

ANOTHER “OTHERNESS OF JAPAN: EARLY LATIN AMERICAN VIEW FROM THE MEIJI ERA

Alejandro FELIX DE SOUZA

Consul of Uruguay in Japan

Until the world of Japanese Studies developed into something more than just a version of “*exotica japonica*”, the contemporary descriptions of Meiji Japan both in the late XIXth and early XXth century, were focused in the “othernesses” of the country, vis a vis the European or the North American visitors. In that sense, most of the essays and books on Japan written at that time by Europeans or North Americans, emphasized mainly the “orientalism” of Japan in contrast with the Western civilization, that was embarked in a new wave of conquest of “areas of influence” in Africa and Asia.

As a matter of fact, what they described as exotic, backward, pre-modern, feudal, helped to justify, to some extent, the expansion of European and U.S. political and economic influence, which was pictured by many as a “crusade” that would bring civilization to far-away lands that had not enjoyed, until then, the so-perceived benefits of Western acculturation.

But there were some exceptions to this approach. There were some visitors that described, together with the “othernesses” of Japan, the facts that were leading the country into one of the most prodigious cases of achieving, in a very short time, the second Industrial Revolution.

Although these studies — looking beyond a condescending view — were not only carried out by Latin Americans, we believe that — in line with the writings of anthropologists of *Nihonjin-ron* like Harumi Befu and others — “there are as many ways of understanding, describing, and characterizing reality as there are people who care to understand, describe and characterize”. Therefore, it is interesting to note the different views on Japan according to the society where the intellectual formation of the observer has originated.

Most countries have had different types of relations with Japan in its various aspects (diplomacy, trade, war, immigration, culture). This various experiences of the concrete bilateral relationship usually have affected, to some degree, the perceptions of the observer. In our opinion, the fact that Latin American visitors to Japan in the Meiji Era, were not nationals of the Big Powers of the time, but — like in the cases that I would like to mention — scientists, travellers or diplomats trying to learn about the country rather than being part of an imperialistic force, had very much to do with the fact that, even today, Latin America is a region of the world that has not had a record of troubled or traumatic relations with Japan.

Among the very interesting chronicles written by Latin Americans who visited Japan

during the Meiji Era, we have selected two, one from the biggest country in North and Central Latin America (Mexico) and the other from the South American giant (Brazil). Both authors were “men of their time”, with a sharp ability to grasp these “foreign ways” so different from the Western cultural matrix made of Jewish, Greek, Latin and Christian components, and without taking a pejorative approach to the new reality they were facing.

In the first case, we have one of the most interesting descriptions of the years immediately after the Meiji Restoration. It is a very complete report on the trip to Japan made by the Mexican Astronomic Commission between November 1874 and February 1875 in order to observe the solar eclipse of Planet Venus. This report was written by the President of the Astronomic Commission, then Vice-Minister of Public Works of Mexico, Dr. Francisco Diaz Covarrubias.

A militant positivist scientist with a solid cultural background (he could speak five languages), Dr. Diaz Covarrubias had an excellent welcome in Japan. And, as it happened with many foreign visitors, the country left a deep impression on him.

His kindness and good manners helped him admirably to make friends in a country that had not yet established diplomatic relations with Mexico. He was first received by the Governor of Kanagawa, and then by the Minister for Foreign Affairs as well as the Minister of Education. The descriptions of the interviews with these officials give us a very good picture of the mindset of the Meiji political elite only six years after 1868.

Dr. Diaz Covarrubias' role in the future of the relations between Mexico and Japan is one fact that should be kept in mind. At the farewell banquet offered by the Japanese Government in honour of the Astronomic Commission, the Minister of Education, Mr. Fuyimaro Tanaka, expressed that Japan was grateful to the Commission because “differing from the Europeans”, it brought “scientific knowledge instead of the sound of firing weapons” to Japan. In the same year of 1875, the Mexican Ambassador to Washington began negotiations for the signing of a Treaty of Friendship between the two countries, which was concluded in 1888.

It was the first treaty in which Japan was standing on equal conditions with a foreign country, and then marking the beginning of a process of revision of the “unequal treaties” that had been previously signed with other countries. Japan never forgot this happy beginning of their bilateral relations, and ceded to the Mexican Government the premises where the Embassy of Mexico is located today, in the Akasaka district of Tokyo.

One of the first things that attracted Dr. Diaz Covarrubias' attention was the intense process of “westernization” of the country: “The clothes and other European customs are becoming notoriously generalized, and this contrasts with the resistance to adopt the same customs that is perceivable in the neighbouring Chinese Empire. In Japan almost all the public servants dress with European-style clothing, and other prominent citizens and ordinary people that can obtain this attire, have also adopted it. In this case, as in many others, there is a perfectly clear difference between the opposing tendencies in both nations, that is, the progressive path of one in contrast with the stationary character of the other”.

And then he listed many parallelisms between both societies, which resulted in the

exaltation of the Japanese nation as opposed to the Chinese one. "There are no Japanese communities abroad as large as those of the Chinese; but in the ones existing in United States or in the main European cities, far from disturbing the countries of adoption, the Japanese are known for their moderation and for their desire of learning. There is no doubt that all this is due to the education that the Japanese Government intends to extend to the populace, and to the moralizing influence of the laws, whose strong power is felt even when the Japanese are abroad".

With relation to this, he quoted some articles of a law regarding the Japanese travelling abroad, which at the same time provides an excellent example of the high priority that was given to information by the authorities of the Meiji Government:

"Article 1. — It is necessary to be informed of all the articles of the Treaty existing between Japan and the country to be visited.

Article 2. — Anything seen or known that could be deemed interesting to the Empire, must be examined very carefully to be informed to the nearby Japanese Legation. In case there is not a Japanese Legation in the visited country, these facts should be reported to the Offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Ports of Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyogo, Nagasaki, Niigata or Hakodate. If there are no direct communications between the visited country and these Japanese ports, a detailed report of all the relevant information will be given after returning to Japan.

Article 3. — After leaving Japan, the subjects should pay attention to the local customs, behaving in an appropriate way in order not to do anything that could bring shame to the Empire. They will never incur into debt with foreigners without having the means and certainty of being fully able to repay the loans; and if a debt is incurred into by virtue of an urgent and unavoidable circumstance, it is necessary to repay it completely before leaving the foreign country. If a person fails to comply with this before the return to Japan, he will be punished along with his family until he pays the debt".

He concluded the consideration of the matter saying that some of these dispositions "should be obeyed by the travellers of all the nations of the world".

Dr. Diaz Covarrubias's first description of Tokyo is very interesting; he admires "how well the Japanese tar the streets with the Mac Adam's system, and the positive way they keep the good state of the streets, performing all the necessary repairs as soon as they perceive any wear and tear". These are the Year 1874 ancestors of the brigades that can be perceived nowadays, 24 hours a day, repairing Tokyo's streets.

In the main avenues of Tokyo the Mexican scientist had the opportunity to appreciate the "rich and well-provided stores where you can admire the most different products of the Japanese industry, as well as the European ones. The workshops of ivory objects skilfully carved, the lacquerware stores, the wonderful showings of pottery, the enamelwork, the silk clothes, the objects made of bronze, and many other articles of the polished work so characteristic of the Japanese, can be found everywhere, and their low cost is surprising considering their beauty". While he was admiring these products, Dr. Diaz Covarrubias was at

the same time “surprised that a speculation with safe results has not yet convinced the Mexican businessmen to experiment with the importation of these products to our market, as it has been already done with their similars of Europe and the United States. I think it is evident that the businessmen that took such an initiative would obtain a high return, especially because such merchandise would be very attractive for their novelty and beauty”. Well, at least we know who was the pioneer that opened the way for the trade deficits between Latin America and Japan.

One of the most interesting part of the report is the analysis of Japan’s foreign trade: by that time, the country — nonetheless the “westernization” process — had accumulated important superavits vis-à-vis England, United States, France, Germany and China. A very impressive thing is that Dr. Diaz Covarrubias left Japan in February 1875 and the trade statistics until September 1874 were available.

The Mexican astronomer made the following evaluation of Emperor Meiji’s reforms: “. . . Speaking about Spanish America I candidly manifested my belief that it hurried into taking a sudden step from a semifeudal regime to the Republican form of Government. At the same time, I believe that Japan enjoys a better condition than the Spanish American countries, and that the step that it is taking is shorter, because it only covers the space existing between feudalism and illustrated monarchy. Besides, with such an old, homogeneous and civilized nation, in which education is spreading more and more, it is not easy for anarchy to be enthroned. Especially when the reforms tend to allow the people to be true owners of their work, and when this progress has not been attained through revolutions or mutinies, but through a movement which has been led by the supreme authority”.

Dr. Diaz Covarrubias finished his report with a beautiful invocation to Japan: “I hope that your past of isolation will not provoke that you will be blinded by the splendorous light of the Western culture. Its refinement establishes the supremacy of the intelligence; but maybe as a terrible and unavoidable compensation, extinguishes the most beautiful feelings of the heart. In the cultural clash, in exchange for a great number of good things, you will lose many of your samurai gentle qualities; but try to keep and cultivate the ones that will be possible to rescue. They will serve you as an antidote to lessen, or at least to slow down, the bad effects of modern civilization”.

In the second case, we found a book written by the second Brazilian diplomat accredited to the Meiji Government, Manoel de Oliveira Lima (1867-1928). He is one of the most relevant historians of contemporary Brazil, and was a member of the most important national cultural movement of his time, the Academia Brasileira. He had been posted to Washington and Berlin, and arrived in Tokyo by the beginning of this century.

From the experiences of his stay in Japan between the Peking intervention by the Big Powers as a consequence of the “Boxers War”, and the beginning of the Ruso-Japanese War, he wrote a book titled “No Japao” (“In Japan”), the first work about the country written by a Brazilian.

Oliveira Lima was one of the many foreigners fascinated by the country, its people, its landscape, its culture, and, overall, by its incredible capacity to assimilate, in a very fast way, the science, the technology, and the political and military organization of the West. His erudition might not be deep or original, but he was a very acute observer. And the fact that he was Brazilian, and then belonging to the European cultural periphery, might have liberated him of some prejudices of Western superiority very common at that time.

The Brazilian diplomat also had a good impression of the Japanese people, and in contrast, he was a harsh critic of the Western Powers' intervention in Asia, particularly after the incidents of Peking. Long passages of his book deal with this question.

He also admired the Japanese pride: "there is something aristocratic in the poor and the rich. . .", since "the Japanese etiquette code was compulsory and the same for all the social classes", and then expresses that "their politeness is never servile; their bows may seem solemn, exaggerated, or amusing, but not submissive. They express centuries of formalism: they do not translate years of slavery. Together with what we consider an excess of politeness, there is an aura of manliness, of assertiveness, from the highest superiors to the lowest subordinates".

But this was beginning to decay, mainly because "the learning of the democratic principles infallibly perverts the teaching of manners". He pointed out that "there is a Western institution that is certainly contributing to this result", and this was the press. He qualified the situation as anarchic, and the profession of journalist as degrading, as a consequence of the activities of some people that "only care to unveil public and private scandals, exciting the morbid curiosity of a numerous public whose taste has been corrupted by obscene love stories, stimulating with all this the sales of their magazines and obtaining for them a wide but sad notoriety".

He was also amazed by the appeal that Japanese History had in the ordinary people: "The pride of a French looking at the Vendome column, or the nostalgia of a Roman gazing at the Arc of Trajan, does not explain nor reach the hysteric devotion of the Japanese towards their feudal heroes". According to him, this cult of the past, "has a decisive influence in two traits of the national character: the pride and the sense of responsibility". He perceived that the Japanese took life very seriously, and, leaving aside their sometimes relaxed appearance, "the sense of duty goes before any other consideration".

Not all his descriptions of the Japanese people were so positive, though. In Chapter 8, the Brazilian diplomat states that "Japan has always been a country of emotional contrasts. The sentimentalism has been usually accompanied by cruelty".

Regarding the life of the "high society", there are some comments that are astonishingly applicable even today: "Almost all the prominent politicians and senior bureaucrats attend the numerous official luncheons and the scarce dancing venues without their wives, and nobody cares to inquire what happened to them, guessing that they stay at home sitting around the hibachi".

One of the most interesting chapters of his book is the 9th, "The Meiji Politicians",

where he analyzed the main features of the political regime and its crucial role in the successful transformation of the feudal structure of the country. His reflections are important since they provide an outsider's perception of the functioning of this process. According to Oliveira Lima, one of the secrets of the incredible success in raising Japan to the level of the European civilization, in a quarter of a century, has certainly been the correspondence and harmony existing between the Government and the people, and the evolutionary approach to reforms, that were carried out without breaking the link with the past nor building an unsurmountable barrier to the future challenges.

Another important factor contributing to the process, was the influence of Yukichi Fukuzawa in the diffusion of the education required by the new times: "the masterwork of Fukuzawa. . . was to infuse in the Japanese people, not only the accurate and standard Western culture, its inventions, its instruments of progress and wealth, but also the ideas of individual freedom, independence from administrative oppression, participation in the public affairs, and avoidance of the Government's initiative in activities that can succeed by the efforts and the entrepreneurial spirit of the citizens".

"Fukuzawa, the most influential spirit in Modern Japan, who only understood the extension of the people's rights when they were based on a general progress of the ideas, the extended popular welfare and the national strength, urged his students so start industrial and commercial ventures, which were so disdained in the old times, and thus moving decidedly away from the old superstition of getting a job in the public service".

"The famous work 'Enrichissez-vous' (Enrich yourselves) of Guizot was never so many times quoted as by Fukuzawa". "He wanted to elevate money from its condition of ignominy in the Old Japan, praising it for the greatness of the New Japan, when he was proclaiming with irony that the public servants, the politicians and the intellectuals could disappear and nobody would miss them, but the same could not happen with the merchants, the manufacturers and the farmers".

But maybe the most interesting part of Oliveira Lima's work was his perception of Japan's foreign policy. After two centuries of isolation, and witnessing with satisfaction an astonishing economic turn around that succeeded in an advanced industrialization of the country in only less than three decades, Japan was beginning to be more assertive in its relations with the world and regional powers.

This is referred by Oliveira Lima in Chapter 8, where he believes that "the Japanese pride is certainly an excellent quality of their personality and it has to be credited in the wealth of their nation; but next to this pride, we see the shadow of vanity, and this one is ridiculous when it is not justified by reality". "They are so delighted by their success in the Europeanization of the country, and their military improvement, that I am convinced a majority of them thinks — in their heart — that it will occur the same as 1,000 years ago with China, that is, Japan will surpass the European culture, after leaving without sap the tree where it has sucked the essence".

He exemplifies this self-confidence with the speech given by a banker in a banquet to

commemorate the Treaty of Alliance between Japan and Great Britain: "Regarding the intellectual capacity, the common sense and the agriculture, Japan is perfectly comparable with its allied country". He also mentions that the speaker conceded that "concerning trade and manufacturing Japan lags far behind England, because it has small capitals and ordinary people are not very ambitious. Men generally retire from work at fifty years of age, exhausted and weakened. The alteration of old lifestyles, and the regular practice of gymnastic exercises will modify these old habits. . . the extension of working schedules will produce an enormous increase of the economic wealth of the country, in a way that Japan may grow before long into a country as rich as its allied partner".

And then Oliveira Lima ironized: "The countries looking for loans are notified that in a very short time, they will have to knock at the doors of the Japanese Rothschilds. They would do well in establishing ties of friendship with them from now on". We can perceive today that the forecast of the Japanese banker has been much more accurate than the irony displayed by the Brazilian diplomat.

The following phrase, depending on the reader, can be applied to present-day circumstances, and there would be many trade partners of Japan that will see some truth in it: "The Japanese do not like very much that foreigners take their money, and one of their biggest, and also justified objections to the easing of the limits to the introduction of foreign capitals in the country, is precisely this preoccupation that the profits of the companies will be channelled to foreign pockets. They always think, and they are not wrong, that the others' earnings come out from their pouches. However, they do not hesitate in gaining somebody else's money, in which they will be very wise".

In the last chapter of his book, premonitoriously called "the Asian hegemony", he predicted that, in the wave of its victories of 1894, Japan would aspire to achieve the hegemony in Asia, becoming the "Great Britain of the Orient, at the same time, a naval and colonial, an industrial and commercial power". The first step, according to him, would be the annexation of Korea, "the cradle of its civilization. . . probably also the cradle of its race, from where it received the continuous invasions, that, combined with the Malay element, expelled the aborigines, now living in Yeso (present-day Hokkaido)". Korea is the land "where the Japanese. . . turn their eyes to like the Europeans look at Greece, in a mix of affection for the past and disdain for the present".

The regeneration of a stagnated Korea, according to the Brazilian diplomat, could only come from outside, since "its own dynamic forces were spoiled in the immobility and are unable to provide any impulse". And many factors, like the geographical vicinity, the racial and historical similarity, were indicating to him that this regenerating force would come from Japan.

But in Korea, Japan would clash with the Russian ambitions in the area. The Russo-Japanese War was in the horizon and the author did not underestimate the capacity of Japan against the Czarist Empire. "Somebody has written before that what gives unity and cohesion to the Japanese foreign policy, apparently fluctuating and incoherent, is the hate of Russia".

Once it has extended its domain to Korea, Oliveira Lima says that “the great objective of Japan would be to transform China; to shake its centennial apathy; to reform its social habits; to transmit to it the fever of progress; to make it reach the industrial era; to transform its small-scale manufactures into a powerful industrial body; finally, to make a reality the famous “yellow danger” that so many European scholars talk about”.

I think this is a good point to finish my presentation, which intended to bring to this prestigious conference “other othernesses” of Japan. I hope that through it I will have succeeded in introducing these not so well known, but also very valid, Latin American views of the Meiji Era.