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by Emily Schulman
Japan’s unique and modern democracy did not manifest itself smoothly. Its first attempt at democratization was sparked by the Western threat exemplified by the Unequal Treaties and reversed by a military coup that shaped Japan into a militaristic and imperialistic country that was not defeated until the United States dropped two atomic bombs on it. Its second attempt at democratization has proven durable, although the country is now stripped of its military power and the current government was styled by the American occupation in the post-World War II era. Clearly, external influences have played a large role in the democratization of Japan. There is still a question of which factors, and to what extent the external world played in its influence of this highly unified country. Further, how can external dimensions explain why that democratization reversed in Japan’s first attempt and proved successful in the second attempt?

The first attempt toward democratization in Japan started after Japan began to view the West as a concrete threat when Britain went to war with China in the Opium War of 1840, which opened Chinese ports to foreign trade. Britain, France, Russia, and the United States now had an open door to easily exploit Japan. These foreign powers devised “unequal treaties” under which Japan was forced to make large concessions to the West. The foreign merchandise that entered Japan facilitated the economic crisis that would contribute to the downfall of the Tokugawa Regime in 1868.

In War and the Rise of the State, Bruce Porter discusses how the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century marked the end of feudalism and the dawn of the “modern warfare” state (Porter 145-146). The institutions and tools for the modern-warfare state were implemented wherever Europe had interests and influence. Porter says, “There was, however, one non-European country, and one only, that reacted to the encroachments of the imperial powers with such a determined course of military and political modernization that it rapidly won acceptance as their equal: the island kingdom of Japan” (146). As a country with a tradition of isolation, and a strong national identity, Japan was willing to do anything during the Meiji Restoration, which ruled Japan after the Tokugawa regime fell, in order to ensure its military equality with Western powers. There is an interesting juxtaposition here between the internal and external factors for this extreme process of modernization. The process would not have begun without the western threat, yet external factors cannot explain why Japan decided it must modernize, while other countries, like neighboring China, lived in denial of the growing imperative to modernize.
There must be something innate in the Japanese identity that caused the country to so willingly abandon the feudal system and modernize, despite the potential threat to the very identity it was trying to protect. Daniel C. Lynch discusses this idea in his article “International ‘Decentering’ and Democratization.” Lynch says:

“All states want to import some elements of modernity, of course; and certainly all embrace the concept of sovereignty and the goals of economic development (central to survivability). But states differ dramatically on the question of whether to submit to complete reconstitution by yielding to global identity. As Carothers argues, evaluating prospects for democratization ‘must proceed from a penetrating analysis of the particular core syndrome that defines the political life of the country in question’ (Carothers 2002:19). That core syndrome, this essay contends, is orientation toward geopolitical and geo-symbolic decentering. Countries that resist decentering, such as China, are not necessarily going to democratize, ever; while those that do not resist decentering, such as Thailand, probably will continue to consolidate their democracies, zig and zag s notwithstanding” (Lynch 342).

Through Lynch’s description, Japan follows a similar pattern to Thailand, rather than China. It is logical that Japan would follow this pattern, due to its lack of ethnic diversity. The country has a strong and internally uncontested belief in the right to the nation’s sovereignty. When Japan perceived a Western threat, it was relatively easy to unify the government because the people were already relatively unified. Japan’s small size and close proximity to China, which was struggling with Western efforts to exert influence and gain control over valuable resources, made Japan hypersensitive to any sign of threat to the identity of the country.

Lynch discusses that particularly within Asia there are two types of countries: “guardians” and “gatekeepers.” The guardians are states that do not “yield to socialization pressures and undergo successful democratization.” The gatekeepers “manage flows from the international to the domestic realms but do not act obsessively to protect an imagined national essence” (340). Considering that Japan rapidly modernized after the Unequal Treaties, one would assume that Japan should be unquestionably delegated as a gatekeeper. The problem is that Japan did “act obsessively to protect an imagined natural essence.” It protected itself by industrializing. Japan compromised its national identity so that it would not lose it.

Copernicus sun centered: The first known representation of the Solar System with the sun at the center, which revolutionized the world and started the Scientific Revolution. In 1663 Galileo Galilei was persecuted by the Catholic Church for providing evidence of Copernicus’s theory using a telescope and was placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life. This page is from the 1543 edition of De Revolutionibus by Copernicus. Courtesy of Special Collections, Lehigh University Libraries.
Japan was able to compromise its identity because its identity was so unified and easily defined. Japan did not lose its identity in the modernization process. Porter and Lynch's theories on democratization fit together nicely here. Porter discusses how war in Europe led to the evolution of the modern war-state that Europe spread throughout the world. Some countries responded better to this imposition than others, but no state ran with the idea as fervently as Japan. Japan's reaction is explained by Lynch, who says that Japan acted as any gate-keeper state would. Although Lynch can explain why Japan modernized, he cannot explain why Japan modernized with such intensity. I argue that Japan acted dramatically because of the strength of Japan's national identity. Porter supports this argument when he describes the goal of Meiji leaders. Porter says the goal was to "defeat the barbarian by using the barbarian" (Porter 146).

The country borrowed the administrative style of France and the military style of Germany. It developed an officer training school, borrowed the Western practice of conscription, and created a cabinet. All of these practices led to the democratization of the state, but also aided in the unraveling of the fledgling democracy in the early twentieth century. The Meiji Restoration, which was so obsessed with the industrialization and centralization of the government and military, was not concerned in the least with democracy; it was concerned with protecting the identity of Japan. The Meiji Restoration created the institutions that could house democracy based on its efforts to face the Western threat. Japan wanted to modernize as a form of protection. Any democratization was based on this attempt to appear modern to the West, not to actually give power to the people of Japan.

There was a shift, after Emperor Meiji died in 1912, and the original elites that ruled the new bureaucracy were gradually replaced with younger and more ideologically liberal intellectuals who had an interest in democratizing the country, due to increasing urbanization and the influence of Western ideas. The democratization process lost its original purely responsive and defensive nature. These ideas inevitably influenced younger Japanese elites, despite the lack of interest that the original elites in the Meiji Restoration had in these ideas. Efforts to democratize were facilitated by the young and inept Emperor Taisho who did not try to inhibit the intellectual's efforts. As the last original "genros," or founding fathers, of the Meiji Restoration died in early 1920's, the Taisho democracy entered its golden age. At this time, suffrage was established for all men, a two party system began to develop, and the prime minister was now expected to be a member of one of the parties represented in the diet (Ishida 7).

Although the threat of the West caused the modernization and democratization process, there were clearly internal processes of democratization occurring during this time period. Japan did not remain a democracy for long. Ishida and Krauss assert that both domestic and international crisis played a role in the disintegration of the Taisho democracy, which ended in 1926. Just like Japan's democratization was sparked by a Western threat, Japan's reversal was sparked by the worldwide economic depression of the early 1930's. The fledgling democracy could not handle this crisis, which revealed weaknesses within the domestic government. The political parties were dominated by big business in the city and the government could not react to the desperate poverty in the countryside, which left the parties without support (Ishida 8). Government simply could not react like older and more stable democracies could. This reveals a pattern. The Tokugawa regime could not handle the Western threat and it was left behind as Japan modernized. Now, the government would shift again to meet the state's new needs.

Not only did the Japanese government face problems at home, but its aggressive foreign policy led to isolation abroad as well, particularly after Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. International isolation combined with the extreme poverty at home mixed to create a good environment for the Japanese to recede from democracy and rally around the Emperor and a nationalist and collectivist mentality. Japan attributed the problems within the country to the worldwide depression. It then was faced with diplomatic isolation when the League of Nations disapproved of the invasion of Manchuria, which led to feelings of alienation and resentment. Rulers trying to transform Japan into a fascist and militarized government easily exploited this hostility at a time of hopeless poverty, which was also attributed to the West. They turned it into anti-western and nationalist propaganda for the masses to rally around.

The weak institutions that hurt Japan's democratiza-
tion effort could not protect the fledgling democracy because Japanese democratization essentially began as a defense policy. When democracy ceased to be a tool to ensure Japanese power on a worldwide scale, democracy ceased to be. The rise of fascism in Europe certainly aided the push away from democracy (8). Right-wing groups began executing terrorist attacks on the government and assassinating officials. They were largely unsuccessful, but these outbursts acted as an excuse for the military to gradually increase its control in the government. After Japan invaded China in 1937, the military took over the government and reorganized it into a fascist state (8). Fascism was different in Japan than in Germany and Italy because it came from above, rather than from a mass movement. So, although Japan certainly looked toward the West and saw examples of fascism, Japan became fascist in its own top-down style which was accomplished by military elites. Authority descending from the top is deep in Japan’s Confucian, feudal, and industrializing tradition. In its reversal, Japan reacted to internal and external factors in a way that the Japanese perceived was best to ensure its security and the most amount of power it could achieve on an international scale.

The military success of the new military government helped to ensure the government’s stability (33). Mansfield and Snyder say,

“The Japanese army invented a populist ideology, rooted in the nation’s imperial myths, designed to solidify the army’s links to a rural mass constituency and to denigrate the commercially-oriented Taisho democrats. Thus, the foreign policy of these autocratizing states was at least partially shaped by the character of the democratic political they were escaping” (35).

The military success of the new government was proof that the fascist government could bring Japan security and dominance more effectively than the past government.

The military success did not last. Japan was defeated by the allies in World War II in 1945, which placed the nation back onto the road of democratization. It is impossible to even speculate about what Japan’s government would have been like if the United States had not occupied the state, stripped it of its military power and singlehandedly reorganized its government. The United States involvement was all encompassing. Even so, there are a couple of variables besides the United States’ involvement that should be analyzed when discussing the second democratization of Japan in the post World War II era.

Mark E. Pietrzyk discusses the reason that Japan was so willing to be dependent on the United States after World War II. He says:

“The acceptance by...Japan of the status of dependencies does seem to violate the premise that states are always trying to maximize their power. However, it is not so clear that this acceptance is due to democracy. Historically, states have often accepted hegemonic leadership if that leadership is perceived as legitimate and the costs of challenging it appear high” (Pietrzyk 50).

In this selection, Pietrzyk explains his issues with the democratic peace theory: democracies do not go to war against other democracies. Within the context of Japan, Pietrzyk says that if democratic peace theory was true then there would have been no need for the United States to remain in Japan after the democracy was established.

Pietrzyk fails to recognize that democratic peace theory is not going to work if states do not remain democratic. The United States occupied Japan for an extended time period to ensure the stability of the state. Democratization reversed once in Japan in some ways due to Western neglect and it could have happened again if the United States did not remain there. For the same reason, the United States made sure that Japan was totally demilitarized and included in the state’s constitution that Japan did not have the right to declare war. If the United States followed the democratic peace theory, then it would not need to worry whether or not Japan had weapons or an ability to wage war. Establishing a democracy does not ensure lasting stability. To ensure peace, the United States made sure another military takeover of the government was not possible.

Japan’s strong national identity contributed to the ease in which the military could rally national support for a militaristic agenda. As evidenced by the country’s rapid modernization and then rapid militarization, Japan consistently tried to gain as much power as possible on an international scale. After its defeat in World War II, the smartest action for Japan to take in order to gain power for itself was to ally itself with the U.S. hegemon. Although Japan was forced to give up its military power, the nation used its relationship
with the United States to become a world economic power. After World War II, stable democracy helped Japan become economically powerful by setting it apart from other potential Asian trading partners. Also, when China and North Korea became communist countries, Japan’s close relationship with the United States became even more important to Japan, and Japan’s democracy and fairly liberal market became more important to the United States.

Aside from direct United States’ involvement, Samuel Huntington discusses how the “second-try pattern” helped Japan to establish a successful post-War democracy. I am skeptical that Japan’s first democracy contributed in any significant way for two reasons. First, the United States’ involvement was just too heavy-handed for it to matter. Second, General MacArthur and his staff wrote the current Japanese constitution after the Japanese proved unable to create a constitution that the United States approved, so they must not have fully embraced the United States’ idea of democracy. Still in the theory, Huntington says Japan’s democracy was more stable on the second try “at least in part because democratic leaders learned from the previous unsuccessful experience with democracy” (Huntington 42). Japan’s lessons

Dear Sir;

The return of Doct. L. Moynier who has been sick since he came to this place affords me an opportunity of acknowledging the receipt of your several letters of the 20th and 30th of May, and of the 1st and 7th insts - and to thank you for your attention to the different matters I gave you the trouble of.

If the books which I required in one of my former letters & were not then to be had are now obtainable I should be glad to get them, - and if you could, conveniently, obtain a catalogue of Books and their prices in some of the best shops & send them to me I shd be obliged to you that I might fix upon such of them as I liked.

Such articles of Foreign and domestic news as you may receive through a good channel, & shall think worth transmitting I should be glad to have forwarded to me either by letter or in the Gazettes. - My compliments to Mr. Benson - Mr. Parker I have written to I shall thank you for giving him the letter - I wish also to whose letter tell him I have rec’d and thank him for.

With great esteem & regard
I am - D Sir
Yr most ob’ & aff’ Serv’t

P.S.
Pray let me know whether old Mrs. Thompson (our housekeeper) is in town or not.

Lieut. Col° Smith.
were less on how to create a successful democracy and more on the importance of being a democracy in order to ensure a positive relationship with the United States and a prominent role in the international economy.

Huntington attributes part of Japan’s democratization success to the fact that the change was more of a “generational change” than an “opinion change” (265). Although the United States forced a democracy on Japan, the people’s support of democracy did not transition as quickly as the actual government did. Huntington argues that it took about two decades for the people to grow into the democracy that the United States created (264). The externally implemented democracy produced supporters of democracy. The new generation was raised within the civil and educational tradition of democracy, and thus it supported the democracy more than the earlier generation who had not been raised in a democratic tradition. The generational change theory explains why democracy stuck in Japan better than the second try theory. If the second try theory held true for the Japanese case, than the first generation would have been more receptive to change and the generational change would have been less prominent.

It is important to note that although the United States implemented democratization, the
external imposition could not change the generation of Japanese who were not used to democracy. There had to be a cultural transition that could only occur with time. Thus, if the United States had created the democracy and left without eliminating the military, it is very possible that the democracy would not have continued. A tradition of democracy is necessary for democracy to remain, especially an externally implemented one. This fact makes the first stage of democratization extremely important. It explains why externally implemented democracies fail in most cases, with the exception of Japan and Germany after World War II where external involvement was more intense than any other case.

Despite United States occupation, Japan’s unique form of democracy reflects the nation’s traditional values. Japan is historically a Confucian state which stresses the values of “the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights...In Japan, Confucian values were reinterpreted and merged with its autochthonous cultural tradition” (300-301). Japan has never had a true party-turnover, which is considered one of the key aspects of democracy, but Japan is universally considered a democracy. It managed to fuse Confucian values with democratic values. From a Western perspective, it seems impossible that a country that does not value liberty can still be a democracy, but no democracy is perfectly democratic. Japan’s single-party democracy works within the Japanese culture. There is one brief exception to Japan’s one-party democracy. The collapse of Japan’s bubble economy in 1992 triggered Japan’s worst recession since the end of WWII, and the 38-year rule of the LPD was ended by a seven-party coalition (Wan 87). The LPD was back in power shortly after, though. The brief period when the LPD was not in power shows that Japan’s democracy may develop into a democracy that has more regular party turnover. Still, Japan’s single-party democracy shows that even with an externally implemented democracy, Japan’s strong identity has not been lost.

Tony Smith argues that one of the reasons the democratization of Japan was successful was because its “modern character as industrial societ[y] had already been established” (Smith 147). Although the first attempt at democratization did not impact the second, the fact that Japan was already modernized did play a large role in the success of the second attempt at democratization.

Smith discusses post-World War II Japan as a country that the United States could transform into whatever form it pleased. There were plans to make it a powerless agrarian nation, or a military power that could balance the Soviet Union. In the end, the policy was a compromise between these two extremes: demilitarization, democratization, decartelization, and deprogramming (Smith 154). Democratization was dependent on these other concepts. Smith says, “Occupation authorities had a shared understanding that political reform was the heart of the democratization process” (155). The United States was conscious of Japan’s own democratic tradition, and the new institutions followed more of a British model rather than an American model—another example of how Japan retained its identity throughout the democratization process (157).

The American occupation attempted to change the Japanese identity, though. The turn from militarism and toward democracy was aided by the purge of individuals active during the war. Smith says: “The fact remains that barring individuals from political and economic life, like preventing the organization of parties, championing the old regime, contributed more than marginally to the promotion of democracy in both countries [Germany and Japan]. The purges allowed new elites to arise and new parties on the democratic right to woo voters who might otherwise have adopted extremist positions away from their wartime sympathies” (158).

Smith discusses that disbanding the military also played a significant role turning Japan away from extremist positions, but these purges were able to set a new tone for the new government. Although there is criticism that the purges could have been more thorough, they contributed to the “generational change” discussed earlier. The United States created a democratic environment, which was received by the new generation. If the most extreme members of the old generation had been able to play active roles in the government, this generational change would not have been possible and it is this change that has allowed stable democracy in Japan.
The United States needed to shift Japan from what it was, a militaristic and fascist state, to a peaceful democracy, but the United States would not and could not totally destroy the Japanese identity. The new constitution, written by MacArthur and his staff, "converted the emperor into a constitutional monarch and abolished the peerage. It vested supreme power in the Diet, now made wholly responsible to the people organized by competitive party elections. A bill of rights was formulated, whose assumptions of individual and group freedom clashed with basic collectivist values enshrined in Japanese culture" (159). It is hard to say whether Japan would have been better or worse off if the bill of rights was more in line with the nation's collectivist values. Because the Japanese people gradually grew into the institutions that the United States implemented, it did not matter as much what rights were written down.

Japan faced economic problems after the war and the United States placed "exaggerated responsibility" (161) on Japanese industrial and financial firms for the past militarism of the country. The United States struggled to help the economy and break up the country's cartels so that it would be possible for Japan to have a liberal democracy. Unfortunately, "American attempts to address socioeconomic obstacles to
democratization encountered some serious problems: trust-busting, reparations, and purges in Japan... so disrupted economic life that the population grew discounted, which in turn threatened efforts to bring about stable democratic political life” (161). Japan’s economy was dominated by zaibatsu (large conglomerates) and destroying the zaibatsu was largely unsuccessful, at least in the long term. The zaibatsu reflect Japanese rather than Western values. The United States was not able to liberalize the Japanese economy to the extent that it wanted partially because of this values clash. Further, the United States reform strategy became more conservative in the early 1950’s because of the Korean War and fears of communism. The United States was successful to an extent and the liberalization of the economy helped to ensure government stability. In particular, Smith says the United States instituted land reform and opened up world markets, while encouraging self-sufficiency to a certain extent. Today, Japan is seen as one of the world’s major economic powers. Japan’s economic success helps to protect its democracy, contrasting the economic failure that brought about the Taisho Democracy’s downfall. Japan’s economy had ups and downs in the 1990s, but the democracy remained stable, which is a good sign for the current government.

Smith also discusses the effort to psychologically “deprogram” (166) the Japanese people mostly through education reform so their values would coincide with democratic values. The most effective way to “deprogram” is through the success of the democratic institutions and a liberalized economy. Currently, Japanese textbooks minimize Japan’s involvement in World War II. Still, Japan found a way to make the democracy its own, and wield power through the economy rather than the military.

Japan maintained its strong national identity from the Unequal Treaties through the occupation and today. The country is a democracy, but it is its own democracy. It has retained a strong sense of national identity, despite its externally imposed government. Now, the government has fully developed institutions that stabilize the democracy and it is hard to imagine another reversal, especially because it would be disruptive to the large role that Japan has in the world economy. Japan was democratized by the United States, but it has remained and is uniquely Japanese because of Japan’s strong and unique national identity.