

Hello and welcome back to World Herstory, the podcast that discovers the lives and legacies of lesser-known, badass women from around the world and throughout history. I'm your host, Tabitha Bear, a traveling multimedia specialist with a passion for exploring the hidden tales of the amazing women who have helped shape our lives today.

Today, our focus turns to the glowing figure of Ichiyo Higuchi, a literary virtuoso who emerged during a transformative period in Japanese history.

As we dive into the late 19th-century of Japan, a time of profound upheaval, we find ourselves at the crossroads of the Edo Period's demise and the dawn of the Meiji Restoration. The closing chapters of the Edo Period witnessed a Japan entrenched in centuries-old traditions, yet teetering on the brink of change. The Meiji Restoration, a seismic shift in governance, marked the ascendancy of Emperor Meiji and the dismantling of the shogunate, heralding an era of modernization and openness.

Against this backdrop of societal transformation, our narrative unfolds amid the tempest of the Boshin War, a Japanese Civil War that erupted between forces loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate and those advocating for the restoration of imperial rule. The clash of swords and ideologies during this conflict echoed through the tales of history, shaping the destiny of a nation in the throes of reinvention.

Women were intricately woven into the fabric of society undergoing profound alteration. Rooted in Confucian ideals and a stratified class structure, their roles were traditionally defined by the principles of filial piety, emphasizing duties as daughters, wives, and mothers. The advent of the Meiji era introduced winds of change that challenged these entrenched norms.

While some women embraced new education opportunities and aspects of Western-inspired modernity, the majority navigated a delicate dance between tradition and progress. The emergence of the 'modern girl' symbolized a subtle rebellion against societal constraints, encapsulating the nuanced evolution of women's roles amid the complex currents of 19th-century Japan.

Enter Ichiyo Higuchi, daughter of a samurai. Higuchi navigated the societal currents of a Japan caught between tradition and modernity. Her pen, a subtle yet potent weapon, became the instrument through which she explored the intricacies of a changing society, particularly in her renowned novella, *Growing Up*, set against the backdrop of the Yoshiwara red-light district.

We're going to start with the Tokugawa Period - also known as the Edo Period. It was a metamorphose era in Japan lasting from 1603 - 1868. Marking the beginning of the Edo Period, this epoch was shaped by the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate under the rule of Ieyasu Tokugawa - if there are any Samurai Warriors video game fans out there - the name might sound familiar to you. The period is renowned for bringing about a prolonged era of stability, peace, and isolationist policies, setting the stage for significant social, economic, and cultural developments.

Under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan experienced a centralized feudal system, with the shogun as the supreme military ruler, wielding authority over regional land owners, who in turn, governed their respective domains. This hierarchical structure aimed to maintain stability and prevent the recurrence of internal friction that had plagued Japan in previous periods.

One of the defining features of the Tokugawa Period was the establishment of the Tokugawa government's seat in Edo (present-day Tokyo), evolving the small fishing village into a bustling metropolis. Edo became the de facto political and cultural center of Japan, while the emperor resided in Kyoto, embodying a symbolic yet largely ceremonial role.

The Tokugawa shogunate implemented the sakoku policy, a deliberate strategy of seclusion from the outside world. This policy restricted foreign influence and trade, with exceptions for limited interactions through designated ports, such as Nagasaki. The intent was to safeguard internal stability and traditional Japanese values, leading to a prolonged period of relative isolation.

Economic growth and urbanization flourished during the Tokugawa Period, as the merchant class rose in prominence. The stability afforded by the shogunate allowed for economic development, and cities like Edo thrived as hubs of commerce and culture. Kabuki theater, woodblock prints, and the flourishing of literature were hallmarks of the vibrant culture scene during this time.

Women were bound by a complex interplay of societal norms deeply rooted in Confucian ideals and the rigid class structure. Central to their roles were the principles of filial piety, which emphasized the dutiful fulfillment of responsibilities as daughters, wives, and mothers. The prevailing social hierarchy and the influence of Confucianism reinforced the idea that women's primary roles were within the domestic sphere, maintaining family honor and perpetuating ancestral lineage. While women from samurai families often received education and training in literary and artistic pursuits, their social mobility remained constrained by the prevailing patriarchal norms.

The urbanization and economic growth witnessed during the Edo Period had notable impacts on women's roles, particularly in the emerging merchant class. In urban centers like Edo (modern-day Tokyo), the merchant class's rise provided opportunities for women to engage in economic activities. Some women managed family businesses, participated in trade, or operated shops, contributing to the economic prosperity of their households. However, despite these opportunities, women's societal roles remained largely circumscribed, reflecting the traditional values and expectations of the time. The Edo Period's legacy for women encompasses a nuanced blend of adherence to tradition and subtle shifts in societal dynamics, offering a glimpse into the complexities of gender roles during this period in Japan's history.

With the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate, the samurai, once warriors in constant battle, transitioned to a new societal role as administrators, bureaucrats, and guardians of the peace. The rigid social structure of the Edo Period placed the samurai at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, defining their status and responsibilities. Governed by a strict code of conduct known as Bushido, the way of the warrior, samurai were expected to embody virtues such as loyalty, honor, and discipline. While they were no longer engaged in frequent warfare, the Edo Period samurai played crucial roles in maintaining order, enforcing laws, and contributing to the cultural and intellectual development of Japan during this era of stability.

However, the Tokugawa Period was not without its challenges. The rigid social structure, known as the 'sankin-kotai' system, required land owners to spend alternate years in Edo, a measure intended to control their power. Economic disparities and dissatisfaction among the lower classes simmered beneath the surface, setting the stage for social and political tensions that would culminate in the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

In retrospect, the Tokugawa Period stands as a pivotal chapter in Japan's history, characterized by stability, economic growth, and cultural flourishing. Yet, its legacy is also marked by the seeds of change that would eventually lead to the unraveling of the shogunate and the dawn of a new era in the Meiji Restoration.

The end of the Edo Period and the advent of the Meiji Restoration marked a pivotal juncture in Japanese history, heralding a transubstantiated shift from feudal isolation to a modern, industrialized nation. The catalyst for change was the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his fleet in 1853, compelling Japan to open its ports to foreign trade or face military consequences. This event shattered the Tokugawa shogunate's policy of sakoku, or national seclusion, and exposed the vulnerabilities of a society that had enjoyed relative peace for two and a half centuries.

The internal struggle and economic disparities that followed intensified discontent among the samurai class and commoners alike. This discontent culminated in the Boshin War, a conflict that witnessed the imperial forces, led by Emperor Meiji and key figures like Saigo Takamori and Kido Takayoshi, challenging the Tokugawa shogunate. The pivotal moment came in 1868 when the Tokugawa shogun relinquished power, signaling the formal end of the Edo Period and the restoration of imperial rule.

Emperor Meiji, ascending to the throne in 1867, symbolized the rejuvenation of Japan. The Meiji Restoration aimed to modernize the country, embracing Western technologies and institutions while discarding feudal structures. In a whirlwind of reforms, the samurai class saw their privileges dismantled, and a new era of social, political, and economic upheaval began. The Meiji government embarked on an ambitious path of industrialization, constitutional reforms, and the establishment of a more centralized government.

By 1869, the new Meiji government had definitively secured its authority, signaling the dawn of an era that would propel Japan into the ranks of world powers. The end of the Edo Period and the onset of the Meiji Restoration not only remodeled Japan's political landscape, but also set the stage for the nation's rapid modernization, marking a profound turning point that resonated throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The significance of Japan gaining imperial control during the Meiji Restoration, particularly to avoid colonization from Western powers, cannot be overstated. In the late 19th century, as Japan emerged from centuries of isolation, the imperial throne took center stage as a strategic bulwark against the looming specter of colonization by Western nations.

The imperial rule served as a unifying force that rallied the Japanese people during a time of external threats. The Meiji government recognized the urgent need to fortify Japan against encroaching influence of Western powers, who were eager to establish spheres of influence and exploit the economic and strategic advantages of the island nation.

The imperial institution, steeped in centuries of tradition, provided a cohesive narrative that presented Japan as a sovereign and unified entity. This narrative was crucial in dissuading potential colonizers, as it projected an image of national strength and cohesion that discouraged external intervention. The emperor became a symbol of national identity, rallying the populace around a shared vision of modernization and resilience against foreign pressures.

By consolidating power under the imperial throne, Japan strategically presented itself as a formidable and united nation, reducing the perceived vulnerabilities that might attract

colonial interests. The Meiji government, recognizing the lessons from other colonized nations, implemented rapid modernization and reforms to bolster Japan's military, industrial, and economic capabilities.

This strategic move bore fruit, as Japan not only avoided colonization, but also emerged as a formidable regional power. The defeat of China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and the victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, showcased Japan's newfound strength and established it as the first non-Western imperial power in the modern era.

In essence, the acquisition of imperial control during the Meiji Restoration played a pivotal role in safeguarding Japan's sovereignty and autonomy. The imperial institution, with its historical resonance and symbolic significance, became a shield against external pressures and a cornerstone in Japan's journey to assert its place in the rapidly changing global order of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Meiji Restoration ushered in significant changes in women's roles, marking a departure from traditional norms. As Japan embraced modernization and sought to navigate the complexities of interacting with the Western world, women found themselves at the intersection of tradition and progress.

The Meiji government initiated educational reforms that expanded access to learning for both men and women. While the curriculum often reflected gendered expectations, some women seized the opportunity to acquire education beyond domestic skills. The establishment of girls' schools and the incorporation of Western-style education laid the groundwork for a new generation of women who would play increasingly active roles in society.

The concept of the 'good wife, wise mother' emerged as an ideal during this period, emphasizing the importance of education for women to fulfill their roles as supportive wives and mothers. However, this notion, while reinforcing certain traditional values, also laid the groundwork for women to engage in broader societal activities.

The transition extended to the legal realm, as the Meiji Civil Code of 1898 granted women more legal rights, including the ability to inherit property and the right to seek divorce. These changes, though limited, represented a divergence from the stricter patriarchal norms of previous eras.

Industrialization and urbanization during the Meiji era offered new opportunities for women beyond the agrarian lifestyle. The textile and manufacturing industries witnessed an influx of female labor, and some women ventured into professional fields, working as clerks, teachers,

and nurses. While many still adhered to traditional roles, a growing number of women began to challenge societal expectations and explore avenues beyond the domestic sphere.

The emergence of the 'modern girl' in urban centers reflected a cultural shift as some women embraced Western fashions, lifestyles, and ideas. This symbolized a subtle rebellion against traditional constraints, highlighting the evolving aspirations and desires of a segment of Japanese women.

The Meiji Restoration brought about a complex evolution in women's roles. While certain traditional expectations persisted, the era witnessed expanded education opportunities, legal advancements, and the emergence of a more diverse and dynamic role for women in Japanese society. The seeds planted during the Meiji era would continue to influence the trajectory of women's rights and roles in the subsequent decades and beyond.

The Boshin War, or the Japanese Civil War, fought from 1868 to 1869, was a pivotal conflict during the Meiji Restoration, marking the transition from the Tokugawa shogunate to imperial rule. This war had a profound impact on Japanese society and culture, reshaping the nation's political landscape and setting the stage for a rapid metamorphosis.

The Boshin War erupted as a culmination of internal friction, economic disparities, and discontent among various factions within Japan. The imperial forces, under Emperor Meiji, clashed with supporters of the Tokugawa shogunate, resulting in a conflict that sought to redefine the nation's governance.

The outcome of the war, with the victory of imperial forces, marked the formal end of the Edo Period and the restoration of imperial rule. This transition had a profound impact on Japanese society, as power shifted from the Tokugawa shogunate to the centralizing forces of the imperial government. The dismantling of the shogunate's authority and the establishment of imperial rule signaled the end of centuries-old feudal structures and initiated a period of rapid modernization.

The impact on Japanese culture was equally significant. The Meiji Restoration sought to break away from the isolationist policies of the past and embrace Western ideas, technologies, and institutions. This cultural shift influenced various aspects of Japanese society, from education and governance to fashion and the arts. The government implemented a series of reforms aimed at modernizing Japan, including the abolishment of the samurai class, the establishment of a conscript army, and the adoption of Western-style legal and education systems.

The Boshin War also led to the suppression of rebellions by factions loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate, most notably the Satsuma Rebellion led by Saigō Takamori in 1877. These conflicts further contributed to the restructuring of Japanese society and the centralization of power under the imperial government.

The cultural impact of embracing Western ideas and institutions during this time laid the foundation for the dynamic and evolving society that Japan would become in the 20th century.

We're going to interrupt this episode for just a moment to let you know that we are on the social media! You can find us @ world herstory on nearly every platform. We're also on Patreon. Patreon dot com slash world herstory. Your support helps keep this podcast going.

As we've covered so far in this episode, Japan was going through a seriously transformative time. The end of centuries-old traditions, the samurai, and feudal systems, replaced by the establishment of imperial rule and Western-inspired modernizations while still keeping Eastern-inspired values.

Ichijo Higuchi, born on May 2, 1872 as Natsuko Higuchi, was the daughter of a forcefully retired samurai. Her birth is so significant as she grows up in a traditional-cultured home, yet the world outside is thriving with modernity. Natsuko's father noticed she had a keen interest in literary aspirations at a young age and invested time in educating her more.

In 1886, at 14, she began studying poetry at the Haginoya, a private school founded by Utako Nakajima. Utako Nakajima is a descendent of Ota Dokan, the builder of Edo castle and the Nakajima's have generations of history of village leaders. Her mother's side was from the Fukushima household, who used to be the suppliers of the shogun - so suffice to say, this poetry teacher was a powerhouse and her school taught upper and middle class students due to generations of affiliations with the upper class.

And on a side note - it also shows the progress of women that in 1886, there was a school founded by a woman who was a specialist in her field of study, which was traditional Heian poetry. Heian poetry is a classical style of Japanese poetry that developed during the Heian period, which was from 794 to 1185 CE.

Not only was Natsu - Ichijo's nickname - not comfortable learning with upper class and middle class students and felt out of place, but she really wasn't into the style of poetry they were learning. And this makes sense, our girl Natsu Higuchi was a modern girl in a new age in Japan.

In 1887, her older brother died of Tuberculosis. In 1889, her father died from Tuberculosis, as well. This put Natsu, her mother and sister into a really strange predicament. They were left with the financial consequences of her father's failed business venture. The men in their family passed away. And now these three women had to face the new Japan and support each other, with Natsu, age 17, left as the head of the family.

Natsu's teacher, Utako Nakajima, invited her to move into Haginoya as an apprentice. While she committed herself to this role for a little while, she felt the role consisted too much of domestic work. She also wasn't happy there as a student, so it's not shocking she wasn't happy there as an apprentice.

Natsu, with her sister and mother, moved to Hongo district where they earned a living sewing and providing laundry services. Although, Natsu had terrible vision and mostly her sister and mother did the sewing as she couldn't see the fabric well enough to do detailed work.

In 1888, Kaho Miyake, a classmate of Natsu, published a novel and received substantial amounts from royalties. Natsu was inspired to write to support her family, so she began her journey by writing short stories and poetry.

Her beginning work showcases her classical training from Haginoya in Heian Period style. Which meant, the plots weren't juicy, the characters had very little development, if at all, and everything was weighed down with emotions and sentiment.

In 1891, Natsu's fiance broke off their engagement because she and her family were unable to pay a dowry, and she began to keep a diary religiously. When you compare the strong and very aware writing of her diary to her first published work, you can see she was trying to showcase a skillset that wasn't who she really was as a writer. Awesomely, she quickly turned that around and began to publish work that was modern, meaningful, and inspired by the events of her life unfolding around her.

Also in 1891, she connected with Tosui Nakarai, who'd become her mentor and advisor in the world of writing. He was a womanizer and didn't reciprocate the deep feelings that Natsu had for him. These relationship experiences showed up in her fiction. It also didn't help that this man, who was supposed to be her guiding mentor, was more interested in writing for money and less for the art of writing itself. So he didn't really help as a mentor for Natsu, either.

In 1893, Natsu and her mother and sister left their middle-class home and moved to Tokyo's red-light district, Yoshiwara. They opened up a stationery store that failed. The experience of



living in this neighborhood inspired her writing even more, especially in the story called 'Growing Up'.

As she quickly found her voice, the literary community took notice with her few publications in esteemed magazines. She soon began to receive a variety of visitors in her home. This included editors, critics, student writers, admirers, poets, etc.

At the height of Natsu's career, she began experiencing severe headaches and would often have to excuse herself from visitors, her family, and eventually writing. Between her ongoing illness and consistent visitors, Natsu stopped writing.

On November 23, 1896, at the incredibly young age of 24, Natsu died from Tuberculosis.

In 1961, the Ichiyo Memorial Museum opened in Tokyo. It is a literary museum that holds items such as her handwritten poems, novel drafts, and letters. She is also the face of Japan's 5000 YEN banknote.

Here is a small translation from her novel 'Growing Up'.

"In this neighborhood, girls liked wide obi sashes with gaudy patterns, and rarely tied their obi properly on the back, which was different from ordinary manners of well-bred women. It might be permissible for the aged to wear it loosely. Ordinary people, however, felt like averting their own eyes from saucy girls of fifteen or sixteen years who wore the kimono loose despite amusing themselves childishly with blowing the ground cherry to make sounds in the mouth."

At the time of recording this episode, some of Ichiyo Higuchi's works are available for free on Amazon's Kindle Unlimited.

Ichiyo Higuchi's writing career during the Meiji Restoration holds profound significance, not only for its literary merit, but also for its impact on the trajectory of women's roles in Japanese society. As a trailblazing female author in a period marked by societal upheaval and extreme metamorphosis, Higuchi's works, such as the poignant "Growing Up", offer a snapshot of the challenges faced by women and the lower classes amidst the clash of tradition and modernity.

Higuchi's ability to navigate the complexities of her era, coupled with her keen insight into the human condition, makes her an enduring figure in Japanese literature. Her writings transcend the temporal boundaries of the late 19th century, serving as a testament to the universality of human struggles and aspirations. As one of the first prominent female voices in Japanese

literature, Natsu's legacy extends beyond her short life, inspiring subsequent generations of women writers to challenge societal norms and carve out their place in the literary landscape.

Moreover, the progress of women's roles during the Meiji Restoration, exemplified in part by Natsu's own journey, laid the foundation for a more dynamic and inclusive role for women in Japanese society. The era witnessed shifts in education, legal rights, and societal expectations that, while gradual, contributed to a more nuanced understanding of women's contributions beyond traditional roles.

In contemporary Japan, the impact of Natsu's legacy can be seen in the strides made by Japanese women in various fields. The echoes of her courage to defy societal norms resonate in the achievements of modern Japanese women who continue to break barriers in literature, academia, business, and politics. The Meiji Restoration, with its winds of change, set the stage for a more inclusive vision of women's roles, and Ichiyo Higuchi remains a beacon whose influence continues to shape the aspirations and possibilities for Japanese women today. As they navigate the complexities of a modern society, the indomitable spirit of Ichiyo Higuchi serves as a source of inspiration and a reminder of the enduring impact that one woman's voice can have on the collective journey of generations.

Thank you for listening - I'm Tabitha Bear - and this is World Herstory.