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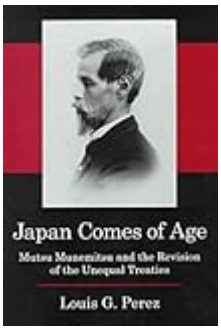

Louis G. Perez. *Japan Comes of Age: Mutsu Munemitsu and the Revision of the Unequal Treaties.* Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999. 244 pp. $41.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-3804-0.

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Treaty Revision and the Razor

Despite Mutsu Munemitsu's abilities, few enjoyed his company. Familiar to diplomatic historians as the foreign minister who revised Japan's unequal treaties with the Western powers in the 1890s, he was known to his contemporaries as "the Razor": an argumentative and "disagreeable misanthrope" (pp. 21, 32). Even as a young man, Mutsu began building a reputation for arrogance. Gunrunning for imperial loyalists in 1867, he and his sharp tongue nearly exhausted the patience of his colleagues. In the aftermath of a shipping accident, they momentarily considered killing Mutsu and chalking him up as the collision's victim; only at the last moment was his future brother-in-law able to dissuade them (p. 27). Making a hero out of the Razor is no easy feat. Louis G. Perez, however, succeeds and, in doing so, makes a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of Japanese diplomatic history. Synthesizing an extensive literature – in both Japanese and English – on Meiji diplomacy [1], Perez also provides an original and incisive analysis of Japan's quest for sovereign equality.

In his first chapter, Perez describes Mutsu's life and career leading up to his appointment as foreign minister in 1892. From Wakayama domain, a close ally of the Tokugawa shogunate, Mutsu had to struggle in the 1860s and 1870s against the handicap of being a political outsider: the best positions in the new Meiji government went to men from the domains that had overthrown Tokugawa rule. These circumstances fueled Mutsu's ambition.

The next two chapters discuss the treaties Japan was compelled to sign with the Western powers in the 1850s and 1860s. These unequal treaties imposed extraterritoriality on Japan, making its foreign residents subject only to the legal jurisdiction of their home nations' consular courts. Adding injury to insult, the treaties established artificially low tariff rates, restricting an important source of revenue for the Japanese government. For forty years, revision of these humiliating treaties was Japan's "national crusade" (p. 11), as integral to Meiji history as industrialization and the establishment of constitutional government. Cabinets rose and fell, but none, until Mutsu's tenure, succeeded in constructing revised treaties satisfactory to both the Western powers and the Japanese public; indeed, some cabinets fell because of

their inability to solve the problem of treaty revision.

In the remaining five chapters, Perez analyzes Mutsu's leadership in finally bringing this endeavor to a successful conclusion. In 1894, Japan and Great Britain signed a treaty eliminating consular jurisdiction and revising the tariff rates (Japan would wait until 1911 for full tariff autonomy). The other Western powers soon followed Britain's lead.

Perez's strength lies in his discussion of Mutsu's political and diplomatic tactics. Much like Mutsu himself, Perez carefully balances the many factors – domestic and foreign – that commanded attention in the busy months of 1893-94. In Tokyo, managing by telegram the treaty negotiations being conducted in London, Mutsu first had to deal with Japan's own representative to Whitehall. Aoki Shuzo, himself a former foreign minister, was frequently insolent and occasionally insubordinate in his dispatches to Mutsu, who shrewdly recognized when to give Aoki free rein and when to tighten them. Mutsu was willing to tolerate these faults because of Aoki's virtues as an experienced and canny negotiator.

Mutsu also had to contend with opponents in the Diet, who loudly criticized the government for continuing to knuckle under to the Western powers and failing to protect the interests of the Japanese people. Indeed, public protest had cut short the revision efforts of two of Mutsu's predecessors at the Foreign Ministry, Inoue Kaoru and Okuma Shigenobu, whose piecemeal proposals had been attacked as inadequate. With Mutsu in office, leaders of the political opposition continued to proclaim that the continuing humiliation of the unequal treaties proved that the cabinet was ineffectual and unpatriotic. In December 1893, Mutsu vowed in a speech to the Diet to remove "any obstruction to the consummation of that great national policy [treaty revision]" (p. 120). This was no idle threat: on the following day, the government dissolved the Diet to prevent it from offering anti-foreign resolutions; five months later, the government did so again as the treaty negotiations neared a conclusion.

Even more perilous, just as success in the negotiations seemed within reach, Japanese and Chinese troops began to face each other down in Korea. Knowing that the British might now threaten to stall the treaty negotiations in the hope of extracting more concessions from Japan, Mutsu yielded on the minor issues remaining. As Perez conveys the urgency of these final weeks, readers are likely to wring their hands along with Mutsu as they see him setting up a cot outside the Foreign Ministry telegraph room, awaiting news from Aoki in London. Finally, word came: on 16 July 1894, the treaty was signed. Two weeks later, Japan and China were at war.

Perez's central thesis is that Mutsu was "the truly indispensable factor" to Japan's success in 1894: without him, Japan's treaty revision efforts would have failed again (p. 16). Certainly, Mutsu's talents suited him for the task. In many ways, however, he also happened to be in the right place at the right time. In the early 1890s, for instance, Great Britain grew concerned about Russian power, symbolized by the Franco-Russian military alliance and construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.[2] The British began to see Japan as a potential ally against Russian expansion and knew that treaty revision would be a prerequisite for such cooperation (p. 88).

Mutsu also learned much from his predecessors at the Foreign Ministry. The experiences of Inoue and Okuma had shown him the importance of dealing first with Great Britain – the most persistent obstacle to revision – and of controlling domestic opposition. As Perez notes, Mutsu calculated that the dissolution of the Diet would help show the British that the Japanese government would protect foreign interests (p. 121). Under the supervision of Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi, Inoue (now Home Minister), and Mutsu, the government also disbanded opposition groups and suspended newspapers. Further, Mutsu and the cabinet recognized the necessity of internal unity: with the assistance of Ito and Inoue, Mutsu was able to secure for his revision plan the prior written approval of every government minister.

Despite its thesis, Perez's account does not show that Mutsu was *the* hero of treaty revision; rather it demonstrates that the *cumulative* efforts of Meiji leaders enabled Japan to reach this milestone. Mutsu was one among many skilled leaders. Indeed, the second Ito government (1892-96) was dubbed the "Cabinet of All Talents" because of the many senior statesmen who served in it (p. 89). Given their experience and Britain's new strategic concerns, Mutsu's indispensability in 1894 remains an open question.

Perez deliberately does not analyze Mutsu's role as foreign minister during the Sino-Japanese War or the subsequent Triple Intervention, when Russia, France, and Germany compelled Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China. Focusing only on Mutsu and treaty revision, *Japan Comes of Age* does not offer an interpretation of his full diplomatic career. It does, though, provide vital pieces of this puzzle to other scholars.

Finally, from an editorial perspective, readers will find that Perez's tendency to discuss points in numerically ordered sentences or paragraphs frequently interrupts the flow of his work. Too often, the narrative dissolves and the skeleton of an outline appears. Also, the book's title has the unintended consequence of reinforcing the Western perceptions of Japan that led to the unequal treaties in the first place. Although Perez conscientiously places such words as "civilized" in quotation marks, the suggestion that Japan "came of age" (p. 9) in 1894 implies that the initial denial of judicial and tariff autonomy was justified because of the "immaturity" or "backwardness" of Japanese institutions (an argument with which Perez clearly disagrees throughout his text).

Nevertheless, scholars and students of Japanese diplomacy and Meiji politics will find that Perez offers a comprehensive and authoritative introduction to the unequal treaties and Japan's efforts to revise them. As more readers share the company of the Razor, this work should become a standard feature in footnotes and bibliographies.

Notes

[1]. Important works include Inoue Kiyoshi, *Joyaku kaisei: Meiji no minzoku mondai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955); Kajima Morinosuke, *Joyaku kaisei mondai*, vol. 2 of *Nihon gaikoshi*, (Tokyo: Kajima Kenkyujo Shuppankai, 1970); F. C. Jones, *Extraterritoriality in Japan and the Diplomatic Relations Resulting in Its Abolition, 1853-1899*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931); Payson J. Treat, *Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Japan, 1853-1905*, 3 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932-38); Ian Nish, *Japanese Foreign Policy, 1869-1942: Kasumigaseki to Miyakezaka* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1977.

[2]. Inoue, *Joyaku kaisei*, 194-96; Kajima, *Joyaku kaisei mondai*, 203.

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