

FREEMASONRY IN JAPAN – a very short history

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The head office of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Japan is a large complex situated near the base of Tokyo tower, in the middle of Tokyo – some of the most expensive real estate anywhere in the world. With such a base, and in a country of over 127 million people one would be led to think that freemasonry was strong in Japan. Unfortunately it is not. To shed light of this paradox I would like to present a brief history of freemasonry in Japan.



Modern Masonic Head Office

Earliest beginnings

The introduction of Freemasonry into Japan was intractably interconnected with the events of the day. If you have ever read James Clavell's famous novel 'Shogun' which was later made into a mini-series, you would know that from 1603 to 1867 Japan was ruled by a Shogunate system, led by the Tokugawa clan, which was centred in Edo, modern day Tokyo. Japan was put into a self-exile and was closed from all external contacts, with the exception of a number of small ports, one known as the Dejima located in modern day Nagasaki. It was here that the Dutch were allowed to trade with the Japanese, thus bringing in exotic goods from the outside world. Dealings between the Dutch traders (including at least one freemason) and Japanese officials was strictly controlled. And so it was till the mid-nineteenth century when western countries employing gun-boat diplomacy forced Japan to deal with the outside world. One name in particular stands out, Commodore Perry. Perry (also a Freemason) from the United States was instrumental in breaking this self-enforced reclusion. In 1853 he threatened to let loose his guns on Tokyo if they did not open diplomatic ties and allow trade. As a result, western trading companies and diplomatic missions were allowed to be set up near Tokyo in Yokohama to facilitate future trade.

From a travelling warrant to a Lodge.

The opening up of Japan to the outside world opened up old rivalries between Japanese powerbrokers, leading to bloodshed on the streets. Europeans located in Yokohama were not immune from this turmoil and indeed were targeted by some Japanese samurai leading to request of protection. In 1864 Great Britain responded by sending the British 20th regiment. It is here that masonic history in Japan started as with this regiment came a military lodge, Sphinx Lodge No. 263, Irish Constitution. Although this lodge only stayed in Japan for two years, the participation of civilian brothers led to a desire to open their own lodge, and in 1866 the Yokohama Lodge No. 1092, English Constitution, was formed. These were soon followed by other lodges and by the beginning of the second world war nine lodges existed in Yokohama, Kobe and Nagasaki.



*Tokugawa Ieyasu 1542-1616.
The first Shogun*



Commodore Perry

Of these nine lodges, six were English Constitution, while three were Scottish. Of interest is one Lodge, Lodge Star in the East No. 640 in Yokohama (SC) which still exists today.



Yokohama Lodge 1092



Count Tadasu Hayashi

Freemasonry at this time was a foreign past time as a gentlemen's agreement existed with the Japanese Government that membership was limited to foreign nationals. This did not stop Japanese nationals from joining when overseas. In 1868 a revolution in Japan overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate and brought in the Emperor, Meiji, this starting the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. This was a period of great social and economic reform, with a desire by the new government to modernize Japan. Many Japanese left to learn about all aspects. the western world, and indeed an few returned to Japan as Freemasons. Two in particular were Baron Mamichi Tsuda (1829-1903), a statesman and legal expert, and Baron Nishi Amane (1829-1897), a philosopher and bureaucrat. Both went to the University of Leyden and were introduced to

freemasonry by Professor Vissering of La Vertu Lodge No.7. Another notable Freemason was Count Tadasu Hayashi, a career diplomat. While stationed in England in 1903 he was initiated into Empire Lodge no.2108 and became Master next year. He was very influential in British-Japanese relations, and he signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance on behalf of the Japanese Government. These were very senior men in this new age of Japan.

Beginning of the Japanese Grand Lodge

During the second world war all masonic activities ceased and lodge materials confiscated. It was with the American presence after the war that Masonry got back on its feet. Many of the US occupation force were freemasons, the most notable being General Douglas McArthur.

Lodge Star of the East was resurrected in 1946 by pre-war brethren with the help of brethren from the US Occupation forces. Many United States personnel felt that an American lodge system was more preferable, and as a result the Grand Lodge of the Philippines started to found lodges in Japan from 1948 onwards. By 1956 sixteen Lodges were formed with membership opened to Japanese nationals. Indeed in 1950 seven members of the Japanese Parliament were initiated, including Ichiro Hatoyama. The Prime Minister of Japan, and father of a recent Prime Minister. From these Philippine Lodges, the Grand Lodge of Japan was instituted on May 1st 1957.

Freemasonry today

Where is Freemasonry today? In 1972 there were nearly five thousand members. Today there are around two thousand. Of the brethren, most are not Japanese, with barely 10-20% being Japanese nationals and American servicemen and expatriates making up the rest. Thirteen lodges exist today under the umbrella of the Grand Lodge of Japan. A few more under the Scottish Constitution. Some of these perform the ritual in Japanese, most however are in English. A number of lodges have handed in their Charters and unless a miracle happens more will do so. Where does this leave the future of freemasonry in Japan? Until Freemasonry becomes relevant to the people of Japan, its outlook is bleak indeed.

References:

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