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Global Histories of the Japanese Parliament: Articles in the International History Review Presented at the Symposium on the Occasion of the 130th Anniversary of the Opening of the Imperial Diet at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo in November 2020

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Introduction

November 2020 marked the 130th anniversary of the opening of the Imperial Japanese Diet, the predecessor of the current Japanese parliament, following the proclamation of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (the Meiji Constitution) in the previous year. Of course, this imperial constitution and the parliamentary government that it established did not satisfy current democratic standards, but they could be considered liberal for their day. And their establishment also marked the beginning of parliamentary government not only in Japan but also in other non-Western countries given the fact that the Ottoman constitution of 1876 was suspended after only two years.

Yet this historic anniversary received very little attention in Japan – from the government, the public, and even academia –, as well as abroad. A rare exception was an international symposium organized by the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo on 26 and 27 November 2020, which was supported by the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. This international symposium on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the opening of the first Japanese parliament argued that the establishment of parliamentary government in Japan was of global historical significance. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 itself was the outcome of the Japanese engagement with Western political literature and the study of the practice of constitutional and parliamentary government by Meiji-era statesmen and therefore evidence of the global circulation of political ideas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. But the Constitution of Imperial Japan as well as the Imperial Diet were then themselves discussed globally. In the colonial and semi-colonized world, Japanese constitutionalism and parliamentarian government were raised as evidence to debunk racist stereotypes legitimizing colonial exploitation as well as the argument levelled by established elites against reformers that absolute monarchy was the most culturally fitting form of government for their subjects. The non-white and non-Christian Japanese had after all defeated the Chinese and Russian Empires under constitutional and parliamentarian government. And through these victories, Japan had become powerful and respected by the colonial powers, as noted by contemporary observers.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Five of the papers presented on the Symposium at the Occasion of the 130th Anniversary of the Opening of the Imperial Diet were subsequently published in the *International History Review* in 2023. They are summarized below and complemented by four additional perspectives on the international reception of the Meiji Constitution and the Imperial Diet for a total of nine contributions. Selçuk Esenbel (Bogazici University, Istanbul) writes on the Ottoman Empire and Iran, and Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua (University of the Philippines - Diliman) about the Philippines. This special section additionally includes the symposium's keynote speech by Kazuhiro Takii from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto (Nichibunken) discussing not only the constitution and the opening of the parliament but also the forgetting of their anniversaries. In a concluding piece, Frederick R. Dickinson (University of Pennsylvania) centres the history of the Meiji Constitution and the Imperial Diet as well as their reception in the global history of constitutionalism.

In his keynote, Kazuhiro Takii argued that there are two possible, complementary, explanations why the anniversary of 2020 received so little regard also pointing out similarities with the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration in 2018. In contrast to the former anniversary, the latter one was commemorated by the Japanese government and civil society through a series of ceremonial acts, conferences, and publications. Additionally, international academic events at the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration took place that resulted in publications. Yet, in comparison to the centennial of 1968, which was a truly national celebration, the events in 2018 appeared muted and lacked enthusiasm.

In his keynote, Takii pointed out that, while in 1968 the Japanese economy was booming and the Japanese public was optimistic about the future, fifty years later stagnation and uncertainty about the future dominated. Present-day gloom might have resulted in a reluctance to look back at a past, when the future looked bright and Japan's international status was increasing. At the same time, one must take into consideration the common perception of the Meiji constitutional system as a second, complementary, explanation for the lack of interest in the anniversary of the establishment of parliamentary government in Japan. The Constitution of the Empire of Japan is often ahistorically seen as fundamentally authoritarian and contrary in spirit to the democratic post-war constitution of 1947. It is thus commonly interpreted as distinct from the former constitution. Yet while there are of course crucial differences between the two documents, there are also important continuities. The post-war constitution was enacted as an amendment of the Meiji Constitution after all. And so, both documents are characterized by concise provisions and a relatively small limited number of articles. Additionally, fundamental ideas on how to administer the constitutional system under the Meiji Constitution have been handed down to the present day. Both constitutions allow for flexible reform of the political system to adapt to social change through the practice of 'constitutional amendment by interpretation' bypassing a formal amendment of the text of the constitution. In this sense, it is possible to say that Japan is still under the influence of the Meiji Constitution. An adaptivity of the constitution to social developments was very much in line with the thinking of the Meiji Constitution's 'father,' Hirobumi Itō's (1841–1909) thinking, as explained in the second part of the keynote address.

In her contribution to the symposium, Yufei Zhou (formerly Teikyo University, now Nichbunken) discussed the introduction and circulation of political ideas in nineteenth century Japan leading to the drafting to the Meiji Constitution.[1] The new ideas sparked a sustained discussion about 'racial' character, natural and historical conditions, civilizational stages and the most fitting form of government for a people. according to these factors. In this context, the notion of 'oriental despotism' – a concept that posits a causal relationship between distinct climatic, geographical, and racial conditions and the emergence of an excessively powerful, authoritarian state – made its appearance in Japanese political discourse following the publication of a complete translation of 'De l'esprit des lois' in 1876. In the contemporary discourse evaluating the suitability of a Rousseauian-inspired democratic state for Japan's future, intellectuals of varying beliefs proposed that Japan's pre-Meiji ancien régime was aptly described by the term of 'oriental despotism.'

Nevertheless, arguments based on geographical determinism did not dominate the discussion. Rather than focusing on these elements, conflicting recommendations were put forth, centred on an appropriate modernization of the political architecture of a country like Japan that was assumed to be characterized by its people's loyalty and allegiance towards absolute authority.

The enactment of the Meiji Constitution in 1889 substantially reinforced the conviction among Japanese intellectuals regarding the universal and evolutionary progression of each nation's socio-political structure. It wasn't until the 1920s, when the transnational discourse about the distinctive Asiatic society, sparked by the global communist movement, swept across Japan. Marxism and the Marxist perspectives on Asian society were enjoying a period of notable influence within the Japanese social sciences that the concept of 'Oriental despotism' re-emerged in Japan's public dialogues. However, this time, the understanding of 'despotism' underwent a significant 'spatial turn,' substantially informed by the empirical research into the geographical and geological conditions affecting agricultural production across the Asian continent. Instead of advocating for the inevitable global emergence of civil society – a result often attributed to the advancement of the capitalist market economy – Japanese social scientists were inclined to believe that distinct natural assets had directly contributed to the political stagnation of 'Oriental society,' with China and Korea serving as notable examples. In societies situated in arid or semi-arid regions, these social scientists argued, the requirements for increasing crop yields and safeguarding farmland from periodic flooding necessitated the construction of extensive flood prevention measures. These efforts often led to the establishment of a powerful, centralized state. Conversely, local society was predominantly made up of self-sufficient and autonomous rural communities. The despotic, central authority maintained control over its citizens through economic means, including taxation and mandatory services, which hindered the transformation of these 'Oriental societies' into modern states with constitutional mechanisms.

The decade-long discourse exploring the economic foundations and social structures of 'Oriental despotic states' progressively solidified this concept within the Japanese-speaking social sciences. Concurrently, by continuously highlighting the 'Oriental' traits of Chinese and Korean societies and contrasting them with Japan. The term 'Oriental despotism' evolved into a pejorative label signifying the perceived backwardness and societal stagnation of Japan's Asian neighbours. For an extended period even after WWII the concept of 'Oriental despotism' retained its influence, shaping Japan's interpretation of the constantly changing political settings of its neighbouring countries, despite progressive movements aiming to re-evaluate Japan's biased perceptions of Asia.

Egas Moniz Bandeira (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen-Nürnberg) reinvestigated the role of Japan as the main positive model for political and legal reforms in the late Qing Empire.[2] Chinese observers were deeply impressed by Japan's transformation into a major political and military force, and increasingly noticed a strong correlation between a country's form of government and its political and economic situation. They noticed that Japan, shortly after adopting a constitution, not only militarily defeated the Qing Empire itself (1894/95), but even prevailed over a major European imperialist power like Russia (1904/05). Japan's victory over Russia showed them that their own weakness vis-à-vis the Euro-American powers was not due to an inherent racial weakness, but the result of political factors. China, many of them concluded, had to play the game of the imperialist powers in order not to fall prey to them. Interpreting the correlation as a causal relationship, they came to favour a constitutional form of government for their own country, characterized mainly by the presence of an element of popular representation within the political architecture.

It was not only more convenient for Chinese constitutionalists to give preference to the Japanese model. The Japanese parliamentary model also offered a specific solution for one of the major conundrums faced by the Qing government. How should one introduce an element of popular representation without further compromising the emperor's theoretically absolute, but in practice rather limited powers? Japanese doctrine, and the interpretation given to it by the offi-

cials tasked with crafting the Qing constitution, treated the emperor as theoretically absolute. In difference to its Euro-American counterparts, the Japanese and the future Qing parliaments were thought of as organs created not to infringe on royal prerogatives, but to increase government efficiency by implementing a division of labour beneath the emperor's supreme power. At the same time, the adoption of a constitutional system of government would distance the monarch from the dangers of day-to-day politics, ultimately helping to break the dynastic cycle and to stabilize the ruling dynasty.

From the perspective of the Qing government, the Japanese constitution simultaneously offered a narrative of progress, in which absolute government was replaced by a constitutional one more befitting to modern times, and one of continuity, since it ought to stabilize the embattled empire and its government. However, not everyone was convinced by this approach, in particular given the widely differing starting points of China and Japan. The attempts of the Qing government at a slow and gradual 'constitutional preparation' – which were also a reaction to the chaos that reigned after the swift adoption of constitutions in Russia and in Persia – were increasingly interpreted an insincere 'sham constitutionalism.' In other words, from a revolutionary perspective, the Qing government was abusing the Japanese example with the aim of solidifying its own autocratic grip on power.

The government's plan did not go as expected, and the Empire soon succumbed to the contradictions of the reform process. The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 meant a nominal turn to popular sovereignty, with the provisional constitution of 1912 taking much inspiration from the French Constitution. However, the high hopes attached to the early Republican institutions led to considerable frustration. Elements of late Qing constitutional thought, such as gradualism and the idea of maintaining the loyalty of elites by integrating public figures into deliberative bodies with little substantive political power, resurfaced and shaped much of 20th-century Chinese parliamentary history.

In contrast to the Chinese Empire, the reception of Japanese constitutionalism in the Kingdom of Siam, which likewise escaped colonization but was subjected to unequal treaties, has received comparativly little scholarly attention. But as David M. Malitz (German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo) shows in his contribution, in the Southeast Asian kingdom, Japan was discovered as a constitutional exemplar even before the Meiji Constitution was promulgated.[3] As early as 1885, a memorandum submitted to King Chulalongkorn proposed a Siamese constitution to counter colonialist arguments and to instill patriotism in the Siamese people. The text explicitly referred to Japan as an example to follow in this regard. The absolute monarch did, however, not agree. The Japanese victories over the Chinese and Russian Empires then rekindled the interest in Imperial Japan. While the absolutist government hired Japanese advisers and procuredJapanese military equipment, critics like the famous early independent journalists K. S. R. Kulap and Thianwan argued in the press that the Meiji Constitution and the Imperial Diet were the foundation stones of Japan's rise to great power status. Confronted with growing discontent and even a failed coup and assassination attempt, King Vajiravudh confronted these critical voices through essays in newspapers as well as plays in a concerted effort to instill an official nationalism in his subjects that equated crown and nation. The 1912 essay 'Japan for Example' explicitly attempted to refute the argument that Japanese constitutionalism offered a lesson for Siam. Rather, the loyalty of the Japanese people toward their emperor and their patriotism proven in war was something to be emulated by his subjects, who as 'Orientals' were not ready to govern themselves, echoing arguments from the discourse of Oriental despotism. The absolute monarch failed to convince his critics, however, and the argument that following the Japanese exemplar by drafting a constitution and opening a parliament would make Siam prosper and support overcoming the unequal treaties was commonly made until the constitutional revolution of 1932. Then, however, conservative actors embraced the Constitution of the Empire of Japan as an example of a constitution that combined parliamentarism with far-reaching prerogatives for a monarch. Notably, Article 3 of the Meiji Constitution served as the basis for Article 3 of the first of the many

'permanent' constitutions of the kingdom, which was promulgated in December 1932. It declared the king as 'enthroned in a position of revered worship and that (he) shall not be violated.' It has been maintained in all following Thai constitutions and is included in Article 6 of the current constitution adopted in 2017. That makes Thailand a country besides Japan where an influence of the Meiji Constitution is still observable today.

Much further to the West in Africa, Ethiopia also remained formally uncolonized like Japan, China, and Siam. In the African monarchy as well, Imperial Japan with its constitutional system was widely discussed, as Sara Marzagora (King's College London) showed in her contribution.[4] Starting from the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan became a recurring point of reference for Ethiopian intellectuals. The early theoretical engagement translated into actual policy in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Ethiopian government forged closer diplomatic and commercial relationships with the Japanese government. This cooperation culminated in a high-profile Ethiopian diplomatic mission to Japan in 1931, and in the extensive influence of the Meiji constitution in the drafting of Ethiopia's first constitution in the same year, which like the Siamese constitution of the following year adopted Article 3 of the Japanese document. If analysed as part of the history of exchanges between non-Western countries, Ethio-Japanese interwar relations well exemplify the constitutive tensions of 'Pan-' movements. Alliances between non-Western societies attempted to counterbalance Western hegemony as much as they often advanced their own imperialist agendas at a regional level. Some Japanese elites saw the diplomatic rapprochement with Ethiopia as a prelude to a possible future colonial expansion on the African continent. Likewise, Ethiopian elites saw in Japan's military conquests in East Asia an appealing model of imperial expansionism. These imperial ambitions were not separated from the two countries' struggle to defend their national sovereignty in a Eurocentric world order. As critical legal historians have recently argued, the imperialist ability to extend the political economy of capitalism to new lands and new people acted as a discriminant in the international recognition of a society's sovereign rights. The Ethiopian 'turn to Japan' of the interwar years should be understood precisely as an attempt to strengthen Ethiopia's claim to sovereignty in a Western-dominated international arena – and therefore as a declination of the Ethiopian government's pro-Western policy. Ethiopia's bid for acceptance into the 'Family of Nations' heavily mobilized the Ethiopian empire's Christian history as a marker of civilization, but the racialization of Ethiopians as non-white undermined the argument of a natural sisterhood between Christian Ethiopia and Christian Europe. This is where the Japanese example came in handy. Japan had demonstrated that non-white societies, too, could be recognized to meet the 'standard of civilization.' Ethiopian thinkers pointed at the developmental agency of Japan's enlightened monarchy as the main drive of Japan's civilizational success. The Japanese example, in this sense, had the bonus of reinforcing by proxy the legitimizing ideology of the Ethiopian monarchy and the absolute powers of the Ethiopian emperor, now recast in developmental terms. The politics of the Ethiopian and Japanese governments, however, did not go domestically uncontested. In both countries, movements arose in opposition to the pro-Western foreign policy of the two governments. In this sense, the Ethio-Japanese rapprochement of the interwar years also brings into focus the tensions between different visions of what the 'global' should look like, and whether Western dominance should be strategically appeased or antagonistically countered.

But the rise of Japan to the status of a great power following the promulgation of the Meiji constitution and the opening of its parliament was not limited to the extra-European and non-Western world. In his contribution to the symposium and subsequent article, Rafał Pankowski (Collegium Civitas, Warsaw) showed that in the early twentieth century, Japan was also frequently regarded as a model of nation-building in Poland, which had been subjugated and incorporated into the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian Empires.[5] Here in Europe, the perceived rapid transformation from a feudal to a modern society was also admired and studied as a potential exemplar for Poland. Therefore, it may or may not be seen as a surprise that the only time that the two leaders of the two main rival branches of the Polish national movements in the early

twentieth century, Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) and Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), met and exchanged their views occurred in Tokyo in the summer of 1904 when both of them travelled to Japan seeking inspiration and support in their efforts to reconstruct Poland's nationhood in the context of the Russo-Japanese war. They were not able to reconcile their very different visions of the Polish nation and its future. Imperial Japan, however, as Pankowski states in his article, continued to be seen and written about as an example for Poland by both those who admired it as a monoethnic, homogenous, and disciplined society but also for example by the liberal writer and humanist Aleksander Janta-Polczynski.

All together, the nine articles that make up this special section show that the history of Japanese constitutionalism and of the Japanese parliament is a truly global and transnational one. The articles are therefore important contributions to the global history of Japan. But they also form important contributions to the global history of parliamentarian institutions by de-centring a grand narrative which remains at present still very much Eurocentric.

Notes

1. Yufei Zhou, 'The Concept of 'Oriental Despotism' in Modern Japanese Intellectual Discourse', *International History Review* 45/3 (2023): 462–77.
2. Egas Moniz Bandeira, 'Creating a Constitutional Absolute Monarchy: Li Jiaju, Dashou, and Late Qing Interpretations of the Japanese Parliament', *International History Review* 45/2 (2023): 243–59.
3. David M. Malitz, '"What Is Good about the Japanese System of Governance?"—The Reception of Imperial Japanese Parliamentarism in Siamese/Thai Political Thought (1880s–1940s)', *International History Review* 45/1 (2023): 48–62.
4. Sara Marzagora, 'Political Thought and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Ethiopian-Japanese Relations (1927–1936)', *International History Review* 45/1 (2023): 95–113.
5. Rafał Pankowski, 'Some Remarks about the Idea of 'A Second Japan' in 20th Century Polish Political Thought', *International History Review* 45/2 (2023): 307–17.

Disclosure statement

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