Against the backdrop of the Second Sino-Japanese War comes a stunning, harrowing epic of a militaristic Japan with the dream of colonising China and the rest of Asia. The story's centrepiece is the Rape of Nanking – six nightmarish weeks when Chiang Kai-shek's new capital in the Republic of China had its gates shut and several hundred thousand Chinese perished in an orgy of killing, rape and looting by a marauding Japanese army.

An unforgettable cast of characters is swept along by the historical forces beyond their control: a young Russian woman caught in a love triangle between a British journalist and a liberal-minded Japanese diplomat, an Indian nationalist working for Japanese intelligence, a Chinese professor with communist sympathies, an American missionary doctor and a deserter from the Japanese Imperial Army – all witnesses to atrocious crimes against humanity, and all of whom will emerge from the war to a world transformed forever.

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MEIRA CHAND

A CHOICE OF EVILS

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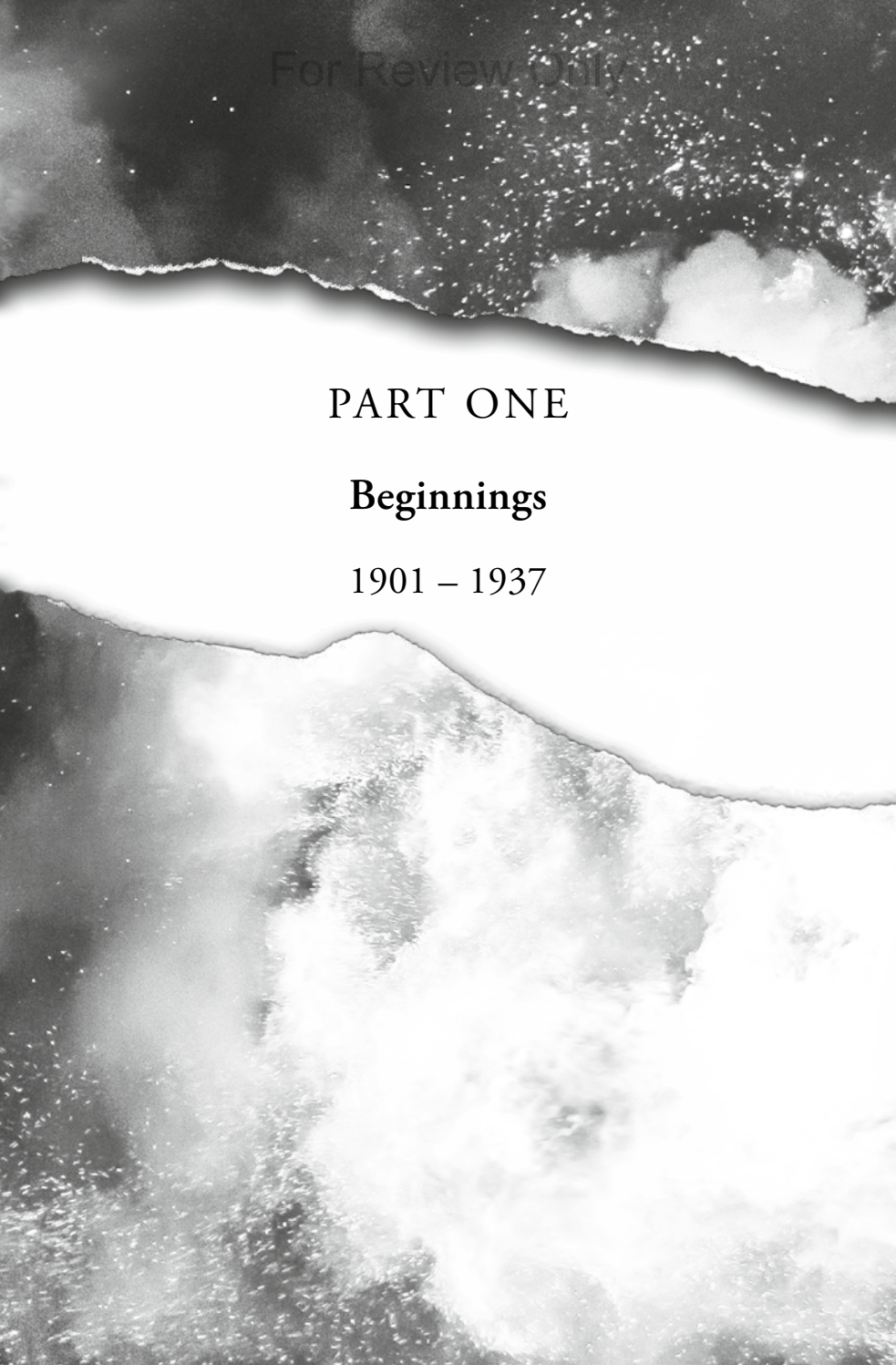

PART ONE

Beginnings

1901 – 1937

1

Sword of Power

1901 – 1937

The Crown Princess of Japan, Sadako, was sixteen years old when the child, Hirohito, was born on 29th April 1901. At seventy days Prince Hirohito was taken from his mother to be reared away from her. Later the Princess bore three more sons, and these too were taken from her.

Once Sadako had produced an adequate number of sons her husband, Crown Prince Yoshihito, lost interest in her, returning to debauchery. Unlike his father, the Emperor, Yoshihito was sickly. The residual effects of childhood meningitis left him mentally and physically unfit for most of his life. In winter he left the capital for the balmy climate of Kyushu and, even when he returned, seldom emerged from the veil of wine and women.

Hirohito saw little of his father and throughout his childhood met his mother only once a week. The ritual separation of royal heirs from their parents was thought to build character, eradicating any softness in a future monarch. The custom sprang also from earlier intrigues, when unscrupulous uncles and concubines sought to establish their own offspring with the demise of the Emperor's son.

Almost from birth Hirohito was surrounded by military men. The first three and a half years of his life were spent in the home of a vice-admiral of the Imperial Navy. He was charged to instil into the heir a spirit able to withstand all hardship. Hirohito was a child apart, withdrawn and painfully aware of the attention surrounding him. He understood that he was different. Already in his tiny life there was deference but no love.

Before Hirohito was four years old the vice-admiral died and the child returned to his father's palace. He saw no more of his parents than before. He was established with his brothers, Chichibu, Takamatsu, and Mikasa, in the grounds of the Akasaka Palace in a separate establishment from his parents, with maids and retainers to care for the children. The court official in charge of Hirohito's new

home, Takamasa Kido, was a favourite of Emperor Meiji and had been partly educated in America. His son, Koichi, was fifteen and became a big brother for small Hirohito.

Marquis Koichi Kido, who would later become one of Emperor Hirohito's closest civilian advisors and his Lord Privy Seal, introduced the child to his teenage friends, the sons of other court aristocrats. Prince Asaka and his half-brother Prince Higashikuni. Prince Kitashirakawa and his half-brother Marquis Komatsu, and the young Prince Konoye, later to be twice Prime Minister. They had all attended the Peers School, founded for the children of the nobility. Hirohito would also later go to this special school. They made a fuss of their young royal friend, enjoying his awe of them, telling him stories of war, playing the soldier to him. They spoke with teenage idealism of Japan's mission to lead Asia from Western bondage. Talk of war, intrigue, conquest and a new Asia surrounded Hirohito in the company of these older boys. Bonds were formed with these young men that would last Hirohito all his life.

Soon Hirohito's real education was begun. A kindergarten was arranged, with Chichibu, the eldest of Hirohito's younger brothers, and five small boys of court officials. Chichibu was free of the restraints imposed upon his older brother. He was an extrovert, leading the way in any games. When the kindergarten children climbed a wall, Hirohito was lectured by courtiers on the unseemliness of such antics in a future monarch. He was forced to stand alone, watching the others scramble up and down, listening to their enjoyment. By nature obedient and sensitive, physically smaller and less aggressive than average, Hirohito did not chaff at the restraints imposed upon him. Led by Chichibu, the children grew scornful of Hirohito's timidity.

'The trouble with Hiro is that when he falls down he doesn't know how to get up,' Chichibu jeered and the others screamed approval.

There was a monthly outing from the Palace for the royal kindergarten. Invariably Hirohito chose to visit the zoo and in this wish he was indulged. The children ran from cage to cage, giggling at monkeys, awed by tigers, pulling faces at the bears. Only Hirohito, in his usual role, was forced to follow some distance behind, lectured on animal life by the superintendent of the zoo. On one visit they reached a small cage containing a newly captured badger. The creature trembled with fear, pressing itself against the far bars, its moist bright eyes upon Hirohito. The child stood in silence, biting back tears, identifying as the other children could not with the animal's terror and isolation.

'I don't want to look at it any more. I want to go home,' he sobbed. Behind him the other children tittered at his distress.

Hirohito's guardians accomplished their work as instructed. The training of imperial children bred the habit of docility and a rigid pattern of behaviour. By five, Hirohito was a grave and lonely child. The tipsy, debauched, promiscuous life at court had already been revealed to him in the most frightening manner. On a rare visit to his father Prince Yoshihito, he was plied with large quantities of sake and drank in filial obedience until he keeled over. His father and the courtiers roared with laughter. Hirohito was ill for days, and although only five, never forgot the experience. He became for life a teetotaller. In contrast to his father and grandfather he lived until his death a prim, monogamous, austere life.

Hirohito quickly learned to mask emotion, giving no sign of mortification, comforting himself like a true prince of the Imperial line. He submitted to grim routines to improve his posture and poor, myopic eyesight. There were attempts to eradicate his extreme clumsiness and the inherited shuffle he walked with, a defect passed on from his grandfather.

Emperor Meiji received the progress reports Hirohito's father refused to see. Meiji had already dismissed his son as being without substance, and placed his faith in his eldest grandson. The affection his father denied Hirohito the child tried in vain to find in his grandfather. But Meiji, libertine and architect of modern Japan, preferred Hirohito at a distance. His virility was legend and projected itself in his commanding figure, short beard and piercing eyes. He enjoyed claret, poetry and beautiful women. He was a marathon drinker, his court permanently shrouded in an alcoholic haze, but, unlike his son, he could surface from debauchery to steer his monarchy as needed.

The years of Hirohito's boyhood coincided with Japan's growth in world stature. Fifty years before, Commodore Perry's black ships had demanded commerce at gunpoint, ending several centuries of isolation. Meiji was the first Emperor in modern times to be more than a puppet living in Kyoto. He was reinstated to power by his supporters, who wrested back the monarchy from the Shogun after centuries of military rule in Japan. In 1868 Emperor Meiji, then a boy of fifteen, was moved by his supporters from Kyoto to Tokyo. It was hoped that under the young Emperor, the land would be rid of foreigners, and modernisation held in check. Then the country would be returned to its heyday when no barbarian could enter and no Japanese leave, without the sentence of death.

But there were also progressive men about the young Emperor Meiji who knew the barbarians would not leave so easily. The isolation of centuries had left Japan impoverished in a larger world. Already, with their massive ships and guns, the Westerners had demonstrated superior power. Until Japan had adequate knowledge of all things modern, she must learn to live with the barbarians and more important, learn from them. This modernisation of Japan took up the next three decades.

An infatuation with all things Western spread like a fever through the land. Young men were sent abroad in droves to seek the desired knowledge. Battalions of Westerners were imported into Japan. Engineers, schoolteachers, lawyers, architects, scientists, military and naval instructers were persuaded to divulge the secrets of modern development ignored by Japan through her centuries of isolation. The Emperor himself, avid and youthful, urged his court to think progressively. He installed electric light in his palace, but rarely used it for fear of fire. Court ladies were encouraged to wear crinolines, and to speak aloud instead of whispering behind their hands. In the street children bounced a ball to the 'Civilization Ball Song', listing things coveted by the nation: steam engines, gas lamps, cameras, telegrams, lightning conductors, newspapers, steamships and hansom cabs. The world was surveyed and institutions picked, suitable for use in Japan. From France came a conscript army, from Britain a navy, from Belgium banking and fiscal reform and from Germany a constitution.

With its isolation lifted at last, Japan now looked for the first time about the modern world and saw that the great land it had regarded through history as the centre of the world, was at the point of disintegration. China, weak and disunited, had become a colony of foreign powers. Japan saw those great powers, Germany, Britain, France, Russia and the United States, grouped before her and feared for herself. Small, vulnerable, newly born into modernisation, Japan was a mouse before an elephant. Only the resource of ingenuity seemed available to Japan. It was decided offence was the only defence.

Japan's new Western-trained army went to war with China in 1894. It overran Korea, then Taiwan and demanded China allow Japan to move into the Kwantung peninsula of south-east Manchuria. So alarmed were the powers of the Western world by this upstart behaviour that Japan was forced to relinquish her slice of Manchuria. She watched Russia take over instead. But in spite of this loss, a new confidence was born within Japan. The sacred dream of past Emperors,

laid down at the birth of the nation, was for Japan to eventually fulfil its predestined place as ruler of the world. A first step had been taken towards this vision.

It was decided to go to war again, this time with Russia, on 6th February 1904. Once more Japan relied upon ingenuity. She moved forward with silence and stealth. Although war was not formally declared until February 10th, a surprise attack was launched on February 8th, crippling Russia's Far Eastern fleet at Tsushima. What was left of the Russian fleet fled to the stronghold of Port Arthur, on the Kwantung peninsula.

This act of stealth by a tiny nation, inferior in strength and size to Russia, caught the imagination of the world. *The Japanese navy has opened the war by an act of daring which is destined to take a place of honour in naval annals*, enthused *The Times* in London in 1905. An identical act of stealth, played to the same rules, began the Pacific War many years later at Pearl Harbor, and brought then a different reaction from world opinion.

Before Russian reinforcements arrived it was imperative for Japan to capture the garrison at Port Arthur. Emperor Meiji turned for this task to his favourite General, Maresuke Nogi, calling him out of retirement. Nogi knew Port Arthur well; his brigade had captured the town from the Chinese in the earlier war. He had taken the place in a day with the loss of only sixteen men. He remembered it as an easy target and saw no need to bother with a new assessment. He took his two sons into battle with him. In 1904 Port Arthur was no longer the place Nogi had earlier defeated; time had moved on. Weapons were improved, thoughts upon strategy had altered, and Port Arthur was now Russian territory.

As he had previously, Nogi hurled wave after wave of infantry at the forts of Port Arthur, but without success. *The Times* reported the battle as a succession of Charges of the Light Brigade, made on foot by the same men, over and over again. Death was certain and the methods innumerable. There were bullets, shells and shrapnel. There were mines, torpedoes and hand grenades, pits of fire or stakes, and poisonous gases. Besides these was the dread of disease: typhoid, dysentery, beriberi and always the ever present danger of gangrene for the wounded. A new era in warfare had also dawned. Now, at Port Arthur, General Nogi could simultaneously look back to the Middle Ages, and forward to an even more brutal age of warfare. His men, in heat and rain, advanced towards both boiling oil and electrified wire. They struggled against planks speared with nails to tear their feet, and

the new devices of searchlights and magnesium flares. Against this illumination men wandered blindly, while machine-guns targeted them in the beam.

Both Nogi's sons died. He watched them through binoculars, waving their swords at the head of their troops. By the time General Nogi had taken Port Arthur observers noted that *corpses do not appear to be escaping from the ground as to be the ground itself. Everywhere there are bodies, flattened out, stamped into the earth as if they were part of it. What seems like dust is suddenly recognisable as a human form, stretched and twisted and rent to gigantic size by the force of some frightful explosion*. It seemed to the world that the Japanese Army won its battles by accepting a price in human life no other nation was prepared to give.

Although devoted to his Emperor, this price was too much even for Nogi. He prepared to commit ritual suicide. until Emperor Meiji forbade it.

'As long as I am alive, you must remain alive also,' he ordered. Obediently, General Nogi retired again.

In 1908 Emperor Meiji called Nogi to him once more and entrusted him with a new order. He was to be mentor to seven-year-old Prince Hirohito. In retirement General Nogi was headmaster of the Peers School and now spent his time imparting to the sons of the aristocracy the Way of the Samurai; the ethics upon which he had been raised.

Nogi, white-bearded, elderly and one-eyed, vintage warrior, scarred in face and body by sword, arrow, bayonet, bullet and shrapnel wound, should have been intimidating to a seven-year-old. But General Nogi was a Japanese gentleman of the old school. Besides the *will that knows no defeat* he also cultivated the art of calligraphy, tea ceremony and flower arrangement. His hobby was growing bonsai trees. He constantly mourned his lost sons, just as the child put into his care looked always for a father. The affection that grew between the old man and the child, was said to have made life almost happy for Hirohito.

Nogi saw Emperor Meiji regularly to report about the child in whom he now took such an interest. Meiji's trust was a source of pride to the General. He saw his last task in life as forming the young Prince in the image of his master, Emperor Meiji. He spent many hours with Hirohito imparting his knowledge of the great battles of Japanese history, reliving the pain and glory of Port Arthur, reiterating a vision of Japan as the premier force in the world. This vision of Japan's place in the world and the ethics of the Samurai code threaded through Nogi's stories of battles and strategies in the mind of the growing boy.

It was Nogi's task to bring the introspective child out of his shell. There was nothing, Nogi insisted, that could not be overcome by practice and will power. Hirohito came to idolise Nogi, with his military mind and military bearing. To gain Nogi's approval he became a competent sportsman and put himself through hours of study and physical training, standing under glacial waterfalls until he could control his shivering. He aped Nogi's puritanism, his contempt for sexual pleasure and his thrift. Nogi took an unassuming lifestyle to extraordinary degrees.

'Be ashamed of torn clothes, but never of patched ones,' he told Hirohito.

He insisted the child wear coarse cotton underwear and kimono; he should not be softened by the touch of silk on his skin. Under Nogi's influence Hirohito began to hoard things. He used his pencils until the stub was too small to grasp, and rubbers were worn down to a crumb.

Each day in the school the children bowed towards the Imperial Palace and repeated the Rescript on Education. After this they sang the national anthem.

'What is your dearest ambition?' General Nogi then asked them.

'To die for the Emperor,' the children replied.

Hirohito bowed with the other children, but was already aware this national sublimation would one day be directed towards himself.

In 1912 the Emperor Meiji died. Nogi was away at the time, sent by the Emperor as his representative at the Coronation in London of King George V. By the time he returned Meiji was dead. The State Funeral was held on 13th September.

The evening before the funeral General Nogi called Hirohito to him. They sat either side of a low table and discussed the calligraphy Hirohito had done that day. Then followed a lecture by Nogi lasting almost three hours. Hirohito sat motionless trying not to betray his physical discomfort or fatigue.

'I am satisfied with your progress while I have been away,' General Nogi said at last. 'Please remember that my physical presence is not necessary for me to be with you in your work. I shall always be watching you and your welfare will always be my concern. Work hard, for your sake and for the sake of Japan.'

Hirohito bowed and left the room. Within an hour Emperor Meiji's funeral cortège began its journey to his resting place in Kyoto, the ancient capital. A cannon thundered in the distance and prostrate subjects lined the route to Tokyo Station.

General Nogi observed the start of the cortege and then returned

to his house in Azabu. His wife waited for him. They bathed and dressed in white kimono and bowed before an autographed portrait of Emperor Meiji. His wife passed General Nogi a cup of sake from which he took a sip. He turned then to bow to her. At this sign Countess Nogi drove a dagger into her throat cutting the artery. General Nogi then thrust a short sword into his bowels, pulling it crosswise and up, falling forward upon the knife in the required manner. He had kept his promise to his beloved Emperor Meiji, made after the death of his sons at Port Arthur. He had lived until his master died.

When told the news the twelve-year-old Hirohito heard it impassively, in the manner General Nogi would have wished. If he stiffened, if desolation consumed him, he showed nothing to the courtiers before him.

'Japan has suffered a regrettable loss,' he said with the composure that befitted a new Crown Prince.

At Emperor Meiji's death, Prince Yoshihito, Hirohito's father, ascended to the Chrysanthemum Throne, taking for his era the name of Taisho. His reign was short and undistinguished. His behaviour became increasingly erratic; court officials feared any public appearance. At a military parade he slashed soldiers with a riding crop, ordered a man to unpack his gear and then repackaged it himself. Such behaviour soon forced the Regency upon seventeen-year-old Hirohito. What small freedoms he enjoyed now vanished. His every move was monitored, his words and gestures coached. Courtiers hemmed him in.

An early marriage for Hirohito was now considered a necessity. Empress Sadako was progessively minded and wished her son to have some say in the choice of his wife. She had married her husband without so much as a glimpse of him. Marriage promised Hirohito a relationship closer than any as yet experienced in his life. Beauty was not what he looked for in this rare opportunity. He passed over the prettier applicants for the role and settled for the homely Princess Nagako. She was the niece of Prince Higashikuni and Prince Asaka, his heroes during his childhood in the Akasaka Palace. Her family, dashing in comparison to the one he lacked, made his choice immediate. After a considerable wait the marriage took place on 26th January 1924. Immediately, speculation began as to when Nagako would produce an heir.

At the end of the following year, as Nagako recovered from the birth of a girl, Emperor Taisho died and Hirohito became the new Emperor. Tradition demanded that ancient Kyoto, not modern Tokyo,

was the venue of Hirohito's enthronement. The Coronation ceremony was on 6th November 1928. From the previous evening people crowded the route in Kyoto along which the Emperor would ride in a horse-drawn carriage. They were ordered not to defile the roadside; bowel movements must be held. As the weather was cold and kidneys less obedient all onlookers were urged to carry a bottle. These must be corked and at the end of the festivities deposited at collection centres for disposal.

Such clarity of detail did not stretch to all issues surrounding the Coronation. There was confusion about the title of the new Emperor's reign. A name must be chosen by which his era would be posthumously remembered. The *Mainichi Daily News* announced that the Hirohito era would be known as Kobun, light and literary achievements. This news was leaked from the palace as Emperor Taisho lay dying. Hirohito was furious and to punish the paper altered the name of his reign to Showa, enlightenment and peace. Many said it was a bad omen to change the name of a reign in this manner.

Religious rites initiated the new monarch into the Shinto priesthood. His position was that of supreme intermediary between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. He planted shoots of superior rice, whose lush maturing would symbolise the harvest of his reign. In ritual celebration he descended for a night into the womb of the Sun Goddess, to be reborn divine. No Emperor could rule without possession of the Mirror of Knowledge, the Sword of Power and the Jewels of Antiquity, bestowed upon him by the Goddess. This Imperial regalia was officially transferred to each new monarch. From now on Hirohito must speak regularly to his Imperial ancestors before the Mirror of Knowledge, reporting the events of the reign of Showa. He was twenty-five, and his sincerity and optimism were undeniable. He wrote the first Imperial Rescript of Showa himself, determined his own words should shape the expectations of his life. From where the new Emperor stood the future looked golden.

Hirohito saw the reign of Showa as fulfilling the prophecy of his ancestors. The first Emperor of Japan, the legendary Jimmu Tenno, had laid down for the nation a vision of its true destiny. *Hakko Ichiu* meant the bringing together of the eight corners of the universe under the roof of Japan. There was nothing Hirohito wanted more for his reign than the fulfilment of this prophecy.

Hirohito was a quiet, thrifty man. The lessons of austerity learned from General Nogi were never forgotten. He cut down immediately on extravagances, including the number of clothes given to courtiers

and the presenting of dried fish on occasions of note. The corridors of the Imperial Palace had reeked with the smell of these gifts at his enthronement and disgusted him. He updated his office with Western furnishing and installed a telephone for direct access to whoever he chose. He built a miniature golf course in the Palace grounds. He wished his reign to embrace the modern world. And he desired his lifestyle to follow that of the British monarchs.

Although, as monarch, Hirohito was above politics and day-to-day decision making, he had no desire to be a shadowy figure hidden away behind moats and walls, or a puppet in the hands of ambitious men. He wished to be rid of the image of the father who had filled him with shame. He wished to propel Japan to her rightful place as a powerful, modern nation and, to this end, his daily life was that of any hardworking statesman. His meticulous, methodical nature, obsessively concerned with detail, missed little. He put his seal to nothing he had not evaluated, and knew at all times every move within the Government. But the formality of court life that encouraged Hirohito's obsession with detail, also weakened his initiative. He had been trained since birth to fit the patterns of protocol. Above all the correct discharge of his duties was ever uppermost in his mind.

In childhood Hirohito had wished to be more like his suave younger brother Chichibu, Oxford-educated, avidly sociable, who played tennis and listened to jazz. Chichibu with his outspoken ideas, who refused to conform, occasionally referred to his brother as 'slow coach'. Hirohito once sadly confided to a court official, 'He has so many attributes of royalty which I lack. He is a natural leader. He has no reticence about showing what he feels, and knows what he wants from his ministers or his people. The business of kingship comes easily to him.'

Unlike the extroverted Chichibu, Hirohito was withdrawn. His greatest interest had always been the study of marine biology, a subject upon which he was already an expert. He had the circumspect nature of the scientist and was never happier than at his microscope with his old tutor, Professor Hattori, or collecting specimens on the beach at his Summer Palace at Hayama.

Lacking Chichibu's forceful characteristics, Hirohito relied on other traits of survival, honed through his unhappy childhood. Secrecy and guile, he discovered, achieved as much as Chichibu's forthrightness. The lessons of military strategy learned at General Nogi's knee, and at which he excelled with brilliance, he applied to games other than war. He was an adept player in the intrigues of his court, playing the Military against the Government, the army against the navy, one person against

another with consummate ease to get his way. No criticism could be levelled against him, and responsibility for any misjudgements was assumed by those beneath him. As Emperor, Hirohito was infallible. As a man, things did not always go according to his will.

The country had been polite in its welcome of the new Emperor's daughter and hoped a son would follow. Instead, before his marriage was five years old, the Emperor had fathered three daughters. Whispers began at court of the need for the Emperor to take a concubine, to give the nation an heir. He would have nothing to do with the plan. He felt affection for his homely wife. Her support and the birth of children gave him for the first time the feeling of a home.

Empress Nagako was acutely aware of her failure to produce a son, and no stranger to the habits of the nobility. Her own father had produced nineteen children from a swarm of concubines. Court intrigue abated only when Nagako's fourth pregnancy was announced. Once more a daughter was born. Eventually the Empress became pregnant again and at last gave birth to a boy, Prince Akihito.

The first five years of Hirohito's rule had not been easy. Pressure was all about him, not only in his personal life but in his public duties. Plots abounded in which his name was always invoked. Fanatical devotion to the monarch was the excuse for secret societies to act against supposedly political or moral deviation. Rightist plots, hatched by the Black Dragon Society and Shumei Okawa, or army plots by ambitious officers like Kingoro Hashimoto or plots in which these two factions worked together, blew like an ill wind through the first years of Showa. The number of dubious secret societies proliferated, as did the plots they hatched. March Plots, October Plots, December Plots, February Plots. There was a tight, idealistic circle of comradeship amongst the brightest of young right-wing minds in Japan. The ambitions of these men abounded about the Emperor who remained secluded in his palace, far from the grassroots of his nation.

The world was seen by the Emperor through the four courtiers closest to him: the Imperial Household Minister, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, the Emperor's Aide-de-Camp and the Grand Chamberlain. There were also *genro*, state-appointed counsellors. Hirohito's *genro* was Prince Saionji, the last survivor of a small group. The Prince had spent his working life in the service of both the previous Emperors. The breadth of his mind and vision were almost unparalleled in Japan. He was seventy-two when appointed as *genro* to Hirohito. It was his job to temper the royal judgement for the good of the nation. He saw Japan's future in co-operation with the West and rejected her military

past. His advice was unfailingly for the moderate course. His views were not always in tune with an idealistic young man in his twenties. Sometimes, Hirohito, irritatingly restrained by Saionji, found ways to disregard or manoeuvre around him. But for many who were also of liberal mind, the old man's place beside the Emperor was seen to bode well for the era of Showa.

Even before Hirohito's ascension to the throne, the name Manchuria spelt magic. Across the water it beckoned with limitless land and resources. Its acquisition was the natural beginning of *Hakko Ichiu*, that mythological vision of a united Asia under Japanese leadership which Hirohito cherished. Within his court, distanced from the world of men, Hirohito dreamed his dreams. But in a modern and aggressive age, the vision of *Hakko Ichiu* had become for many fanatical right-wingers a megalomaniacal symbol of world domination through military force. The young militarists about Hirohito looked not to the south but to the north to begin this march towards an Empire. They aimed to secure Manchuria in readiness for a strike at Russia.

Hirohito distanced but did not deter the young militarists about him. Silence was the constitutional course and for Hirohito silence was convenient, both as a weapon and as a screen. Ambiguity had its uses. Officially, he could not be seen to agree to a plan that might commit Japan to a future of unknown ramifications. Unofficially, the young officers involved in preparations for the taking of Manchuria assumed they had his backing.

There were differences of opinion upon this subject in the army, and political unrest in the country. Keeper of the Privy Seal, Count Makino, begged Hirohito to be prudent. Prince Saionji, finding army attitudes increasingly unreasonable, argued the sense of going to war. He was also not always happy with the opinions of his Emperor who appeared in turn to blow hot then cold upon a variety of matters. As the band of aged Western-leaning moderates like himself grew smaller, it appeared to Saionji that the influence of fanatical young officers and upstart radicals about the monarch grew ever more dangerous, even though Hirohito continued to act with propriety. He was particularly alarmed by a rumour that Hirohito planned to encourage the moving of troops to Manchuria without official sanction. Eventually a compromise was reached in the Diet, the Japanese parliament, and the war was sanctioned. The nation knew nothing of these plans. As anticipated, the conquest of Mukden, capital of Manchuria, was bloodlessly over in a few hours on 19th September 1931. It took only a further few

months before the whole of Manchuria was under Japanese control, and the new state of Manchukuo proclaimed on 1st March 1932.

Some years later on New Year's Day 1936 Hirohito wrote a short but apprehensive poem about the future.

As I
was visiting
the Shinto Point in Kii
clouds were drifting far
over the sea.

His private life was on an even keel. Nagako had given birth to a second son, but his reign had textured since its early days, and events piled up in complexity. The army's expansion from Manchuria into China continued unabated. The strength of the Military could no longer be denied, nor the difficulty in ruling it. Its ranks were subversive and divided, filled by officers from poor rural areas whose minds were crammed by schemes of grandeur. Whatever early support Hirohito had given the army seemed to have gone to their heads. There were those in the army who now wanted an Emperor who could be presented to the people as a monarch but manipulated by those in power behind the throne. They condemned all liberal elements in Japan which encouraged the Emperor to think of his role as more temporal than divine.

An ugly mood grew in the army and soon after the election of the new Diet, on 26th February 1936, a revolt began. Murder squads went out to eliminate any government leader or elder statesman who was seen to advise the Emperor too liberally. Old men who had served Hirohito were cut down. The former Keeper of the Privy Seal, Count Makino, escaped, as did Prince Saionji. Those in the army who favoured caution were shown no mercy by the revolutionaries.

Within the Palace, Hirohito was beside himself with anger, appalled at the murders, and the terror suffered by his closest advisors at the hands of radical restorationists. 'The army are using silken thread to suffocate me. I want this rebellion ended, and its instigators punished. Do this,' he ordered his War Minister.

The revolt seethed a while and was put down. Hirohito wanted no martyrdom for those involved and would agree to no compromise. He was particularly upset that Prince Chichibu, whose right-wing radicalism had grown apace, had supported the rebels. Prince Saionji

did not discount the fact that, had the coup been successful, the rebels might have put Chichibu on the throne if Hirohito were not compliant enough. 'Japanese history has … considerable examples where, urged on by hangers-on, a younger brother has killed an older brother to ascend the throne,' Saionji said.

Hirohito's wrath shook those about him. Executions of the culprits were without formality and no ashes returned to their families. Many others were sent in disgrace to cool their heels in Manchuria. Such tactics of strength from the usually passive Emperor shocked the army command. He had asserted himself as never before. Even those who disagreed had obeyed him.

By the following year the thought of war with China could no longer be avoided. Chiang Kai-shek had joined hands with the Communists against Japan. This alone was a terrifying thing, and pushed Hirohito towards compromise with his rebellious army. The army feared a Communist bloc of Russia and China, if it ever came about, would eventually annihilate Japan. Already a pact with Hitler pledged Japan to act with Germany in resisting the spread of Communism. The war the militarists sought at last coincided with Hirohito's own dreams of mythological conquest. There was also the Emperor's added desire to safeguard his homeland from any threat of Communism, however remote, coming over the water from China.

In spite of Hirohito's brief assertion of strength after the 1936 February revolt, the power of the rightists and the army was now established to such a degree that prime ministers rose and fell in quick succession when they did not meet army requirements. Finally, in 1937, Prince Konoye became Prime Minister. As a child Hirohito had admired Konoye. He was one of the 'big brothers' introduced by Marquis Kido when Hirohito moved into the Akasaka Palace. He was elegant and debonair and had the audacity to sit with his legs crossed before the monarch. Beneath this show of sophistication, Konoye was a man who lacked judgement and dithered. He did what he could to seek a negotiated resolution with China, but was powerless to control the flow of events. One month after his investiture, Japanese troops clashed with Chinese outside Peking at the Marco Polo Bridge. An era was begun from which there was no turning back.

War, as it now evolved, might not have been of Hirohito's making but, conscious always of his duty, he turned his precise mind to its detail. Those heroes of childhood, his uncles by marriage, Princes Asaka, Higashikuni and Kitashirakawa, were tough professional soldiers who held important posts in the army. Even though they were many years

older than himself, Hirohito was now their Supreme Commander. He ordered a Supreme War Headquarters to be built in the Palace, to personally oversee on maps and tabletops, each battle as it grew. All moves were to be reported to him. The ultra rightists and the militarists who now had his ear were delighted with his enthusiasm. The ideals of pan-Asianism, absorbed as a child from his teenage friends at the Akasaka Palace, the stories of battle told by General Nogi, those dreams of colonisation passed down from Emperor Meiji and before, and his own dull, circumscribed life, came together now for Hirohito. On a tabletop in his War Headquarters, Hirohito plotted strategy. He watched the tiny flags of advance push down on the map deep into China. Tientsin was taken and then Peking. The sudden offensive of the Chinese military in Shanghai further forced the Imperial Army to look south to protect its interests in that city. Then, Chiang Kai-shek's new capital of Nanking appeared the ultimate glittering prize.

From the sidelines Prince Saionji, now eighty-eight, watched sadly. His life work appeared destroyed. He had envisaged a modern, internationally minded Japan, and had encouraged the Emperor towards this. Instead, he had seen Japan become a pariah nation after the conquest of Manchuria, withdrawing from the League of Nations. He had condemned an arms race and watched money poured into war preparations. He had advised friendship with Chiang Kai-shek and instead saw the Emperor agree to war against the Generalissimo. He advocated close relations with Britain and the United States, and instead the anti-Comintern Pact had been signed with Nazi Germany. People of dubious worth were being promoted about the Emperor, cutting him off in a ring of security as never before.

When he heard of the elevation in court of people whose views he considered extreme, Saionji sighed. 'It comes as no surprise … that is the trend of the times and there is nothing to be done. It is a great pity for the Emperor's sake.' Saionji's grumbles were distant. Hirohito did not hear.

Emperor Hirohito spent each summer at Hayama. In this fishing village thirty miles from Tokyo, he forgot the weight of monarchy. He became a man, walking the beach, trousers rolled above his ankles, fishing, swimming, his mind wandering from affairs of state to wider reveries. The greatest irritant in this idyll was an excess of mosquitoes.

The Summer Palace was of weathered wood, modest compared to the house of an American neighbour a distance along the beach. There were no telephones, refrigerators, electric stoves or air-conditioners.

At dawn in the garden Hirohito relaxed by chopping wood. In rock pools he gathered the marine specimens on which he was an expert. Years before upon the beach he had discovered a spotted red prawn. This creature had been overlooked by the cataloguers of marine biology until Hirohito's identification. The discovery of *sympathiphae imperialis* had been a proud moment in Hirohito's life. So introspective and bizarre a hobby as marine biology, was earlier deplored by Chamberlains when Hirohito was Crown Prince. Only when Hirohito's interest in military history reached a level of equal obsession, did murmurs of displeasure cease.

In the summer of 1937 the Emperor left Tokyo and drove once again to Hayama. The weight of war in China depressed him. It was more, he had discovered, than a game upon a map, more than dreaming the dreams of his Imperial ancestors or the glories of General Nogi's tales. At moments the reality came through to him. His subjects suffered. Young men in droves must be shipped off to die far from home. Taxes burdened his people to pay for the war in Asia and to float the Japanese Fleet. In his name the common people must suffer all manner of hardship. These were things not thought about in the rush to enter China. Even this annual visit to Hayama had been forbidden at first by court officials. It appeared ostentatious for Hirohito to relax when men were dying on the battlefield. But the vision of *Hakko Ichiu* superseded all other considerations. For such a dream some sacrifice was inevitable. Hirohito was still impatient for the fall of China, still impatient to move on, to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya. His mind was filled with strategy and an ultimate glory.

Now, briefly, at Hayama he could forget the events of the day. He stood once more on the deck of his motor launch in a white linen jacket and straw hat and dropped starfish and sponges into his pockets. He read Aesop's *Fables* on the beach, picnicked, swam, built sandcastles and raced with his children. He spent many hours at the microscope studying the specimens caught at Hayama; there he entered the only world in which he was truly happy. By mid-August he relinquished these pleasures and returned to Tokyo, to the khaki uniform he now wore. It had been decided by the army chiefs that he should make Iwane Matsui, an ageing, retired General in the reserve, Commander in Chief of Japanese forces in Central China.

It was an honour, but also a mystery to General Matsui, why he of all people should be reactivated from the reserve to take command in China. He was sixty, frail and tubercular. His weight on a five foot

frame was down to no more than a hundred pounds. He was given to recurrent fevers and coughs. He had been retired at his own request four years before in disapproval of the army's outrageous plotting to conquer China. He espoused the Strike South, but also recommended friendship with China. In retirement he had set up the East Asia League in Japan, a society to work for a united Asia and prevent a war with China. He had gone to Peking to establish a branch of this society but the Chinese were suspicious; Manchuria had given the Japanese a bad name. Asia for Asiatics sounds like Asia for the Japanese, they told him as they turned away.

Now that war was upon them, General Matsui could no longer talk of prevention. His speeches to the East Asia League advocated a quick drive up the Yangtze to take Nanking. Once in occupation Japanese actions must be exemplary. They must persuade the Chinese a Japanese administration was preferable to the deviousness of Chiang Kai-shek.

Everyone knew Matsui's convictions. He took his new command to be a sign of temperance on the part of the army and the Emperor. If a man of his mind was being reactivated when others, both active and able were bypassed, it must mean a change in attitude by the high command. Perhaps now they saw the wisdom of a negotiated settlement with China. That wheels within wheels still turned in the Military, or that to all he appeared a dispensable man, did not occur to the General. In the Phoenix Hall of the Imperial Palace, Matsui's medal-encrusted uniform weighed heavily in the August heat and his sword knocked against his knees. His face twitched uncontrollably. He bowed then knelt before his Emperor to receive command of the Imperial Army in Central China.

On his departure from the Palace, General Matsui shared a car with Prime Minister Konoye. Matsui was still dazed by the honour thrust upon him, still warm with thoughts of all he must do.

'There is no solution except to break the power of Chiang Kai-shek by capturing Nanking. That is what I must do,' General Matsui promised.

There was to be no delay. Two days later the East Asia League gave him a hurried farewell dinner. General Matsui made his last speech.

'I am going to the front not to fight an enemy but in the state of mind of one who sets out to pacify a brother.'

In the magnificent Phoenix Hall of the Palace, with its motif carved in silver or wood, painted on lacquer or woven into brocade, Hirohito became on important occasions the nation's high priest, unapproachable, speaking in archaic words and voice. As Matsui

prepared to leave for China, the Emperor prayed for Japan's success. After the General's departure, Hirohito walked back to his workroom in the Imperial Library. In that room he was a man and fallible, and he could discuss events with other men. The sincerity of Matsui was unmistakable. If his health held up, it would be good to have such a man in the field. Hirohito wanted the war over quickly. What had to be done, had to be done, but he wished the nastiness finished as soon as possible and China swiftly under his thumb. Only then could the rule of Showa begin to spread Enlightenment over greater Asia.