

Japanese Imperialism as a Self Defence Mechanism

Written by Mathew Bonnon

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MATHEW BONNON, APR 9 2015

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The latter half of the 20th century marked a fundamental change in the Japanese psyche as, up until this point, “Japan” had never existed. Fractured and fragmented, the geographic area which we now call Japan was a collection of domains living on a collection of neighbouring islands, with distinct cultural and linguistic differences between their populations. It was only after the breakdown of the Tokugawa political structure and the implementation of the Meiji Restoration that a sense of national identity was fostered.[1] However, following on from the internal and external troubles (*naiyū gaikan*) which plagued the final years of the Tokugawa Shogunate, it became apparent that the security of the new nation took priority. At the same time, a variety of wide-reaching measures were employed to educate the population on what it meant and how it felt to be ‘Japanese’. In this essay, I will prove how the relationship between the processes of nation-state building and imperial expansion was co-dependent. Of course, when perceptions of Japan were changing, both internationally and domestically, Japan sought to rewrite the rules of the East Asian power game. Long gone was the ancient idea of Sino-centrism and instead, Japan was the ‘civilised’ centre of a region seen to be playing catch-up with the advanced West. As a result, relations between Japan and its neighbours altered dramatically, following on from events which shook the world order.

To first prove the co-dependent theory of nation-state building and imperial expansion, it makes sense to disprove the relevance of other theories which attempt to explain why imperial expansion occurs. John Hobson’s theory argues that the “taproot of imperialism” is the availability of surplus capital in the colonising country. In such circumstances, investors seek foreign markets to expand their own wealth while finding ways to allocate the expense of expansion on the state so that big business can still profit. Similarly, Vladimir Lenin’s theory argues from a financial viewpoint. According to this theory, imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism before the proletarian social revolution takes place. Mirroring capitalism’s aggressive need to constantly grow and expand, nations proactively colonise others for pure financial gain. However, as Gordon rightly points out, Japan could not simply monopolise countries as it did not have the surplus capital to invest.[2] Japan was heavily indebted to Great Britain and the United States due to its industrialisation and infrastructural modernisation processes.[3] Additionally, the enormous initial fiscal spending required to finance victorious wars against China in 1894 and Russia in 1904 rendered the funds available for external investment minuscule, let alone substantial enough for monopolisation of states. As McClain puts it, “The economic dimensions of Japan’s expansionism in the nineteenth century were subordinate to geopolitical concerns”.[4]

On the other hand, the theory of nationalism emphasizes the essential role of the state in adopting imperialistic behaviour as a nation seeks to maximize its “...power, prestige, and wealth relative to other countries”. [5] This ultimately elevates the imperial nation, rejects the notion of Westphalian sovereignty, consolidates the power of the state both domestically and in the international order and incites a distinctive national identity which goes hand in hand with patriotism. This patriotism, a product of the process of nation-state building, then fuels further imperial expansion as a way of imposing ‘superior’ customs onto other states, legitimising the customs of the imperial nation. By no means is this an evitable, co-dependent relationship; many countries have managed to establish themselves without resorting to imperial expansion. In the case of Japan, however, the impetus for creating a nation state was rooted in the need to create a secure, respected, functional and durable state in the face of the aggressive Western

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colonisation of parts of East Asia.

While consolidating power at home, Japan looked to expand on the periphery, taking in Ezo and Ryukyu and looking to 'civilize' as well as standardise culture and language amongst their populations. Although the Meiji administration had an official policy of assimilation, Japanese media, which was still strictly controlled by the authorities, paid careful attention to amplify the cultural divide between the "pure" Japanese, and those who were suddenly under Japanese control, subjugating their way of life and instilling a sense of pride in what Japan as a nation was able to achieve.[6] Of course, on top of this psychological process, there were also geopolitical dimensions to this expansion. Ezo's proximity to Siberia was seen from a Japanese perspective as a key reason to colonise the area before it fell to Russia, which was at this point a well established and fully fledged empire. Nonetheless, it can still be argued that this expansion on the periphery was merely an extension of nation-state building, as the Meiji administration sought to consolidate domestic control by creating a patriotic sense of identity while securing land to act as a buffer zone against neighbouring empires which were also looking to extend their influence.

However, during this era, it was not only the Russian Empire which Japan had to be concerned about. With European empirical powers easily defeating China in the Opium Wars, and conscious of the US, which was riding on the back of 'Manifest Destiny', Japan feared the intrusion of great Western powers on its shores.[7] Crucially, Japan was envious of the power such states could exercise and as a result, was keen to learn from them what exactly made a great state. The findings of the Iwakura Mission of 1871 taught Japan the importance of an education system, a standing army, a wealthy state and a sense of patriotism.[8] As a result, pursuits to stretch Japan's empirical grip further into East Asia were delayed, while domestic nation-state building processes continued to further strengthen the core of the Japanese empire. Although it could be argued that the colonisation of Taiwan in 1895 and the formal annexation of Korea in 1910 demonstrate Japan's primary ambitions to expand its empire, it seems more believable that the main purpose of these actions was to reinvent Japan. Japan had to be seen as a great nation on par with the Western empires in order to reject foreign imperialism and ultimately consolidate the nation state it was trying so hard to create. Japan had already been embarrassed by the West once in the form of the signing of the Convention of Kanagawa and the Harris Treaty with America; this time, Japan had to prove that it had created a legitimate and powerful state. As Iriye Akira puts it, 'It was believed that all successful modern powers must expand overseas.'[9] The subsequent subjugation of Taiwanese and Korean culture, the latter of which, John Lie extensively covers in the preface of his book, *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan)*, is testament to the fact that Japanese imperialism was as much a psychological process as a physical one. Placing the patriotic Japanese people on a pedestal for the world to see was key to creating a strong country which would earn the respect of other imperial rivals, therefore safeguarding the Japanese state.

It cannot be denied that the rise of the Japanese empire coupled with this subjugation of other Asian races upset the balance of East Asian order and altered the way in which Japan and its neighbours interacted. China had wielded cultural influence in Japan since the fifteenth century but at the turn of the 20th century, the tide had definitely turned. It would be misguided, however, to believe that the changes in relations between these countries were a sole product of the behaviour of Japan; the Qing dynasty in China was considerably weaker than previous dynasties and as a result, its tributary state, Korea, appeared more vulnerable and unstable.

One reason why the Sino-centric tributary relationship model was downcast is that Qing China was seen as frail. Due to its failures to modernise its military, the administration had to rely on foreign help to quell the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and was also greatly embarrassed following its defeats in the two Opium Wars. It was clear to see that the former powerhouse of East Asia had been put in its place by the empires of the West. Additionally, it was no secret that Qing's grip on the outskirts of China was incredibly weak, leading to port trading with external states without the involvement of the authorities.[10] Set against this backdrop, Japan was becoming ever more aware of external perceptions of East Asia and what constituted a 'barbaric' civilisation as opposed to a 'civilised' state. Following what it had learned from abroad during the Iwakura Mission, Japan looked at trying a new approach to international relations and diplomacy with China. From March to July 1873, foreign minister, Soejima, and advisor, LeGendre, made a trip to China to make sure that the Qing dynasty would not interfere with Japanese expansionist dreams in Korea and Taiwan.[11]

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In an unprecedented move, Japan had begun to use Western laws and diplomatic practises^[12] to outsmart its counterparts in China,^[13] showcasing a change in the way diplomacy was conducted in East Asia and, importantly, successfully proving to the West that Japan was the first civilized state to emerge from the region.^[14] As the situation in Korea became ever more unstable leading to the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894, China came to the peninsula in order to keep the peace. Seeing this as a threatening encroachment into the Japanese sphere of interest, the Japanese entered the conflict and winning the first Sino-Japanese war which resulted in the formal acknowledgement of the superiority of Japan. This was a major milestone that Japan had craved since its creation.

Riding on the back of this victory, Japan saw it as its imperialistic duty to 'civilize' and improve the lives of the Koreans. After successfully, albeit narrowly, defeating the Russian forces in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan completed the formal annexation of Korea in 1910. Korea was forced to make the transition from revering China to serving Japan. Although the argument can be made that this aggressive colonialism is just an extension of Japanese imperialism, it is more convincing to believe that this expansion into Korea and embarrassment of the Qing dynasty was more an extension of nation-state building. Korea has always been, and continues to be, a concern to Japan due to its proximity and geographic location; As Prussian advisor Major Klemens Meckel put it to the Meiji army, Korea was "a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan." The attempt to bring Korea under control ruled out the colonisation of Korea by another powerful suzerain, therefore safeguarding the Japanese state while showcasing Japanese military might to the outside world. As Gordon points out, it is unwise to believe that finances motivated Japan's acquisition of overseas land due to the enormous initial expenditure required. However, as McClain importantly notes, "the fruits of imperial expansion, coupled with industrialisation at home meant that the dawn of the new century held considerable promise". It is therefore believable that despite the large amounts of time and money dedicated to battle overseas, the Japanese population, on the whole, had no objections to further expansion of the empire, demonstrating that a strong sense of national identity and patriotism was in place, resulting in the successful creation of the stable and recognised Japanese state.^[15]

To conclude, in order for Japan to redefine itself and its standing in the world order, dramatic changes, both internally and externally, had to be made. There was a real fear that Japan could be colonised by a Western power which prompted the authorities to quickly learn from existing empires to safeguard its future. The relationship discussed in this essay between imperialism and nation-state building was ultimately fuelled by nationalism, which was in turn, a result of the successes of the Meiji administration, both at home and abroad. Growing patriotism coupled with a fear of foreign dominance led Japan to adapt to the wider world order by shunning the archaic notion of sino-centrism and playing by the rules and laws widely accepted in the West. This gave Japan a unique advantage in the region and with a relatively content population, there was no great desire for the Japanese to slow down neither their processes of modernisation and nation state building, nor their processes of imperial expansion. All in all, the co-dependency of the processes can be summarised to the following: imperial expansion relies on the subjugation of races and nations and in order to do this, there needed to be a Japanese state to which others could be compared.

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[4] McClain, James L. Japan, a Modern History. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.(2002). p.314.

[5] Gordon.

[6] Mark Caprio, Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945. Seattle: U of Washington. (2009).

[7] Jeffrey A Keith "Manifest Identity" – the idea that the greatness of the US was predicted in the C19th as Europe became too decadent was widespread in America.

[8] Caprio.

[9] Akira Iriye, Japan's Drive to Great-Power Status, Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 5 (1989).

[10] Caprio.

[11] Mayo. P. 808.

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[12] Ibid. P. 810.

[13] Japan distinguished through its terminology the idea of “China proper” and the China’s “vassal states”

[14] Iriye. p. 764. July 1894 marked the abolition of extraterritoriality with Britain.

[15] Naoko Shimazu, “Patriotic and Despondent: Japanese Society at War, 1904-5,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January, 2008). Shimazu admits in her article that although there were powerful and vocal opposition groups riding on the back of socialism and Christian pacifism, they were small in numbers compared to the pro-war lobby groups.

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Written by: Mathew Bonnon
Written at: Queens’ College, Cambridge
Written for: Dr Deokhyo Choi
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