

The Coming of the West

1840-1873



Occasionally in the history of a country there comes a time when a number of different social and political changes reach a critical stage together. This is the signal for a 'revolution', using the word in its widest sense. For Japan the middle of the nineteenth century was such a turning-point. It was marked by entry into multi-faceted relations with the West; the choice of Europe and America as institutional models, instead of China; the first steps in the introduction of capitalist industry. These developments coincided more or less with the overthrow of the Tokugawa Bakufu and its replacement by an emperor-centred form of government. As a result Japan's national life was transformed, much as it had earlier been in the Asuka and Nara periods.

The trigger for these events was the action taken by the western powers to open Japanese ports to foreign trade, itself part of a wider process of imperialist expansion in India and on the China coast. It once more bound Japan into a close political and commercial relationship with China, this time under the aegis of the West, acting through 'unequal treaties'. It also exposed her for at least a generation to the full weight of economic and military pressure that modern industrial states could bring to bear. Her response was to determine much of the region's modern history.

Unequal treaties

The immediate background to the western threat to Japan was the trade of the maritime powers with China. From the outset it had met with difficulties. Chinese officials, conditioned by centuries of the tribute system, took it as axiomatic that there should be an acceptance of Chinese law and methods of taxation among the foreigners coming to their country. Europeans and Americans did not always agree. There were occasions when Chinese custom seemed to them to be barbaric or unjust. There were also problems about balance of payments. By 1800 the world had acquired a taste for Chinese tea and silk to a value very much greater than that of China's demand for western products. To avoid using bullion to make good the difference, an alternative was found in selling opium to China; and when the Chinese government, denouncing opium as a danger to its people's health, banned the import of the drug, there was the making of a serious conflict. The opium trade became a smuggling enterprise. Since its proceeds found their way in large part to Canton, where they financed the legal purchases of tea and silk, western governments soon found themselves involved in its ramifications.

Crisis came in 1839. A conscientious Chinese viceroy at Canton, determined to uphold the law, chose to hold foreign merchants at the port as hostages until the smugglers, their fellow-countrymen, surrendered all opium held in ships offshore. In the short term, the move succeeded: the trade came to a halt, the opium was handed over and destroyed. The British Foreign Office, however – much the largest part of the opium traffic, as well as of the purchase of tea, was in British hands – held that the viceroy's action was no more legal than the smuggling he was trying to suppress. It therefore authorised the use of force to support the merchants' claims for compensation. Since China refused to accept the argument, the result was war. Desultory naval engagements in the Canton estuary in the winter of 1839-40 spread northwards up the China coast in the next two years; Britain

seized the islands of Hong Kong and Chusan; China sued for peace at Nanking.

The treaty signed there in 1842 was taken by Britain as an opportunity to settle not only the issues from which the war arose, but also the general management of the trade. Hong Kong became a British colony and naval base. Four more ports in southern China were opened to trade, in addition to Canton. Consuls were to be appointed to them, having access to Chinese officials of equivalent rank; foreign merchants were to reside in designated settlements, subject to their own national laws, administered through consular courts; customs duties were to be charged on a scale laid down by treaty (that is, not fixed by China of its own volition). These privileges were made available to all the powers that came to terms with China, by means of the inclusion in each agreement of a most-favoured-nation clause. Together they defined the 'treaty port system'. It was expanded in 1858 by the addition of extra ports in the north and along China's river system, plus the right of diplomatic residence in Peking.

To Japanese, when they learnt of them, the arrangements seemed ominous. One Japanese scholar, writing in 1847, after accounts of the Opium War had been brought to Nagasaki by Dutch and Chinese merchants, was moved to ask, 'how can we know whether the mist gathering over China will not come down as frost upon Japan?'. He had reason on his side. Western governments, consuls and commercial establishments, largely ignorant still of this part of the world, were easily persuaded that the structure they had devised to regulate their trade with China would serve just as well in dealings with other 'orientals'. This attitude did much to ensure that the treaty port system was eventually imposed on Japan with the minimum of adjustment.

In 1844 the Dutch, fearing for the future of their rights at Deshima in the international situation produced by the Opium War, approached the Edo Bakufu to seek a relaxation of the seclusion laws. The overture was rejected. A British plan to send an expedition to Japan from the China coast in 1845 came to nothing because an 'appropriate' naval force could not be found

to carry it out. In the next few years, occasional warships from Britain, France and the United States found occasion to call at Ryukyu (Loochoo) and Nagasaki, but none of these visits was followed up.

It was events in America that in the end brought a more determined effort to 'open' Japan. In 1848 the United States acquired California from Mexico, securing a substantial seaboard on the Pacific. There was talk of a transcontinental railroad, even, perhaps, a steamer route across the Pacific to Shanghai, where American trade was second only to that of Britain. Since the Japanese islands lay on the great circle route from San Francisco to the China coast, and were known from Dutch accounts to possess deposits of coal, they might, it was thought, serve as a staging-point for steamers, which at this stage of their development had limited range. For the first time, therefore, Japan's ports became of more than passing interest to one of the maritime powers.

By 1852 it was widely known that an American naval expedition was being prepared to undertake negotiations with Japan. In July of the following year, it anchored off Uruga at the entrance to Edo Bay. The two steamers and two sailing vessels that made it up were cleared for action. Its commanding officer, Commodore Matthew Perry, was very clear that he would admit no visitors to his presence but Japanese of suitable rank, while the letter he brought from President Millard Fillmore – it called for better treatment for shipwrecked seamen, the opening of ports of refuge where foreign ships could obtain coal and stores, plus permission to carry on trade – must be received with proper ceremony. On 14 July the elaborate boxes in which the President's letter and Perry's credentials were enclosed, escorted by a landing party from the squadron, were handed over at nearby Kurihama in the presence of 5,000 Japanese troops. The commodore added a letter of his own. If these 'very reasonable and pacific overtures' were not accepted at once, it said, he would return for a reply next spring, this time 'with a much larger force'. To underline the point, before he left for China he took part of his command

into Edo Bay to survey the approaches to the Tokugawa capital.

True to his promise, Perry returned with eight ships early in 1854. In the interval Edo's policy-makers had been consulting the country's feudal lords. The results had not been helpful. One small group, whose spokesman was Tokugawa Nariaki of Mito, head of a senior branch of the Shogun's house, held that so insulting a demand must be altogether rejected, if necessary at the cost of war. Anything less would not only impugn the national honour, he claimed, but also undermine the Bakufu's prestige at home. Another equally small minority, led by Ii Naosuke of Hikone, the most powerful of the Tokugawa vassal lords (*fudai*), took a very different view. To seek to buy time, even if it meant compromise, was in their opinion only politic in view of Japan's military weakness. The time so gained could be used to prepare for war, above all by the adoption of western weapons and technology. The great majority of the lords, however, were less forthright. Most of their replies were nothing more than reiterations of the duty that followed from 'ancestral law', or plaintive calls for peace. They did little to suggest how the one could be upheld or the other secured.

Faced by these inconsistencies, Abe Masahiro, the senior member of the Tokugawa council, decided to accept the substance of Perry's proposals, if all else failed. It did. In meetings at Yokohama under the guns of the American ships, Perry showed himself unmoving. In March 1854 a convention was signed. It opened Shimoda and Hakodate as ports of refuge, gave undertakings about the future treatment of castaways and provided for the appointment of an American consul at Shimoda. It made no specific mention of rights of trade, which was Edo's only diplomatic achievement.

Despite the disappointment over trade, the agreement prompted efforts at emulation. The Dutch obtained better terms for their commerce at Deshima. The British and Russian naval commanders in the north Pacific, engaged in desultory operations against each other — one of the remoter aspects of the Crimean War — found time to secure conventions much like Perry's. British

officials on the China coast, believing all that had been done so far to be inadequate, began to formulate plans for a 'proper' treaty with Japan. So did the new American consul at Shimoda, Townsend Harris, who arrived there in September 1856.

At this point Japan's dealings with the West became entangled once again in the affairs of China. Towards the end of 1856, when the Crimean War was over, fresh hostilities, arising from disputes over trade, broke out between China on the one side, and France and Britain on the other. Canton was captured, large Anglo-French forces were assembled for a campaign in the north. Both Dutch and American representatives in Japan made it plain to Edo that these forces, once victory set them free, would undoubtedly be used to support a demand for trade rights in the Japanese islands. The Bakufu, it was pointed out, would be able to offer no effective resistance, so its only hope of averting a catastrophe was to sign a commercial treaty first with countries whose demands would be less exacting. This could become a model for what would follow.

The Bakufu council, led now by Hotta Masayoshi, acknowledged the attractions of this argument. By October 1857 the representatives it sent to Nagasaki had concluded agreements not only with the Netherlands, but also with Russia, removing the upper limit long imposed on the value of the Nagasaki trade. High customs dues were retained, however, as were other Bakufu rights of interference. It was a formula Townsend Harris, a former businessman, was quite unwilling to accept. These treaties, he recorded in his journal, were 'disgraceful to all parties engaged in making them ... [and] not worth the paper on which they were written'. Instead, he proposed negotiations on a different text, which was more in line with the demands that France and Britain were currently making on Peking.

Getting it agreed by Edo proved uphill work. During the winter Harris was subjected to 'interminable discourses' by the Japanese, refusing 'points they subsequently grant, and meant to grant all the while', as well as 'many absurd proposals made by them without the hope, and scarcely the wish, of having them