

The Origins of Meiji Imperialism

Why did Japan begin to acquire an overseas colonial empire in the late Meiji period? After all, there was little precedent in Japanese history for a deliberate program of overseas territorial expansion. Throughout most of their recorded past the Japanese had remained in splendid isolation from their continental neighbors, making very few attempts to expand their political power abroad. No dynastic marriages had linked the Japanese with the continental monarchies, nor had the imperial or shogunal regimes ever established a stable territorial foothold there, as, for example, the English monarchy had in France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The only exception to this tradition of relative political isolation—Hideyoshi's brief, costly, and unsuccessful invasion of Korea in the 1590s—did not inspire imitation. Neither was there any sustained tradition of exploration abroad nor any outward migration like the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Of all the nineteenth-century imperialist powers, Japan therefore had the least experience in dealing with alien peoples overseas, let alone exercising domination over them. As Takekoshi Yosaburō complained in 1913, “Nurtured by history and limited in vision, the [Japanese] people have lacked the intellectual heritage of a maritime country, the idea of national expansion.”¹

Indeed, for most of the three centuries that separated Hideyoshi's in-

1. Takekoshi Yosaburō, “Keizai gunji futatsu hōmen yori mitaru hantō,” in Aoyagi, *Chōsen*, 262–63.

vasions of Korea from the Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese had lived at peace with their neighbors, carrying on trade and occasionally exchanging emissaries, but firmly avoiding sustained contact. If any East Asian country was "imperialist" during these years, it was Ch'ing China, whose armies marched and countermarched across the Inner Asian frontier, shoring up old areas of domination on the steppes of Mongolia and establishing new ones in the highlands of Tibet. If "tradition" or "historical precedent" have any explanatory value, it should have been China, not Japan, that emerged as the first Asian imperialist power. Indeed, for a brief period in the 1880s and early 1890s the Ch'ing leadership pursued an imperialist program in Korea, but they ultimately failed, in part because of reluctance to abandon practices associated with the tribute system, China's traditional form of exercising domination over alien peoples.

For the Japanese, a policy of external expansion, like so much else in the Meiji period, was new and unprecedented. And like so much else that was new and unprecedented, it had its origins in Japan's new contacts with the West. It is no coincidence that until intrusions by the Russians in the late eighteenth century and by the British and the Americans in the early nineteenth century, the notion of overseas colonies found no place in Japanese political discourse. Only in the wake of these contacts did visionaries and reformers like Hayashi Shihei, Satō Nobuhiro, and Yoshida Shōin, all later touted as "precursors" or "forerunners" of modern Japanese expansion, begin to spin schemes for Japanese colonial expansion. These men were "precursors" or "forerunners" only in the sense that they were the first to imagine new relationships with the outside world, based on a hazy understanding of what the Westerners were doing. With the emergence of the Meiji government, what had been visionary and hypothetical became a national goal. Within a generation after the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese leadership had shifted from a traditional policy of peaceful and passive isolation to a radically new policy of active expansion.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF MEIJI IMPERIALISM

The adoption of an expansionist policy was intimately linked to the timing of Japan's decision to modernize. The Japanese chose to tread the path toward "civilization and enlightenment" at precisely the moment in history when the nation-states of Western Europe were in the midst of

frenzied territorial expansion across the globe. Between 1800 and 1900 the Europeans acquired control over territory eight or nine times the size of Europe itself. Indeed, this Western surge to seize dominion over lands and peoples historically and geographically remote from Europe was the most salient feature of international politics during the Meiji era. The global reach of Western imperialism could not help but influence both the character of Meiji modernization and the thrust of Meiji foreign policy. It provided the context in which the Meiji leaders acted and a model for them to follow.

The imperialism that the Japanese encountered in the nineteenth century was quite different from the imperialism they had encountered two and a half centuries earlier. The Portuguese, the Spanish, the English, and the Dutch who arrived in Japan during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had been the vanguard of early modern trading empires, interested less in acquiring territory than in inserting themselves into regional trade networks in East Asia and establishing small trading outposts to sustain their commercial activities. Theirs was an entrepreneurial expansionism, bolstered by crown or church in most cases but spearheaded by bold explorers, adventurous merchants, or enterprising courtiers, often operating within the framework of a chartered company. Indeed, these early empires may be seen as trade diasporas, involving only a handful of Europeans, driven by dreams of gold and personal glory, but only tenuously linked to the metropolitan society. By contrast the Western empires confronting Meiji Japan forged far tighter links between metropole and periphery and engaged far broader social participation.

Nineteenth-century Western imperialism was *postnationalist* as well as *postindustrial*. The main agent of expansion was not the adventurous entrepreneur, nor the freebooting trading company, but the nation-state itself. Whatever tangle of private motives or initiatives may have prompted expansion, it was the nation-state that ultimately undertook the responsibility for the acquisition of new territories and new privileges abroad, that provided the military and financial resources to build new colonial regimes, and that provided a cloak of legitimacy for expansion. The acquisition of colonies or other overseas territories became one of the attributes of international status, state power, and even modernity. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the European “powers” had been dynastic regimes whose strength was measured by the size of their standing armies and who sought to dominate one another, but by its end they were ranked as well by the size of their navies,

the output of their manufacturing sectors, and the extent of their non-European possessions.

What gave the nineteenth-century nation-state its political cohesion was the belief, though not necessarily the reality, that political boundaries conformed to ethnic or cultural boundaries. In Benedict Anderson's terms, they were "imagined communities" whose internal coherence rested on the presumption of linguistic or cultural unity and whose elites were assumed to share a common culture and language with the mass of the population. Since the modern nation-state was a "participatory" state in the sense that a mass public was seduced rather than coerced into supporting the incumbent regime, these new and often fragile feelings of shared tradition and destiny enabled political leaders to conscript mass armies and send them to war in the name of a higher "national" cause. And as the political franchise expanded, political leaders discovered that an imperialist foreign policy, festooned with appeals to "national ideals," "national pride," "national mission," or "national destiny" that promised some collective good, could be a powerful means to build popular political support.

The literate, enfranchised, newspaper-reading political publics in late nineteenth-century Europe were stirred by news of far-off jungle explorations, colonial battles, and naval encounters. Association with successful imperialist enterprises offered an empowering identity to the emerging mass publics. What glorified the nation glorified the national populace, no matter how dimly that glory was reflected in their own lives. Victories over the "natives" in far-off lands placed the low and powerless in the metropolitan society above the high and mighty in the colonial domains, and the acquisition of overseas territories appeared to add to the collective national wealth. Leaders as different as Napoleon III, Disraeli, and Bismarck all used jingoism to build support among the new mass publics, who vociferously applauded and consistently supported imperialist policies.² Indeed, some historians have argued that Western leaders deployed expansionist policies in order to divert attention from domestic social conflicts generated by industrialization—conflicts between countryside and city, capital and labor, or small enterprises and large—and to reintegrate conflicting forces in a grand national enterprise.³

While governments in the European imperialist powers could deploy

2. Cf. Hayes, *Generation of Materialism*, 228.

3. Cf. Wehler, "Bismarck's Imperialism, 1862–1890," 119–22.

common symbols—flag and country—to mobilize support for expansionist policies, the prenationalist societies they encountered could not. Their elites, often set apart from the masses by ethnic, religious, intellectual, or cultural barriers, found it difficult to mobilize broad resistance to the Europeans. They were also put at a disadvantage by their unfamiliarity with the framework of “international law” under which the European imperialist nations operated. This system of law was assumed to be universal among the “community of nations.” When leaders in non-Western states ignored or “violated” international law out of ignorance, the Westerners frequently seized the moment to impose sanctions, including the establishment of their own dominion. Societies with no state organization at all were even more vulnerable since only nation-states were considered subject to international law. Many Western international legal theorists took the position that “backward” or “uncivilized” peoples had no sovereign rights over the territories they inhabited and that territorial rights should be recognized only if held by states able to protect its inhabitants. Such arguments, for example, sanctioned the European partition of sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

The imperialist powers would have been far less successful in imposing their dominion on others had they not been industrialized. The projection of state power overseas always moved in one direction—from the industrialized states of Western Europe and North America to the preindustrial regions of the globe. The technological and economic changes wrought by the industrial revolution empowered the Europeans to impose their will on others. Without the steamship and the railroad, the breech-loading rifle and the modern cannon, the telegraph line and the undersea cable, the dynamite charge and the steam engine, it is unlikely that the Western imperialist powers would have been able to expand as quickly as they did or perhaps even expand at all. As Daniel R. Headrick has noted, “There is no reason to believe that late nineteenth century imperialists were any more strongly motivated than their predecessors. The reason for their sudden success was a shift in technology, similar to the development of ocean-going ships some four centuries earlier.”⁵

4. “Territorial sovereignty bears an obvious resemblance to ownership in private property. . . . As a result of this resemblance early international law borrowed the Roman rules for the acquisition of property and adapted them to the acquisition of territory, and these rules are still the foundation of law on the subject.” Brierly, *Law of Nations*, 150.

5. Headrick, *Tentacles of Progress*, 5.

Industrialization upset the technological balance of power between the European powers and the rest of the world, and this imbalance made possible the rapid European successes in conquest and domination. Once European colonial empires disintegrated, often within a generation or two of their creation, it was easy to see how transient and fragile their technological advantage was. But in the early stages of industrialization, the possession of superior technologies, and the sense of superiority they conveyed to both dominator and dominated, made the encounter between the Western societies and the rest of the world a lopsided one. In the early seventeenth century the Japanese had thrown the Spanish, the Portuguese, and even the English out of their country without much fear of retaliation, but Commodore Perry and his four black steamships posed a threat that threw the country into a panic.

Industrialization not only extended the reach of Western political power but also enabled the Western economies to dominate the new global market. According to some estimates, between 1750 and 1913 the value of world trade increased more than fiftyfold, most of it in the hands of the Europeans and the North Americans. The peoples of Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Oceania were no more able to withstand the impact of Western traders bearing machine-spun cotton yarn than they were able to resist Western troops armed with repeating rifles and Gatling guns. The penetration of distant markets went hand in hand with the expansion of European political dominion. Indeed, the first steps toward political dominion often began with attempts to force open doors to markets barred by restrictive political or institutional barriers intended to keep foreign goods out. The Westerners also began to consume a larger and larger volume of goods from the non-Western world. At first, with the exception of items like tea or spices, raw materials were imported to feed the burgeoning textile industry—cotton, silk, and even wool; then, as technology advanced came new types of raw materials—palm oil, rubber, tin and mercury, and eventually petroleum not found in Europe; and finally imported foodstuffs became increasingly important to the Western diet—not only exotic tropical goods like coffee, cocoa, and bananas but even wheat, beef, and dairy products.

The expansion of external markets helped to sustain economic growth in the industrial economies. In the early part of the century the British, who had the most advanced industrial economy, discovered that manufacturing output eventually reached the point where it ran ahead of domestic demand and required external markets for surplus production. Usually the most important outlets for exports were to be found in

other relatively industrialized economies, but for mass-produced goods, particularly cotton textiles, the British began to seek more distant markets in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. At the same time, the growth of manufacturing and the shift of workers out of agriculture created new demands for foodstuffs and raw materials that could be satisfied by imports from these new customers.

The search for new markets and new sources of raw materials became more intense during the pan-European “great depression,” a long-term slowdown in economic growth in the Western European economies that lasted from the 1870s down through the 1890s, more or less coinciding with the era of “new imperialism.” Visions of “over-production” at home led officials, manufacturers, merchants, and other businessmen to argue that vigorous export policies, protective tariffs, and colonial expansion were essential to national prosperity.

As trade expanded, so did Western investment in the world outside the West. The new world market required the improvement of harbors, the building of interior roads and tunnels, new networks of rail lines, and underseas cable systems. For example, between 1825 and 1920 world railway mileage expanded from 5,000 miles of track to 675,000, most of it concentrated in Europe and North America but nearly one-quarter of it in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Australasia. Like the world trade system, this world railway system was devised for Western ends to increase access to markets and raw materials, to extend political and military reach, or to facilitate the migrations and settlement of Western colonists. There was also much investment in extractive industries—mines, plantations, and oil fields that produced the raw materials Europe was consuming in ever greedier portions. By contrast, since the Westerners saw no need to stimulate competition for their own exports, relatively little Western capital flowed into manufacturing facilities in the non-Western world.

Industrial technology, and the wealth and power it created, gave the Western imperialist nations the novel idea that they were entitled to dominate the rest of the world. In earlier centuries the Westerners had seen themselves as morally superior to non-Western peoples, particularly those who had been conquered, but they had not necessarily seen themselves as materially or politically superior. In the sixteenth century Portuguese and Spanish missionaries described Japan as a “heathen” country, but they also found its people as intelligent, courteous, industrious, and vigorous as any in the world; and in the seventeenth century a Dutch visitor like Engelbert Kaempfer marveled at the flour-

ishing commerce revealed in the bustling ports, highways, and towns he encountered on the road to Edo. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, “progress” came to be measured in terms of material wealth, and technological mastery became a touchstone to separate the “advanced” from the “backward,” and a new sense of inherent European superiority opened a yawning gulf between imperialists and imperialized.⁶ The social distance between the Westerners and subordinate peoples was underlined by obvious differences in physique and skin and hair color and magnified by the pervasiveness of race thinking and social Darwinism.

THE ADVANCE OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM IN EAST ASIA

In East Asia the first stage of imperialist penetration took the form of “informal empire,” or what John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson have called the “imperialism of free trade.” As this term suggests, the goal was not to establish direct political control or formal colonies but instead to exercise less direct and visible forms of domination.⁷ In East Asia the essence of British policy was, as Gallagher and Robinson suggest, “trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary.” States such as China, Japan, and Korea were too weak to resist Western demands for trade, but they were strong enough to deter conquest or occupation by force. The British therefore chose to negotiate trade agreements under the threat or limited use of force rather than to attempt military conquest or subjugation. In any case, since British military and naval power was finite, and indeed was stretched rather thin as the empire expanded in the nineteenth century, the technique of “informal imperialism” was a parsimonious means of extending domination.⁸

As in other parts of the world outside the West, when the British encountered “closed” markets but did not wish to bear the costs of governing the local population, they advanced their commercial interests under the cloak of free-trade ideology. Arguing that the laws of economics—and sometimes the law of God—required societies to trade

6. Cf. Strachey, *End of Empire*.

7. Gallagher and Robinson, “Imperialism of Free Trade.”

8. As Grover Clark observed many years ago, “Where economic advantage could be secured without actual annexation of territory, it was felt perhaps as well to avoid the complications and responsibilities which went with political control.” Clark, *Place in the Sun*, 28.

freely with one another, the British negotiated treaties that gave them privileged trading enclaves.⁹ Such treaties—usually called “treaties of free trade and friendship”—were signed with China in 1842, 1858, and 1860, with Japan in the 1850s, and with Korea in the 1880s. Essentially these treaties were “unequal contracts” signed under duress—the explicit or implicit threat of force—which gave the British and other Western powers rights and privileges that went unreciprocated. This asymmetrical structure, later dubbed “the unequal treaty system,” was a classic expression of “informal empire.” And while these treaties were later viewed as a matter of national humiliation, at the time they checked more predatory forms of imperialist penetration.

By the last third of the century, however, the Western imperialist powers turned to more aggressive tactics. To be sure, Western powers continued to be interested in opening markets, but beginning in the 1870s they began a frenetic competition for the acquisition of colonial territory, particularly in Africa but in Southeast Asia and the Pacific as well. “Between 1876 and 1915,” notes Eric Hobsbawm, “about one quarter of the globe’s land surface was distributed or redistributed as colonies among a half-dozen states.”¹⁰ Astonishingly, the European colonial powers acquired an average of about 240,000 square miles (an area somewhat larger than France) per year between the late 1870s and World War I. This new phase of European expansion was probably triggered by changes in the political map of Europe.¹¹ The redrawing of national boundaries on the continent left little room for further redivision or redistribution of territory, and the intra-European rivalries that had occupied the Western countries for centuries were displaced to other parts of the world, where weaker states and less developed economies remained easy prey to the growing military and economic strength of the Europeans. The territorial partition of sub-Saharan Africa among the major European powers during the 1870s and 1880s was the rawest and most immediate expression of this “new imperialism.”

As the Western powers expanded in Africa, they not only brought new colonies under their control, they also developed new techniques of “informal empire”: the “protectorate,” the “sphere of influence,” and

9. Gallagher and Robinson, “Imperialism of Free Trade.”

10. Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 59.

11. As C. J. Hayes noted many years ago, “[The new imperialism] followed hard upon the national wars which created an all-powerful Germany and a united Italy, which carried Russia within sight of Constantinople, and which left England and France eclipsed. It expressed the resulting psychological reaction, an ardent desire to maintain or recover national prestige.” Hayes, *Generation of Materialism*, 220.

the “concession” or “leasehold.” All were created in “international law” to minimize the likelihood of direct military conflict between competing imperialist powers. Under a “protectorate,” such as the French deployed in Tunis and the British in Egypt, the imperialist state promised to guarantee the security of a dominated state; a protectorate was usually created by negotiated agreement and fell short of full colonial control. The “sphere of influence” (also called a “sphere of action” or a “sphere of interest”) received general recognition at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which declared that the territory of a state might be under the “influence” as opposed to the “protection” or “sovereignty” of another. “Spheres of influence” were created by boundary-marking agreements among the imperialist powers, often without the consent of the dominated people, to forestall or to resolve standing disputes among them.¹² “Leaseholds” or “concessions,” by contrast, were established when a dominated state agreed to let a dominant one “occupy and administer” part or all of its territory for a specific period. Like the “treaty of free trade and friendship,” the leasehold was a temporary and unequal contract, but it was often a preliminary step toward long-term cession of territory.¹³ The development of the Suez Canal in the 1850s and 1860s provided a model of how concessions could serve a complex set of military, economic, and diplomatic interests simultaneously.

By the time the “new imperialism” reached East Asia its territorial appetite had been sated to some degree. During the 1870s the Russians moved into the Ili River valley in Chinese Turkestan, and the British began to extend political control over the Malay Peninsula and into Burma. By the end of the 1880s the French, who had already conquered Cochinchina and established a protectorate over Cambodia, had brought Annam and Tongking under its colonial control.¹⁴ Although the Europeans were greedy enough to nibble on the borders of the

12. Agreements setting up “spheres of influence” might take any number of forms: agreements of one power to abstain from taking any actions that might lead to the acquisition of territory allotted to another; recognition by two powers of the special interest of one in the territory of a third; or an agreement by a subordinate state not to dispose of a piece of territory except to the dominant one. Lindley, *Backward Territories in International Law*, 207–46.

13. In 1890, for example, the Sultan of Zanzibar granted leaseholds to the British East Africa Company; in 1895 the company transferred its leasehold to the British government.

14. Shinobu Seizaburō, *Nihon gaikōshi*, 1:129. In late November the Japanese minister in Peking, Enomoto Takeaki, informed the government in Tokyo that the French were demanding the cession of Taiwan. Fearful that a French occupation of Taiwan would pose a threat to the Ryukyu Islands, the Japanese government offered to mediate between the French and the Ch'ing court on the condition that the Chinese fend off demands for Taiwan by agreeing to an indemnity payment and a grant of railroad concessions on the island. Needless to say, the Chinese refused the offer.

Ch'ing empire, none dreamed of swallowing China, where their main interests continued to be trade and markets. In any case, China was too vast to bring under control. But just as imperialist competition had escalated elsewhere by the 1890s, it escalated in East Asia too. Instead of pursuing formal empire, the Europeans sought leaseholds, concessions, and spheres of influence that would give them exclusive rights to raw materials, markets, or naval stations. In a sense, this "concession imperialism" was halfway between the "imperialism of free trade" and direct colonial rule.

The "free-trade imperialism" of the 1840s and 1850s had been a collective enterprise. The inclusion of "most favored nation" clauses in the early treaties with China and Japan assured that the gains enjoyed by one power would be enjoyed by all the others. In this sense, the imperialism of free trade in East Asia rested on a multilateral structure, with all of the powers sharing the same set of privileges. But in the 1890s the European competition that had produced the partition of Africa manifested itself as a "race for concessions" in China, with all the major powers trying to secure an economic or political enclave from which it could exclude the others. The runners in this race were driven by economic motives, as they always had been, but the urge to primp the national plumage by acquiring what their rivals got was no less important. As one American observer later described concession diplomacy:

A concession was in effect a business favor granted by the conceding nation to the government of the diplomat who asked for it. An immediate result of granting to one foreign nation a business favor ... is to excite competition and jealousy among all other national representatives in that place. Each must succeed in wresting a similar profitable privilege ... or the prestige of his own nation is diminished.¹⁵

The mingling of nationalist with economic goals served to intensify the competition.

THE IMPERIALIST IMPULSE IN JAPAN

A world dominated by Western imperialism provided both context and model for the agents of Meiji modernization—the bureaucrats and politicians, the generals and the admirals, the entrepreneurs and financiers, the ideologues and intelligentsia. In much the same way that they imported, assimilated, and transformed other cultural and institutional

15. Sands, *Undiplomatic Memories*, 197–98.

structures from the Western world, they adopted imperialist practices as well. Given the successful example provided by the Western nations, it was natural to conclude that acquisition of overseas possessions, like building a modern army and navy, was essential to establishing Japan's bona fides as "civilized" state and society. Indeed, one is often struck by the absence of doubt about the appropriateness of imperialism as a policy or as a way of life. With the exception of a handful of dissidents like Kōtoku Shūsui, hardly a voice was raised in protest against a program of expansion. Disputes revolved around the speed, direction, and management of expansion, not its legitimacy, which was no more questioned than was the legitimacy of steam-driven machinery or constitutional systems. In this sense, the pursuit of an expansionist agenda was part and parcel of the larger mimetic project of the Meiji elites.

THE SEARCH FOR STATUS

The intrusion of the Western imperialists introduced the Japanese to a new way of defining their relationships with other societies. The imperialism of free trade provided their first, and rather ambiguous, lesson in the culture of imperialism. On the one hand, the "civilized countries" refused to recognize traditional practices of interstate relations within East Asia that rested on notions of suzerain-vassal relations and elaborate rituals of exchange. Instead, they insisted on a new system of "international law" (*rekkoku kōhō* or *bankoku kōhō*) that assumed that all members of the "community of nations" would deal with one another on the basis of equality and reciprocity.¹⁶ By the mid-1860s works like Wheatley's *International Law* had been translated into Japanese, and the Japanese leadership accepted it as a fixed and universal system ("*tenri jindō no kōhō*," as Iwakura Tomomi put it) upheld by all "civilized nations."¹⁷ They may have had an easier time accepting this new system than Ch'ing dynasty officials because traditional relations with

16. As Sanjō Sanetomi observed in a memorial to Iwakura Tomomi in 1871, "The purpose of treaties among the powers is both to maintain equal rights and refrain from mutual insults or aggression and to exchange the profits of trade under their procedures and regulations; moreover, since all countries, as a matter of course, enjoy equal rights, it goes without saying that these treaties must be based on equal rights. . . . It is the law of nations (*rekkoku kōhō*) that guarantees good will in intercourse and regulates the profits of trade. On the law of nations depends the maintenance of equal rights among countries by restraints on [national] strength, regulation of disparity in size, and support of the just principles of the laws of Heaven (*tenri*) and the Way of Man (*jindō*)."

See Sanjō, "Iwakura tokumei zenken shishishi teimei kakkoku hōmon ni kansuru ken," in *NGB*, 4:67.

17. "Bei-ō shisetsudan haken no riyūsho," in Shibahara, Ikai, and Ikeda, *Taigaikan*, 17.

other countries did not place Japan at the center of its own world system. Rather, the *bakufu* had organized relations with Korea, China, the Ryukyus, and the Dutch on an ad hoc basis, dealing with each in a different fashion rather than trying to fit them into a ceremonial matrix designed to underline Japan's centrality.

On the other hand, gunboat diplomacy made it clear that some nations were more equal than others. While the Westerners denied the old ritual hierarchies, they created a new hierarchy of power, and the more "civilized" a country was, the higher it stood in that hierarchy. The Western nations gave lip service to the "equality of nations," but in practice they regarded themselves as on a higher level than those nations with whom they had concluded unequal treaties, including Japan. The Westerners justified extraterritoriality and consular jurisdiction, for example, on the ground that the laws of Japan were too "barbarous" and "uncivilized" for Westerners to submit themselves to. As the Japanese leaders came to understand better the nature of the imperialist world order, they realized what a considerable affront to national amour-propre the treaties with the Westerners were. Visceral xenophobes had rejected foreign intercourse in the 1850s and early 1860s because they thought that consorting with Western barbarians was polluting, defiling, and disgusting. By the late 1860s, however, the treaties came under criticism because they revealed national weakness and ignorance.¹⁸ The Meiji leadership was acutely aware that the treaties with the Westerners had placed Japan in a subordinate place in the hierarchy of power. Needless to say, they put the blame on the *bakufu*. Even the departing shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, in his letter of resignation as shogun, expressed the hope that a change in regime would enable the country "to maintain its rank and dignity among the nations of the world."¹⁹

18. For example, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the Dajōkan to bring the matter of treaty revision before the Shūgiin in January 1871, officials argued that existing treaties had been concluded at a time when the Japanese knew little about conditions abroad and the people lacked unity. The *bakufu* had no choice but to sign the treaties as a temporary expedient. But conditions had changed, the authority of the emperor had been restored, and the country was making progress toward "enlightenment," so it was appropriate to raise the question again. In any event, *uchū no kōgi* required that Japan be established on equal and parallel standing with the Western powers. Shimomura, *Meiji shonen jōyaku kaiseishi*.

19. Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, *Meiji Japan*, 2:65. Similar sentiments were expressed in a memorial on foreign intercourse presented by the daimyos of Echizen, Tosa, Choshu, Satsuma, Aki, and Kumamoto, who urged that the country rid itself of narrow-minded xenophobia "in order to restore the fallen fortunes of the empire and to make imperial dignity respected abroad." Ibid., 2:79.

While the new government enjoined the populace to abide by the treaties and to refrain from antforeign activity, privately its leaders brooded over how best to restore “imperial prestige” (*kōi*), “national prestige” (*kokui*), or “national power” (*kokken*). After all, many of them had begun their political lives as antforeign *jōi* activists, and they chafed against the inferior international status of Japan. To be sure, the Meiji leaders worried about foreign economic domination or potential foreign territorial intrusions on the borders of the archipelago, but their early foreign policy was shaped by an almost obsessive concern with enhancing “national prestige” or “national rights.”²⁰ Wherever the leaders might stand on other issues, they agreed that the achievement of symbolic and legal parity with the West through treaty revision was of the highest priority. Less than a year after the Restoration the foreign affairs office sounded out the Western diplomatic community about the possibility. As they quickly learned from rebuffs at the hands of Western diplomats like Sir Harry Parkes, however, treaty revision was a long-term task, requiring a program of massive self-strengthening, institutional change, and cultural reform. The Iwakura mission, originally intended to launch treaty revision negotiations with the Western powers, was transformed into a mission to explore the secrets of Western wealth and power firsthand.

Failure in this early effort at treaty revision did not deter the Meiji leaders from attempting to retrieve a degree of national dignity by restructuring relationships with China and Korea. Given its limited fiscal, political, and military resources, the Meiji government was in no position to embark on an expansionist policy in the 1870s and 1880s, but it could notch itself higher in the international hierarchy by doing to their neighbors what the Westerners had done to Japan. When the Meiji government sought diplomatic relations with China in 1870, it tried—unsuccessfully, to be sure—to extract an “unequal treaty” from the Ch’ing government modeled on Western treaties with China. Their assumption was that Japan, having embarked on a reform program, had clambered one or two rungs higher than the Chinese on the ladder toward “civilization.” The Chinese, needless to say, did not share this assumption and rebuffed the Japanese demands. And when the Meiji leaders sent an expedition to “open” Korea in 1876, not only were they consciously mimicking the Perry expedition of twenty years before, but

20. In 1943 Ōkawa Shūmei observed that a policy to spread “the imperial dignity” was a positive expression of the “expel the barbarians” idea. Ōkawa, *Ōkawa Shūmei zenshū*, 2:780.

afterward they were eager to show the Koreans how easy it was to assimilate the benefits of “civilization.”

The pursuit of international status continued to consume the Meiji leadership down through the 1890s. Indeed, as Itō Hirobumi noted in 1899, “the hope of competing with the Powers for leadership” lay behind the post-Restoration development of the country.²¹ The Meiji leaders constantly fretted about how their policies would affect “national prestige.” Whatever benefits or harm a particular policy might entail on other grounds, its effects on Japan’s international standing always figured in the debate. And when the Japanese leaders were confronted with a “national humiliation,” such as the Korean refusal to enter into Western-style diplomatic relations in the early 1870s or the Triple Intervention that forced a victorious Japan to return the Liaotung concession to China in 1895, they renewed their effort to establish Japan’s “proper place” in the international order. Significantly, it was only when Japan consolidated its colonial empire that the Meiji leaders finally felt that Japan had been accepted as a full-fledged power by the Western nations.

STRATEGIC ANXIETY

The encounter with Western imperialism aroused a perennial anxiety over national security. In the 1850s, as young men, the Meiji leaders had watched helplessly as the gunboats of Commodore Perry sailed brazenly under the coastal defenses at Edo, and as *jōi* activists they had fulminated at the intrusions of the foreigners into the newly opened treaty ports. Even after the Restoration they still felt Japan to be at risk. As Iwakura Tomomi noted in a memorandum to Sanjō Sanetomi in 1869:

Although we have no choice in having intercourse with the countries beyond the seas, in the final analysis those countries are our enemies. Why are they our enemies? Day by day these countries develop their arts and technology with a view to growing in wealth and power. Even a little country like Holland remains independent among the powers and submits itself to no other power. That is because the people’s hearts, high and low, are united in revering their monarch and loving their state. Thus, every foreign country tries to place itself over other countries. Country A directs its efforts at country B, country B at country C—they are all the same. That is why I say, all countries

21. Komatsu, *Itō-kō chokuwa*, 332.