

LADY SNOWBLOOD

The End of the Shogunate

For nearly three centuries (approx. 1603-1867), Japan existed as a feudal society under the relatively tranquil rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which attempted to keep the nation isolated from the rest of the world, resisting change or progress. For more details on the history of the Tokugawa Shogunate, please refer to our other liner notes (available on the web).

The last few years of Tokugawa rule were characterized by an unstable, highly chaotic political scene. The arrival of US Admirals Perry in 1853, and Harris in 1856, offered convincing proof that the Western nations were far more advanced than Japan was in every way, especially in matters military, economic and technological. This realization planted the seeds of the final downfall of the Shogunate, which was by this time considerably weakened.

The Meiji Restoration

Modern Japan begins in the fall of 1868, when the era name “Meiji” was proclaimed and ruling authority was officially restored to the new emperor, Meiji. At that time only sixteen years old, he had been petitioned by the final Tokugawa Shogun, Keiki, to accept the restoration of power the year before in order to resolve political chaos that the Shogunate could no longer control.

Emperor Meiji, who ascended the throne in 1867, and reigned until his death in 1912, was a firm supporter of Western ideas, unlike the Tokugawa seclusionists. He helped Japan to emerge from feudalism into a modern age, quickly transforming the nation into an Eastern superpower. Meiji's centralized bureaucracy replaced the balance of power between the Shogunate and the autonomous domains. The military authority of the samurai class was replaced by a conscript army, based on the Prussian model. Under his orders, official missions (some in the form of foreign exchange students!) were dispatched to examine Western countries.

The sudden modernization was not universally embraced. Importing Western philosophies, many of which contradicted long-held traditions, outraged many. Others, however, enthusiastically viewed anything Western as the new ideal.

As Japan's seclusionist policy ended, it became clear that other nations viewed Japan as a backward nation. To correct this, the leadership devised a new policy of “Fukoku Kyohei” (lit. “Enrichment of the Nation, Strengthening of the Army”) in the belief that the rapid enlargement of trade and the establishment of foreign colonies were essential for Japan's survival in the modern age. In other words, they stole a copy of the Western power's playbook.

The new government also cooperated closely with “zaibatsu” --- major merchant families and other plutocrats. By 1872, private banks were established, and the government offered for sale, at low prices, many previously government-run enterprises, such as mining and shipping, to prominent zaibatsu houses such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi (the same giants which prosper to this day). These successful ventures not only boosted the economy, but also played a major role in enhancing the nation's military capabilities.

The Military and the “Blood Tax”

A central policy of the Meiji government was the creation of a strong national army. In 1871, several thousand men from Satsuma, Choshu (also called Nagato), and Tosa, the three major daimyo-controlled provinces, were called upon to form the prototype of a new national military.

In January of 1873, the Universal Conscription Law was proclaimed. All men aged seventeen were required to be registered for possible enlistment. Twenty-year-olds were also liable for seven years of service. By 1883, all enlisted men (which was modeled after Prussian army implementations) were conscripts.

The law actually offered certain exceptions. For instance, a wealthy farmer could buy his son a draft exception by paying 270 yen. This was an expensive option which most could not afford. When the law was originally proclaimed, the peasants reacted with outrageous riots, due to a misleading clause in the law. The statement that, in the Western nations, “...one protects his country with blood...”, was misinterpreted to mean that the army drained the blood of their conscripts for sale to other nations. Hence, strange rumors circulated about “blood tax men,” who were coming to round up conscripts, dressed in white.

Names

Part of social reforms under the Meiji Restoration called for elimination of the class system founded by the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Starting in 1869, the government classified the populace into four major categories: court aristocrats, upper-class samurai, lower-class samurai, and common people (in 1870).

The common people were permitted to adopt family names in 1870. Prior to this, most commoners were only known by their given name, and possibly an additional alias --- which might be their trade, district name, even a nickname.

Shurayuki - “Shura” is a Buddhist term that is very much like “hell” or “netherworld,” a conceptual location of violence and carnage. “Yuki” simply means “snow” and is a common girl's name. “Shurayuki-hime” (“-hime” meaning “Princess” or “Lady”) is also a play on “Shirayuki-hime,” the Japanese rendering for “Snow White.”

Lady Snowblood - the manga

The “Lady Snowblood” movies are based on the original early 1970s manga co-created by Kazuo Koike, who also co-created the “Lone Wolf and Cub” manga series.

The Thunder-Sand Bomb

In the scene where Yuki is fighting Kitahama Okono and her henchmen, Yuki utilizes a “Thunder-Sand Bomb” which literally translates into “sand thunder” and is concocted of gunpowder and iron fillings.

“The Flower of Carnage”

In our original release, we translated the title of the song “Shura No Hana” as “The Flower of

Hell.” However, when Quentin Tarantino decided to use the song in “Kill Bill, Vol. 1,” he preferred the more poetic title, “The Flower of Carnage.”

Though not a direct translation, we have to admit that “The Flower of Carnage” is a good fit and sounds better. So we're stealing it from Quentin in broad daylight and using it on the DVD release.

AnimEigo helped Mr. Tarantino obtain the right to use “The Flower of Carnage” in “Kill Bill, Vol. 1.” Everyone (both here, in Japan, and in particular the composer, Mr. Masaaki Hirao) is thrilled that Mr. Tarantino used the song in the movie as well as in the soundtrack album.

Finally, we just want to say, if Quentin ever gets tired of the boring work of making major motion pictures, we can probably make room for him in our translation editing department. As an apprentice, of course...

A considerable amount of historical research was necessary in translating Samurai Cinema's films and in compiling the information contained here. Among the many sources we have consulted, the following were especially helpful:

- 1) “Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan” Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Ooishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) “Japan - A Historical Survey” Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) “A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867” George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963
- 4) “The Emergence of Meiji Japan” Marius Jansen, ed. Cambridge University Press, 1995