

# A personal account of Japan's Meiji Restoration

by Carol White

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### **Samurai and Silk, A Japanese and American Heritage**

by Haru Matsukata Reischauer  
Charles Tuttle Co., Rutland, Vermont, 1987  
400 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

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Haru Reischauer is the wife of former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer, who has written several books about Japan. Mrs. Reischauer considers herself to be American as well as Japanese, because her mother was born and raised in America, whereas Mrs. Reischauer was born in Japan. In Japan she was tutored by Americans and then attended the American school, and she attended a Christian Science-run college in St. Louis.

All of this would have given Mrs. Reischauer a unique vantage point from which to write another book contrasting the two cultures, or explaining the Japanese to an American audience, but she has been able to do something far more interesting. On both sides of her family, Haru Matsukata Reischauer is related to the men and women who transformed Japan from a feudal to a modern state. She has written about accounts in her possession by members of her own family who participated in these great events, and added her own recollections, particularly of her maternal grandfather.

The story she tells is particularly relevant today for two quite different reasons: It is a welcome counter to the kind of anti-Japanese propaganda which is becoming increasingly popular in the United States. It also opens an exciting window into the roots of the strength of the Japanese economic system.

As is well known, following western demands that they open themselves up to foreign trade, the Japanese began the

process of rapidly transforming their country from a feudal into a modern nation. The Japanese learned a great deal from studying the economics of Friedrich List and Alexander Hamilton, from studying both their published works and the economies of Germany and the United States. That tradition is more alive in Japan today than in either Germany, or most assuredly, in the United States.

Although they learned and assimilated a great deal from the West, nonetheless, as Mrs. Reischauer documents, their ability to do so was rooted in the strengths of Japanese culture itself. And while Japan was relatively isolated for the 200 years before Admiral Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay in 1853, it was never completely closed off either from Europe or China; Nagasaki was kept as a port open to trade with both the Chinese and the Dutch. Japanese intellectuals learned Dutch in order to assimilate the latest advances in science, from astronomy to medicine. For example, inoculation was practiced in Japan at the same time that it was introduced into the United States. Moreover, it is estimated that there were around 300,000 Christian converts in Japan in 1630 when the Jesuits were expelled and Christianity banned. Many of these families and their descendants remained "hidden Christians."

Many Japanese throughout the 19th century debated the question of how to turn Japan into an industrial republic—well before Perry's arrival; and they urged that Japan be reopened to free contact with the West. Nevertheless, they, along with the more conservative members of the ruling elite, were concerned to protect their sovereignty against a correctly perceived threat from the western nations, particularly the British, who used the slogan of free trade as a wedge to open up colonial domination. One had only to look at their brutal intervention into China or the long history of British imperialist domination of India.

This debate was fought out over at least 25 years.

The impetus for the expulsion of the Jesuits was fear that warring feudal families would seek outside support. This, of course, was exactly what later occurred in India, where the British East India Company cleverly played off maharajas and Muslim overlords against each other—a classical “divide and conquer” strategy. Japan’s effort to thwart this gained it 200 years of peace, but at a cost of cultural and economic stagnation, which had begun to seriously concern Japanese intellectuals well before intervention by the American naval fleet.

While ostensibly a monarchy, the Japanese central government was run by a bureaucracy recruited from the ranks of the aristocratic Samurai class, headed by the Tokugawa family. The actual head of state in Japan was the Shogun, an elected figure, but who would be a member of the ruling Tokugawa family. Thus the Japanese had a tradition of a strong federal government. The emperor was maintained as a figurehead; and feudal lords, the Daimyo, retained a good measure of independent control in their domains. By the 1850s many of these Daimyo actively supported westernization.

At the time of the American intervention, the power of the Shogunate had already been weakened because of an economic crisis which had left most of the ruling Samurai class deeply indebted. We in the West have a distorted image of the Samurai, taken from Kurosawa movies, which are modeled on Hollywood cowboy films. In fact, the Samurai were the civil servants of the regime, although they also maintained a military tradition. Class society in Japan was structured by birth, and, along with the Samurai, there were the merchant and a peasant classes.

Throughout this period the merchants, who functioned as bankers, increased their economic—and hence their political—hold over their Samurai debtors. In practice, through marriage or adoption, outsiders were assimilated into the ruling elite, and, in turn, impoverished Samurai dropped into the ranks of merchants or peasants. Although there was fluidity within the apparently castelike class system, it was nonetheless quite rigid and dominated by protocol.

### **Facing the western intervention**

How to respond to the western intervention sparked another national debate, involving educated people from all classes. Slowly but surely, class barriers and the formal structure within the Samurai ranks were eroded in face of the grave danger to the nation. An extraordinarily creative leadership was formed, men who successfully took upon themselves the task of remaking Japan.

The Shogunate was forced to sign treaties with the western powers, allowing them limited rights to trade, which opened the Shoguns to attack from all sides. They were accused of selling out on the one hand, and of failure to industrialize and westernize rapidly enough on the other. After a time, all of the opponents of the existing system united around the slogan of returning power to the monarch, which effectively became a device for a virtually bloodless republi-

can coup that ultimately deprived the Samurai of their feudal prerogatives. The name Meiji Restoration is taken from the reign of the Emperor Meiji who came to power in 1867, and who was a principled supporter of the process by which the new Japan was created.

It is against this dramatic backdrop that Mrs. Reischauer’s story is told. Her paternal grandfather, Masayoshi Matsukata, was born into the lower rungs of the Samurai class. His father had become an affluent merchant, who brought his family to Nagasaki—the center of the westernizing elite—so that his children could be active in modernizing Japan. He did this at a great financial cost, since only by becoming an adopted son of a feudal family who already lived in Nagasaki, was he permitted to emigrate there with his wife and children. Haru Matsukata Reischauer’s paternal grandfather was at various times finance minister and then prime minister of Japan, one of whose first political posts was as governor in the prefecture of Hita. There he started an orphanage as a way of encouraging families to end the abominable practice of infanticide that had been forced upon them by poverty. He and his wife personally helped to care for the 150 infants whose lives were saved.

Her maternal grandfather came from a merchant family, which had achieved quasi-Samurai status as the political leadership in their town. This family moved into the silk trade, and Mrs. Reischauer’s maternal grandfather emigrated to the U.S. in order to organize the silk trade with Japan. It was this trade which gave the Japanese the financial resources to support the capital investment for the industrialization of their country.

The grouping of which both Mrs. Reischauer’s grandparents were part were courageous men and women of enormous moral and intellectual stature—individuals who sought to meld the best of western and Japanese culture. Her book is exciting, because it is a personal account of these individuals.

### **Crichton: a dishonest contrast**

*Rising Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) by Michael Crichton is a view of Japan in sharp contrast to that of Mrs. Reischauer. Crichton portrays the Japanese as amoral and characterless materialists, who are strangely different from the rest of us. His is a boring pastiche of the growing number of “Jap-bashing” books, which he obligingly footnotes in a bibliography at the end of his so-called detective novel. The dishonesty which characterizes his work is revealed in the opening pages. Here a Japanese public-relations representative of the Japanese corporate owners of a fancy new hotel tries to get the Los Angeles police to postpone their investigation of a murder on the hotel premises, until a gala event held to celebrate its opening is over. He is offensive to the police, but when next seen with the mayor, his behavior is obsequious. Reprehensible behavior, yes; but also unfortunately typically American as well. Nonetheless Crichton’s narrator uses the incident to attack Japanese national character as lacking in integrity.