary of economics, 1822): 'The development of products is the first task of the ruler.' Humans organize into states, Satô suggested, in order to better exploit resources and control energy.

Importantly, the environment that Satô sought to develop was of largely human design, Japan's contribution to the early signatures of the Anthropocene Epoch, which is characterized by the pervasiveness of human-induced change on Earth. In their early history, Japanese began discovering and engaging the natural environment through engineering their islands. Indeed, Japan might be seen as a built archipelago, a string of islands envisioned as a controllable,

exploitable, legible, and almost technological space. This process began early in Japanese history. With the advent of agriculture came a 'fundamental change in the relation between humans and the natural world', argues one historian. Humans began to 'affect other organisms' and 'remake the nonliving environment' to better control access to nutrition and energy. Agriculture means removing undesirable species, creating artificial landscapes, and increasing the productivity of desirable species through better access to water and sunlight. Humans remade organisms around them, genetically engineering crops and exterminating threatening species, such as Japan's wolves. As they created this agricultural landscape, humans 'may have experienced a growing sense of separation between the "natural" and "human" worlds', or a sense of 'alienation' from natural conditions.

Ultimately, this alienation objectifies nature and facilitates its indifferent exploitation. Historians have identified this objectifying 'death of nature' hypothesis with post-Enlightenment European culture, but, as we shall see, Japanese culture undertook a similar process of alienation. In Japan nature was slowly killed over historical time, but then philosophers and theologians stitched it back together and injected it with the anthropomorphic life of Shinto and Buddhist deities. Nature became a marionette of the human craving for resources and energy, even though observers have long mistaken this raggedy, natural puppet for a living, freestanding nature.

WRITING JAPAN'S HISTORY

'Historical consciousness in modern society has been overwhelmingly framed by the nation state', writes one historian. Even though the nation is a contested entity, it manipulates history and secures the 'false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time'. It is the nation 'evolving through time' that claims prehistoric Jômon (14,500 BCE – 300 BCE) hunters and Yayoi (300 BCE – 300 CE) agriculturalists as 'Japanese' because apparent evolutionary development can also be read in reverse order. National history narratives, such as this one, nearly always impose an evolutionary chain on the past. Speaking to this point, one historian insists that,

'the nation is a collective historical subject poised to realize its destiny in a modern future'. In other words, we are conditioned to read national histories as anticipating the rise of the modern state, as if its emergence is inevitable. 'In evolutionary history, historical movement is seen to be produced only by antecedent causes rather than by complex transactions between the past and the present.' This is an important cautionary note for narrating national histories such as this one. Rather than viewing history as a clean linear movement from one cause to another, reaching steadily and inexorably towards the emergence of the modern nation, this history is more sensitive to contemporary political and cultural debates and the nuances that frame questions imposed on the past. Of course, history is often more about present political and cultural debates than it is about the past. Therefore, a major theme in this history is environmental change because that is the challenge of our time.

This concise history does not dismiss outright the reality of the time-travelling power of the modern nation or its ability to sculpt the identities of people it claims as its earliest members. Jômon hunters did not see themselves as 'Japanese', nor did their Yayoi replacements. Heian courtiers viewed courtly positions as far more meaningful than 'Japan', as did later samurai, who moved according to the rhythms of a hierarchical status system. In this respect, the modern nation is a recent 'imagined community', one that is invented through museums, school curricula, holidays, and other national events. As one anthropologist writes, the nation 'is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. In modern nations, citizens and subjects are taught that they share affinities with people whom they have never met. As we shall see, Japanese imagine their communities through discourses of a shared natural environment, one neatly delineated by surrounding seas, as well as a common history, language, and cultural practices. Many of these are rehearsed in the pages of this history because they are important in the making of Japan.

This concise history does not necessarily see nations as entirely 'imagined', however. Nations are not merely figments of the

cultural imagination. Because one theme in this story is people's relationships to the natural environment, this concise history uncovers the material imprint of Japan's populations throughout its history. It tracks a presence shaped by generations of bodies rotting in the soil, men and women pulling fish from the same rivers and coastal waters, engineered landscapes that reflect shared subsistence values, and transitory ideas heaped on one another for centuries and that shape a distinct manner of being. Viewed from this vantage point, early Jômon inhabitants, though they did not know it themselves, really can be viewed as the earliest 'Japanese'. The nation, for all its time-travelling hegemony, is built, in a fundamentally material way, on the people that preceded it. In this sense, 'tradition' is not necessarily the invented whipping boy of modernity, as some historians have submitted. Modernity, it has been argued, necessitates the 'invention of tradition' in order to demarcate itself historically. But earlier inhabitants of Japan, people we might call 'traditional' for convenience, had traceable material practices, ones imprinted on Japan in material ways and that inform modern life. These practices shaped the evolutionary development of Japan's modern nation, not vice versa. To label a Jômon hunter with the title 'Japanese', and then to pin on him the future horrors of Japan's Nanjing Massacre (1937), is to saddle him with burdens that would have been unimaginable to him. But Jômon hunters died and rotted in Japan's soil. Their progeny and Yayoi replacements adopted ideas, made choices, and imprinted those choices on themselves, their social organizations, their political systems, and on the landscape. These material imprints shaped their progeny, and then their progeny, and so forth. Eventually, those people, guided as they were by generation upon generation of material and cultural drivers, decided to ransack the city of Nanjing during what they trumpeted as the 'Greater East Asian War'.

The nation might be in part imagined, but not out of thin air. It is not entirely an unnatural phenomenon, either. And so it is for Japanese history. For this reason, even in the face of new global predicaments such as climate change, the modern nation remains an important category of historical analysis.

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The Birth of the Yamato State, 14,500 BCE – 710 CE

Japan's environment proved much more than simply a sculptor of Japanese civilization, where wind and rain painstakingly chiselled, over the centuries, the intricate contours of Japanese life. Rather, the environment was a product of Japanese civilization. Early inhabitants of the Japanese Islands, from the Yayoi archaeological phase (300 BCE – 300 CE) onward, carved, sliced, burned, and hoed their subsistence needs and cultural sensibilities into the alluvial plains, forests, mountainous spine, and bays of the archipelago, transforming it, like some colossal bonsai tree, into a material manifestation of their needs and desires. This is the most profound disjuncture between the Jômon archaeological phase (14,500 BCE – 300 BCE) and the Yayoi: the introduction of East Asian culture and its transformative effect on the archipelago. This chapter explores the emergence of the earliest Japanese state, and how state development was intimately connected to environmental transformation.

EARLY FORAGERS AND SETTLERS

The Pleistocene Epoch, about 2.6 million to 11,700 years before present (YBP), witnessed the first wave of early hominid, non-human animal, and incidental plant migrations across Eurasia and onto the Japanese archipelago. Japan was not an archipelago at the time, however. Rather, it was connected to the continent at both the southern and northern sections by coastal lowlands that