

EVENT SUMMARY:

The Impact of Women on Japanese History

Talk by Lesley Downer

Monday 8 September 2025

Lesley Downer's Talk:

When I was asked to write 'The Shortest History of Japan', it seemed to me to be a marvellous opportunity to bring together some 45 years of my love of and interest in Japan and its history. It was a kind of coda to a whole lifetime lived in and around Japan. The first thing I asked myself was, okay, where do I start? That was fairly easy, because I love Japanese pottery, and it turns out that the Japanese were the world's first potters in 14,500 BC when we were still in the Ice Age, and there was a land bridge linking Japan to the Asian continent. Some people, probably women, took some handfuls of soil and began to shape it into a kind of pot shape. Some of these pot-shaped items made of clay went into the bonfire, probably by accident. The people realised that this made them rock hard. So, this was a phenomenal technology. With pots, you could store your food, you could carry your food, and you no longer had to only roast your food over a spit. You could also boil food, you could simmer food, so you could make your food soft, and you could eat foods that were not edible raw, like chestnuts. So, it widely expanded people's diets, and was a much greater, much further advance in technology than the internet.

Then the Ice Age came to an end, and the sea levels rose, and the people living at the far eastern edge of the Asian continent found themselves on the islands that we now know as Japan. At this point, there was a really wonderful climate. It became very warm, and the people could pluck food; they could pluck fish from the oceans and pick fruit from the trees. There were deer and boar that they could hunt. All in all, they led a very prosperous and easy life. They were hunter-gatherers, but they led such an easy life that they were able to settle down in communities. They were so prosperous; food was so easy to find that they were able to specialise. Not everybody had to go hunter-gathering. So some people specialised in making pots. So by about 3000 BC, they were making really magnificent pots like this, which presumably you all know. You can see these pots in the British Museum. They're big and magnificent, usually with a flame or wave design, and they all have this rope design, which is why these people are known as the *Jomon*.

Obviously I was going to begin my shortest dispute of Japan with the Jomon, and equally obviously, having been a journalist in my time, I was going to end it as near to yesterday as I could. So, a quick bit of mathematics: that meant I would have to cover 16,500 years of Japanese history in 50,000 words, which was my word count. So, what I wanted to do was to tell the story in as vivid and lively a way as possible, to make it and to draw out

the chain of cause. I also wanted to bring in women's stories because Japanese history is not all battles and samurai. There were very important women who shaped the course of Japanese history. So today I'm going to talk about some court ladies, some women warriors, and some courtesans. I'm going to first at least ask three questions. Question one: Who was this? Question two: How did she get where she was? Question three: How do we know about her?

So the very first name in the whole of Japanese history, the first named person to arise in Japanese history, and she lived about 100 years after Boudica. Her name was Himiko. So she lived about 190 AD. While Boudica was a warrior queen, Himiko had a different kind of superpower. She was a shaman, and that meant that she could intervene with the Gods, she could intercede with the Gods. She could ensure that the harvests would come, she could ensure that the weather would be fine, that everybody would have good fortune.

So how did she get to where she was? How did she become queen? At that time, Japan was divided up into many, many, many kingdoms. Around 190 AD, 30 of the kings of these kingdoms got together and decided to make a federation. They realised that while men ruled, they would carry on fighting each other all the time. So they decided the solution was to ask a woman to rule over them. Indeed, Himiko ruled for about 60 years, and she kept the peace throughout that time. Who was she? She came from a line of queens, so there must have been women rulers before her that we don't know about. How do we know about her? Well, at the time, Japan had no writing. But the great empire of China, across the water, did have writing. When she was about 50, Himiko sent a delegation to the Emperor of mighty China with tribute. The tribute was of 10 slaves and bolts of silks. The emperor of China received this and he recognised Himiko as the Queen of the 'Land of Wa', which is what the Chinese called her kingdom.

The Emperor of China was curious about this small kingdom across the water in these islands way off at the edge of the Asian continent. He sent a fact-finding mission. So a group of Chinese arrived in Himiko's land. They wrote a long report, reporting that the people of the Land of Wa lived in villages of thatched houses, grew all sorts of crops like barley, and that they dived for fish, which played a large part in their diet. They were tattooed, some of them from head to toe, which was to protect them from dangerous fishes. They wrote that Himiko herself lived completely surrounded by a stockade, with watchtowers and with an army to protect her, and with 1,000 women attendants to serve her, and one man who acted as her spokesperson. So she kept herself pretty much hidden, as indeed the Emperor does to this day. But she wielded not only religious power; she was not only a shamaness but also temporal power. She charged taxes and so on. While she ruled, the country was at peace. They also reported that these people grew mulberry leaves, and they fed those to silkworms. They made very beautiful silk. So we can imagine that Himiko looked and dressed something like this. So these people made *haniwa*. These were the *Yayoi* people, who were dressed in the garments of the time. So Himiko probably wore a tunic of this beautiful silk that they wove. Also archaeologists have found the necklaces and coronets and so on that she would have worn.

She ruled for 50 years. When she died, she was buried with enormous pomp and ceremony in a tumulus. It was one of the very first grave mounds. She was buried, it is said, with either 100 or 1,000 living attendants. But the archaeologists tell us that that's not right - that the Japanese did not practice human sacrifice. But if she was buried in this tumulus, which is not certain, but this tumulus is Hashihaka tumulus. It's outside Nara. It dates from the same period as Himiko. So it is possible. It is likely that this was her burial place. In that case, her land, her kingdom, the Land of Yamatai, would have been the Nara area. So there are also people that contend that actually the land of Yamatai was in northern Kyushu. So if she wasn't buried with living attendants, she could well have been buried with terracotta attendants like these. After her death, the people found a man to rule them. Immediately fighting broke out. So they kicked him out and they installed her niece, who was called Iyo, who was 13 and who was also a shamaness. Peace was established again.

So there's a lot of controversy about whether a woman can inherit the Chrysanthemum throne. Just the other day, the Emperor's nephew was recognized as the heir apparent, as the crown prince, thereby leaping over the Emperor's daughter who's older than him. Well, this is because of very recent constitutions. I think the Meiji Constitution stated that only a man could rule from the imperial throne. That was reinforced by the American-based Constitution of 1947. But before that, there were empresses. So, I will tell you about three of these empresses quite briefly. So, the first one was Empress Suiko, and Empress Suiko ruled from 593 to 628. She was the daughter of Emperor Kinmei who received the first statues of the Buddha from the Koreans and the Chinese. So during her reign, Buddhism came to Japan. She ruled for 35 years, so there were quite a few pictures of her. Under her, the regent whose name was Prince Shotoku, who was a very great and famous regent, established Buddhism and also established many Buddhist temples, and established lots of Chinese culture in Japan.

Jumping over a few emperors, the next Empress we come to is Empress Kōgyoku. Empress Kōgyoku came to the throne in 642 and she ruled till 661. In her reign, she presided over a very spectacular coup d'état. The situation in Japan was always that you had the figurehead emperor or empress, and then you had the people who held the real power. At her time it was a clan called the *Soga* clan who held the power. Her son Prince Naka decided that it was time that the imperial family got the power back into their hands. So he plotted. There was a big party held at the Palace. He ordered that all the gates be locked, and he smuggled in a sword, and there he locked off the head of the young leader of the Soga clan. So that was the end of the power of the Soga clan. Empress Kōgyoku had to abdicate immediately because she was polluted by being in the presence of death. Now, probably at this point, Prince Naka had the power, but he didn't want to be the one that appeared to have the power. So, her brother became emperor, and after her brother died, she became Empress again with a new name because her name was polluted because of that death. So, she became Empress Saimei. She went down to Kyushu. She was about to actually lead an armada to fight the Koreans and Chinese who were threatening Kyushu, but then she died.

Prince Naka now finally took over power, and he became Emperor Tenji. He took the name Emperor Tenji, and he was a very magnificent emperor. In his reign it was a bit like the time of William the Conqueror when a lot of

French culture came to England. Under his reign, a lot of Tang China culture came to Japan, including Gagaku, for example, came over from China. The ladies of his court dressed like ladies in the Tang Chinese court. So it was a time of great glamour and a lot of culture.

Now we come to the third of these, was Empress Kōken, who ruled from 749 to 770. Her father was Empress Shomu, who was the one who built the Great Buddha in Nara. Unfortunately, he also bankrupted Japan while he was building the Great Buddha because he used up so much valuable metals. She came to the throne and she was rather sickly. A faith healing, very low-ranking Buddhist monk called Dōkyō healed her. He'd done a lot of austerities, and he had magical powers. He was also young and handsome, and she liked him very much and took him to her bed. She also gave him a lot of power. So he started to issue laws and to decide what was gonna go on in the country. At that point, the clan that had the power or thought they ought to have the power were the *Fujiwara*. They rose up in rebellion against her and Dōkyō. He sent out an army, which defeated them and took the head of the Fujiwara leader. In gratitude, she printed out a million sutras. Sutas are Buddhist scriptures. This is 750, it's way, way, way before the Gutenberg Press. So, this is the first instance of printing in the world. These sutras were put inside small pagodas, like this one, about this tall, of which there are some in the British Museum, and distributed around the 10 great monasteries.

Dōkyō continued wielding power. She made him chancellor and then priestly Emperor. But then he got a little above himself. He decided he wanted to be Emperor. But she still favored him until eventually she died. At this point, the Fujiwara rose up and decided that they had to get rid of Dōkyō immediately. They couldn't execute him because you don't want to be haunted by a monk. So they exiled him. But they also decreed that women could no longer inherit the imperial throne because they were too easily influenced. So that was the end of this run of empresses, although there were a couple more empresses about 1,000 years later. But that didn't mean that women didn't continue to play an important role. There were women who changed the course of Japanese history through very different means.

We'll move on a few years to Murasaki Shikibu. We are now about 1,000. That is before 1066. So over here, we are fighting each other. You have Wessex and Mercia and Northumberland and all that, and people are charging around with axes, sort of hacking each other to pieces. Or we're living in great halls, wearing helmets with horns on, drinking mead, listening to bards. Most of us can't read. But over in Japan, it was very different. There, a most marvelous civilisation grew up centered around the beautiful city of Heian, which we now know as Kyoto. It was laid out in a grid plan, as it is to this day with magnificent palaces like this one. This is an exact model of the Heian Palace, lining the boulevards of this marvelous city. There, ladies and men trundled up and down the boulevards in ox-drawn carriages. So when I say ladies and men, we're talking about noble men and noble ladies, because, as far as these people were concerned, the ordinary people were barely human at all. They really didn't count.

The noble ladies made sure that they were never seen by the noble men. It was a very peculiar, extraordinary, and very obviously aesthetic culture. So these ladies would ensure that there was a beautiful brocade sleeve hanging

from the window of their ox carriage so that people would know that hidden inside was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Well, a little anachronistic, but we can guess what these ladies looked like, because there are these processions to this day where people dress in Heian costume and parade around Kyoto. We can see that these ladies wore these wonderful 12-layer kimonos which were color coordinated, and they had this long, beautiful hair that swept down their back like a waterfall and trailed along the ground behind them. The only mistake in this costume is that in reality, the Heian ladies would have shaved off their eyebrows, and they would have painted them high on their forehead, mothwing eyebrows like these. So the ladies kept themselves hidden away. When a man came to visit, the lady would receive him from behind screens so he didn't get to see her. As I said, this was a very aesthetic culture, a very literate culture. People could write a poem just like that. So if a man was very interested in a particular lady, he would compose a poem, and he would write it in his best calligraphy on a piece of beautifully scented paper and have it sent in to her. She would take a look at it, and she would assess it. If she thought it was worth her while, she might answer. If things developed well, she might invite him in to spend the night. So he would arrive at dead of night so he didn't get to see her face. They would be alone together in the darkness, apart from some 40 or 50 servants who didn't count because they weren't people. But the servants would be very discreet. But they would know exactly who the man was by his perfume because each man makes his own perfume. They were all different. The man would leave before the cockcrow.

So the men all learnt Chinese characters, so they wrote somewhat staid poems in Chinese characters. The ladies were considered to be an inferior species. So they were taught kana, hiragana. The idea was that they should read the sutras, and they should be very devout and pious. But these were extremely sophisticated court ladies. So they used this kana to write diaries and letters and accounts of all the funny things that they saw, like the men preening themselves, and their sadness at things like falling in love with a man because of the sound of his voice and never being able to meet him, that kind of thing. The pinnacle of all this was Murasaki Shikibu's 'Tale of Genji', which I'm sure you've read and if you haven't then you should. It's about the shining Prince Genji, who was the most handsome and kind-hearted and charming and brilliant man, and who also had a streak of tragedy, many people that he loved died. It's all about feelings. It's all about relationships. It's all about emotions. It's like Proust or Jane Austen. It's very famed, as the world's first novel. It actually forms the bedrock of Japanese culture ever after, with all the marvelous poems in it.

Such a decadent culture could not last forever. Though it did last 400 years. 400 years is actually quite a long time. 400 years ago from now is 1625, and a lot has happened since then. So, this culture lasted for quite a long time. But eventually, the buildings were falling down. The government was so busy with their writing of poems and their mixing of perfumes that they forgot how to print money, for example. In the end, there were bands of monks fighting each other on the streets. There were robbers. The emperor hid himself in his palace, he was afraid to come out. Anybody that went traveling did so in fear. Eventually, the Samurai whose job it was to defend the nobles, charged in and took power themselves, and so began the age of warfare.

Now, among these samurai, there were women. The most famous of the whole lot was Tomoe Gozen. Tomoe Gozen was pretty much a contemporary of Richard the Lionheart. So, it's a similar period over here. She was

extremely beautiful, had white skin and long black hair. She was the companion, or probably the lover, of a man called Kiso no Yoshinaka, who was a very gallant warrior, who was the cousin of the first Shogun of Japan, Minamoto no Yoritomo. The shogun means he was the first person to try to unify Japan. So, Yoshinaka was his cousin. We know about Tomoe because her exploits are recorded in the Tale of the Heike, which was the great epic of the time. Whenever a battle was imminent, Yoshinaka sent her out as his first captain, equipped with strong armour, an oversized sword, and a mighty bow. She performed more deeds of valour than any of his other warriors. She was the leader of the troop of 300, who drove the enemy, who was the Heike, out of Kyoto. The enemy was an army of 2,000, and she and her 300 men drove them out of Kyoto, fleeing to the Western provinces. So she was a great horsewoman. She could tame wild horses, she could gallop down cliffs. But her weapon of choice was the *naginata*, which became the classic woman's weapon. This is the long-handled sword which has a haft about two meters long and a sharp blade that was one meter long. This is the classic woman's weapon. So if you are a woman and a man with his two meter long sword is charging towards you, if you are nifty with your three meter long naginata, you could probably cut his legs off. This was her weapon of choice.

But then Yoshinaka got a bit above himself. He decided that he wanted to topple his cousin and be Shogun himself. Obviously the Shogun Yoritomo was not standing for this. So Yoritomo sent down a massive army led by the greatest warrior in the whole of Japanese history, who is Yoshitsune. There was a huge battle in 1184, which is the Battle of Awaza. Tomoe and Yoshinaka were enormously outnumbered. Eventually, none of their warriors were left apart from five. Yoshinaka called over Tomoe and said, "Flee! Go to the eastern provinces. Make sure that my story is not forgotten." But she was a warrior. She said, "No way". She wanted to show him what a glorious death she could die. So she looked around for a worthy opponent. She saw a poor chap called Honda no Moroshige, the head of the Musashi clan. So she rode up to him, grabbed him, pulled him off his horse, held his head up against the pommel of her saddle and cut it off. She then looked around for Yoshinaka, her lover, to give him the head. But unfortunately, his horse— this is a rather humiliating ending— had sunk to its withers in a paddy field, and he was full of arrows and had been killed. So then she did take off her armour and ran off to the eastern provinces and lived a long life, and so his story was told.

So we're now going to move on a little further to a woman who wielded power in a very traditional way, from behind the throne. The sad thing is we don't have any pictures of Nene as a young girl. So you're going to have to imagine what she looked like. She was a contemporary of Elizabeth I. So we're now in Tudor times and she was born in the kingdom of Owari which is around Nagoya, which was also the kingdom of Oda Nobunaga, who was the great warlord of the day, who was in the middle of unifying Japan. She was the daughter of quite a mid-ranking samurai family. So her parents wanted her to marry a high-ranking samurai. There were lots of handsome and young high-ranking samurai who were keen to marry her. But there was also a scrawny, very ugly bloke who was of farming ancestry, therefore very low ranking, absolutely not a catch at all. He was so ugly that people called him a monkey. His name was Tokichido. She went for him. Well, he was scrawny, ugly, and everything else, but he also was a genius. He had an amazing tongue. He was able to persuade anybody to do anything, and he was also able to make most people laugh. Oda Nobunaga, the great warlord, had already spotted him and made him his sandal bearer. So her husband, Monkey, or Tokichido, rose very rapidly through

the ranks to stable boy, gardener, and then Nobunaga tried him out on the battlefield. He was a genius at tactics, so he became a general. By now he had a new name, which was Hideyoshi. He was out and about on campaign all the time.

How do we know about Nene? Because he wrote to her. He wrote her tons and tons of letters. He consulted her about everything, including battlefield tactics and all sorts of practical things, like, do we charge the peasants around our castle? How much tax should we charge them? So by now he was a Daimyo. He was a warlord. He had his first castle, which was Nagahama Castle in Shiga-ken. So Nene's job was to stay at home and to be the daimyo. So she ran the castle. She was in charge of policing. She reared their adopted children because she couldn't have any children of her own. She ran the justice of the castle. There was one problem from her point of view, which was that any man worth his salt in those days had quite a few ladies other than his wife. Hideyoshi took this rather far. He had about 100 concubines. So Oda Nobunaga, the great warlord, at one point writes to Nene like this: 'Your beauty grows day by day. Tokichiro (Hideyoshi) complains about you constantly, and it is outrageous. While that bald rat flusters around trying to find another good woman, you remain lofty and elegant. Do not be jealous. Show Hideyoshi this letter.' I love this because I think you can hear the voice of Nobunaga.

Well, shortly after this, tragically, Nobunaga was assassinated in 1582. By now, Hideyoshi was his right-hand man, and he became *kampaku*, which is regent. So he rose right to the pinnacle, and Nene, his wife, was like the Queen. So she was higher in rank than any daimyo. She was at this point incredibly powerful, able to communicate with the Emperor whenever she felt like it. But besides those 100 concubines, there was one new concubine, which really was a problem. The 100 concubines were ok. Women were used to it: it was the job of a wife to run the household and make sure the concubines didn't squabble; that was all fine. But there was this new, young, beautiful concubine who was called Yodo Dono, Lady Yodo. She was Oda Nobunaga's niece, so she was posh unlike Nene, who was not. She was the daughter of Nobunaga's beautiful sister, whose name was Lady Oichi.

So basically, Hideyoshi was in the process of completing the unification of Japan. There were two clans still left to pacify. One was the Hōjō of Odawara, and the other was Date Masamune, the one-eyed dragon of Oshu. Hideyoshi decided to besiege the castle of Hōjō in Odawara. He knew this was going to be a really long and boring siege. So, while the people inside the castle were starving, he decided his men outside the castle needed to be having fun. So, he summoned fire eaters, sword swallowers, storytellers, dancers, jesters, musicians, and he told his generals to summon their wives and their concubines.

Now he had a problem, which was he really wanted Yodo to come, but he didn't want to annoy Nene. So, he wrote to Nene like this: 'You've got the enemy like birds in a cage. I wish to send for Yodo. I wish you to tell her and make arrangements for her journey and tell her that, next to you, she is the one that pleases me best. Your skill is the best in this world, and our wish is always the same.' So he's obviously trying to make sure that Nene stays on side. In fact, Yodo did go and join him. Now, there was one thing: none of these hundred concubines

had produced an heir for Hideyoshi. He had no heir. Now, Lady Yodo succeeded. She had two children. The first was called Tsurumatsu, and he died when he was two, and Hideyoshi was distraught. But then she had another son, Hideyori, and he lived on. I should add that there was no DNA testing in those days, but Hideyoshi was sure that these were definitely. So basically Yodo was the concubine, so she was the one whose job it was to be delightful and charming, and Nene was the official wife, so she was the one that reared the children.

Finally, Hideyoshi had succeeded in pacifying and unifying the whole country, and it was at peace. This was the *Momoyama* Age. It was a time of unbelievable culture and glamour, when people wore the most glorious robes and the first magnificent castles were being built, and peasants and serfs were coming in from the countryside and establishing new jobs, establishing new professions as artisans. So it was kind of the beginning of modern Japan. Hideyoshi himself set up Nene in the Jurakudai, which was this palace which was in northern Kyoto. It's not there anymore. It was a beautiful golden palace, and there he had parties. At one point, he had a tea ceremony party. It was a 10-day tea ceremony party, and he invited every single inhabitant of Kyoto, and all they had to bring was their own mat and their own bowl. There he showed off his magnificent solid gold tea ceremony house and his solid gold tea ceremony utensils. So basically, he was of farming stock. So you know, he was like a nouveau riche. He really wanted to be cultured. He learned no dancing, and he was keen on tea ceremonies. Well, this 10-day tea ceremony party only lasted one day because he got bored. So, after one day, they closed it down. But 10 years later, he had a cherry blossom viewing party. He's getting rather old by now, and there's a wonderful reenactment of this party every year. It was at Daigo-ji in the south of Kyoto, and there he completely refurbished Sanbō-in, which is this wonderful rock garden where he filled it with 800 incredibly expensive rocks of very beautiful shapes from all over Japan. There, all the ladies in their magnificent costumes paraded through the city.

So Japan was at peace, but the problem was that there were quite a lot of unemployed samurai. Hideyoshi was very concerned that these unemployed samurai would get up to mischief, or possibly rise against him. So the obvious thing to do was to declare war on Korea and China. So he did. He sent off an armada over to Korea. There were huge and terrible battles. I think something like a million Koreans were killed and something like 100,000 Japanese were killed. It was really appalling. Nene really thought this was an atrocious idea. She was in a position where she could speak to the Emperor and she said to the Emperor, "Can you stop him? Please stop him from doing this." The Emperor was obviously afraid of Hideyoshi. He sent him a note saying, "Excuse me, this might not be the best of ideas." But then, to everybody's relief, Hideyoshi died. They immediately called back the troops. Nene we finally get to see her in old age. She didn't have any less power, she didn't go off to a nunnery, nothing like that. She also didn't shave her head; she cut her hair. But she took a new name. She became known as Kōdai-in, and her temple in Kyoto is Kōdai-ji. So Nene lived to a ripe old age, and she rose from very modest origins to a position of incredible power and influence.

Meanwhile, a lot of other women had had a very, very hard time. Because of the centuries of warfare, this meant that there were a lot of destitute women who really had a hard time making ends meet. They had no choice but to engage in prostitution. There were a lot of prostitutes roaming around in Japan. So we'll just wind the clock a

little further to somebody called Izumo no Okuni. She lived around 1603, which was during the reign of James I and two years before the gunpowder plot. In 1603, Izumo no Okuni set up a stage in the dry bed of the river Kama. She was a shrine maiden and a courtesan, which was not a contradiction. There she began to do wild and outrageous dancing. The most outrageous of all was when she donned two swords, like a samurai, and did dances as a man and did comic skits. After the shows, a lot of men queued up to enjoy her sexual favours. So it was very good for her business. The other courtesans and prostitutes in Kyoto noticed this, and soon they were all doing wild and outrageous dancing. A name had to be found for this absolutely new art form. That name was *kabuki*, which came from, *kabuku* or from *katamuku*, which means to do something which is kind of offbeat. So basically, the Tokugawa shoguns had no problem with sexual morality. There was no Judeo-Christian fuss about that. But they did not want disorder.

By now, as I'm sure you know, the Tokugawa shoguns were running the show, and they did not like disorder at all. There was a lot of disorder among the men lining up, fighting for the favours of all these courtesans and prostitutes. So eventually, they banned women from performing on the public stage. So that meant that thereafter, women could perform to parlour audiences, to paying private audiences, but not on the public stage. So the women were replaced by beautiful young men, and the same problem arose: that men lined up to enjoy the favours of the beautiful young men. So they got banned as well. So then the Shogunate decreed that hereafter, only adult men could appear on the public stage as they do to this day. This is Tamasaburō. To this day, Kabuki and Noh are performed only by men.

Some of the point of this is that the world of the courtesans and the prostitutes was very intimately connected with showbiz. It was a lot to do with dancing and with music and with performance. So there were all these courtesans and prostitutes milling around all over the place. The question was how to establish order. This was very disorderly. So the answer was to gather them together in one place, so government-sponsored pleasure quarters began. The very first one was actually at the time of Hideyoshi. It was the Shimabara, and it was founded in 1589 outside Kyoto, so you had to travel to get there so that it wouldn't pollute respectable people.

The most famous pleasure quarters of the whole lot was outside the great city of Edo, which was the Tokugawa shogun's new capital. That was the Yoshiwara. It was known as the nightless city because the lights never went out. It was made up of five streets, and it was a place where a man who spent his days maybe being humiliated at work, maybe being beaten down, maybe being nagged by his wife, could go up there, and he could imagine himself a prince, he could imagine that the courtesan who was declaring her eternal love for him was a princess. So, it was a place where a man could enact any fantasy he chose to. Anybody could go there, it didn't cost anything. Women could go there. This painting is by Hokusai's daughter, Katsushika Ōi. She depicts the Yoshiwara as a fun place. I don't think this is a critical depiction of the Yoshiwara. So, if you were a poor man, you could walk around the streets, you could admire these beautiful ladies behind the showing off their wares, which was their beauty. If you had a little bit of money, you might be able to spend an hour or so with one of these ladies. Even if you had no money, you could still see one of the great courtesans parading down the road, if you were lucky. You could easily spot these courtesans because they had these 30-centimeter high clogs and they

undulated down the road in a long procession. They wore the bow of their obi tied at the front in an enormous knot. The implication being that if you were rich enough, and patient enough, and lucky enough, you might just possibly have the chance to untie it. So these were the most marvelous processions. If you were a poor man, you could certainly enjoy them. But they're so marvelous that they are repeated to this day with these enormous obis. So these ladies are now actresses.

Now if you were a rich man, that was a different business altogether. You wouldn't be on the street; you would go straight to the courtesan's boudoir, and you would have booked her, and there you would wait. While you were waiting, you would need to demonstrate that you were worthy of her interest because you were such a big spender. So you'd have to call in dancers, jesters, storytellers, all at enormous expense, and also food for all these entertainers, and food for yourself; lavish feasts for all these people. You would wait. It could take her all day before she showed up; it could take longer. She might have other customers. But eventually, the courtesan would appear, and you would glimpse perhaps her little bare foot, suggesting a human woman inside all this fancy outfit.

Now, it would decrease these ladies' value if they were to go to bed with just anybody. So quite a few of them didn't go to bed with anybody at all. So the odds of you actually untying that obi were very small indeed. As I said, what it was really all about was much more about culture. In fact, an evening at the Yoshiwara was a bit like an afternoon of tea. So the courtesan would probably play music for you, or she might do a tea ceremony with two trainee courtesans to help her. She would certainly dance for you. But these ladies were also like queens of salons because there were salons in the Yoshiwara. The Yoshiwara was actually the heart of the whole of the Edo period culture. So all those wonderful woodblock prints depict the Yoshiwara. Novels like Saikaku's marvelous novels, out of the pleasure quarters. So poets and artists would gather in the salons where the courtesans were the queens. They were celebrities, and they were certainly not going to undo their obi for just any old guy. Far from it.

So some 150 years went by, to about 1750. Now, 150 years is also quite a long time. 150 years ago was 1875. No electricity, no gas. So 150 years went by, and some of these women were really into their arts. So if they were dancers, they were pros, like the Royal Ballet. If they were singers, they were professionals like opera singers today. I mean, like Western opera singers. So these were not amateurs. These were fantastic performers. Some of these women realised that they absolutely did not need to sell their bodies. They could make a living by selling their arts. They called themselves arts people, which was *geisha*. The geisha were very different to the courtesans. They were into their arts. They tied their obi at the back. They didn't bother with the thick makeup because that was not their job. They were really interested in their profession. They were professionals. So, over the years, it became far cooler for a young man about town to be seen with an understated geisha on his arm than an over-made-up, overdressed courtesan. When the westerners finally turned up, the geisha, who were trendsetters, were the first to try out things like, bustles and bonnets, western clothing and western dancing.

In 1853, when all of this jollity came to an end when Commodore Matthew Perry showed up with his four black ships, with cannons blazing, and forced the Japanese to open up to interaction with the West. That sparked 15 years first of trouble, then of more trouble, then of civil war, and eventually in 1868 Emperor Mutsuhito, who was 15, came down from Kyoto to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo, the eastern capital, and entered Edo Castle, which was renamed the Imperial Palace. But that wasn't quite the end of the story.

There was a Tokugawa resistance. There were a lot of resistance warriors. and among these resistance warriors there were women. The most famous is Nakano Takeko. So the Tokugawa resistance gathered at Aizu Castle, which is not very far from Fukushima and for very good reason. There is no Aizu prefecture. So the new government, which was made up of the clans which had been the ancient enemies of the Tokugawa clan, the Satsuma, the Choshu, sent a mammoth army up and they besieged Aizu Castle where the Tokugawa resistance were holed up. Women were bandaging the wounds of the wounded inside the castle. Some of the women killed themselves so as not to eat the food, so the men would have more food. Quite a few engaged in battle.

So one day, the army was outside the castle, and suddenly the gates opened and a brigade came out. The army took one look at them and realized that these were women. They'd cut their hair short, they were wearing headbands, and their leader was Nakano Takeko. So for a moment, the cry went up in the army to hold fire. So the women charged in with their naginata. They didn't have guns, they just had their long-handled swords, and they sliced a few men up. But then the men started to fire, and she was killed straight away. Her sister cut off her head so that the enemy could not have it as a trophy. Shortly after that, that resistance crumbled. Then the resistance moved up to Hokkaido, and finally, the whole thing came to an end and the Meiji period began.

So, for the next 30, 40 years, it was a period of nation building. This was not a great time for women. There was the first constitution, and the constitution decreed that women were to be good wives and wise mothers. In other words, stay home and keep quiet. So, it was not a great time for women. But eventually, the nation building was over, and then came around 1910, the Jazz Age, the Taishō period. By now, the country is established. There is universal education and this is the age of the *moga* or the modern garu. So the moga were flappers. Not everybody was a moga, but there were quite a few mogas. They had shockingly short skirts, they had shockingly short hair, and they had jobs. They could be beauticians, secretaries, elevator attendants, they could be waitresses, but they could be financially independent. These women smoked, ate ice cream, did the can-can, roamed around the Ginza, drove around in fast cars, or were driven, practiced free love when they felt like it and discussed Marxism, anarchism, socialism, and all those other exciting things.

Among them, there were militant feminists, of whom the most famous was Hiratsuka Raichō. So, Hiratsuka Raichō very famously said that marriage was slavery by day and prostitution by night. So she certainly didn't bother getting married. She went off with a married man, and that didn't work out. She then moved on to a much younger man and had some children by him but didn't actually get married to him until eventually her children were grown up. She founded a magazine called *Seitō* which means blue stocking, where she published extremely risqué stories by women authors, all about their sex lives. Women weren't supposed to have sex lives,

but these were stories about things like picking up a man in a bar and having sex with him. So, this was all very shocking, but the government didn't do anything about it until she started demanding women's rights, and she also started criticising capitalism. Then, at that point, the government clamped down.

But her most famous contributor was Yosano Akiko, who was a famous poetess, and she too went off with a married man. She had 13 children. She wrote 'Midare Gami', which means tangled hair, which were these very erotic poems. Women were not supposed to have erotic thoughts of any sort, let alone write poems about it. So these women took their lives into their own hands, and their power was their independence. So the very first words of Seitō were, 'In the beginning, woman was the sun.' This is a reference to Amaterasu, who is the sun goddess, who is the creator of all life. Actually, Amaterasu is with us to this day, she's just as powerful as she ever was because she's become a very popular figure in manga. So I write about all of this and much else in 'The Shortest History of Japan'. There are copies on sale if you are interested in buying a copy, and I could sign it and stamp it with the gold stamp of the Tokugawa Shogun. Thank you very much for listening.