Inoue Kaoru (1836–1915): A Controversial Meiji Statesman

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INTRODUCTION

‘A little man with a bright and intelligent expression.’ Count Inouye, as he was known to Tokyo’s foreign residents in the 1880s, was a giant of Meiji politics. In his role as Minister of Foreign Affairs he had, thought German doctor Erwin Baelz, ‘adapted himself to western civilization and habits more perfectly than any of his compatriots.’1 Mary Crawford Fraser, the wife of a British diplomat, called him ‘a good talker’, and the French minister Joseph-Adam Sienkiewicz was impressed by his ‘sharp and quick mind.’2 In some ways his career mirrors the path of the Meiji state he served. A radical reformer in its early years, he later became known as a pillar of the establishment. And as one of the genrō, ‘the Old Guard of statesmen’, he epitomized the world of the oligarchs; the immense power wielded by a select few.3

No public figure divided opinion quite like Inoue Kaoru. At the dawn of this new age he already had a towering reputation as a hero
of the Meiji Restoration. But while he made important contributions in government his time in office rarely ran smooth. In charge of the Treasury he set about dismantling the old financial structure with revolutionary zeal and pioneered the state’s first ventures into the world of capitalism. As minister of foreign affairs he then steered negotiations through a critical juncture in the campaign to revise the unequal treaties. And yet, in both instances, he was eventually forced to resign following bitter government disputes and even uproar on the streets.

In contrast with Ito Hirobumi, whom Baelz described as the ‘artful dodger’, Inoue lived his political life in the eye of the storm. Bold and outspoken, not even the Emperor was immune from his legendary temper. On one occasion in 1891, he created ‘a great row’ at the palace when he flung away ‘a thick silken mat’ he had found under the imperial throne. The offending item had been smuggled in by ‘the Emperor [who] could not endure that the Empress’s throne should be as lofty as his’. In some circles he was known as ‘Thunder’, but he also showed immense patience with his own protégés. Shibusawa Eiichi was called ‘lightning rod’ for his ability to escape his wrath, although he thought this might better describe Inoue himself, such was his mentor’s talent for surviving political attacks. But while he commanded the devotion of powerful friends, he was loathed in equal measure by his enemies. High profile, well connected and conspicuously rich, he was a prominent target for anyone with a grudge against the Meiji oligarchy.

Britain featured prominently in Inoue’s early career, for he was the moving spirit behind ‘the Chōshū Five’, the group of young samurai who in 1863 defied the Tokugawa ban to escape overseas and study at University College in London. Like other young men from his domain he was then a supporter of the jói campaign bent on expelling foreigners from Japan, until a single defining moment during the voyage transformed his outlook. In the words of Marius Jansen, ‘for some, a ride on a steamship brought enlightenment; for Inoue Kaoru it came when he saw the forest of masts of Western ships in the Shanghai harbor.’

EARLY YEARS

Inoue was born in the village of Yuda on the outskirts of Yamaguchi on 16 January 1836. One of five children, he came from a respectable samurai family with a nominal stipend of 100 koku per year. His father actually received only 40 koku, and had to work the fields to make ends meet. At night the boys read and the girls sewed by the light of a single lantern. Inoue, whose boyhood name was Yūkichi (also Yūjirō), began his formal training at the age of nine, and on