

Meiji Japanese who sought to improve China

By FLORIAN COULMAS

ASIA FOR THE ASIANS: China in the Lives of Five Meiji Japanese, by Paula S. Harrell. Merwin Asia, 2012, 407 pp., \$35 (paperback)

The radical makeover Japan prescribed itself in the course of the Meiji reforms, driven by entirely justified fear of Western domination, fundamentally changed conditions in East Asia. The threats of European and American encroachment prompted Japan to howl with the wolves, while China continued to believe in its time-tested cultural superiority.

While the Chinese tried to resist the imperialist powers, the Japanese joined them. They emulated Western institutions, technologies and habits, and, observing China's weakness, turned increasingly to the West. Japan's unexpected victory over China in 1895 could only strengthen the hands of those who considered Qing China a basket case and subscribed to the "Leaving Asia" ideology.

To be sure, disdain for China took hold in Japan; yet, cultural affinity, feelings of awe for an age-old tradition, and resentment of Western arrogance fed a strong pro-China counter-current among Meiji Japanese elites. The book under review here probes the depth of this current and, in so doing, draws a differentiated picture of the complexities of Sino-Japanese relations during the Meiji Era.

The author's approach is biographical. She portrays five Japanese individuals, born between 1860 and 1875, who, in one way or another, were involved in Japanese interests operating in China in the Meiji Era. Atsumaro Konoe, a prince, influential politician and president of the Peers School (later to become Gakushuin University) was a strong advocate of an "Asia for the Asians" policy. China scholar and educationalist Unokichi Hattori served to set up an institution of higher education in Beijing and witnessed the convulsions of the Boxer uprising. Misako Kawahara went to China as a pioneer female teacher, accepting a position in Shanghai first and then moving to Mongolia to set up Japanese-style schooling in Karachin. Naniwa Kawashima was a fervent anti-Western adventurer who immersed himself into the study of Chinese and rose to a position of considerable influence in the Qing bureaucracy. Nagao Ariga, cosmopolitan professor of international law of Tokyo Senmon Gakko (predecessor of Waseda University) and editor of Japan's first foreign policy journal, served as legal expert in the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War and later advised the Chinese government on constitutional reform.

The life stories of these five figures are well worth telling. They were extraordinarily gifted and energetic individuals who lived through turbulent times. Harrell's narrative sheds much light on how they were drawn, each in their own different way, into the evolving drama that unfolded between a weakly governed China, Western powers' designs for extending their influence in East Asia, and their own country, which tried hard to gain a place among "civilized nations" and succeeded in this endeavor to the extent that it waged "just wars" against China and Russia.

Their actions were rife with contradictions as were those of the major players of the international power game. The Japanese government was determined to curb European and American interference in Asia, but sided with the Western powers to subdue an anti-Western uprising in China. Proclaiming Japanese solidarity with China was not incompatible with condoning Manchu separatism or advocating a Japanese mandate in Manchuria. Embracing Western institutions of

governance, while holding on to Confucianism; participating in the quest to develop a rules-based system of international conflict resolution, while engaging in horrendous atrocities on the battlefield (in Port Arthur).

Those were some of the contradictions that weren't necessarily perceived as such. They grew out of objective conditions, shifting power relations in Asia and the quagmire of Chinese politics, and were reflected in the actions of the five protagonists of this book as well as many other Japanese individuals. Going to China as technical experts, educators and diplomats, they held positive feelings toward the country whose tradition they revered. At the same time they embodied Japan's ambition to become a global player, which was realized to a large extent on the ruins of the disintegrating Qing empire. Much like the Western nations they emulated, the Japanese pursued an aggressive diplomacy backed up by military force, in the interest, they professed, of expanding the rule of law. Their success on the battlefield proved them right, but also sowed the seeds of cynicism about the opportunistic nature of the Western-dominated world order.

In 1911, the curtain fell on the Meiji period and on the Qing dynasty. Reading "Asia for the Asians" helps to appreciate the difference this turning point meant for Japan, which had largely completed its modernization program, and China, which was only hesitantly embarking on its own. Many Japanese, the five individuals whose careers are recounted in this book among them, thought that what had transformed their country could be replicated in China and were willing to help bring this about. They each had their own expectations and motives for going to China.

As Harrell expertly shows, imperialism wasn't on their mind; however, in their capacities as teachers, advisers and legal experts, they participated, some more deliberately than others, in shaping Japan's new role in Asia and the world.

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