

Race and empire

Japan, the Hague Convention and the prewar world

It has often been observed that the Hague Peace Convention of 1907 reflected the optimism and idealism of its age, however naive. Its ideals remain a beacon for our times. Then and now, the Convention was cause for pride regarding the progress of human civilisation as a whole, and hope for a brighter and more humane future. But a look back at the Hague Convention, and Japan's place within it, also provides a lens onto the contradictions and ambiguities of a modern world founded on the imperialist law of the jungle.

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A moment of optimism

For Japan, the only non-Western imperial power, participation in the Hague Peace Convention of 1907 had a special symbolic meaning: It was a source of optimism and pride regarding Japan's acceptance as an equal, autonomous, and civilised nation within the global community of nations. As such it was one of a series of events over the decade preceding it, including the victory over Russia in 1905, that marked Japan's arrival as one of the world's Great Powers. Yet for all the optimism, the early 20th century world was also a divided and tough place, a world in which in many ways the law of the jungle applied to the competing Western powers, between the West and the Rest, and between empires and colonies. In this context, the optimistic promise of the Hague Convention could not in fact be shared equally by all, and as a non-Western empire, Japan's position was in fact always a rather tenuous and ambiguous one.

While recent history had taught the Japanese to be wary of how their nation counted among the imperial powers, there was perhaps no moment when Japanese hopes for full inclusion among them burned brighter than in the period of the Hague Convention. How far Japan appeared to have come in the 54 years since the first arrival of Perry's warships in Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853. Then, Western force had compelled a weak, vulnerable Japan to open its ports, its economy, and its society to Western trade and Western ways. Forced to acknowledge that it was far behind the Western powers technologically, militarily, economically and institutionally, Japan had been subject to a humiliating series of 'unequal treaties' that compromised its sovereignty in areas such as international trade and legal jurisdiction.

The forced ending of Japan's 200-year self-imposed isolation from the West and the imposition of the unequal treaties resulted in both a severe sense of humiliation and severe economic instability. Combined with a number of complicated domestic factors, this in turn contributed to a period of turmoil that ultimately led to the establishment of a new political regime in 1868. The primary objective of this new Meiji State was to respond to this crisis and reverse Japan's downward spiral in a threatening world. For more than 250 years, the decentralised, feudal Tokugawa Order had proven a good system for keeping the domestic peace. But it was clearly entirely inadequate for surviving the rapidly changing and competitive international system of the 19th century. Signaling their openness to a new course, Japan's new leaders embarked on a tour around the world in the early 1870s to observe the conditions that had made the West so strong, and the rest of the world so weak. Along the way they not only visited the U.S. and Europe, but also journeyed through the Suez Canal and witnessed conditions in the European colonies of North Africa, India, and Southeast Asia.

What the Meiji leaders saw on their travels confirmed what they had already witnessed from afar: To compete successfully in the modern international system, you needed to have a unified and industrialised nation-state such as those that had emerged in Britain, France, the Netherlands, the US, and, more recently, Germany. Each had a powerful, respected and effective central government, an educated and motivated population, military might, an enterprising industrial elite and a strong sense of national mission. These nation-states had put such a gap between themselves and the rest of the world that they could increasingly project their power across the globe. There was no hiding from this reality any longer: Those who were not quick enough to achieve such central control, national unity, and technological advancement were doomed to colonial domination. Japan had to mobilise and concentrate the human

and material resources needed for industrialisation and the building of a strong military – and to do it quickly.

For the non-Western world at least the last decades of the 19th century were tough ones. Historians refer to this period as the time of 'High Imperialism,' or, more colloquially, the 'carving up of the Globe.' Western expansion continued relentlessly into many parts of Africa and the Asian societies of Burma and Indochina. The scramble for imperial glory and the world's resources intensified. Eyeing the worsening situation in neighbouring China in the 1880s, the liberal Japanese politician Sugita Tei'ichi famously commented,

The Western powers in China squabble over their interests, each trying to assert hegemony over the country. As close as we are to this scene, my colleagues and I wonder whether Japan will be served up as the main dish in the coming feast, or whether it should join the guests at the table. Surely it would be better to sit at the table than to be part of the menu.

Following this hard but inevitable logic, the Meiji leaders set about building a powerful nation able to defend itself in a competitive world. This also meant building an empire that might ensure national security, prosperity and prestige. When Japan thus imposed its own unequal treaties on Korea as early as 1876, there was remarkably little internal concern about the hypocrisy such a move might suggest. It should be noted that this act of imperial mimicry drew no protest from the Europeans or Americans either.

Japan's relatively 'late arrival' on the international scene, and the urgency of Japan's modernisation and imperial expansion, imparted to Japan's development a special character that was in some ways similar to that of Germany. The development of local heavy industry, the expansion of state power and influence, the instilling of patriotism and loyalty in the population, and the strengthening of the military were to receive absolute precedence. Existing resources were to be exploited to maximum advantage, and anything seen to stand in the way was to be consistently and often brutally suppressed. Victims included, for example, fledgling movements for greater popular representation and free speech, movements for improved wages and working conditions, and religious or political beliefs that might be seen to question the political and moral authority of the emperor and the nation.

The Meiji Regime was not always popular among its citizens as a result, and the repressive trends it set in motion were ultimately to haunt Japan's development and its dealings with the rest of the world. In the dog-eat-dog international environment of the late 19th century, however, national loyalty and strength were valued above all else in most of the world's advanced nation-states. For not only the Japanese state but the society at large, the building of empires was seen as a normal and indeed natural consequence of being an advanced nation. Like citizens in Europe and the US, Japanese people were quick to see themselves in the national reflection, and to glory in the advances of the empire. Like those in the West too, Japanese imperial expansion was accompanied by a belief that Japan was also bringing the light of modern civilisation to the world's 'backward' peoples.

For Japanese however, the building of a modern nation and empire had an even deeper significance, precisely for the reason that Japan was not a Western nation. We cannot overlook the fact that the period of high imperialism was one in which European and American racism was at its peak. Just as the Hague Convention was getting underway,

anti-Asian legislation was being passed in California amidst press reports of an impending 'Yellow Peril.' The experience of humiliation at Western hands with the imposition of the unequal treaties, along with Western racial arrogance towards non-whites, awakened in many Japanese a fierce sense of national pride and determination. Reflecting this, the removal of the unequal treaties, and the receipt thereby of a Western acknowledgement that Japan was civilised enough to run its own affairs, was perhaps the single highest political priority of late 19th century Japan.

Not surprisingly, then, early failures in negotiating an honourable ending to the unequal treaties in the 1880s resulted in an extreme popular political backlash. The state's promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, while important as a response to domestic pressures for greater political representation, was perhaps more important for its symbolic value in heralding Japan's legal arrival among the community of civilised nations. In 1894, when Japan finally succeeded in gaining a British promise to end the unequal treaties in 1899, the development was greeted with an outburst of pride and patriotic sentiment. Japan's subsequent easy victory in its first imperial war against China in 1895 brought a great financial windfall in reparations as well as Japan's first colonial possession in the form of Taiwan. But most of all it brought a newfound sense of power and prestige. In 1900, Japan was invited by the Great Powers to contribute substantially in putting down the Boxer Rebellion in China, further signalling to Japanese that it was beginning to be included as a Great Power itself. This sentiment was immensely encouraged with the signing of a treaty of alliance with mighty Britain in 1902, and most of all with the difficult but unexpected victory over Russia in 1905.

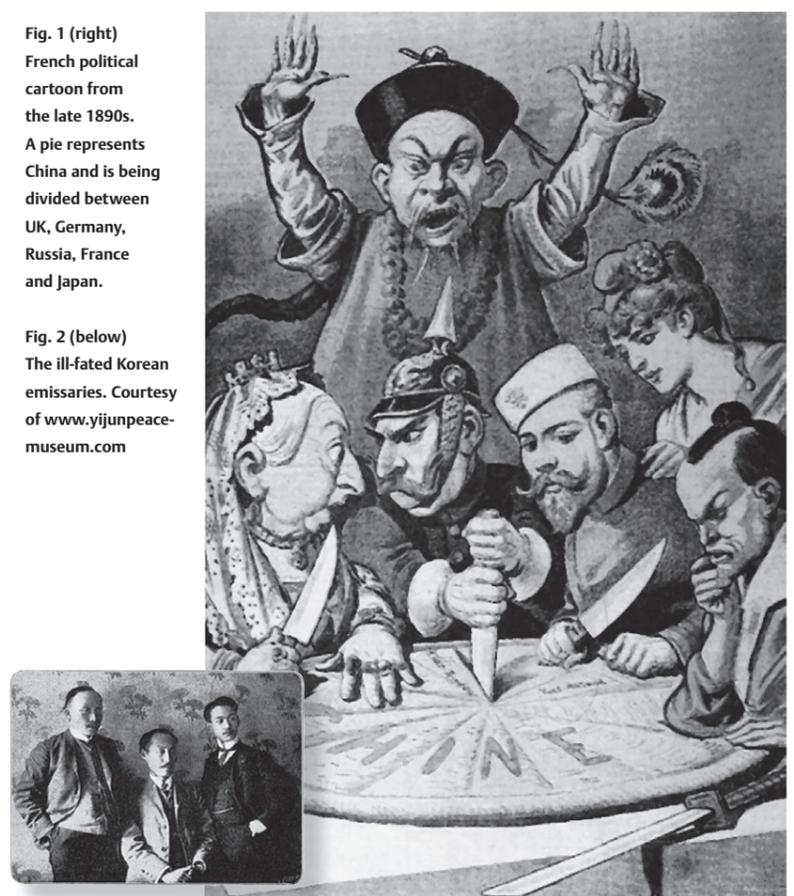
The period in the wake of these developments, which included the year of the Hague Convention, might then be seen as a peak in Japanese optimism and pride at being included as one of the world's Great Powers. Accepted as a military and economic equal, Japanese also hoped that in the long run at least, Japan would also receive acknowledgement as a political, cultural, and racial equal as well. This optimism coincided with, and strengthened, a shared faith in the idealism that characterised the Hague Convention.

A world of double standards

In retrospect it is not hard to see the precariousness of this optimism. Within seven years of the signing of the Convention, the European powers were engaged in the most brutal and all-encompassing war yet seen in human history. World War One laid bare the degree to which the law of the jungle still prevailed in the modern world, whatever Europe's pretences of representing a higher and more humane civilisation. For many observers around the globe, however, the smouldering inter-European rivalry just underneath the Convention's civilised surface was not the only issue that threatened its legitimacy. In a number of ways, the aims and achievements of the Hague Conference, while noble and admirable, must also be set against the awkward reality that the Convention's historical context was a world of double standards with regard to notions of human civilisation itself.

Fig. 1 (right)
French political cartoon from the late 1890s. A pie represents China and is being divided between UK, Germany, Russia, France and Japan.

Fig. 2 (below)
The ill-fated Korean emissaries. Courtesy of www.yijunpeace-museum.com



As early as 1902, the famous Japanese poet and art conservator Okakura Tenshin observed:

“Do we not all alike enjoy the blessings of consular courts where murder is an accident on the part of the Western, accident an assassination on the part of the Oriental; where the systematic perjury of white witnesses overrules the evidence and testimony of all our kind? Do we not all alike rejoice in extorted concessions, and enforced tariffs, in residents who goad us to impotent rage, in financial advisors who advise us to ruin, in medical counsellors who counsel sanitation in measures worse than death? Do we not all alike delight to invest in magnificent harbours where ships may come to drain away our gold; in gigantic railroads which frustrate the water-course, and bring us fever and famine; in splendid churches where they hurl anathemas against the holiest ideals, in expensive hospitals where they only are privileged to recreate, in beautiful parks where we are forbidden to walk? All these bounties we enjoy and what more? – Starvation.”

Among Japanese of his day, Okakura was exceptional both in how much he mistrusted the Western imperialists, and how much he identified with fellow Asians under colonialism. In the more optimistic times of the Hague Convention, most Japanese remained patient that Western recognition of Japan's proper status would eventually come – and that in the meantime, Japan still had much to learn from the West. They saw little alternative to participation and cooperation in a global order dominated by the Western powers.

The Convention's noble notions of universal standards of human decency, basic human rights, equality, and dignity meant to apply to friend and foe alike, were in fact drawn up at a time that most people in the world thought in terms of races and nations that were by nature different from one another in their essential character. More ominously still, at the time, most people in the world's most powerful nations also believed that the world was divided into a hierarchy of peoples and races, whereby it was only natural that the world's 'weaker' and 'uncivilised races' should be perpetually dominated by the stronger ones. The period was in fact one in which this sort of racial thinking had recently become stronger, not weaker. Dutch legal statutes in the Netherlands Indies of the day reflected this trend: systematized in this period, they were divided into three according to race, with separate provisions for whites, 'foreign Orientals,' and 'natives.'

Reflecting this worldview, only representatives of nations acknowledged by the Great Powers as independent and sovereign were invited to attend the Convention. Secondly, the Convention conceived of war as a form of conflict between sovereign nations, with the definitions of combatants defined accordingly. Signators were obliged to follow the rules and understandings therein as they applied to conflicts between sovereign states. But what of colonial conquests and suppression? Within the understanding of international intercourse of the day, including that of the Hague Convention, these conflicts appear to have fallen under the heading of domestic disputes – meaning that the Convention's signators would be under little or no legal obligation to enforce its statutes in these cases. In the colonial thinking of the day, meanwhile, there was a common belief that in dealing with resistance from 'inferior,' races, there was little moral obligation to observe the rules of 'civilised warfare' either.

The case of the people of Korea in this period, including their experience of their would-be representatives at the Convention, is an interesting and provocative illustration of the 'double standards' of the day. Officially at least, prior to 1910, Korea was a sovereign nation. But in recognition of Japanese colonial claims upon Korea, Korean representatives were not invited to the Convention. In the years leading up to the Hague Convention, Japan had encroached increasingly upon Korea, and was clearly heading towards annexation. The Great Powers of the day accepted this as normal intercourse between a strong and advanced nation and a weak and backward one. With its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japanese hegemony

over Korea was generally recognised by the West as a spoil of war. Japan was viewed by both the British and the American governments as a useful ally in countering the threat of Russian regional domination. While some Western missionaries and other progressives were nurturing Korean hopes regarding notions of liberty, equality, and the right of national self-determination, the official line of their governments was: no interference in Japan's increasingly aggressive dealings with Korea, this being after all an 'internal' matter.

Not surprisingly unsatisfied with this situation, and eager to hold the Great Powers to the ideals of peace and justice they believed the Convention represented, the Korean government devised an elaborate plan to send emissaries to the Convention in secret. After arriving in The Hague, the emissaries managed to make their case to the newspapers, but their attendance was successfully blocked by the Japanese delegation. Embarrassed and angered by the unexpected appearance of the Koreans, the Japanese government soon forced the Korean king to retire. Within three years, Japan was to annex Korea as a colony. In the meantime, and from now on, Koreans who resisted were brutally suppressed in ways that often defied the terms of the Hague and Geneva Conventions. Yet officially, the international community never held Japan to account in this 'domestic dispute.'

The experience of the Koreans at the Hague Convention and afterwards clearly indicates that Japan had taken its place among the world's Great Powers. Yet in light of what might be called the racial double standards of the day, Japan's own position at the table of world powers also remained tenuous and provisional. Illustrative in this regard is the way that Japanese were defined in the legal codes of the Netherlands Indies after 1899 as 'Honorary Whites.' On the one hand, this status reflected how far Japan had come in the eyes of the Western world. But it also reflected Japan's contradictory racial position as a nation caught, in some sense, between the Western Imperial Powers and the rest of the world's 'coloured races.' While the West was compelled to acknowledge Japan as an equal in terms of military, economic, and political power by the time of the Hague Convention, Westerners remained much less inclined to recognise Japan as a genuine racial and cultural equal. In the more optimistic times of the Hague Convention, most Japanese remained patient that Western recognition of Japan's proper status would eventually come. They saw little alternative to participation and cooperation in a global order dominated by the Western powers.

As the 20th century wore on, however, the problem of global double standards continued to find Japan as both party to and victim of discriminatory racial treatment. As Japan further modernised, the Japanese grew not only increasingly convinced of their superiority over their Asian neighbours, but also of their right to equal status with the West. When relations with the West worsened amidst the subsequent turmoil in the global order in the 1920s and 1930s – fostered by the Great Depression, increased imperial rivalry, and rising anti-colonial movements, particularly in China – the fact that Japanese had never really felt fully accepted within the Western order made it easier for them to attempt to withdraw from it.

Japan now turned to its Asian neighbours, claiming to act as Asia's leader and champion in a shared struggle against Western domination. The continued Japanese notion of racial and cultural superiority over its Asian neighbours not only undermined any chance of acceptance in this role, but also made possible atrocities against 'brother Asians,' and the Chinese in particular, that violated any notion of civilised conduct in warfare. The subsequent conditions of treatment of Western POWs also appears to have violated the Hague and Geneva protocols. But it is telling that the administration of POW camps, however bad their subsequent conditions, was only formally established by the Japanese state in the weeks following the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941 – more than four years after Japan had begun a brutal war of colonial aggression in China that was to claim, according to certain estimates, some nine million Chinese lives. Here was the application of double standards of the most awful variety: As hated as the Western enemy had now become, their lives were apparently still valued more highly than those of the lowly Chinese.

In establishing a context to the Hague Convention, and in understanding Japan's participation and later contravention of its precepts, it is important to reflect that the world of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was in many ways a world of double standards in which Japan occupied a particularly awkward place. It was a world in which pacifism, universal brotherhood and equality could be sincerely promoted in the name of the advancement of civilisation. At the same time, it was also a highly divided, hierarchical world dominated by the European powers, in which the possession of a superior 'civilisation' was also used as an excuse to dominate 'inferior races'.

In their colonisation of Asia societies such as Korea, the Japanese proved adept at manipulating these same double standards to their benefit. 'Inferior,' 'obstinate' Koreans and Chinese who resisted Japanese rule were treated with ruthless brutality that reached a crescendo in the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). At the same time, as a late arrival to the imperial scene of a 'different race,' the Japanese often felt themselves the victim of double standards at Western hands. For all the successes of their modernisation, nation- and empire-building, the Japanese never felt accepted as full members of the imperial club. The result was a fundamental lack of mutual trust and an underlying resentment that expanded greatly in the period between the two World Wars. In part this reflected the decline in the West's imperial power and stature, prompted by such events as the Global Depression, the rise of communism, and the spread of anti-colonial movements. It was also encouraged and inflamed through the military propaganda and crisis atmosphere that penetrated all walks of Japanese life in the 1930s.

By the time of the Second World War, Japan's longstanding sense of insult and isolation from the Western powers made it easier for Japanese to imagine that they represented a civilisation whose job it was to save Asia from Western imperialism. Blinded to their own role as oppressive imperialists, many Japanese even viewed Chinese anti-colonial resistance as a Western-sponsored anti-Japanese scheme. More so than at the time of the signing Hague Convention in 1907, the Japanese of the World War Two era felt themselves at a far remove from the West racially, culturally, and morally. This is certainly no excuse for the ferocity of Japan's wartime behaviour, but it does perhaps go some way to illuminating at least part of the story behind it.

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