

The Meiji Restoration: Roots of Modern Japan

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Introduction

The start of the Meiji Era and the beginning of Japan's road to modernization, started when the 16 year old emperor Mutsuhito selected the era name Meiji for his reign. This period commenced with the collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate and led to Japan's transformation from a feudal nation into a modern industrial state. Japan emerged from the Meiji Period with a parliamentary form of government and as a world power through military expansion abroad. The Meiji regime first began as an alliance between *Satsuma and Choshu*, the two domains responsible for the overthrowing of the Tokugawa Shogunate, with support from Tosa and Hizen domains as well. Satsuma and Choshu faced the daunting task of imposing and maintaining national unity. From January 1868 to June of 1869, the new Meiji government was involved in a civil war with the fragmented Tokugawa and dissident forces. The Tokugawa forces eventually were defeated and the former shogunate capital of Edo, was renamed Tokyo and designated as the new national capital.

After coming to power, the Meiji government wanted to ensure the people that the new order would be of justice and opportunity. The emperor on April 6, 1868 issued the *Charter Oath*, which promised that assemblies would be established to deal with all matters through public discussion and that evil feudalistic customs of the past would be abolished. There were early attempts to implement the "assemblies and public discussions" mention in the Charter Oath, but before long the regime reverted to a more authoritarian structure. However, the boundaries between the social classes were gradually broken down, and reforms led to the establishment of human rights and religious freedom in 1873.

Japan introduced its first constitution in 1889, based the European style. A parliament, called the Diet was established, while the emperor was placed as the sovereign figure head. The emperor stood at the top of the army, navy, executive and legislative powers. The ruling elder statesmen (genro) however held the actual power to run the

state. Political parties at this time did not yet gain real power due to the lack of unity among the members of parliament. In order to stabilize the new government, the former feudal lords (daimyo) were required to return their land to the emperor in 1870. The return of land to the central government allowed the collection of land tax to be more extensive and allowed the people to own their own land. This led to the restructuring of the country into prefectures that is currently still in implementation to this day.

The Meiji government reformed the education system after the French and later after the German system. Among those reforms the most significant and lasting was the introduction of a compulsory education system. After about one or two decades of intensive westernization, a revival of conservative and nationalistic feelings took place: principles of Confucianism and Shinto including the worship of the emperor were increasingly emphasized and indoctrinated at the educational institutions.¹

For Japan, catching up militarily was a high priority in an era of European and American imperialism. This attitude was driven by the humiliating and unequal treaties Japan was forced to oblige to due to their military inferiority compared to the West. The Meiji government introduced universal conscription and a new army was modeled after the Prussian force and a navy after the British fleet.

In order to transform the economy from an agrarian one to a developed industrial state, Japanese scholars went abroad to study Western science and language, while foreign experts taught in Japan. The government also invested heavily in public works such as railroad transportation and communication networks. It also directly supported the prospering industries, especially the powerful family owned businesses, called zaibatsu. The huge expenditures to industrialize led to a financial crisis in the mid 1880's that resulted in reforms of the currency and banking system.

Japan during the Meiji period was involved in two victorious wars. Conflicts of interests in Korea between Japan and China, led to the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895. Japan was to receive Taiwan and other territories from China, but was forced to return the

territories by the intervention of the Western powers. About a decade later, new conflicts over Korea between Japan and Russia resulted in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. The Japanese army surprised the world and gained respect in their victory over a Western nation.

The Meiji rule ended with the death of the emperor on July 30, 1912, which also marked the end of the era of the genro. This era in Japanese history was a momentous epoch that saw the transformation of feudal Japan into a modern industrialized state with a parliamentary form of government and its emergence as a world power through military adventures abroad.ⁱⁱ The Meiji period brought about drastic political, economic, and social changes in Japan, which in turn became the framework and foundation of modern Japan as we know it.

Decline of the Shogunate

In July of 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in Japan with the demand that Japan open its country to foreign trade with the United States. The Tokugawa shogunate realizing that resisting with force was impossible, and had no alternative but to sign the Kanagawa Treaty with the United States in 1854. The Kanagawa Treaty opened the ports of Shimoda and Hakodate to foreign ships for supplies and repairs, but did not include provision for trade. This was just the beginning of a series of treaties the shogunate was forced to sign with the Western powers seeking trade with Japan. These unequal treaties all favored the foreign counterpart, as the treaties gave extraterritorial rights as well as the power to set Japanese tariff levels. The opening of Japan and the way in which the treaties were agreed upon seriously weaken the shogunate's already feeble position.

With the opening of Japanese ports in 1859, the wave of anti-foreign sentiment swept the nation. Foreign presence in these ports gave way to the creation of slogans such as "Expel the Barbarians!"ⁱⁱⁱ At this critical juncture, the shogun, Tokugawa Iesada

died childless creating a succession dispute. Furthermore, his ineffective replacement, Ii Naosuke was assassinated in March 1860 by a group of loyalist from Satsuma. The situation was fast becoming an impossible one for the shogun. The numbers of Westerners in the treaty ports were increasing, and serious clashes occurred between the reactionary feudal lords and the foreigners. Foreigners were frequently attacked and occasionally killed by rebellious samurai who thought they were aiding in the expulsion. The Western powers demanded of the shogun a severe punishment of the ferocious daimyos, but the shogun had no power to do so. On one hand, the shogun had orders of the emperor to expel the foreigner. However, the shogun could not comply, for he knew that he was powerless against the cannons of the foreign gunboats. Nor did he dare to refuse point-blank the emperor's orders, for such an insult to the legal head of the state would not be tolerated.^{iv}

The foreign minister had at first been ignorant of the true nature of the relation between the shogun and the emperor. They had regarded the shogun as the supreme ruler of the land and the emperor as a kind of high priest. In the course of time they discovered their mistake and when time for a renewal of a treaty, they went to the emperor. Sir Harry Parkes, the British Minister requested the immediate opening of the port at Osaka and a reduction of custom duties. Terrified by the show of force, the emperor reluctantly accepted the treaty. This incident finally made it apparent the complete failure of the shogunate government, thus leading to the overthrow of Tokugawa shogunate by the new Meiji regime.

Political Changes

Soon after the restoration of the emperor to power, the new government promised the people it would establish a constitutional government. In 1889, the Japanese Constitution was declared and various liberties and rights of the people, beginning with the right to political participation, were recognized. A year later in 1890, a national assembly,

the bicameral Diet, was assembled and the constitutional government was formed. The former samurais of the Tokugawa period, who in the Meiji took the role as elder statesmen (genro) understood that the adoption of a Constitutional government was essential if Japan was to become a country strong and wealthy enough to rank with the Western powers. Accordingly, it devoted all its energies to achieving such a government.

The Meiji Constitution borrowed from the constitution of the European nations, specifically the German states. The 1889 Constitution was largely the work of Ito Hirobumi, a Choshu man who had studied abroad in Europe. The constitution invested the emperor with full sovereignty, he commanded the military, made peace and declared war, and dissolved the lower house of the parliament when elections were necessary.^v Effective power however lay with the genro, but the genro's power was vaguely defined in the Constitution for it seemed to contradict with the emperor's total sovereignty of the nation. The emperor himself reigned, rather than ruled.

The new system of government had its troubles at first, but the genro was determined to make these new institutions work, for national pride, foreign approval, and political stability. However, once war with China became inevitable, political differences had to be put aside and national unity became the priority. Before long, Japan was at blows with China, in what is known as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 - 1895. Japan's army was victorious over the Chinese forces, and it seized control of Korea and the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria. In defeat China, also handed over control of Taiwan to Japan, but the Tripartite Intervention by Germany, France, and Russia forced the return of the Liaodong Peninsula. The intervention by the Western powers made the Meiji government realize that their country was still unequal to the West and greater national strength was necessary. These events led to the intensification of Japanese expansion of their military, and their imperialistic drive.

Military Development

The military was the first area of major structural change, the first to adopt Western organizational patterns, and the first to hire foreign advisers. The army and the navy rapidly became the largest scale organizations in Japan, and their demand for resources acted as a major stimulus in the development of other systems, from the zaibatsu industries to the universal compulsory education. The government investment in private industries to aid the country's military expansion resulted in the founding of companies such as Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and Sumitomo, which are still in existence today.

There are three phases in the transition to a modern military organization. The first phase, which lasted from 1853 to 1870 was a lengthy period of experimentation with new forms and involved wide variation among a large number of organization. The second phase (1870-1878), the central government established a single, centralized organizational model for the army and the navy. Both institutions went through intensive organization building, which focused on internal structures and processes. The third and last phase (1878-1890), attention was shifted to the ways in which the military interacted with the political and social environment, with respect to ensuring the supply of needed resources and increasing the military's autonomy and effectiveness.^{vi}

The 1853 lifting of the formal prohibition on the construction or purchase of large scale ships marked the beginning of two decades of military mobilization for Japan. The military mobilization was initially stimulated by fears of Western invasion. For Japan, the principle threat from the Western powers came from the sea. A Western-style navy could be created in "a vacant niche": there was no existing organization performing that function which might resist attempts at transformation to a new model or oppose the creation of a rival organization.^{vii}

There was a widespread agreement within the Meiji elite that Japan needs to become a militarily and economically powerful nation to be considered in the same rank with the Western powers. However, there was a great disagreement over how this should

be accomplished. The traditionalists led by Saigo Takamori argued that the samurai should constitute the core of the new army, while the majority group felt that the samurai should be a minority. Saigo also urged an expedition against Korea and argued that this would force the internal unity sought by the government.^{viii} A samurai of Satsuma, he gathered a strong army of discontent southern samurai. In 1877, acting as the leader Saigo led a revolt against the Tokyo government, which came to be known as the Satsuma Rebellion. The new national army was brought out to end the fierce rebellion, which the national army won relatively easily. The government called out more troops than were actually necessary to demonstrate to the nation the efficiency of the new system and to ensure victory. Omura Masajiro, the head of the War Department at that time believed that the government needs to assure domestic order and once that is achieved, the Western powers would be compelled to consider Japan as a power and would thus terminate the humiliating unequal treaties.

By the 1880's, both the military and the government came to the agreement that its independence meant the ability to pursue rights and privileges on the Asian continent as does the West powers. More precisely, the "independence" of Korea from China and into their control was the driving force behind the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, a fight between China and Japan for control of Korea. War served to solidify the strength of the military, as well as giving a huge boost to the zaibatsu, the government subsidized industrial family owned companies.

Economy

The government was primarily responsible in laying the foundations necessary for economic development. It was not just the role that the state undertook, but also the linkage between the private and public sectors that accounted for the industrial take-off. This special relationship between the state and private enterprises has remained a feature of the Japanese economy to the present day. The state-private enterprise relationship was

consolidated within a national framework during the early Meiji period and this coherence played a vital role in the economic development of Japan.

In the first fifteen years of the Meiji period, the government worked at developing both social and industrial infrastructure. The government invested heavily in public works such as railways, shipping, communication, ports, lighthouses, and etc. The Meiji leaders also invested a high percentage of national revenue in importing Western technology and expertise in setting up modern factories. There existed no private entrepreneurs who the capital or the confidence to enter the various fields of telegraph and railways. Without the direct investments by the government, the backbone of Japan's modernization would not have developed as rapidly as it did.

Japan developed in a manner which involved the characteristics of the dual economy, with distinctions between the traditional and modern sectors. The traditional sector refers to agriculture, and it dominated the economy for the first two decades of the Meiji period. Not only did it employ the largest percentage of the workforce, but it also provided the most revenue for the government, in the form of land tax. Through the implementation of the Land Reform Act of 1873, the introduction of new strains of rice, and the establishment of educational center of farming, the economy experienced a impressive rate of growth of 2% per year in the period of 1870-1900.^{ix} After the Meiji Restoration the peasants were made the owners of the land that they had cultivated for the feudal lords under the old government. Payment of land tax in currency was substituted for forced labor and for payment in the products of the land. Japan's economic transformation in the Meiji was initially achieved through the subsidizing of the agriculture industry, and exploiting the peasant population. This was the only viable source for government revenue, for the government to tax the heavy industries and the zaibatsu at this early stage of development would have been counter-productive for the whole economy.

While the country was poor in natural resources, Japan was able to take advantage

of the high demand for silk in Europe. Up to the end of the nineteenth century raw silk represented 40% of Japan's total export revenues. Tea was another commodity that Japan exported heavily. The foreign demand for silk and tea, therefore, stimulated agricultural diversification and growth, which in turn led to higher revenues for which the government used to invest in industrial development. The revenues from exports in Japan was used for the purchase of foreign machinery. By the end of the Meiji Period, Japan was the leader among all manufactured silk exporting countries. The spin-off effects from the silk trade were particularly noticeable in the cotton industry. The initial motivation for the introduction and diffusion of Western technology in the cotton industry was to end its dependency of imports of Western textile goods. The aim of both public and private sectors was to achieve a situation whereby foreign revenue would be used to fund import of capital goods rather than on consumer goods. At the end of the first decade of the Meiji, there were less than 10,000 cotton spindles in Japan, but by the second decade that figure was up to 100,000.^x Thus by the end of the Meiji Era, Japan was a world leader in the textile industry. Japan was able to import foreign technology, then make adaptation and innovation to build its industry to become competitive in the world.

In more recent times perhaps the most marked characteristic influence of the Japanese economy on the West has been the competition and ultimate victory which the Japanese have waged precisely in the areas of apparent Western comparative advantages: Swiss watches, British motorcycles, Western Europe/ US automobiles and musical instruments have been overtaken by Japanese products. As has been indicated in regards to silk and cotton, the roots of this phenomenon goes back to the Meiji Period.

With the growth of international commerce, banks naturally sprang up. Initially, the Meiji government experimented with various devices, and in 1873 established a national banking system patterned largely after the United States. Japan also desperately required a strong financial system, due to the unequal treaties with the West, Japan was being drained of its currency. The banks and the national treasury were in a precarious

state. In 1881, the government was led to organize a central bank, later known as the Bank of Japan. Furthermore, to assist in trade and foreign exchange, a secondary institution called the Yokohama Specie Bank was set up. Postal savings bank was also introduced in this time period. During the Meiji Period, the banking system finally took the form whose main features set the foundation for the modern Japanese banking system. In 1894, agricultural and industrial banks were formed to finance the farmers and manufacturers.

As commerce and financial institutions developed, there was an improvement in the means of transportation. There was an increase in steamships use and construction in Japan. The Meiji government gave its encouragement, and heavily subsidized ship building companies that laid the foundation for the tremendous growth of domestic and foreign shipping in Japan. On top of shipping, the state was also a pioneer in railway building. In spite of strong opposition by the conservatives in the government, a railway was built between Tokyo and a port in Yokohama in 1872. The state continued to promote railways and most of the earlier ones were constructed either by the state or by government aided companies. Telegraph lines were built by the state and in 1886 the telegraph and postal services were united under a joint state bureau.

The government, directed by the reformers played a major part in the reorganization of banking, commerce, transportation, industry, and agriculture. There were two main reasons for this. First, the state was the only institution which had the organization, the capital, and the credit to undertake an operation on the large scale necessary to compete with the West. At the coming of Perry there were few if any large commercial industries. Secondly, an emphasis upon the state had been encouraged by the former government and it was just natural that the ministers of the Meiji should follow the precedent of the past ages.

Education

The vision, determination and the effective means of communication remain characteristics of Japanese society today. The vision and the determination encompassed a frightening degree of ruthlessness. To the new Meiji elite, the end justified all the means, which included the exploitation of women and children labor, the heavy taxation of the peasant population, etc. However, none of these characteristics make Meiji Japan all that different from the industrialized West. The process of modernization has inevitably involved a degree of brutality. Despite these quality of the Meiji leadership, they did at the very least, teach the people to read, write, and count. The ruling powers of other failed developing nations never seemed to have placed much importance of achieving national unity through education. Japan's success was derived not so much from financial capital or imported technology, but from the accumulation and successful formation of its human capital by means of educating the masses.^{xi}

A new system of compulsory education was introduced in 1871, and it placed emphasis on the spirit of scientific inquiry. A text commonly used was the "Illustrated Course in Physics" written by Fukuzawa Yukichi and was adopted as a primary text book by the Ministry of Education in 1872. A complete program of public schools was gradually carried out, beginning with the elementary school then leading through "middle" and "high" schools, and for some the national universities. Efforts were directed at seeking to discover and encourage (male) talent wherever it might be.

The Education Order of 1872, proclaimed that education should no longer be the monopoly of the upper class or indeed of only the male population. The Meiji reformers set as its goal universal literacy, and divide the country into higher-school districts with supporting networks of middle and lower schools. The literacy rate of the total population on the eve of the Meiji period was somewhere in the region of 40%, but by the end of the Meiji the literacy rate had doubled to about 80%. Progress, however, was marred by financial difficulties. In regards to overall government educational policies, its ambitious vision was not matched by its fiscal generosity. Throughout the Meiji Period, the

government expenditure on education remained frugal in comparison with the excessive spending on the military.

In the early Meiji era, the government was not simply hampered in its educational aims by financial obstacles, but also by ideological obstacles. In other words, there was stiff opposition in the rural areas to mandatory education: the peasant population objected that it had more immediate priorities, like having enough to eat, than receiving an education. The peasants' objection to compulsory education was also partly based on economic grievances. Along with the land tax, the peasantry perceived education as just one more financial burden which they were being forced to bear. There was also in some cases an instinctive premonition that this new Western-style education was some form of witchcraft, hence schools were viewed by the peasant masses with suspicion and hostility.

Undaunted, the Meiji government persisted in its educational efforts. The Iwakura mission, composed of both a diplomatic and a fact finding expedition, was led by Tanaka Fujimaro, the chief educational officer. For 18 months from 1871 to 1873, a large part of the Meiji leadership toured Europe and America. Exposure to the West changed the thinking and priorities of many of the Meiji reformers. Upon Tanaka's return in 1873, he acquired the services of American, David Murray who as chief adviser to the Ministry of Education was partly responsible in changing the original Meiji education system. The original Meiji model had been the highly centralized and structured French Napoleonic format. During the 1870's a more informal and decentralized American format was implemented instead. The liberal atmosphere which pervaded the education system was a general reflection of the anti-Confucianist attitude of that period. The emphasis in school teaching was on learning and discovering all about the West, and past principles were discarded in enthusiastic favor of individualism, egalitarianism and other various Western concepts.

By the middle of the Meiji Period, the government had devised and implemented an educational system which suited its needs and ambitions. A highly qualified leadership

with a well disciplined and educated Japanese people was, the ideal recipe for the creation of their new modern nation.

Social

By the beginning of the second decade of the Meiji Period, most of the daimyo and upper samurai power and privileges had disappeared. The new ruling class, in terms of socio-economics consisted of an urban-based upper middle class. It was primarily composed of industrial managers and bureaucrats. To the bureaucrats and managers, the ruling class also included military officials, doctors, professors, architects, and members of liberal professions. All of these classes, by the late Meiji period tended to be drawn completely from the universities and colleges. Thus the new Japanese elite can be said to have been meritocratic in nature.^{xii}

The composition of Meiji's ruling class was very similar to that of Western industrial countries. However there are two marginal differences which set Japan apart from the West. Most Western countries counted among their elite the magnates of various churches, while there were no such phenomenon in Japan.^{xiii} More significant difference lies in the fact that Meiji bureaucrats and managers tended to be completely divorced from the land, where in the West, the possession of estates continued to confer social and political prestige.

Japan remained a overwhelmingly peasant society and economy, under the leadership of a minority elite class. The demographic picture of Japan showed a heavy concentration of the population in small villages. There was a urban ruling class within that population, which consisted namely of school teachers, proprietors of small businesses, retailers, and manufacturers of traditional crafts. Another feature of the social setting of Japan during the Meiji period was the relatively small number of urban middle class. Japanese society at this time has two main characteristics. First, there was a substantial gap of wealth between the urban and rural areas, and secondly, the difference

between the upper and lower class. The upper class was well educated and rich, while the lower class was poor and uneducated. The upper orders tended to be cosmopolitan in outlook, while the lower orders were parochial. The rapid modernization did bring along with it comforts, however it brought a great deal of social confusion as well. The failure to recognize the imperative need for social progress made all political reform no more than cosmetic in effect. The economic gains of the first phase of the period of Meiji modernization were not translated into social amendments in the course of the second phase.

Conclusion

The Meiji Era brought about major changes in the economic, social, and political sectors, that became the foundation of modern Japan. First and foremost, from the political aspect, Japan adopted a Constitution and implemented a parliamentary government. The basis for Japan's current style of government was founded in the Meiji period by emulating the then superior Western powers. On a side note, the emperor became a eminent and potent figure, which everyone in country was aware of. The monarchy was an effective instrument for creating and sustaining national unity. More importantly it created a close relationship between the central and local government, as well as between one the central government and the common people.

Economically, the government's support of family owned large businesses, called zaibatsu led to the development Japanese industry and economy. Although these zaibatsu conglomerates was abolished after World War II, a very similar conglomerate system still exists in the Japanese economy to this day. The roots of modern Japanese banking and financial system can also be traced back to the reforms during the Meiji. Socially, Japan made the monumental leap from feudalistic society into a modern industrial state. The samurai class lost its ruling and privileged power and there was a breakdown of strictly divided social classes. Meiji Japan also was the roots of the current compulsory education

system, that we see in Japan today. The high literacy and level of educated people, is the result of this education system in modern Japan. Although the current state of the Japanese military is much less imperialistic, the Meiji's military expansion to catch up with the West did influence Japan's imperialistic role in both the World Wars. The Meiji era, the foundation of modern Japan can be thought of as the first step of the nation in its goal to achieve modernization and superpower status in a once Western dominated world.

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- ⁱⁱ Michio Umegaki, *After the Restoration* (Oxford University Press, 1988) 73.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hazel Jones, *Live Machines: Hired Foreigners and Meiji Japan* (University of British Columbia Press, 1980) 146.
- ^{iv} Jones 151.
- ^v Richard Chang, *Historians and Meiji Statesmen* (University of Florida Press, 1970) 122
- ^{vi} Mehl 74.
- ^{vii} Jones 56.
- ^{viii} Mehl 77.
- ^{ix} Kenneth Latourette, *History of Japan* (The MacMillan Company, 1957) 136.
- ^x Chang 184.
- ^{xi} Latourette 48.
- ^{xii} Mehl 155.
- ^{xiii} Mehl 161.