

Background of the "Yellow Peril"

By BOGGER ARMSTRONG

This is the first of a series of three articles intended to inform the reader about the history and economic organization of Japan. The second, on Japanese feudalism, will appear in an early issue.

On December 7th, 1941, there took place a surprise attack upon Hawaii by Japanese aircraft and submarines; this was the blow that precipitated the United States into war, first against Japan, then against the remaining Axis powers.

Far from Punchbowl Hill, in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village, stands the Cherry Lane Theater, where for nearly a year a village company of players has been presenting Gilbert and Sullivan. By a coincidence, the piece scheduled for the week of December 7-14 was "The Mikado." After a hasty conference, the schedule was revised and another operetta substituted. In response to a telephone inquiry, the Cherry Lane Players explained that they were afraid that the audience might stage a riot if they stuck to their original schedule.

Japan and the Japanese are known to Americans chiefly through the medium of the musical stage—through "The Mikado," "The Geisha," and "Madame Butterfly." If for patriotic reasons it becomes necessary to ban these productions, there will be a musical loss indeed, but not much from the historical standpoint. Indeed, the extent to which Americans in general are ignorant of even the broad outlines of Japanese history and culture must be surprising to anyone who has not learned at first hand the American's contempt for foreigners in general—a contempt amply evidenced by the colloquial appellations limey, dutchman, frog, hunky, kike, wop, greaser, chink, nigger, and the like. This ignorance of Japanese people and institutions is likely to do a great deal of harm in the future for two reasons. In his calmer moments, the average American recognizes Schmidt the butcher and Tony the fruit peddler as men essentially of his own kind, and this feeling must

modify, to some extent, the tendency to vindictiveness which may make itself felt after winning a long, hard war. A Jap, on the other hand, is always alien and sinister, and conjures up talk about the "yellow peril" even in peace time. Again, our war against Germany and Italy is, in our own minds, largely personalized—we think of our fight as mainly against Hitler and Mussolini, as in 1917 it was against the Kaiser. When the personal devil has been overthrown, the American's tendency is to be a magnanimous victor—a fact attested, to the everlasting credit of the American people, by their repudiation of the so-called "Peace Conference" of 1918-1919. But in the case of Japan we cannot concentrate our hate on a single victim, since there is in Japanese politics no single figure to compare with Hitler in Germany. Hate can be a terrible destructive force when there is no scapegoat against whom it can be dissipated. It behooves us all, then, if we are to avoid actions which will shame us in history, to remedy our ignorance of our Oriental enemy, and strip from him that veil of mystery and sinister evil which we have always wrapped about him. Known danger may give us pause, but it is only the unknown and mysterious that can strike terror.

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From ancient times there has lived in the islands off the east coast of China a tribe of savages note-



worthy for their extraordinary hairy bodies. Members of this race still survive; they are called Ainus. They lived in caves. Their civilization was that of the New Stone Age. They were about on a level of the most primitive of the American Indians when the white man came.

About the time of Julius Caesar these island shores were visited by barbarians under the leadership of one Jimmu Tenno. Nobody knows where they came from. Whatever they were, they were not Chinese, although the Chinese had carried on a desultory commerce with the Ainu aborigines from very early times. Theories ascribe the origin of the invaders to Egypt, Africa, India, and Malaya; the balance of evidence seems to favor the hypothesis that they came, either from the Malay Peninsula, or from the islands of the East Indies.

Whatever they were, they were competent sailors, vigorous fighters, and ruthless conquerors. Against the stone arrows of the Ainus they had weapons of iron. In eight years they had overrun the southern half of the Japanese Archipelago, driving the natives to the north and the less accessible portions of the invaded territory—those, that is, who survived. These invaders were the Yamato, the ancestors of the present day Japanese.

About their ancient civilization we know almost nothing. Writing was not introduced into Japan until the seventh century, and the earliest written historical record of Japanese origin is dated 712. At the beginning of authentic history we find a sort of patriarchal regime, grading down the scale from the immediate members of the family or clan to the bondsmen and slaves. We find much the same type of society in pre-Norman England.

The religion was a bastardized Confucianism. In its pure form, the philosophy of Confucius would have been unacceptable to the Yamato overlords, for it preached the doc-

trine of advancement due to merit, and the Yamato were committed to the idea of advancement because of birth. In the sixth century Buddhism made a bid for converts, and after a few early setbacks began to grow rapidly. The Buddhist priests found it worth while to "cooperate" with the overlords, and the lords had no objection to a creed that emphasized humility, submission, obedience, and resignation to the will of fate—virtues especially suitable for the lower classes there, as elsewhere. It need surprise no one that Japanese Buddhism presently became as thoroughly bastardized as Japanese Confucianism. Side by side with both of these there continued a more primitive religion, Shintoism, a sort of nature-worship.

In none of these faiths, as they were practiced in Japan, were there any of the ethical and humanistic concepts which we find in Christianity. There was some sort of belief in the immortality of the soul. In ancient Egypt royal corpses were interred with clay images (ushabti) of men and women, so that the departed might not lack servants in the underworld. In Japan it was the custom, when an important lord died, to dig in a circle around his tomb holes in which a man could stand upright. A bodyguard of the dead man's retainers was then buried alive in these holes, up to the neck, with the head free. It would not have been etiquette to kill them, but they never survived more than a few days. One emperor of a later period had the hobby of making men climb about in trees and hunting them with arrows. When feudalism came to Japan it was without the softening influence which the Church exerted in Europe. Well for the common people that they had learned the Buddhist virtues of submission, resignation, and so on; they wanted them all.

About the beginning of the seventh century there appears in Japanese history a remarkable man who is sometimes called the Constantine of Japanese Buddhism. He was Prince Shotoku, and if we do not subscribe to the Constantine view, we may call him a Japanese

Bismarck. Before his time the Emperor had been little more than the nominal chieftain of often rebellious tribes. Shotoku welded the nation into a political unit. He was the Justinian of his time, a student of Chinese law, the promulgator of codes for his own people. He was a student of Buddhism in its pure form, and came to recognize the doctrine of the brotherhood of man. And he must be named among the precursors of Henry George, for he was the leading land reformer of his time. In Nitobé's "Japan" we read:

"There had been a growing and grievous tendency for the great to enclose public domains and to reduce their occupants to serfdom. The Taiho Code laid down the principle that all land and people belonged primarily to the sovereign, and that, therefore, he would provide all his subjects with land sufficient for their support. For this purpose every male above the age of six was to be given a rice field, two *tan* (half an acre) in extent, and every female an area one third less. It was further provided that distribution was to be renewed every six years." Hardly more than a beginning was made on the scheme, though traces of it still survive. "There was a loophole in the laws which made private ownership possible, and, though such was allowed for only a limited period, the neglect of assessment resulted in the gradual transformation of ownership to property—small acres to latifundia, free peasants to slaves."*

Polygamy was universal among the upper classes—if indeed that can be called polygamy in which the marriage bond is of the most attenuated. The royal harem overflowed with wives and concubines, women usually acquired by the simple process of seizing them from someone weaker. A huge royal progeny was thus provided; one emperor had eighty children from seven wives, and all of these were of divine lineage and had to be provided for.

Indirectly, this royal fecundity was the cause of an eventual drastic reorientation in Japan's civilization, and the way it happened was this:

Since among all the royal children only one could be emperor at a time, there must always be a considerable number of disappointed candidates. Once in a while a child might poison one of his brothers just to keep competition down, but this remedy was not completely adequate. In the course of time the multitudinous issue of the royal house banded together into two clans, the Taira and the Minamoto, their knives deep into each other, gaining in power constantly, and forcing most of the lesser nobles to identify themselves with one of them.

At court, in the meantime, a curious situation had developed. In deference to the Confucian idea of advancement through merit, it had become customary for the Emperor to select as a sort of prime minister a member of some family of noble but not imperial stock. In the seventh century this office itself became hereditary in the Fujiwara family, which supplied powers behind the throne for four centuries. On the theory that a divine creature should not be concerned with earthly matters, they encouraged the Son of Heaven to devote his time to flowers, music, poetry, liquor, and amorous dalliance. If he proved difficult, they put him into a monastery (with the assistance of the Buddhist priests) and proclaimed him a saint. In either case, they acquired the privilege of wielding imperial power almost without interference. It was their ambition to have the Imperial Consorts taken from their family, but this was contrary to etiquette; the Fujiwara were not of imperial blood and could not be wives of emperors. The difficulty was surmounted by bringing into the family women of the Minamoto family. With this grafting of royal blood, they proceeded to claim a monopoly of the business of supplying brides for the Son of Heaven—a monopoly that was broken by the present Emperor Hirohito, who took

*"Japan: Some Phases of her Problems and Development" by Inazo Nitobé; p. 65. (Scribners, 1931.) Dr. Nitobé supplies an excellent discussion of the growth of the latifundia in Japan.

a wife from another family in defiance of the tradition.

The Fujiwara and their allies, the Buddhist priests, grew fat with riches and power. From time to time the malcontents in the south and north ventured open rebellion, but such was the jealousy between the two royal clans that the Fujiwara, by playing them against each other, managed to maintain themselves reasonably secure—for a time. In 1155 civil war broke out, and in a few years' time control had passed from the Fujiwara to the Taira clan.

Their triumph was short lived; when the infant son of the defeated

Minamoto leader had grown to manhood (his life had been spared on the condition that his mother enter the



harem of the victorious Taira chief) he led a revolt which plunged the nation into civil war. By 1185 he had completely defeated the Taira; he forthwith began the task of utterly exterminating the clan, without respect to age or sex, and did a competent, workmanlike job. With the title of *shogun* he took over the reins of government; the emperor himself had stood on the sidelines during all the years of strife. His accession marks the end of one period in Japanese history and the beginning of another, the period of feudalism, which continued almost to the present day.