

Democracy in Japan

Foreign Stimuli and Domestic Leadership

By Thomas W. Burkman

In 1860, a few years after Commodore Perry forced open the doors of Japan, the Tokugawa Shogunate sent the first Japanese official mission to California. A member of the entourage asked his San Francisco hosts where the descendents of George Washington were living. He was shocked to find that the Americans had no clue. The Japanese could not fathom that the family of the nation's founder had faded from public view.¹

The Tokugawa Legacy

In traditional Japan, the common wisdom was that a bloodline pedigree should govern. Government “by the people” ran counter to the longstanding East Asian principle that elites are inherently qualified and ordained by the cosmos to organize and manage society. The model for the governed was the filial son—obedient, submissive, and loyal. This is not to say that the interests and welfare of common people were regarded as irrelevant in traditional political culture. Indeed Neo-Confucianism, the political ethical system that

Japan imbibed from China and inserted into the samurai ethos, taught that rulers were to exercise benevolence toward the people and act in deference to their needs. Experience had taught Chinese and Japanese officials that peasant rebellions and rice riots could destabilize society and undermine regimes. But the exercise of political decision-making lay within the realm of an aristocracy. In Japan, this aristocracy arose as the leadership of powerful clans and morphed into imperial families. Around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a parallel aristocracy emerged in the military class, centered upon the central shogun and the *daimyō*, or regional lords.

The Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1867), the ruling structure that preceded Japan's rapid modern transformation, was far from democratic as Americans understand the term. Decrees could be issued from a central military government without the consent of any representative body. Farmers, the majority of the people by a wide margin, were said to be treated so that they would “neither live nor die.” Participation in governance was restricted to the 10 percent of the population who were born into the samurai (warrior) class.

While authoritarian in theory and pretense, the Shogunate was not totalitarian. The central government of the shogun administered major fortifications and cities and applied ingenious control mechanisms that maintained Tokugawa power without a major uprising for two and a half centuries. At the same time, it left regional and local affairs, including taxation, in the hands of the 250-plus *daimyō* and their samurai retainers. Even central policies were influenced by a council formed of trusted “inner” *daimyō*. Moreover, societal change in the Tokugawa period undermined the elite class structure by broadening the economic and political influence of the commoner classes. Some farmers accumulated large landholdings and secured political sway at the local level. Samurai government officials became increasingly indebted and beholden to merchants, the most despised tier in the traditional class structure. While authoritarian class formalities remained the law, the base of political participation was in fact broadening. Commoners secured literacy



Members of the Japanese Embassy, photographed on their trip to America in 1860. Picture by C.D. Fredricks & Co.
Source: <http://civilwarnavy150.blogspot.com/2010/06/usn-united-one-last-time.html>.

and wealth, positioning themselves for a voice in governance once Japan was opened to the influence of Europe and America in the mid-1800s.

Some believe the foreigners who stepped into Japan's opened doors after the Perry Mission in 1853 brought democratic notions with them. Townsend Harris, the first consul appointed to Japan, believed that Christianity was the key to making a modern nation and that democracy would naturally follow in the wake of the Western religion. He even saw Japan as a testing ground where the merits of American democracy and Russian despotism would contend.² But the overt diplomatic program of the powers as they entered Japan was commercial: to secure advantages for trade. Unlike American policy toward postwar Japan or the Middle East today, the foreign negotiators in the nineteenth century had no concrete plan to erect or promote institutions of popular sovereignty in Japan.



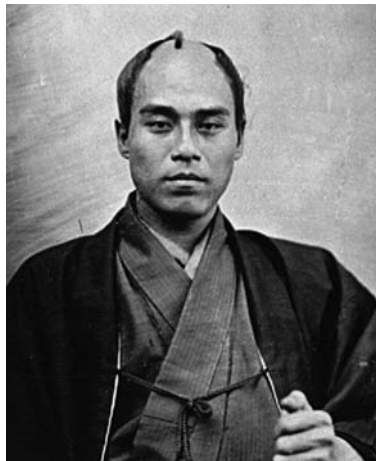
Portrait of Townsend Harris.

Source: http://www.nutquote.com/quote/Townsend_Harris.

Townsend Harris, the first consul appointed to Japan, believed that Christianity was the key to making a modern nation and that democracy would naturally follow in the wake of the Western religion.

Japan's leading intellectual and interpreter of the West at the time was Fukuzawa Yukichi, an educator of samurai heritage.

Fukuzawa Yukichi. Photograph taken during his trip to Paris in 1862.
Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:FukuzawaYukichi.jpg>.



The Popular Will in the Meiji Period

The end of the Shogunate and emergence of the Meiji regime (1868–1912) was accompanied by a great deal of public discussion that cut across class barriers. Schools, study groups, and poetry circles were sites of citizen political discussions. Some voices called for deliberative assemblies in the new government structure. Sensitive to these unprecedented expressions of popular views, the leaders of the Restoration issued a Charter Oath in 1868 that called for public discussion, assemblies, and a class-blind officialdom. In a surprising nod to social democracy, the declaration stated that “the common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall each be allowed to pursue their own calling so that there may be no discontent.”³ Reforms that the new regime enacted made all subjects equal before the law and granted freedom of religious practice. The principles of public participation aired in 1868 would set the agenda for political debate in the remainder of the century. But former samurai held the top posts in the national government, and the formation of a national assembly would wait two decades.

Japan's leading intellectual and interpreter of the West at the time was Fukuzawa Yukichi, an educator of samurai heritage. After traveling in Europe and the US, he established a school for Western learning that eventually grew to become the prestigious Keio University. Fukuzawa was intent on inculcating in his students and children the spirit of independence. He perceived the most glaring impediment to independence in the Japanese social context to be class distinctions and what Fukuzawa termed “meaningless etiquette.” He ascribed these oppressive social distinctions to Chinese learning with its emphasis on pedigree. In his new school, Fukuzawa forbade the practice of students bowing low before their teachers, substituting instead a mere nod. On an outing with his children, he encountered a farmer who dismounted his horse and groveled in deference to the teacher's higher status. Fukuzawa berated the man for not knowing that such fawning behavior had been abolished in the new Meiji order and forced him to remount his horse. In the “Moral Code” he composed, Fukuzawa declared that “a man of Independence and Self-respect should not be dependent upon others for the determination of his own conduct. He should be intelligent enough to think and judge for himself.” The code made it clear that this principle applied to women as well as men.⁴ Gradually, such individualistic concepts seeped into Meiji society and underlay movements for political liberalism.

By the 1870s, voices of dissent, known collectively as the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement, began to call for a constitution and a representative assembly. Although there were a few populists among its adherents, the movement in general was made up of disgruntled elites who had been shut out of the halls of power by the Restoration leaders from the Tokugawa domains of Chōshū and Satsuma. The ruling clique consented to create a constitution, which was promulgated by the Emperor Meiji in 1889 and lasted until 1947. Research and drafting of this instrument of government involved a great deal of attention to constitutional practices in Germany, England, and

the United States. Its provisions included an elected Lower House of a parliament (the Diet) and an impressive list of the rights of subjects. The constitution placed real limits upon the exercise of imperial authority, but it made it clear that the emperor was sovereign. The Diet and civil rights could be sidestepped in times of emergency, and the military had special status and prerogatives. The first parliamentary election was held in 1890. Gender, tax, and age requirements limited the electorate to a mere 1 percent of the population.

Nonetheless, the Meiji Constitution was a step forward on the road to democracy. While the emperor was sovereign in theory, he could not rule as a dictator. Although the service chiefs had unique access to the emperor, the military budget was subject to approval of the Lower House. Most importantly, the vagueness of the constitution concerning governmental structure and procedure left wide holes where democratic practices could find space and become conventional. By the turn of the century, cabinets and political parties—unmentioned in the constitution—were accepted structures of the political process and functioned increasingly like their counterparts in Europe. On the flipside, these gaps also gave space to forces of authoritarianism and militarism to seize the initiative in times of national stress.

Power to the People in the Twentieth Century

The early twentieth century brought both encouragement and restraint to the impulses of democracy. Public rallies and riots marked each political crisis, beginning in 1905 in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War. Protesters typically called for the bureaucratic government to listen to the will of the people and for the popular voice to be conveyed to His Majesty. By 1913, two strong political parties turned elections into two-party contests. As the Meiji oligarchs aged and retired, power passed into the hands of party politicians. In 1918, Japan saw its first cabinet selected from members of the leading party in the Diet, the Seiyukai. The principle of cabinets based on the electoral success of a party continued in practice until 1932. The World War I period saw an economic boom and a commensurate surge in print media outlets. The burgeoning of newspaper and magazine publications and readership continued through the 1920s, giving voice to political views on both the left and the right. Some magazines catered to the interests of women readers. Feminist activists called attention to the appalling conditions of female labor. Some intellectuals, often Christian converts, were attracted to socialism. They campaigned for improved and less costly public services. By 1925, all tax qualifications were removed from the male electorate.

Across the world, World War I brought the issue of democracy to the fore as never before. Humanity shrank in horror at the specter of gas warfare, dirigible bombings of cities, and submarine assaults on passenger liners. German autocracy was blamed for the carnage, and monarchies tumbled in Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg. The will of the people, channeled through democratic institutions, appeared to be the guiding star of the future. At the postwar peace conference, President Woodrow Wilson insisted that even territorial settlements be based upon “the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned.”⁵ At the same time in Switzerland and Russia, a revolutionary—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin—was promoting a radical socialist program that emphasized the social and economic rather than the political causes of war. His understanding of oppression covered all colonized people and all workers in capitalist states. The programs of both Wilson and Lenin were heard and discussed in Japan.

Liberal intellectuals and journalists latched on to Wilson and his diplomatic program, including the formation of the League of Nations. They believed that the tide of Wilsonianism would sweep up Japan as well, bringing about



Yoshino Sakuzo.
Source: The website of Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures at <http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/indexes/category03.html>.



Emperor Taishō.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor_Taish%C5%8D.jpg.

Through his lectures and numerous journal articles, Yoshino served as the most prominent voice of Taishō Democracy, a liberal movement and an era of relative political liberalism and journalistic permissiveness that began early in the reign of Emperor Taishō.

at home the progressive changes they desired in government and society: universal manhood suffrage, the legalization of labor unions, and the reduction of military expenditures. Conservatives and political realists, on the other hand, saw Wilson's democratic ideology as a threat to the imperial institution. The Right feared the unleashing of the popular will as susceptible to Leninist influence and perceived the League of Nations to be a device of the Anglo-American victors in the war to impose a status quo order on aspiring imperialist nations like Japan. Wilson's star fell from the sky when, at the peace conference, the president ruled against Japan's motion for a statement of national equality in the League of Nations Covenant. Nevertheless, Japan joined the League. Throughout the 1920s, the link to the democracies of Europe helped encourage parliamentary government in Japan. Japan's tie to the League-related International Labor Organization (ILO) was vital in furthering social democracy. Japan signed on to ILO-initiated standards for working hours, factory safety standards, and women and child labor.⁶

At the time, the leading Japanese exponent of democracy was Yoshino Sakuzo, professor of political theory at Tokyo Imperial University. Through his lectures and numerous journal articles, Yoshino served as the most prominent voice of Taishō Democracy, a liberal movement and an era of relative political liberalism and journalistic permissiveness that began early in the reign of Emperor Taishō (1912–1926) and extended through the 1920s. Yoshino tried to harmonize traditional concepts of monarchy and benevolent rule with such modern mechanisms of popular will as the parliament and suffrage. He rejected the notions of “popular sovereignty” and “natural rights” and focused instead on the “general welfare” of the people. Yoshino's democracy, hence, was termed *minpon shugi*, or government “based on the people.” This democracy was set in motion when the people freely expressed their needs through the widest possible electorate and a Diet majority to His Majesty who, acting on the basis of the Confucian principle of “imperial benevolence,” effected the general welfare. He taught that the road to democracy lay in the full application of the Meiji Constitution, which posited sovereignty legally in the emperor but in practice limited the prerogatives of the sovereign and established the mechanisms for expression of the people's will. Yoshino was a steadfast advocate of universal manhood suffrage and the enhancement of the powers of the Diet as opposed to the prerogatives of senior statesmen and the bureaucracy.⁷

The early twentieth century was also the period of the rise of Japanese imperialism. The empire engaged in war and interventions on the continent and

acquired colonies in Taiwan (1895), southern Sakhalin (1905), and Korea (1910). The need to recruit soldiers, fund expensive weapons and wars, and maintain nationalistic unity led to restrictions on political activism. Repressive legislation, euphemistically titled Peace Preservation Laws, limited rallies and other assemblies and forbade the spread of ideas counter to the principle of private property. The elite politicians and bureaucrats

grew more defensive of their powerful places in society and fearful of the transfer of political and economic power to the masses. Labor unions were not afforded legitimacy, and wildcat strikes were repressed by police violence. Even centrist political parties were viewed suspiciously as corrupt instruments—a charge vindicated by vote-buying scandals—and promoters of private interest at a time when dedication of self to the state and the emperor reached a level of cultic obligation.

The years of war from the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 through the World War II surrender in 1945 were dark days for democracy. Strict censorship was imposed on the media, political parties were disbanded, and militarist operatives imposed their power under the guise of imperial absolutism. Assassins brought down senior statesmen. Mythologies of the race, nation, and imperial family intruded into childhood and military education. But even in the stringent context of war, there were signs of restraint on absolutism. The constitution remained in place, and Diet elections were held in 1942. Two prime ministers, including the notorious Prime Minister General Tōjō Hideki, were removed from office and replaced through standard procedures in 1944 and 1945.

The Allied Occupation and Democratization

In the immediate aftermath of surrender, prewar, liberal thinkers and institutions of parliamentary democracy rose remarkably from the ashes to cooperate with the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) in the dismantling of wartime autocracy and the establishment—for the first time in Japanese history—of popular sovereignty. This resurrection of liberal impulses stimulated one of the ongoing debates among political historians. Is Japan's postwar democracy a new chapter in the nation's political history and an infusion of an alien political culture? Or, is Japanese democratic practice since 1945 an ongoing development since Taishō Democracy, temporarily stalled by the war and then accelerated by the Occupation?⁸

The Allied—*mostly American*—occupiers did not take over Japan primarily to democratize it but to disarm and demilitarize the country. The Potsdam Declaration of July 1945, which laid out the terms of surrender, did not get around to mentioning democracy at all until the tenth of its thirteen articles. That article called for strengthening the “democratic tendencies among the Japanese people” and the establishment of freedoms and human rights. Article 12 asserted that a peaceful and responsible government would be formed “in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people.” Once remaining arms and weapons factories were dismantled and the repatriation of

When Japanese committees' drafts fell short of this principle [to establish popular sovereignty], General MacArthur abruptly ordered a committee comprised solely of Americans to produce a new constitution for Japan in a week's time.

Emperor Hirohito signing the Constitution of Japan, November 3, 1946.
Source: http://www2db.com/image.php?image_id=8942.



some six million Japanese soldiers and civilians was begun, the Occupation turned its attention to social and political reform. The occupiers held a deep conviction that the recent war in Europe and Asia was rooted in autocracy and that democratization was the most reliable path to pacification. Occupation-picked leaders of the Japanese government also supported democratic reforms, for they wanted to prevent the resurgence of the military and rightist forces that had sidelined them in the preceding decade. The Japanese public, disillusioned by defeat, affirmed democracy as a redemptive ideology for rebuilding their lives and the character of the nation. They let Supreme Commander General Douglas MacArthur lead the way.

Democratization in the six and a half years of the Occupation took many forms. In most cases, programs were ordered to the Japanese government that, unlike the German government, continued to function. Instructions from the supreme commander were legislated by a compliant Diet and implemented by the bureaucracy. Political prisoners were released, and governmental press censorship was ended. An enlarged electorate, including women and men from age twenty, voted in the first postwar parliamentary election in 1946. A new marriage law gave women full equality in choice of spouse, initiation of divorce, and inheritance. Tenant farmers were enabled to purchase the land they worked at confiscatory prices. Labor unions were given the rights to organize, to strike, and to bargain over wages and working conditions in 1946. A 1946 US Education Mission recommended local control of education curriculum and methods to engender freedom of inquiry, critical thinking, and equality. Commensurately, the domineering Ministry of Education was forced to share power with local elected school boards that had the power to select textbooks, manage curriculum, and set standards for teachers. The Occupation itself was often a less-than-stellar example of democracy. Public discussion of the atomic bombs was censored. As the Cold War ensued, the supreme commander ordered the jailing of communists and prohibited a strike planned by public employees.

The supreme commander ordered the government to revise the Meiji Constitution to establish popular sovereignty. When Japanese committees' drafts fell short of this principle, General MacArthur abruptly ordered a committee comprised solely of Americans to produce a new constitution for Japan in a week's time. This group poured into the project all their New Deal and feminist convictions. While not without flaws of internal contradiction and alien culture, the document delivered by this commission remains today as arguably the world's leading constitutional statement of internationalism and liberal democracy. Beginning with the memorable words, "We, the Japanese People," the Shōwa Constitution reiterates almost monotonously the principle of popular sovereignty, relegating the emperor to the role of "symbol of the State" without governmental powers. Both houses of the Diet are elected. The relationship of the executive to the legislative is clearly spelled out, making

it difficult for autocratic special interests to override the will of elected representatives. A long list of civil rights is guaranteed, including some on which the US Constitution is silent: academic freedom, sex equality, emigration, collective bargaining, public health, and marriage. Pursuit of education and "minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living" are posited as rights.⁹

Democratic change was wrought not only in government but in society through a host of Occupation-generated education and media projects. "Local government teams" organized and mentored farmers' and women's groups to develop skills for political participation. In a 1980 gathering near the crypt of the supreme commander in Norfolk, Virginia, a group of Occupationaires and Occupation scholars listened to venerable American diplomatic historian Norman Graebner tell how he, as a young member of the Occupation army, was recruited to teach a course in American democracy to school teachers in Yokohama. A spokesman for the teachers told Graebner, "Democracy is not a new word for us, but we have learned nothing about it for ten years. We know nothing about its aims or how it is carried out. But we are eager to learn." For six months, Graebner met for two hours each Wednesday afternoon with the teachers. Through an interpreter, he explained one concept at a time and then opened the floor for discussion. Graebner recalled, "They found the simplest application of [democracy's] principles a huge adventure." Graebner upbraided the overwhelmingly male attendees of the first meeting, admonishing them that a group with only one woman was insufficiently balanced for a class in democracy. The next week, eighteen women were present. It was difficult for the teachers to conceive that laws could protect freedoms. Venturing into territory forbidden just months before, the teachers debated what elements of Japanese tradition—including His Majesty—should be retained or discarded in the project of democratization. Graebner had the class elect officers, an uncomfortable procedure they eventually took back to their own teachers' association. Before the class ended, the teachers dared to evaluate the lectures and even critique the Occupation itself. Graebner, whose distinguished historian career took him to the University of Illinois, the University of Virginia, and Oxford University, described his stint in Yokohama as "the one brief period in my life when my experience might have had some historical significance."¹⁰ Occupation-era, foreign democratizers like Graebner also found their own understanding of government by the people formed and enriched through their mental and moral wrestling in the real-life setting of postwar Japan.

Even Japanese who resented the external social and political manipulation that Occupation reforms entailed acknowledged that the postwar experience

accelerated the process of democratization to the benefit of the people. This achievement can be attributed to the quality of pre-planning that began in Washington in 1942, the skill of the occupiers in generating the support of key interest groups, and most of all, the positive prewar experience of Japanese society in the institutions of democracy.

Since the postwar reforms, Japan has been the setting of a relatively smoothly functioning democracy. Parliamentary, prefectural, and local officials have consistently been chosen by the ballot. National leadership transitions have taken place without violence and through constitutional procedures, with the exception of one incident in 1960 when a prime minister stepped down in the midst of riots over the US-Japan Security Treaty. While Japan's neighbors—China, Taiwan, and South Korea—endured repressive military regimes until the 1980s, Japan stood alone as a democratic state. Through most of those decades, Japanese society also excelled as relatively egalitarian in income distribution, healthcare, and access to quality education.

Like other advanced societies, Japan continually faces challenges and hurdles in the project of democracy. One political party held the parliamentary majority for nearly half a century after 1955. Minority parties, discriminated class and social groups, and now youth cultures have felt ignored by government. Big money and corporations have broken laws in exerting an inordinate influence in elections and governmental decisions. Yet, in the final analysis, Japanese democracy, nurtured by external ideas and fashioned by internal leadership, is firmly established. ■

NOTES

1. Fukuzawa Yukichi, *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 116.
2. Oliver Statler, *Shimoda Story* (New York: Random House, 1969), 153, 206.
3. Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78–79.
4. Fukuzawa, *Autobiography*, 220–221, 243–244; Fukuzawa, *Fukuzawa Yukichi on Education: Selected Works* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1985), 271.
5. Mount Vernon Speech, July 4, 1918, quoted in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (1918), Supplement 1, I, 270, last accessed February 16, 2011, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?id=FRUS.FRUS1918Supp01v02>.
6. The influence of Japan's League of Nations involvement is addressed in Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914–1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).
7. On prewar Japanese constructions of democracy, see George O. Totten, ed., *Democracy in Prewar Japan: Groundwork or Façade?* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1965); for critical analysis of prewar political theorists including Yoshino Sakuzo, see Walter A. Skya, *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
8. On the Occupation, see Mark E. Caprio and Yoneyuki Sugita, eds., *Democracy in Occupied Japan: The U.S. Occupation and Japanese Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2007).
9. *The Constitution of Japan*, <http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Japan/English/english-Constitution.html>.
10. Normal A. Graebner, "Occupation Policy and the Schools of Yokohama, 1945–1946," in ed. Thomas W. Burkman, *The Occupation of Japan: Educational and Social Reform* (Norfolk, VA: The MacArthur Memorial, 1982), 219–230.

THOMAS W. BURKMAN is a historian of twentieth-century Japan. His studies include Japan's relationship to world order during and following the "war to make the world safe for democracy." He helped organize a series of symposia on the Occupation that involved scholars and practitioners who had been involved in democratization projects in post-World War II Japan. Lately, he has shifted into peace research in a quest for new mechanisms to resolve the lingering animosity between Japan and its continental neighbors. He teaches at the University at Buffalo (SUNY).

FRANKLIN R. BUCHANAN PRIZE

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The Association for Asian Studies (AAS) invites submissions for the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. Established in 1995 by the AAS Committee on Educational Issues and Policy and the Committee on Teaching about Asia, the prize is awarded annually to recognize an outstanding curriculum publication on Asia designed for any educational level, elementary through university.

The winning submission will reflect current scholarship, present innovative teaching strategies, and make a significant impact on the intended audience. Submissions must have been published after January 1, 2010, and include extensive teaching strategies in order to be considered. Various formats are acceptable, including print, CD, video, and online formats. Submissions that address underrepresented regions of Asia are encouraged.

The 2012 Buchanan prize will be awarded to the author of the work at the AAS Annual Conference in Toronto, Canada, March 15–18, 2012. The prize includes a \$1,000 monetary award and a one-year membership to AAS.

Submissions are due November 1, 2011.

For more information and a submission form, please contact the Chair of the Committee:

Peter Gilmartin
E-mail: peter@primarysource.org

To view past awards, visit the AAS Web site:
<http://www.asian-studies.org/publications/book-prizes.htm>.