

## JAPAN'S ARISTOCRATIC REVOLUTION

By THOMAS C. SMITH

“AN aristocracy,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “seldom yields [its privileges] without a protracted struggle, in the course of which implacable animosities are kindled between the different classes of society.” Despite our democratic partialities, most of us would add, “And why should it?” To know the exalted pleasures of power, and the grace of refined taste with the means of satisfying it; to believe oneself superior on the only evidence that gives conviction—the behavior of others; and to enjoy all this as birthright, with no vitiating struggle, nor any doubt that one’s privileges are for God, King, country, and the good of one’s fellow man—what happier human condition, for a few, have men devised?

Yet, not all aristocracies have behaved as one fancies they must. Japan’s warrior class, a feudal aristocracy though it differed from European aristocracies in crucial respects, did not merely surrender its privileges. It abolished them. There was no democratic revolution in Japan because none was necessary: the aristocracy itself was revolutionary.

Consider the bare outlines of the case. Until 1868, Japan was ruled by a class of knights who alone had the right to hold public office and bear arms and whose cultural superiority the rest of the population acknowledged. A party within this aristocracy of the sword (and swagger) took power in 1868 and embarked on a series of extraordinary reforms. Where there had before been little more than a league of great nobles, they created an immensely powerful central government: they abolished all estate distinctions, doing away with warrior privileges and throwing office open to anyone with the education and ability to hold it; they instituted a system of compulsory military service, although commoners had previously been forbidden on pain of death to possess arms; they established a system of universal public education; and much else. The result was a generation of sweeping and breathless change such as history had rarely seen until

this century. I believe, though of course I cannot prove, that these decades brought greater changes to Japan than did the Great Revolution of 1789 to France.

Why was the Japanese aristocracy—or part of it—revolutionary? Why did it abandon the shelter of its historic privileges for the rigors of free competition, which, incidentally, many warriors did not survive? Its behavior, like that of a man who takes cold baths in the morning, requires a special explanation.

Two general lines of explanation have been offered; though no bald summary can do them justice, even on fuller account they leave much unexplained.

One might be called the prescient patriot theory. That is, the foreign crisis—to be quite specific, the unamiable Yankee, Commodore Perry, and the Americans, English, and Russians who followed him—stimulated the patriotism of the warriors and demonstrated to them the inadequacy of existing institutions, prompting them to make revolutionary innovations in the name of national salvation. This I believe is quite true in a way. But it takes for granted what most needs explaining. Communities in danger do not necessarily seek safety in innovation; commonly they reaffirm tradition and cling to it the more resolutely. Such was the first response to the challenge of the modern West in China and Korea; it also had intelligent and patriotic spokesmen in Japan.

The other explanation may be called the Western analogue theory. It emphasizes (in the century before Perry’s arrival) the improvement of transport, the growth of towns, the development of trade, and the rise of a wealthy merchant class—all important developments which add much to our knowledge of pre-modern Japan. But, suggestive as they are, these developments would better explain, keeping the Western analogy in mind, an aristocracy being overthrown or reluctantly forced to share power with a rising new class, than an aristocracy conducting a social revolution.

Differences, rather than analogies, would seem more to the point. The man who takes cold baths is made of different stuff from most of us; and the Japanese warrior differed from the European aristocrat in ways that throw light on his seemingly odd class behavior. I wish to discuss three such ways that any satisfactory explanation of the

aristocratic revolution, as I will call it, would have to take into account. One has to do with the relations of the warrior to the merchant class; another with social and economic distinctions within the warrior class; and the third with the relations of the warrior class to land and political power.

My earlier statement that there was no democratic revolution in Japan because the aristocracy was revolutionary has an important corollary: had there been a democratic revolution, the aristocracy would not have been revolutionary. Nothing unites an aristocracy so quickly and firmly in defense of its privileges as an attack from below, by classes in which it can perceive neither distinction nor virtue.

Unlike the Western bourgeoisie, townsmen in Japan never challenged aristocratic privileges, either in practice or theory. They were seemingly content with a secondary political role, finding apparent satisfaction in money-making, family life, and the delights of a racy and exuberant city culture. This political passivity is puzzling. It is not to be explained by numerical weakness (Tokyo was a city of a million people in the late eighteenth century, and Osaka was only slightly smaller); nor by poverty, nor illiteracy, nor political innocence. Least of all is it to be understood as reflecting an absence of resentment at the warriors' smug and strutting pretensions. There was resentment aplenty and there were many instances of private revenge; but for some reason resentment never reached the pitch of ideology, never raised petty private hurts to a great principle of struggle between right and wrong. For whatever reasons, townsmen acknowledged the political primacy of the warrior, leaving him free to experiment without fear that to change anything would endanger everything.

But, one may suppose, no ruling group ever launches on a career of radical reform merely because it is free to do so; there must be positive incentives as well. In the Japanese case these incentives were in part born of differences within the aristocracy. Such differences were not unique to Japan, of course, but they can rarely have been more pronounced anywhere.

On the one hand were a few thousand families of superior lineage and very large income, with imposing retinues and magnificent houses, who in practice, though not in law, monopolized the important offices of government; some offices in effect became hereditary. On the other

hand was the bulk of the warrior class, numbering several hundred thousand families, who were cut off from high office and lived on very modest incomes; many in real poverty, pawning their armor and family heirlooms, doing industrial piecework at home to eke out small stipends, and resorting to such pitiful tricks as sewing strips of white cloth to the undersides of their collars so people might take them to be wearing proper undergarments. As warrior mothers proudly taught their children, a samurai might have an empty belly but he used a toothpick all the same.

But it was not so much the contrast between his own and the style of life of his superior that moved the ordinary warrior to fury. It was, rather, the impropriety of the merchant's wealth. Surely it was a perversion of social justice, that the warrior, who gave his life to public service, should live in want and squalor, while men who devoted themselves to money-making lived in ease and elegance, treated him with condescension and even rudeness, and in the end not infrequently found favor with the lord.

The merchant himself was not to blame since he merely followed his nature. Though he was feared and hated for that, ultimate responsibility lay with the effeminate high aristocrats who, through idleness or incompetence, failed to use their inherited power for the proper ends of government. No secret was made of the failure, either. Political writings were full of charges of the incompetence and corruption of government, of the fecklessness and indifference of princes; and the only remedy, it was said, lay in giving power to new men—men of lower rank, who were close to the people and whose characters had been formed by hardship. This was no revolutionary doctrine. It called for a change of men, not institutions; but the men it helped to power were in fact radical innovators.

This brings me to the final difference—or rather to two differences—between the Japanese warrior class and European aristocrats. Japanese warriors did not own land, and their political power was to a greater extent bureaucratic. I want to say more on these points, but first it will be helpful to see how a once feudal aristocracy had come to be without private economic or political power.

We must go back to the late sixteenth century. At that time warriors were scattered over the land in villages where they were overlords,

levying taxes, administering justice, and keeping the peace. To defend their territories and lessen the hazards of life, they had long since banded together into regional military organizations consisting of a lord and his vassals. The normal state among such groups was war or preparation for war, that being the most direct means of increasing territory and territory of increasing strength and security.

Then, about the turn of the century, Tokugawa Ieyasu, a man of authentic genius, who had the remarkably good fortune of having two brilliant predecessors who had already half done what he intended, succeeded in conquering the country. Instead of destroying the feudal leagues or groups, however, he chose to use them to govern, taking care only to establish his own firm control over them. Seemingly a compromise between order and chaos, the resulting political structure, surprisingly, kept the peace for two and a half centuries.

These long years of orderly government, which favored economic growth and urban development, brought profound changes to the warrior class, altering not so much, however, the fact of warrior power (which remained uncontested) as the nature of it. I would like to mention three such changes in particular.

First was a change in the relation of warriors to the land. The lord, in order better to control his vassals and to achieve greater uniformity of administration within the territory he dominated, gradually restricted his vassals' power over their fiefs. He forbade them to administer local justice; he moved them from the land into a town which now grew up around his castle; he decreed what taxes they might collect and at what rates, then decided to collect the taxes himself and in return to pay them stipends in money or kind from his treasury.

There were local exceptions to the rule, but taking the country as a whole, fiefs in land disappeared. Land and the seigniorial rights associated with it, once widely dispersed through the warrior class, were now consolidated in the hands of a few hundred noble families. The typical warrior had become a townsman living on a salary paid him by the lord, with the townsman's disdain for the country and country people. Both his juridical and social ties with the land were gone. If his fief was still an identifiable piece of land at all, it was rarely more than a unit of account, with other land, under the lord's common administration.

Second was the resulting bureaucratization of government. The lord, having taken into his hands his vassals' political and judicial functions, now governed an average population of about 100,000. To police so large a population, to collect its taxes and regulate its trade, to give it justice and maintain its roads and irrigation works, required a small army of officials and clerks. The lord, of course, used his vassals to perform these functions, to man the expanding and differentiating bureaucracy under him. The warriors who manned the bureaucracy exercised far more power over the rest of the population than warriors ever had before; but it was a new kind of power. Formerly power was personal and territorial: it pertained to a piece of land and belonged to a man as inherited right. Now it was impersonal and bureaucratic: it pertained to a specialized office to which one must be appointed and from which he might be removed.

There is unmistakable evidence of the increasingly bureaucratic nature of power in the more and more impersonal criteria for selecting officials. However writers on government might differ on other matters, by the late eighteenth century they were in astonishingly unanimous agreement that ability and specialized knowledge should take precedence over lineage and family rank in the appointment and promotion of officials. To this end they devised tests for office, job descriptions, fitness reports, official allowances, salary schedules, and pensions.

It was only in the lower ranks of officials that the ideal of impersonality came close to realization. Nevertheless, men of low rank were sometimes promoted to high office; merchants and occasionally even peasants with specialized qualifications were ennobled that they might hold office; and promotion in the bureaucracy became for warriors an important means of improving status. If the highest offices usually went to certain well-placed families, this was looked on as an abuse rather than proper recognition of rank, and an abuse that struck at the very foundations of good government. Moreover, many families of high rank were without office, and office rather than rank or wealth gave power.

Thus a group of young samurai who met on the morrow of Perry's first alarming visit to Japan, to consider what they might do for their country, were exhorted by their leader to do what they could *even*

*though none held office.* One cried out: "But what *can* we do without office!" No one, it seems, complained of the lack of age, wealth, or high rank in the group.

The third change I would like to mention followed very largely from the second. The relationship between vassal and lord was slowly, silently, and profoundly transformed. It had been an intimate, intensely emotional relationship, based in no small part on the personal qualities of the lord, a relationship which existed between men who had fought side by side, grieved together at the loss of comrades, whose safety and families' safety depended on their keeping faith. During the centuries of peace and urban living, however, the relationship lost much of its emotional significance. It became distant and formal; it was hedged about by ceremonies and taboos; the vassal came to look on his lord less as a leader in war (for there was no war) than as an administrative head.

One sees this change in the changing concept of the ideal warrior. Once a strong, stout-hearted fellow, quick and warm in his sympathies, generous to the weak and unyielding to the strong, he becomes a man whose native intelligence has been disciplined in the classroom, who gets on harmoniously with his colleagues, who deals with matters within his jurisdiction without fear or favor. Loyalty is still the highest virtue for him; but where once it had meant willingness to follow the lord to death, now it meant giving the lord disinterested advice and conducting oneself in a way reflecting credit on his administration. Qualities of the ideal bureaucrat had come to be viewed as the very essence of the warrior.

Moreover, the power of the lord as administrative head increasingly became merely symbolic; actual power passed to lower echelons of officials. Partly this was a result of the growing complexity of government, but in greater measure it was because the lord's position was hereditary and as time passed fewer and fewer of his breed were men of force and intelligence, fit for the top job. Vassals who still looked on the lord with awe were likely to be men who regarded him from a distance; those who saw him closer, despite all outward deference, could often scarcely conceal their contempt.

Indeed some hardly tried. An anonymous author, writing about 1860, calls the lords of his day time-servers; men brought up by

women deep in the interior of palaces where no sound of the outside world penetrated; surrounded from childhood by luxury and indulged in every whim, they were physically weak and innocent of both learning and practical experience. But it was not revolution that was called for, only better education for rulers, that they might choose better officials. "The secret of good government," the writer confidently declared, "lies in each official discharging his particular office properly, which in turn depends on choosing the right man for the right job."

To summarize up to this point: the two and a half centuries of peace after 1600 brought great changes to the warrior class. They brought a change in the warrior's relationship to the land, which became purely administrative; in his relationship to political power, which became bureaucratic; and in his relationship to his lord, which became distant and impersonal.

I should like now to show, as concretely as I can, the connection between these changes and some aspects of the economic and social transformation of the country after 1868—my so-called aristocratic revolution.

Consider the creation in the years immediately after 1868 of a highly centralized government. This was a brilliant achievement which permitted the new leaders who came to power to formulate for the first time a national purpose and to call up energies that did not before exist. Political power had lain scattered in fragments over the map, each lord collecting his own taxes, maintaining his own army and navy, even following an independent foreign policy. Then, with astonishing speed the fragments were pulled together; a central government created; the entire country subjected to a single will. Feudal lords and their miniature kingdoms were swept away and one bureaucratic empire emerged in their place.

This change was possible in part because warriors had long since been removed from the land and stripped of seigniorial rights. Had these interests remained, the warrior must first have been dispossessed of them—the base of his power and source of his pride. Whoever might eventually have succeeded in this would not likely himself have been a warrior, nor have accomplished the feat without a long and bitter struggle. As it was, only the great lords had to be deprived of their power, and the deed was sooner done because their powers had

come to be exercised, in fact, by officials who might trade them for similar powers within a vastly larger organization.

But what of the vaunted loyalty of the samurai? One would think this must have prevented liquidation of the great territorial lords by their own vassals. The unconditional loyalty to the lord as war leader, however, had shrunk to the conditional loyalty of the administrative subordinate to his chief—a loyalty valid only so long as the chief performed his duties efficiently. That the great lords had long ceased to do this was known to all. Meanwhile a new and higher loyalty emerged, sanctioning—indeed, those who prevailed thought, demanding—the transfer of all power to a central government. This was loyalty to the Emperor, in whose name the aristocratic revolution was carried out. Nor was the emergence of this new loyalty unconnected with the decline of the older one: one suspects that men brought up in the cult of loyalty to the lord, as an absolute obligation and the noblest of human ideals, needed some escape from the disloyalty they felt in their hearts.

Second, consider how the new central government used its power to liquidate the four estates of which society was legally composed. Each estate—warrior, peasant, artisan, and merchant—was theoretically closed, and subject to detailed restrictions concerning occupation, residence, food, and dress peculiar to itself. The new government swept away such restrictions, and endowed men with extensive civic, though not political, rights. Henceforth anything that was legally permissible or obligatory for one, was permissible or obligatory for all; moreover, a system of free public schools very soon gave this new legal dispensation concrete social meaning. The warrior lost his privileges and immunities and was forced to compete in school and out with the sons of tradesmen and peasants. Even his economic privileges were done away with. Warrior stipends were commuted into national bonds redeemable in twenty years, after which time warriors, as such, had no claim on the national income.

Now, how is one to explain a ruling class thus liquidating its privileges, and not by a series of forced retreats but at a single willing stroke? Surely part of the answer lies in warrior privileges not being bound up with the ownership of land. To restrict or even abolish

them, therefore, did not arouse fears for the safety of property, or stir those complicated emotions that seem to attach peculiarly to land as a symbol of family continuity and an assurance of the continuing deference of neighbors. Few ruling classes have ever been so free of economic bias against change. Warrior power was based almost exclusively on office-holding, and this monopoly was not immediately in danger because no other class had yet the experience, education, and confidence to displace warriors in administration. The striking down of barriers between estates, on the other hand, opened up to warriors occupational opportunities formerly denied them, a not insignificant gain in view of the large number of warriors who, with more than normal pride but neither property nor important office, were nearly indigent.

This brings me to a third aspect of the revolutionary transformation of Japanese society after 1868: the explosion of individual energies that followed the sudden abolition of status distinctions. Until then opportunity was very limited; men looked forward to following the occupations of their fathers, and even to living out their lives in their same villages and towns and houses. After it, everything seemed suddenly changed, and young men strove with leaping hope and fearful determination to improve their characters, to rise in the world, to become something different from their fathers.

For warriors the abolition of status restrictions meant finding new occupations and new roles in society. Few had enough property after the commutation of stipends to live without work, and not all could continue in the traditional occupations of soldier, official, policeman, and teacher. A very large number were forced either to suffer social eclipse or become merchants, industrialists, lawyers, engineers, scientists; or they saw in these occupations exciting new opportunities for wealth and fame.

In any case, there was a grand redirection of warrior talent and ambition. Despite the traditional warrior aversion to money-making and the merchant's love of it, for example, most of the first generation of modern entrepreneurs, above all the earliest and most daring, came from the warrior class. Nor is this to be explained merely by the occupational displacement of the warrior. Part of the explanation

lies in the warrior's aristocratic background—his educational preference under the old regime, his cult of action, and (at his best) his intense social idealism.

Okano Kitaro, a man born in a warrior family of low rank, who founded an important provincial bank, illustrates the point. He writes in his autobiography: "I lost my wife and third daughter in the earthquake of 1923. They were on their way to a resort hotel when the great quake struck, and their train plunged into the sea. When news of the accident reached me my courage failed, but after a while my sense of responsibility returned and I thought to myself, 'You are head of the Suruga Bank! You must discharge your duty as a banker in this time of trouble! Compared to that, your personal loss is a trifling matter!' My whole body trembled."

Other classes were scarcely less affected than warriors. Finding themselves suddenly free to become whatever wishes, effort, and ability could make them, with not even the highest positions in society closed to competition, they responded with an heroic effort at self-transcendence. Freedom of this kind must always be heady; but one wonders if it is not especially so when it comes suddenly, in societies with a strong sense of status differences, where the social rewards of success are more finely graded and seem sweeter than in societies less schooled to such distinctions.

In a charming little anecdote in his autobiography, Ito Chubei, the son of a peasant who became a leading industrialist, gives some hint of the poignancy of the hopes for success he shared with other peasant boys of his generation. Upon graduating from elementary school not long after 1868, the first boy in his village to do so, Ito called on the headmaster to take leave. He was not surprised to meet with an angry scolding, since he had been far from the model boy. After the master finished his scolding, however, he spoke glowingly of Ito's future and predicted that, despite his rebelliousness, he would be a success. "You will make your mark in the world, I know it!" he exclaimed. And at this the young boy, unable to hold back his tears, wept aloud. Years later, in recounting this incident to a reunion of his classmates, Ito was so affected that he wept again, and his gratitude to his former teacher was no less when, after the meeting, he discovered that all of his classmates had been sent off with exactly the same exhortation!

Such hopes were real because, though not everyone was equal in the competition for wealth and honor, the privileged estate under the old regime had no prohibitive or enduring advantage. In respect to income, for example, warriors were at no advantage over the rest of the population, and though they were the most literate class in society, literacy was very widespread among other classes as well, and it rapidly became more so through the new schools. But most important, perhaps, warriors could not for long claim a cultural superiority, compounded of superior education, elegance, and taste, to act as a bar to the achievement of others, or to divert others from achievement in the pursuit of aristocratic culture. Indeed, by the twentieth century, one can scarcely speak of an aristocratic culture in Japan, despite the peerage created by the government in 1885. Whether a young man came of warrior family could no longer be reliably told from his speech, manners, or social ideas; moreover, his origins were far less important to his self-esteem and the good opinion of others than whether he had a university diploma and where he was employed. I want to return to this point.

In hope of making its revolutionary behavior less puzzling than must otherwise appear, I have discussed three ways the Japanese warrior class differed from Western aristocracies—its relation to other classes, its internal divisions, and its relation to economic and political power. I should like now to suggest, very briefly, some of the ways in which Japanese society seems to be different because its modern revolution was aristocratic rather than democratic.

First, a point so obvious it need only be mentioned in passing: the aristocratic revolution, despite the civil equality and economic progress it brought, has not made for a strong democratic political tradition—but the contrary.

Second, more than any other single factor, perhaps, that revolution helps explain Japan's rapid transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. How different the story must have been had the warriors behaved as one would expect of an aristocracy, if they had used their monopoly of political and military power to defend rather than change the existing order.

Third, as there was no aristocratic defense of the old regime, there was no struggle over its survival; no class or party war in which the

skirmish line was drawn between new and old, revolutionaries and conservatives. There was, of course, tension between traditional and modern, Japanese and Western, but not a radical cleavage of the two by ideology. All parties were more or less reformist, more or less traditional, and more or less modern; excepting perhaps the Communists, whose numbers were insignificant, no pre-war party thought of the past, as such, as a barrier to progress. It was a barrier in some respects, in others a positive aid. Modernization therefore appeared to most Japanese who thought about it at all, not as a process in which a life-or-death confrontation of traditional and modern took place, but as a dynamic blending of the two. I wonder if this does not account in large part for what has seemed to many people the uncommon strength of tradition in the midst of change in modern Japan.

Fourth, status-consciousness is relatively strong in Japan in part because there was no revolutionary struggle against inequality, but for that reason class-consciousness is relatively weak. These attitudes are by no means contradictory. The nervous concern of Japanese for status is quite consonant with their relatively weak feeling about classes—higher-ups to some extent being looked on as superior extensions of the self. This is an attitude familiar to us elsewhere. It is illustrated in Jane Austen by the servant who fairly bursts with pride when his master is made a baronet; and by Fielding's story of Nell Gwynn. Stepping one day from a house where she had made a short visit, the famous actress saw a great mob assembled, and her footman all bloody and dirty. The fellow, being asked by his mistress what happened, answered, "I have been fighting, madam, with an impudent rascal who called your ladyship a whore." "You blockhead," replied Mrs. Gwynn, "at this rate you must fight every day of your life; why, you fool, all the world knows it." "Do they?" the fellow said in a muttering voice; "They shan't call me a whore's footman for all that."

Finally, and this brings me back to an earlier point about the absence of an aristocratic culture in modern Japan, since warriors were never thrown on the defensive by the hostility of other classes, they never felt the need to make a cult of their peculiar style of life, either as evidence of virtues justifying their privileges or as compensation for loss of them. One wonders if Western aristocracies did not put exceptional value on leisure, gambling, dueling, and love-

making, as aspects of the aristocratic way of life, in good part because they were a dramatic repudiation of bourgeois values.

In any case the warrior did not have the means of supporting a leisurely and aesthetic style of life. The revolution found him separated from the land, living on a government salary rather than on income from property; he therefore carried no capital inheritance from his privileged past into the modern age. He had no country estates, no rich town properties, no consols to spare unbecoming compromises with the crass new world of business. On the contrary, warriors were the chief makers of this world and they scrambled for success in it to escape social and economic oblivion.

Then too, this new world was irrevocably bound up with Western culture, whence came (with whatever modifications) much of its technology and many of its conventions. Success in it had very little to do with traditional skills and tastes, and much to do with double-entry bookkeeping, commercial law, English conversation, German music, French painting, and Scotch whiskey. Traditional arts were not forgotten, but they were never identified with a particular social class, least of all perhaps the upper class. It is significant, for example, that the pre-war Peer's Club in Tokyo, located within easy walking distance of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Finance, was a great ugly stone building with marble stairways, thick carpets, mahogany bar, wallpaper, glass chandeliers, and French cuisine. In respect to such things all classes of Japanese, during the first generation or two after 1868, were born cultural equals. One could not learn of these things at home, any more than one could learn there a foreign language or the calculus. Such subjects were taught only in the schools, and the schools were open to anyone.