

Jonathan CLEMENTS

Japan at War in the Pacific. The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire in Asia (1868–1945)

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Jonathan Michael Clements is a British historian with a long-standing interest in the Far East. The interesting thing about this author is the fact that he originally devoted himself to manga and anime. But thanks to his knowledge of both Chinese and Japanese languages, he also started writing non-fiction books. He is known for his translation skills. He wrote about Confucius, Mao Tse-tung, Beijing, Admiral Togo, but also Vikings and Baron Mannerheim. His latest book is *Japan at War in the Pacific: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire in Asia (1868–1945)*. The main aim of the book is to trace the development of Japanese militarism from Perry's mission in 1853 to the end of World War II. The central idea is a reflection on Japan's path from isolation to one of the most militarily oriented states in Asia. Clements tried to understand how it was possible that Japan, which was a backward country until the second half of the 19th century, became a great power that was able to defy the Americans during the Second World War and extend its influence on a substantial part of the Far East.

Clements came up with several points, which he gradually breaks

down thematically in his book and maintains a clear, logical, and chronological structure. First thesis is based on the analysis of imperial policy of world powers in the Far East. The rise of Japanese imperialism is trying to be traced gradually from the days of the Opium Wars to the end of the 19th century. According to Clements, Japan was perceived from the same perspective as China or India. It was understood as a state that was not advanced enough to manage its foreign policy independently. For this reason, it should have become another target of the imperial policy of European states.

The key feature for Clements's thesis was the power vacuum that arose in the Far East after the "fall" of China (after Opium Wars) and was soon filled by European powers, the United States of America and Japan. It was here when Japan decided to adopt a policy that would lead to the abolition of unequal treaties and Japan's entry into the world political scene. Japan became involved in China both commercially and politically. This is where the pan-Asian idea was born. Idea which was so strong that it even promised the expulsion of the "invading"

Qing dynasty. The problem was that whatever Japan did it was never recognized as equal to world powers. Even the British-Japanese alliance of 1902 did not lead to a shift in this perception. Japan was an ally of reason, but not a valued ally.

By Clements, the Paris Peace Conference, which began after the end of the First World War, only confirmed this fact. Japan continued to be perceived as one of the “yellow states”, i.e., unequal, and although under the auspices of the League of Nations it was committed to maintaining peace in the Pacific, it began to take steps to break away from the world’s “white” politics and create a pan-Asian empire that would be (by force) placed on a par with a world power.

Clements also came up with an answer to the question, why did Japan decide to use force and war as main political instruments? It was a combination of several obsolete factors. First, after the Meiji Restoration, some samurai elements were impressed into the newly created army. Second, Japanese militarism was a logical response to the policies of world powers, which refused to recognize Japan as an equal and maintained a tendency to talk into Far Eastern affairs and to be sovereign towards Asian states. The last point are the curiosities of the Japanese domestic political scene itself. On the one hand, Clements highlights the fact that history completely ignores the opposition to the militant faction that delayed the entire process of Japanese radicalization. On the other hand, he sees the consequence in the loopholes

in the Japanese constitution, according to which the army answered directly to the emperor, who allowed himself to be absorbed by the idea of militarism in the 1930s. The fact that the moderate members of the *genró* (council of elders) and Yamagata Aritomo (father of Japanese Army) gradually died out in the 1920s also played its part. After their death, people with tendencies towards radical militarization were pushed to the fore.

From an international perspective, Clements highlights the fact that Japan joined the world stage late. Japan wanted to create an empire along the lines of the United States of America and Great Britain. But at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, world was already running out of places on peripheries that could be occupied and used for expansion. The idea of imperialism and colonialism was of the essence to the Japanese, but it could not be fulfilled in any legitimate way.

Clements must be commended for trying to conceive of the interpretation of history in different way. He does not look for causes only in the political sphere, but also tries to grasp the social and cultural sphere. He describes the phenomenon of *gunshin*, i.e., a series of “war gods” that began to appear in Japanese children’s books after 1911, but he also focuses on songs, books, and paintings. We can also read about the “militarization of radio”. A phenomenon that flourished in the 1920s. The book is full of excerpts from books and sayings that have appeared in Japan since the Meiji restoration. Clements compares

folk and marching songs and traces their changes during the Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, but also the Second World War itself.

He explains that militarism has permeated Japanese society, culture, institutions, and the armed forces, almost becoming a way of life. His theory is based on a simple idea – Japan could not be perceived as an equal state due to the feeling of Western (racial) superiority. The only time Japan was recognized as a power, were successes in armed conflicts. Japan managed to gain influence after the war with China as well as after the war with Russia, and because of this, the impression was given that arms were the only possible means by which Japan could claim its place on the world's periphery. It is then perfectly logical that the Japanese government tried to seize militarization from all sides and make it both a political dogma and practically a lifestyle. Japan's deprivation of resources independence and the financial difficulties that accompanied the end of every Japanese war effort are also mentioned as crucial for Japanese militarism.

The book could practically be divided into three subsequent parts. The first four chapters deal with the opening of Japanese ports and foreign policy in the Far East. According to Clements, the years 1853–1914 could be evaluated as a period when Japan “copied” from foreign powers, invested in the army, modernized, and tried to enter world politics through two

wars. The period between 1914–1931 (until the creation of the Manchukuo Protectorate) thereafter was a “sobering-up” period during which Japan realized that it would never be treated as an equal by other states. It was a period characterized by political skirmishes between the army and navy. A period during which there was such a massive increase in the influence of the military that, according to the author, Japan was ready for war, no matter who it was fought with. The final part (1931–1945) describes Japan's efforts to create a “Greater East Asia” and the definitive (forcible) departure from the policies of Western states.

A paradoxical insight emerges from the entire book. Clements practically does not resist the claim that Japan tried so hard to get rid of unequal contracts in the second half of the 19th century, that in the end, it accepted Western (barbaric) hypocrisy and then itself in the 1930s and 1940s began to practice policies like those it had fallen for in 1853. After all, the Americans arrived at Japanese ports without warning, just as the Japanese arrived at Korean, Chinese and later American ports. After the end of the Second World War, Japan took a democratic path. But the importance of the Japanese army in relation to the constellation of forces in the Far East is gaining importance again, and it is a question of the future (and American support) to what extent Japan will return to militarization to create a body opposing China.

Aleš Kotva