

## Mr. Ito's Dance Party

It was not much more than a century ago that the youthful, pragmatic aristocrats who ran things in Japan following the Meiji Restoration (1868) led the nation's fateful rejection of political, economic, and cultural isolation. "Intellect and learning," pledged Mutsuhito, emperor from 1867 to 1912, "would be sought from throughout the world, in order to establish the foundations of Empire." One result, among many others, would be a crisis of cultural identity among the Japanese. Historian James L. McClain describes that crisis, in the context of a gala that took place in Tokyo 100 years ago.

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*by James L. McClain*

The spring of 1887 was a season of great entertainment in Tokyo.

Much of that social swirl took place at the Hall of the Baying Stag, an elaborate Renaissance-style building opened by the government in 1883 to provide an appropriate setting for social intercourse between Japanese and foreigners. With rooms for dining, billiards, cards, musical presentations, and dancing, the Baying Stag quickly became Tokyo's leading social center for elite foreigners and prominent Japanese industrialists, aristocrats, and government officials. By 1887, costume balls had become a Sunday evening tradition. Newspaper articles complimented the Japanese men, "stylish in their tuxedos," and lavished even more praise on their women, whose hair, "fashionably trimmed in bright ribbons, shimmered in the lovely, bluish glow" of the newly imported gas lamps.

So popular were these balls that dance studios sprang up around the capital. The wife of Japan's prime minister, Hirobumi Ito, fostered a Ladies Costume Society to encourage the wearing of Western dress, and some women even ordered their gowns from famous shops in Berlin.

In tune with his wife's enthusiasm, Mr. Ito decided to host a masquerade ball at his official residence on the evening of April 20, 1887. More than 400 guests attended. Driven to the Itos' in gaily decorated carriages, they were greeted by the prime minister incongruously dressed as a Venetian nobleman. Mrs. Ito appeared in a yellow silk dress of obvious Spanish design, topped off with a mantilla, while her daughter was decked out in



*A rendering of the Western-style ball hosted in 1887 by Japan's Prime Minister Ito. One novelty was the presence of wives—in traditional Japanese society, “persons of the interior” with no social life outside the family.*

the garb of an Italian peasant girl. The foreign minister of Japan came as a mendicant Buddhist monk; Prince Arisugawa as a medieval European knight; the industrialist Eiichi Shibusawa as a mountain aesthete; the home minister as a Japanese warrior with black body armor, two crossed samurai swords, and, curiously, a whistle.

The Japanese women, also dressed as characters from Japanese and European legends, were reportedly much in demand as dance partners by the foreign gentlemen, most of whom came in Japanese costumes. The dancing lasted until four in the morning.

To understand why a Strauss waltz would bring Japanese and Westerners together on the dance floors of Tokyo, we must go back to 1853 when U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry sailed his four “black ships” into the waters of Edo, today’s Tokyo. Perry carried a letter from President Millard Fillmore demanding that the Japanese end their isolation and open themselves to full intercourse with the United States by establishing permanent trade relations. The commodore saw his role in the more grandiose terms of Manifest Destiny: “It has so happened, in the order of Providence, the [United States] has, as it were, taken the end of the thread which, on the shores of America, broke in the hands of Columbus, and fastening it again to the ball of destiny, has rolled it onward.”

The Japanese had little choice in formulating a response to the Fill-

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more letter. Perry's flotilla was clearly capable of breaching Japan's rudimentary defenses. Certainly the Japanese were more impressed by the black ships than by the rolling ball of destiny. As one of them noted, Japan's "military class had during a long peace neglected the military arts; they had given themselves up to pleasure and luxury . . . so that they were greatly alarmed at the prospect that war might break out." Perry quickly got his treaty. Other Western nations followed close in the commodore's wake. By 1858, Japan had signed treaties with more than a dozen nations giving them clearly unequal (most would say grossly unfair) trading rights with Japan and also permitting foreigners, those "hairy outsiders," to reside in Japan's newly opened treaty ports.

Although Perry's rude and forceful arrival stirred up waves of bitterness among some Japanese, it ultimately served to open an era of intense cultural borrowing that lasted through the 1870s and well into the 1880s.

In large part, the new enchantment of the Japanese with the West flowed from the decision by the Meiji oligarchs, the young men who took control of Japan in the years following Perry's arrival, to "let the foolish argument be abandoned which has hitherto described foreigners as dogs, goats, and barbarians." The Meiji leaders decided to Westernize—to emulate the institutions and organizations of the West—because they were determined to revise the unequal treaties, and believed that the West would agree to do so only if Japan could assimilate enough imported culture to appear to be a civilized country, equal to those of the West. Thus, Kaoru Inoue, foreign minister during the 1880s, argued that "what we must do is to transform our Empire and our people, make the Empire like the countries of Europe and our people like the people of Europe."

Only thus could Japan "be independent, prosperous, and powerful."

Consequently, by 1890 the Japanese had adopted a constitutional system similar to that of Prussia, constructed a British-style navy, and begun an industrialization program that achieved success by importing the best available Western technology.

Much of the Westernization evident during the 1870s and 1880s, however, was spontaneous change that welled up from the people themselves, who seemed to believe that the West represented an advanced, superior culture. Perry himself helped to plant this idea in the Japanese mind. When the Japanese accepted the terms of President Fillmore's letter, Perry hosted a minstrel show (a form of entertainment that fortunately never found popularity in Japan) and then presented the Japanese

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with some of the West's latest inventions: a miniature railroad train, a telegraph set, a Dollard's telescope, and a French opera glass. Soon the fascination with Western technology became so great that one young Japanese was driven to declare that he and his fellow students "all fervently believed that we could not become real human beings without going abroad." Other Japanese sought to import Western culture into Japan.

Amane Nishi, a government official, wrote in 1874 that "At the present time an immense number of European customs are pouring in on us; it is as though a bottle has been overturned. Clothing, customs, even all kinds of crafts and scholarly pursuits—there is nothing which we are not today taking from the West."

Nishi was not exaggerating. By the end of the 1870s short haircuts had replaced the topknot, men wore gold watches, carried black rolled umbrellas, and dressed in knitted underwear. Cheap glass outsold pottery produced by craftsmen and in many homes gaudy tin boxes became more highly esteemed than traditional lacquer ware. A railroad linked Tokyo and nearby Yokohama, and gas lights and telegraph poles dotted the land.

#### **Dancing Fish, Wobbling Women**

New foods appeared. Japanese first tasted ice cream and lemonade during the 1860s. The first beer halls opened in downtown Tokyo in 1899, some 11 years after the first coffee shop, a social institution popular among students and geisha, two groups that seem always drawn to the new and the exotic. Beef became a fad. Buddhist prohibitions against consuming flesh had traditionally steered the Japanese away from beef, but after Westerners were seen cutting into steaks, a man named Horietsu started a restaurant in Tokyo that specialized in meat dishes. Opening day was not encouraging: People held their noses when passing by and no customers appeared until ten at night, when two men, so drunk they could barely stand, came tumbling into Horietsu's shop and demanded beef—"We want to try this strange, new stuff." But eventually, people of all classes began to patronize several beef restaurants in Tokyo and Yokohama.

Occasionally, the craze for things Western took on absurd dimensions. Some Japanese claimed that their civilization lagged behind that of the West because of the rice diet, and one university professor nearly died when he vowed to eat only the outer skin of the sweet dumplings known as manju, because they were bread-like. Not all the new beefeaters really enjoyed meat, concluded one song popular in the streets of Tokyo:

Behold him; unwilling to admit his weakness, even to himself;  
He stuffs his face with the unfamiliar, Western food;  
And then stealthily steals out to the hallway, there to disgorge  
it all over the floor  
Putting on a feigned smile of enjoyment, he returns to finish  
his coffee.



*When the International Red Cross extended membership to Japan in 1886, upper-class Japanese women (e.g., these Red Cross volunteers) were elated. They took to charitable work as eagerly as their Western counterparts did.*

Nonetheless, even intellectuals began to champion things Western. Arinori Mori, a future minister of education, proposed abolishing the Japanese language and adopting English. Yoshio Takahashi's *On Improving the Race* (1884) argued that the Japanese were "inferior barbarians" and suggested that the fastest route to progress was to expand the gene pool by having Japanese men marry Western women.

Given all this, it is difficult to imagine that Mr. Ito's dance party would become a matter of public concern. Certainly Ito himself had no intention of creating controversy. Yet, as chance would have it, the masquerade ball was held at the exact moment that many Japanese were beginning to have second thoughts about imitating Westerners. The Ito party touched off a sudden, violent backlash of criticism. Angry conservatives likened the attending Japanese gentlemen to carp—"dancing fish, swimming in a sea of perfume"—and mocked them for "clutching" at foreign women and "waltzing until dawn." Previously idolized, the Japanese women were now ridiculed for "mangling their hair in curling irons" and "wobbling about, pigeon-toed in foreign-style shoes." One newspaper dubbed Ito and his ministers the "dancing cabinet." Another observer wrote that Ito's country had learned the decadence of the Roman Empire without first attaining its pinnacle of glory.

At the heart of the criticism was a new and growing fear that the innovations brought on by the more bizarre forms of cultural borrowing during the 1870s and the 1880s might have been too radical, too sudden,

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too far-reaching. Many Japanese began to feel that they had become separated from their past. Nearly two decades of emulating the West now caused many to doubt their very Japaneseness. In short, in the pools of darkness around the edges of Mr. Ito's dance floor, serious fears lurked about the destruction of native traditions and the loss of national identity.

For some Japanese, baseball provided a means of maintaining their national identity in the modern world. The American game was introduced into Japan by a railroad engineer named Hiraoka who had journeyed to the United States to study. When he returned to Japan in 1873 he brought a bat and three balls, which occasionally had to be restuffed with red azuki beans (and thus could perhaps be called the first true bean balls). The game's popularity spread quickly, first among young company workers. During the 1880s several schools founded teams. By 1890, the First Higher School (Ichiko) of Tokyo emerged as the Japanese champions.

### Searching for Japaneseness

Americans, of course, had already claimed baseball as their own "national game," one ideally "suited to the American character." As Albert G. Spalding declared, it uniquely expressed American "Courage, Confidence, Combativeness . . . Vim, Vigor, Virility." The Japanese felt that the game nourished their traditional skills and virtues: loyalty, order, perseverance, courage, and honor. Batters were likened to samurai swordsmen.

The first official confrontation between Japanese and U.S. teams took place between Ichiko and American members of the Yokohama Cricket and Athletic Club (YCAC) on May 23, 1896. Ichiko had issued annual challenges to the YCAC from 1891, only to be turned away with haughty condescension. Finally, however, the idea of an international match had become a matter of national honor, and the Yokohama Americans agreed to a game on their field, previously off-limits to Japanese. The first inning belonged to the Americans, but the middle of the Japanese batting order asserted itself. The day ended with an embarrassing 29-4 defeat for the Americans. It was no fluke. Ichiko won two of three rematches that year.

The Japanese victories triggered an outpouring of national sentiment. The Ichiko student president proclaimed "victory for the Japanese people," national newspapers gave front-page coverage to the games, and the local heroes were toasted with sake in the streets of Tokyo and Yokohama, where they became the idols of the beer hall and coffee shop denizens. The Ichiko players had proved Japanese modernity and equality with the West, and in a way that was compatible with the islanders' own sense of dignity and perception of traditional values.

When Mr. Ito hosted his dance party in 1887, many Japanese had been held suspended between the poles of a powerful magnet. Decades of emulating the West were being challenged by a renewed interest in the unique traditions and rituals of Japan's past. Out of this conflict some Japanese, like the Ichiko baseball players, fashioned a new cosmopolitan-

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ism. Unfortunately, the new national self-confidence nurtured by baseball would not last much beyond the fading echo of the Ichiko bats before being overwhelmed by the fanatical patriotism of the 1930s and '40s.

Yet, having suffered total defeat in war, the Japanese after 1945 again turned to the West as a source of inspiration. And again Western influence poured out of the overturned bottle: ski weekends and summer houses, bourbon and Big Macs, blue jeans and miniskirts—each had its moment of glory during the post-war decades. The new Japanese search for modernity was different from that of a century ago. It was not as frantic, for one thing, and it was accompanied by a deepening self-confidence born of economic success. Still, during the 1960s, traditional values seemed to be losing ground as Japan moved toward the kind of technological, urban-centered society found in the United States.

By the 1970s, however, the gulf between past and present began to reopen, and the Japanese once again entered a period of reassessment. The initial sign came when bookstore shelves began to overflow with best sellers concerning the *Nihonjin-ron*, “the debate on being Japanese.” By way of explanation, novelist Shotaro Yasuoka, author of a sort of Japanese *Roots*, argued in a recent interview that “we’ve absorbed too much foreign culture and education and so it is more difficult for us to re-establish ourselves as Japanese within our traditional way of life.” He suggested that “by searching for common roots” through works like his, the Japanese “might begin to understand ourselves and regain our identity.”

The old confrontation, then, between what is perceived as a national Japaneseness and an alien, essentially Western style has again come to the fore. For many modern Japanese, the difficulty remains as real as it was for those men and women who waltzed away the evening a century ago at Mr. Ito’s dance party.

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