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The Taisho Era: When modernity ruled Japan's masses

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"Democracy is so popular these days!" — "The Democracy Song," 1919

One hundred years ago this week — on July 30, 1912 — Emperor Meiji passed away and Japan, traveling blind and hardly knowing where it was going, entered a new age.

The Taisho Era (1912-26), sandwiched between the boldly modernizing Meiji Era (1867-1912) and the militarist tide of early Showa (1926-1989), deserves more recognition than it gets.

Taisho is Japan's Jazz Age. Can it be summed up in a phrase? It often is: *ero-guro-nansensu* — eroticism, grotesquerie, nonsense.

All three filled the air. Was Taisho, then, mere frivolity? To cite only the plainest evidence to the contrary: World War I; the 1918 Rice Riots; "Taisho Democracy;" the founding in 1922 of the Japan Communist Party; the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923; the granting of universal manhood suffrage in 1925; and the repressive Peace Preservation Law passed barely two months later.

Taisho's turbulence was of an intensity and significance way out of proportion to its brevity. It was a revolution — a failed revolution, as the militarism of the 1930s was to show. Meanwhile, exuberance reigned — exuberance of a peculiar kind. Something of its spirit comes across in the reaction of novelist Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965) to the earthquake which incinerated much of his native Tokyo, killing roughly 100,000 people: "Almost simultaneously I felt a surge of happiness which I could not keep down. 'Tokyo will be better for this!' I said to myself."

A child as Taisho dawned would have had grandparents molded by the Edo Period (1603-1867), living symbols of how startlingly Japan had changed within living memory. Edo Japan, closed to the outside world and drifting in a samurai and Confucian time-warp, would have seemed as archaic to Emperor Taisho's subjects as it does to us. In 1912 only 58 years had passed since the United States pried Japan open like a rusty sardine can. Between Edo and Taisho stood the stern and patriarchal Meiji Era (1868-1912), surely one of the most energetic regimes in world history. British historian Richard Storry (in "A History of Modern Japan," 1960) enumerates the most visible innovations — many others, institutional and psychological, were less visible — of Meiji's first two decades: "Banks, railways, harbors, lighthouses, dockyards, telegraph offices, printing presses and newspapers, post offices, cigars and cigarettes — the entire apparatus of Western material civilization seemed to find some reproduction, some kind of echo, in Japan."

Such was Meiji. The emperor posthumously named for the era (he was Emperor Mutsuhito while he lived) was a grave, dignified figure. Actual power was wielded not by him and certainly not by “the people.” It was wielded by a narrowly exclusive oligarchy, but Emperor Meiji was a worthy symbol of the modernization effected in his name, and of the era’s most characteristic slogan: “Rich country, strong army.”

His son and successor, Emperor Yoshihito (posthumously Taisho), marked a shift of gears — or maybe a stripping of gears. A bout of cerebral meningitis as an infant left him with lifelong brain damage. Lucid intervals alternated with spells when no one knew quite what he would do. A characteristic story is of him attending a Diet session and peering at the proceedings through a rolled-up document as through a telescope. He was unpresentable, and more or less faded from public view, a skeleton in the nation’s closet. (From 1921 until his death on Christmas Day in 1926 his son, the future Emperor Showa, served as regent.) If a “Jazz Age” is to bloom under a divine emperor, it probably should be one like Emperor Taisho.

Ero-guro-nansensu — where to begin?

The Taisho Era transfigured the Japanese character. New types abounded. Meet *mobo* and his sister (or lover) *moga* — modern boy and modern girl respectively — mobo in bell-bottom trousers, floppy tie, colored shirt and round-rimmed *roido* spectacles (named for American silent film star Harold Lloyd), moga having shed her “shapeless, unbecoming kimono” (the description is Tanizaki’s) in favor of “Western clothes” that “accentuate every curve and hollow, give her body a brilliant surface and lively flowing lines.” Mobo’s hair was long, moga’s short, sometimes boyishly short; sexuality was out in the open now and not to be hemmed in by simplistic old categories like “male” and “female.”

Where did mobo and moga hang out? Most typically, in the new European-style cafes springing up here, there and just about everywhere, especially in the Ginza, Tokyo’s little Europe. The first one opened in 1911 (coffeehouses, quite different, had been around for a generation); by 1939, nationwide, they numbered 37,000. To the cafes streamed mobo and moga and all their various sub-species.

Disputation raged. This was not, by our standards, an educated generation — in 1920 less than half the population got beyond the six years of compulsory schooling, with senior high school, let alone university, accessible to barely 1 percent of boys and the merest handful of girls. But Tokyo — population 2 million plus and one of the largest cities in the world — had one of the world’s largest student populations. Literacy was widespread if not necessarily advanced; newspapers, magazines and books proliferated. The Communist Manifesto was translated in 1904; “Marx Boys” and “Marx Girls” pored over it, and the cafes were the backdrop for their fierce arguments over the fine points.

Not only Marx but “Dekansho” — Descartes, Kant and Schopenhauer — were the fashionable philosophical mentors of the day, and a lesson drawn from them was that the world was not merely to be accepted as given but recreated according to reason and justice. This implied varying degrees of action and commitment.

Most were content merely to read, debate and give themselves intellectual airs. Others — Bolsheviks, anarcho-syndicalists, radical feminists — were poised for action; for blood if necessary. The burgeoning industrial-capitalist society that surrounded them, with its machines, its factories, its appalling working conditions, its stark contrasts of grinding poverty and plutocratic wealth, was in their eyes irredeemably corrupt, debased, evil. They nurtured one hope for salvation: its utter destruction. From its ashes, they passionately believed, a new society would arise, more human, more compassionate, more fulfilling. The details were vague. The details could wait.

Relatively few were so grimly, deadly serious (not even the grimly serious ones were grimly serious all the time, and “free love” was no small part of the revolutionary ethos). More prosaic preoccupations were reflected in types who would seem very familiar to us today, however odd to their parents.

There were, first of all, the entrepreneurs, not only of heavy industry but of consumer goods. Prominent among them was the young electrician Konosuke Matsushita (1894-1989). In the early 1920s, bicycles’ lamps were still mounted candles in a glass-fronted box — imagine that in even a moderate breeze. The company that grew up around Matsushita’s electric bicycle lamp became Matsushita Electric — now Panasonic, the world’s largest manufacturer of consumer electronic products.

The 9-to-5 company salaryman became numerous in this period, as did the newly fledged “working girl” reveling in her financial independence. Department store clerk, train station ticket-seller, teacher, telephone operator, typist, elevator girl, nurse, writer, journalist, beautician — a Taisho woman might don any one of these identities.

Beautician? Japan’s first Western-style hair salon opened in March 1923, six months before the Great Kanto Earthquake which, to many conservatives, was heaven’s wrathful judgment on all this frivolous tinkering with native tradition. Chieko Yamano, 27 years old and just back from training in New York, set up her parlor on the fourth floor of the Maru Building, Asia’s largest structure at the time, just across the street from Tokyo Station. She employed 20 assistants, all in Western clothes and Western coiffeur. Conventional Japanese notions of feminine beauty, reflected in the languid poses of 18th- and 19th-century *ukiyo-e* (“floating world” prints), were, if not out, clearly on the defensive. Not even the earthquake brought them much of a revival.

Or, a Taisho woman might — and many, many did — become a *jokyū* (cafe waitress), serving coffee, whisky, wine and *hotto sandoitchi* (hot sandwiches), granting or withholding sexual favors as she saw fit. So numerous, so bright, charming and above all “modern” were the *jokyū* of Taisho — by 1936 there were some 112,000 of them — that, remove them from the scene and it dims perceptibly. Male customers fawned on them. Unlike all but the highest-ranking courtesans of the traditional licensed pleasure-quarters, the *jokyū* was her own mistress, free to accept this homage or reject it. One *jokyū* is remembered for a pert rejoinder to a smitten mobo’s eager advances. “I do the seducing,” she snapped.

World War I “sent Europe to its knees and brought Japan to its feet,” as historian Jeffrey Hanes put it (in “Media Culture in Taisho Osaka,” 1998).

European and American industry’s all-out mobilization for war created a vacuum that Japanese heavy industry, then in its infancy, rose to fill. The resulting war boom seeded Taisho’s cultural and social ferment. There were fortunes to be made, and those quick to seize the opportunity made them, more or less irrespective of birth.

The salarymen who staffed their offices became the new middle class. Rougher types, male and female, kept their factories humming, suffering the attendant evils of long hours, low pay and an overall standard of living not much above brutality. “On those machines fall my tears,” went a song lyric of the day.

Proletarian literature has its place in Taisho culture alongside less ephemeral literary celebrations of eros and the new freedom. “I was in the war and I can tell you that to spend eight hours down there in that mine was worse than 24 hours under enemy fire” — so testifies a mine worker in “The Handstand,” a short story published in 1920 by Mimei Ogawa. “What the hell,” the mine worker continues, “we were risking our lives down there every day to make profits for the company. We all got together and were going to make a set of minimum demands for our safety — not wages, mind you, just for our safety. But we had an informer among us. Our plan leaked out and the company put a stop to it all.”

The narrator listens to his talk and the truth dawns on him: " 'A socialist,' I thought to myself." The narrator is wary but not unsympathetic. "I soon learned," he says, "that almost all the workers with whom I had now come to spend my time suffered to a greater or lesser extent from (a) sense of monotony. They were forever discussing possible ways of breaking the tedium of their lives." We see here the emergence of a strangely modern theme: tedium amid ceaseless activity.

Then there's Naomi — *Miss Naomi*, as she insists on being called. She is the sexual-predator moga protagonist of Tanizaki's novel "A Fool's Love" (1924), and she lives to this day as the personification of what came to be known — more approvingly than otherwise — as *Naomishugi* (Naomi-ism). The novel's narrator is a 30-something salaryman — nothing special about him except a desire to adopt a child-wife he can mold to his own particular (though not perverse) tastes. Naomi, a starveling 15-year-old apprentice jokyū, appeals to him and, without much enthusiasm though with no repugnance either, she accepts his overtures. His goal is to make of her a woman who would meet Western standards of grace and style. He has money to spend and he spends it freely. For a time she is content to be his toy; then she discovers Western ballroom dancing. That sets her free, and off she dances, for better or for worse, into the brave new world of the liberated female, a species Japan had scarcely ever known before.

Michael Hoffman is the author of "Little Pieces: This Side of Japan" (VBW, 2010). His next novel, "The Naked Ear," will be released Nov. 1.

Taisho timeline; its roots and branches

1853-54: Forced opening of secluded, backward Japan by U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry's "Black Ships."

1867-68: Meiji Restoration overthrows Tokugawa Shogunate, which had been in power since 1603, and empowers a modernizing, Westernizing oligarchy.

1881-82: Formation of Japan's first two political parties.

1890: Meiji Constitution. Not itself democratic, it sets the stage for "Taisho Democracy."

1894-95: Japan expels China from Korea, seizes Taiwan and other territory.

1904-05: Russo-Japanese War, Japan's victory in which astonishes the world.

July 30, 1912: Death of Emperor Mutsuhito (posthumously known as Emperor Meiji); Taisho Era begins.

1914-18: World War I.

1918: Rice Riots sweep the country, bringing down a government and leading to the appointment of Takashi Hara, "The Great Commoner," Japan's first prime minister to be an elected member of the Diet. Thus begins "Taisho Democracy."

November 1921: Hara assassinated.

September 1923: Great Kanto Earthquake levels Tokyo, kills 100,000; anarchist Sakae Osugi, his nephew and lover are murdered in prison.

1924: Junichiro Tanizaki's novel "A Fool's Love" portrays the sexually liberated Naomi — the "modern girl" par excellence.

March 1925: Passage of progressive Universal Manhood Suffrage Act

May 1925: Passage of repressive Public Peace Preservation Act

Dec. 25, 1926: Emperor Yoshihito dies; Taisho Era (from which he takes his posthumous name) ends.

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