

UNDERSTANDING JAPAN

BY J. ALAN JENKINS

IT has been said of the Buddha that "There is perhaps no person in history in regard to whom have arisen so many opinions that are either wholly or partly false". Substitute "nation" for "person" and you have the case of Japan today as it rests in the hands of the average American. First of all, the Japanese aren't "heathen". "Heathen" can hardly be applied to a nation which, shocked by reports of the Inquisition and the horrors of the stake, rightfully distrustful of "Christian" nations, torn itself by internal strife resulting from the introduction of Christianity, closed its doors in 1612 to the Church Militant not in the interests of national integrity alone but on humane grounds as well. Nor is the "geisha" a prostitute. The "geisha" is a professional entertainer, accomplished musically, often highly intelligent. Nor are all Japanese merchants pretenders and cheats. *Some* of them are—a fact which may be largely explained historically. In old feudal Japan, the Japan of the 13th Century and the Japan of 1867, merchants were déclassé. They made up the lowest class of society. The priests and the military ranked first, the farmers second, and your merchants a poor third. Not until the beginning of the 18th Century did gold begin to take the part in Japanese life it had already taken for some centuries in the life of Western nations. The standard has been lowered, not raised. And what of the man in the street's pet bogus, the militarists? Japan has her share of them, true, and when Russia attempted to force her into compliance and self-effacement in the decade preceding the Russo-Japanese war it was well she had. If there were less agitation on this side of the Pacific and more head-work on the part of Congress, militarism in Japan, in so far at least as this nation constitutes its direct inspiration, would be a drug on the market.

Whenever nations, as well as individuals, claim backgrounds wholly dissimilar, misconceptions and misunderstandings are certain to arise. It is only natural that we should think in terms and symbols intelligible to ourselves. But when this means following the line of least thought resistance it is time for us as a nation to watch our step. Understanding Japan, alas for the sluggish-minded, implies acquiring a new background—necessary fragmentary in the case of most of us though none the less important. Needless to say, Japan has been at great pains to understand ours. As the center of world interest keeps shifting to the Pacific it becomes increasingly important that we should understand *theirs*. "Orientation", as far as the United States is concerned, becomes a term of growing significance in its most literal sense.

What are the lines along which the civilization of Japan has evolved? What forces have most strongly influenced its development? Our existence, as a nation, dates back just 150 years. The history of the Japanese nation runs back some 1400 years and its mythology a full 1000 years more. Five generations take us back to Washington. Present-day Japanese are just eighty generations removed from the time of Jimmu Tennō, alleged descendant of the gods and "father" of the Japanese Empire. Now pick out the more important threads, from a sociological and evolutionary point of view, in a history of such proportions? It can be done and in an easily remembered way.

Chronologically we may speak of Japan's dim past, of her immediate past, and of the present. Again, we may say that the first concerns itself with Japan alone, that the second witnesses Japan affianced to China, and the third her assumption of bigamy, i. e., alliance with the West. The casual visitor, landing at ports largely Westernized, and never penetrating far enough inland or staying long enough to get any but the most superficial impressions, is apt to think of Japan as having sold her birthright. Not yet. The danger is there and one is perpetually astonished with the evidence, on every hand, of Western method and manufacture, but the longer one lives in Japan the more one comes to realize the super-imposed nature of it all. True of the Whole East, this is especially true of Japan. To live in the Far East is to be continually impressed with the ephemeral nature of Western civilization, of any civilization, in its purely commercial and industrial aspects. But this side of Japan, because it is the most obvious, is well enough known.

It is the story of two generations. Our present interest lies with the other seventy-eight.

China is weak; Japan is powerful. For back of the Japanese Empire is an idea. This idea takes its rise in mythology. Izanagi and Izanami, pre-creation gods, mated. First they produced the islands of Japan, then various gods and from the descendants of these gods, in turn, came Emperor Jimmu and the ancestors of the Japanese. This story of creation, as found in the two oldest "histories" of Japan, the *Ko-ji-ki* and the *Nihongi* (both dating from the 8th Century, A. D.), is given the same popular credence in Japan exacted by the book of Genesis here. Only the Japanese are a "chosen people" and their Emperor a representative of the gods. That "Emperor-worship", in the case of the educated, belongs to the "limbo of forgotten things" is true. Reverence rules in its stead. But then the Emperor in Japan has always been more important as an *idea* incarnate than as Emperor. The present Emperor is non compos mentis. But the *idea* is still there. One's devotion to the flag has nothing to do with the chemistry of its fabric.

Intimately bound up with the mythology of Japan, and consequently with the "Emperor-idea", is Shintoism. Shintoism, as the native religion, touches all aspects of Japanese life. Hearn goes so far as to say that "the history of Japan is really the history of her religion". It may be held responsible for (1) Japan's possessing today the oldest ruling dynasty in the world (2) together with the teachings of Confucius, the family system.

Now no one knows when ancestor-worship first started in Japan. But as it evolved the gods of Shintoism took shape. Among these Amaterasu, the sun-goddess (from whom the Emperor descended), and the Emperor himself, as the "Son of Heaven", became of special importance. Thus religion and early government, to a very appreciable extent, became identified. Each strengthened the other. To over-estimate the importance of this reciprocal relationship is hardly possible. In the course of time it was to prove Japan's salvation. Community government, further, in so far as each community had its local gods, began to wear a religious aspect. Finally, family government early began to pivot on the idea of ancestor-worship as expressed through Shintoism, "The Way of the Gods".

In Japan the unit is the family. For long ago, out of the worship of ancestors, there grew both a religion and an ethics of the

home. Then later Confucianism, reinforcing the ideas of moral responsibility developed through Shintoism, came from China. Only Shintosim emphasized one's responsibility to the dead; Confucianism, one's responsibility to the living. To the Shintoist the dead became gods, exerted a mystic influence over human affairs. It became necessary to live on good terms with them, to perpetuate the family in order to "carry on" with the family cult. If there were no sons, a husband might be adopted for the eldest daughter. In such cases the husband took the adopting family's name. If there were no children at all (1) an heir might be adopted (2) the wife divorced (3) as among the ancient Jews, a mistress taken.

Under such a system, the creative force being assumed as masculine and hence the duty of cult maintenance falling to the husband, women naturally held a subordinate position. True under early Shintoism, this became still truer under the influence of Confucianism. By the end of the 8th Century a power in the life of the nation, Chinese philosophy brought to Japan the doctrine of woman's perpetual obedience to man: before marriage to the father: after marriage to the husband; widowed, to the son. Then Buddhism, following, contributed its article of faith, i. e., that women were "unclean, temptations, obstacles to peace and holiness". Sterility, lewdness, failure to obey either the father-in-law or mother-in-law, larceny, jealousy, disease, and loquacity were the grounds upon which a wife might be divorced. She possessed no corresponding rights.

Since 1893, when the Civil Code was promulgated, this has all been changed. The wife possesses practically the same legal rights as her husband. Divorce may be (1) by mutual consent (involving no judicial procedure) (2) judicial. The liberal nature of the law may be inferred from the fifth cause for which either party may bring action for divorce viz., "If one party is so ill-treated or grossly insulted by the other that it makes further living together impracticable."¹ The individual has been recognized at the expense of the family system.

Let no one suppose, however, that the framers of Japan's new code were unwise enough not to provide for the continuance of the old system. It was given adequate legal recognition. Unless a man has completed his 30th or a woman her 25th year, the consent of parents is necessary for marriage. Again, "If a husband and wife have effected a divorce by mutual consent, arranging as

¹ International Legal Directory, "Japan".

to whom the custody of the children shall belong becomes the *husband's* right.²" Full provision was made for the adoption of husbands and heirs hitherto mentioned. The new Civil Code rejects the teachings of Chinese philosophy and jurisprudence, mocks the traditional tenets of Buddhism, at the same time preserving the customs and forms necessary for the continued existence of the family system. For back of Cofucianism and Buddhism in Japan lies Shintoism which in the home, no less than in its support of the Imperial Cult, has for centuries proved a unifying force in the life of the nation.

It is hard for some to think of Shintoism as a religion. But think of religion as essentially a "conservation of values" and Shintoism becomes a religion in the deepest sense. It preserves the loving memory of the dead. It enriches the atmosphere of the home. It acts as an incentive to nobler living. For is it not true that the spirits of the dead hover about their tablets? As Hearn writes in his "Japan, an Interpretation": "From their shrines they observe and hear what happens in the house; they share the family joys and sorrows; they delight in the voices and the warmth of the life about them. They want affection but the morning and evening greetings of the family are enough to make them happy. They require nourishment but the vapor of food contents them. They are exacting only as regards the daily fulfillment of duty. . . . To cause them shame by ill-conduct, to disgrace their name by bad actions, is the supreme crime. They represent the moral experience of the race."

If the traveller, arriving at Yokohama or Kobe, is first struck with the evidence he finds of Western civilization, let him but linger a fortnight and his most lasting impression will be that of a country immeasurably enriched by Buddhist art and architecture. Graceful temple roofs, magnificent gates, the gigantic Buddhas at Kamakura and Nara, lofty pagodas, Buddhist pictorial art in temple and palace, these will he remembered. And the sound of giant, bronze temple bells, a sound strangely disquieting, full of the sorrow and wisdom of the East, will echo long in his heart. For if through Shintoism one can get nearer to the heart of Japan, it is through Buddhism one gets to know Japan's more popular side.

When we speak of Japan as having been affianced to China, it must be remembered that the link was a religious one, Buddhism. And when we speak of this as having occurred in the "immediate

² International Legal Directory, "Japan".

past", it must be remembered that we are using the phrase in a relative sense. It was in the 6th Century that Buddhism came to Japan. It brought with it all that was best in the civilization of China and proved the greatest cultural force Japan has ever known. It filled the country with temples and works of art; it encouraged learning; it extended the philosophic and spiritual horizon of the Japanese.

Shintoism and the newer religion conflicted only at the start. Then the two joined forces, places being found in the Buddhist pantheon for the gods of Shinto belief. Amaterasu, goddess of the sun and ancestress of the Imperial family, came to be worshipped by Buddhists and Shintoists alike. This was in the 9th Century and the two religions were (theoretically, at least) as one until 1871 when they were again separated.

Christianity was introduced in Japan by Francis Xavier, a Jesuit priest, in 1549. First taken as the propagator of a new Buddhist sect, he was given a Buddhist monastery. The new faith spread rapidly. Far-seeing lords, appreciating the connection between trade and Christianity, renounced Buddhism and their vassals followed suit. There were doubtless bona fide Christians, as various cases of martyrdom would attest, but for the most part, as Brinkley says, it was a "harvest of artificial growth". Christianity, as interpreted by the Jesuits and Franciscans, did little in 16th Century Japan but help close the country to the world (1637) for over two hundred years.

One of the most interesting developments of modern Japan centers in the new Buddhism. I refer to such activities sponsored by the Buddhists as "Buddhist Sunday-schools", the "Young Men's Buddhist Association", orphanages, homes for ex-convicts, and "evangelistic campaigns". Hitherto the sutras having been in difficult Chinese, far beyond the understanding of all but the highly educated, "sectarian bibles" in the common written language of the people have recently been putting in their appearance. The largest and most powerful sect of Buddhism in Japan, the Shin, has been particularly active along these lines. Its main temple in Kyoto boasts over 600 Sunday-schools. If Christianity in Japan were responsible for the rejuvenation along modern lines of this leading Buddhist sect alone, its continued existence as a challenging faith would be justified.

But we have strayed into the present, the too "immediate past". We have said nothing, thus far, of the more purely historical side

of Japan—of the rise of the great military families, of feudalism, of the decline of the royal power, of the Restoration. For from the 6th Century on, the actual administration of the country came to lie more and more in the hands of the great military families; and from the 13th Century on down to 1867 the Imperial Court suffered almost total eclipse. The Emperor became a figure-head, far too strongly entrenched as an *idca*, as the traditional focal-point of Shinto belief, to be supplanted, too weak in his own right to successfully challenge the ruling military chief. There was a time when the Imperial treasury was so low that the Emperor's corpse remained unburied for forty days, awaiting funds. There was a time when the unfortunate Emperor had to earn his own living as a calligraphist. There were *times* when the "Heavenly Sovereign", in female attire, unceremoniously fled from his palace. The story of Japan's Imperial family is of epic proportions but for the student of history and sociology it affords a fascinating tale.

The Restoration came in 1867. The story of the resignation of the Shogun and of the Emperor's subsequent reinstatement to full civil and military power constitutes one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of any nation. For two centuries a closed country, Japan suddenly found her existence jeopardized. Two of her ports having been bombarded, Kagoshima in 1863 and Shimonoseki in 1864, and her own weakness made manifest, Japan took her cue—Westernization. Shinto scholars, busy since the beginning of the century in reasserting their Emperor's divine right to supreme rule, had finally, in the face of a common peril, evoked the latent loyalty of his people. The Japanese were behind their Emperor to a man. In the hands of a few master statesmen, Emperor Meiji among them, the little Empire presented a united front to the world. She destroyed feudalism; revolutionized her government; modernized her army and navy. China in 1894-95 and Russia some ten years later both discovered how well she had learned to speak her lines.

Japan owes her unity and consequently her present position as a ranking power to (1) Shintoism (2) insularity (3) imitative capacities. Shintoism, backbone of the nation, through its challenge to the loyalty of the Japanese, made possible both the Restoration and the success of Japan's subsequent Re-formation along Western lines. Shintoism constitutes the primal source of Japan's esprit de corps. Some day, in the dim future, it will belong to the past—with Japan strong enough to do without it. Japan's insular

position, further, has made not only for oneness and a community of interests but for a progressive spirit among her people as well. These two factors, religious-sociological and geographical, largely explain the startling contrast afforded by the positions of Japan and China today. Our third factor, Japan's imitative capacities, it has been customary to emphasize to the exclusion of the other two. That Japan has a genius for adaptability and the rapid assimilation of new ideas is true. Yet it is equally true that her race is far from one lacking in creative power. When we remember the four great sects of Buddhism (preeminently the Shin) that arose in Japan during the 12th and 13th Centuries which together, according to Reishauer in his "Studies in Japanese Buddhism", represented "as real a development of Indian and Chinese Buddhism as is the Protestantism of Germany, England and America a real development of medieval and early Christianity", it becomes difficult, turning to this page of Japan's history, to unreservedly classify her genius as "imitative". The "creative" and the "imitative" are closely related. It is a phantom line that separates the two.

That Japan should be playing "the sedulous ape" as far as Western method and manufacture are concerned is only natural. Some seven decades ago Commodore Perry, emissary extraordinary of a new order, forced her to go to school. Some six decades ago the inevitable had been accepted and the Restoration was under way. Some five decades ago, Japan having abolished feudalism, a despatch from Korea announced the breaking of relations with a "renegade from the civilization of the East". Japan, with what Brinkley calls "a Perry show of force" immediately opened her sister country. Obviously the unvoiced grievance of our native alarmist is that Japan has learned too rapidly. She will continue to learn and grow in power and if, through an understanding of her past history and present needs we can help her along the paths of world citizenship, we may expect history's final judgment to record at least one more chapter of which we may well be proud.