

Historical Hideyoshi

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Mary Elizabeth Berry, the author of *Hideyoshi* has an extensive background in the subject matter of her book. Her advisers have been some of the most knowledgeable Westerners on Japan, and she credits them along with her colleges at UC Berkeley as sources of tremendous influence. Portions of the book were constructed while she researched her dissertation, and much of her work has been financially supported by various fellowships and reputable societies. Her research has carried her to many extremely credible universities throughout the U.S., and even to Kyoto. Not only has she researched secondary sources in English, but also she has gone right to direct sources and studied them in a foreign language, a feat in itself recognizable as no easy accomplishment.

The work itself centers on the life of Hideyoshi, one of the most animated characters in the history of Japan, and one of the greatest generals in the history of the world. The book sets the tone of 16th century Japan by briefly introducing Nobunaga, Hideyoshi's Lord and military antecedent, which lays the ground work for the main focus as Hideyoshi rises and assumes the powerful center stage of a country torn apart by century-long domestic wars. Concentrating on Hideyoshi's efforts to eventually unite Japan, she also explores the details of his rule and what lasting effects it had on the later history of the country. Unveiled is the far reaching sphere of his influence, much of it presiding up to the Meiji period, and some even in modern day Japan.

Berry contends that Hideyoshi's rise to power would have been

impossible without the antics and fears established by his predecessor Nobunaga. She goes on to claim that by following his kismet, Hideyoshi rose by keenly knowing how to use the resources around him in an effacious and innovative manner. His rule decided things that had lasting cultural, sociological, and legal implications on the country although his family would be usurped soon after his death.

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Berry makes it very clear that significant causal relationships exist that helped propel Hideyoshi into his lofty position. By devoting nearly 20% of the book to Nobunaga battle years, she shows us that Hideyoshi needed this backdrop in order to claim power at a later date. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is that Nobunaga gave Hideyoshi the chance to climb into the seat of a leader though the latter was of peasant roots. Most leaders of the day had been born to the Samurai class and it was quite unusual for someone like Hideyoshi to be anywhere near the position of general.

It was not only Nobunaga's promotion that led to the rise of Hideyoshi, for other notable forces were at work as well. Nobunaga's ruthlessness had much to do with it. Although this kind of behavior wasn't new to the brother-against-brother struggle for power in 16th century Japan, Nobunaga vaulted the violence to new heights by attacking scared institutions like temples of Buddhist priests, increasing the level of massacres, and employing bloodier forms of weaponry available through advanced technology. Because Hideyoshi was a retainer of Nobunaga, once the former assumed power, it was presumed that he would follow the vicious patterns of his lord should any organizations challenge him. Nobunaga's precedence of violence struck a chord of fear in those who were immune to slaughter before the use of his shrewd tactics, and consequently added to the strength of Hideyoshi.

Hideyoshi also copied a ruling style put in place by Nobunaga in that he

filtered power down to daimyos in charge of a region, and left them with control of the land. He ruled from a position of central government, but stayed away from the day to day dealings in the realm of his appointed regional rulers in a *lasie faire* fashion. This was a radical new form for a military general, and the daimyos responded by treating him with respect, paying him homage while ruling their separate fiefs.

Also like his lord, Hideyoshi possessed the ability to make quick decisions that were daring or maybe even foolish enough to catch his adversaries off guard. His decision to immediately avenge the killing of Nobunaga with a march and eventual conquering of the man responsible for the death of Nobunaga certainly demonstrated where his loyalty was. He presented the body of the slain man to the spirit of Nobunaga in a move that was filled more with political theatrics than with revenge. That move really paved the way for him to assume power, as other generals indecisively dragged their feet causing a questioning of loyalties to be aired. Hideyoshi seized the moment of confusion by demonstrating loyalty and was able to buy time, which he used to get a feel for how the realm established by Nobunaga would hold together after his death.

It was a chaotic time, but Hideyoshi used the influence that came his way as a result of the revenge murder to install a young boy as the heir to Nobunaga, which in effect bought him more time as the question of who would really assume power heightened. One of the main reasons Hideyoshi was able to quickly launch an attack on Nobunaga's killer was due to the fact that his men had intercepted a message that was meant for someone else. Hideyoshi used this information to his advantage, and it put him in a position to act decisively, and act before others had a chance to even know of Nobunaga's death. In hindsight, times like these show that Hideyoshi had luck or fate on his side.

Again, his sometimes capricious military decisions, mimicking those of Nobunaga caused him to fulfill his destiny. Like his former lord, he led

whimsical attacks on forces against which he was severely outmanned, but this kind of reckless abandon often achieved against-all-odds victories and established his military rule.

Once inconclusively in power, Hideyoshi issued a series of edicts that would lay the groundwork for the development of Japanese society, and have influence stretching into the 21st century. He disarmed the peasants, and took land away from the Samurai warrior class, which allowed these sectors of society to coalesce into hardened dichotomies. This also added to the peace as the farmers needed no weapons and could concentrate on farming without the threat of potential uprisings, and the Samurai were put into positions of obeying their lords when calls to arms took place like Hideyoshi's foreign campaigns against neighbors Korea and China. During peaceful times, the Samurai were afforded leisure time during which time they turned to the arts, which have also become such an ingrained part of Japanese society.

The Japan of Hideyoshi's time was experiencing drastic change, but it held together and came out not so vastly different from what it was in the past. Hideyoshi took advantage of the changing times by utilizing the use of firearms, newly introduced to Japan, in his army. His skillful use of muskets allowed him to have a small army, but defeat his opponents still yielding traditional war tools of swords and spears. Recognizing this as an advantage, he kept a close eye on the mining centers within his realm, and made sure he possessed the main smelting and mining cities in Japan. Although warfare continued, the new technology was used cunningly as a tool for establishing absolute power as well as eventual peace.

The goal of Hideyoshi was a united Japan, but at the same time he wanted recognition for accomplishing this. It required a tremendous amount of vision to be able to see how to do this, and although change would occur in the making of it, in the end it was the clever strategy of leaving things in place that played an essential role in unification. So Hideyoshi would make deals with *daimyo* (military rulers of small domains) by leaving

them in power of their territory if they would swear allegiance to him. Of course, this was backed up with the threat of military conflict, and some *daimyo* put Hideyoshi to the test. In a radically unusual move, he sometimes returned these conquered leaders back into power in the realm that he had just defeated.

Seemingly ludicrous at first glance it paid handsome dividends. First, it left someone in power that was already a prominent figure in the community. This meant that the subjects of the domain could live with the man in charge because they already had in the past. This caused no large scale change for the peasants to use for a reason to rebel. This unchanged ruler knew the territory and already had many aspects of government installed, so transition of power really didn't have such a topsy-turvy atmosphere. The only difference was that the *daimyo* were loyal to Hideyoshi, and consequently the movement to consolidate the provinces into one country. Secondly, it demonstrated the sincerity of the Hideyoshi regime to have the country exist as a peaceful Japan as opposed to warring prefectures. Thirdly, it sent a message to other *daimyo* that if they wanted to avoid war, they could, and they wouldn't lose their land. This last reason was key in getting the strongest *daimyo* to agree to pay homage to Hideyoshi, and in most cases he increased their fiefs for doing so.

Upon knitting Japan together and issuing laws from his position of leader, Hideyoshi found himself in the familiar place that many great generals do in that he was a warrior without a war. Once the goal of domestic peace was established, he needed a way to vent the army he had amassed, so he then turned outward to the international scene in search of conquest. Korea was the next obvious step with its close proximity to Japan, but Hideyoshi insisted that a military invasion of that country was just the stepping stone to the takeover of China. It did give his military something to do while the country was at peace with itself, but in 2 invasions the Japanese military proved futile in attempts of permanent annexation of the peninsula.

During this period, the institutions of the country were also undergoing change as well as scrutiny. The emperor and court had been reduced to a state of shambles, and only acted as puppet-like figureheads in a country that was in disarray. It had no funding, and at best could only offer titles to the current *daimyo* in power. Hideyoshi, recognizing that the court could be a rallying point to assist in uniting the country, paid tribute to it with rice and precious metals (cash), by granting land that he had taken in war, and by rebuilding and refurbishing palaces that had fallen into dilapidated states. In return, the court bestowed on him lavish titles of power signifying him as the leader of the nation that Hideyoshi himself welcomed, as he had no royal titles as a birthright. At one point, the emperor even paid a visit to Hideyoshi's home. This is a very rare thing for the emperor to do and the occasion was marked by a well documented pageantry that epitomized wealth and glitz.

Buddhist temples occasionally issued a threat to the peace as certain sects didn't agree with the policies of Hideyoshi. He kept them in check with the ominous possibility of burning raids on the temples as Nobunaga had previously done. The monks sometimes begrudgingly agreed to Hideyoshi's terms, but they always ended up assisting him in whatever way he needed. The temples made it easier for the new centralized government to register land, and other happenings in the community with their impeccable records.

The Christians that had infiltrated the island nation were to have a worse fate. Controlling the ships that brought foreign goods to Japan mostly at the port of Nagasaki, the Jesuits had a strong following in Kyushu, and were able to make a great many converts. After a certain point, a cap was put on the conversions by the government, but the Jesuits were still allowed to be in Japan. Later, the Franciscans established a base on Honshu, which led to heated arguments with the Jesuits, and apparently, although they were tolerated as a nuisance for a while, finally some were persecuted. Berry writes that the reason could have been because Hideyoshi was starting to go insane, but she argues stronger in favor of the theory that the subservient religious

were perceived as a threat to peace. It probably had a lot to do with misunderstanding and miscommunication, but I'm sure the Christians were up to some mischief, and they were discovered.

The government, now consisting of two factions, the central government controlled by Hideyoshi, and the local governments ran by the local *daimyos*, continued to operate in a smooth fashion. Seeking to establish some uniformity, Hideyoshi would make various laws, and ask that the *daimyo* to enforce them. This government has been called feudal and oligarchic, but in reality there is no one word that can be pinned to it. Land surveys, and censuses were taken repeatedly so that an accurate account of things could be accessed.

The times saw the rise of another institution, namely that of artists. As previously mentioned, idle Samurai now had leisure time on their hands, and the arts began to flourish in Japan. Of particular note were things associated with Zen, such as the tea ceremony, but others such as flower arranging, poetry writing, and pottery also burgeoned. Notably, Noh plays were in vogue, Hideyoshi himself became preoccupied with the art, not only acting, but having plays written about his most historic deeds.

Called by Edwin O. Reischauer "the most extraordinary and significant political figure in the world during the 16th century", Hideyoshi's life certainly lived up to this epitaph. We have seen from the direct sources compiled by Elizabeth Berry many of the causes that catapulted him into power, as well as the things he set in motion consequently steering Japanese society to where it is today. Looking at the institutions of the day, it is possible to find influences that set the pace for social behavior, and again how it has even impressed modern Japan. The greatest achievement by Hideyoshi was his mending of a nation torn apart by the struggle for power and land, and he rose to his destiny using revolutionary techniques, but also by the vision

of keeping things as they were with respect to local areas

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