Meiji Restoration and Modernisation of Japan

In 1868 the Tokugawa shôgun ("great general"), who ruled Japan in the feudal period, lost his power and the emperor was restored to the supreme position. The emperor took the name Meiji ("enlightened rule") as his reign name; this event was known as the **Meiji Restoration**.

The Reign of the Meiji Emperor

When the Meiji emperor was restored as head of Japan in 1868, the nation was a militarily weak country, was primarily agricultural, and had little technological development. It was controlled by hundreds of semi-independent feudal lords. The Western powers — Europe and the United States — had forced Japan to sign treaties that limited its control over its own foreign trade and required that crimes concerning foreigners in Japan be tried not in Japanese but in Western courts. When the Meiji period ended, with the death of the emperor in 1912, Japan had

· a highly centralized, bureaucratic government;
· a constitution establishing an elected parliament;
· a well-developed transport and communication system;
· a highly educated population free of feudal class restrictions;
· an established and rapidly growing industrial sector based on the latest technology; and
· a powerful army and navy.

Japan had regained complete control of its foreign trade and legal system, and, by fighting and winning two wars (one of them against

a major European power, Russia), it had established full independence and equality in international affairs. In a little more than a generation, Japan had exceeded its goals, and in the process had changed its whole society. Japan's success in modernization has created great interest in why and how it was able to adopt Western political, social, and economic institutions in so short a time.

One answer is found in the Meiji Restoration itself. This political revolution "restored" the emperor to power, but he did not rule directly. He was expected to accept the advice of the group that had overthrown the shôgun, and it was from this group that a small number of ambitious, able, and patriotic young men from the lower ranks of the samurai emerged to take control and establish the new political system. At first, their only strength was that the emperor accepted their advice and several powerful feudal domains provided military support. They moved quickly, however, to build their own military and economic control. By July 1869 the feudal lords had been requested to give up their domains, and in 1871 these domains were abolished and transformed into prefectures of a unified central state.

The feudal lords and the samurai class were offered a yearly stipend, which was later changed to a one-time payment in government bonds. The samurai lost their class privileges, when the government declared all classes to be equal. By 1876 the government banned the wearing of the samurai's swords; the former samurai cut off their top knots in favor of Western-style haircuts and took up jobs in business and the professions.

The armies of each domain were disbanded, and a national army based on universal conscription was created in 1872, requiring three years' military service from all men, samurai and commoner alike. A national land tax system was established that required payment in money instead of rice, which allowed the government to

stabilize the national budget. This gave the government money to spend to build up the strength of the nation.

Resistance and Rebellion Defeated

Although these changes were made in the name of the emperor and national defense, the loss of privileges brought some resentment and rebellion. When the top leadership left to travel in Europe and the United States to study Western ways in 1872, conservative groups argued that Japan should reply to Korean's refusal to revise a centuries old treaty with an invasion. This would help patriotic samurai to regain their importance. But the new leaders quickly returned from Europe and reestablished their control, arguing that Japan should concentrate on its own modernization and not engage in such foreign adventures.

For the next twenty years, in the 1870s and 1880s, the top priority remained domestic reform aimed at changing Japan's social and economic institutions along the lines of the model provided by the powerful Western nations. The final blow to conservative samurai came in the 1877 Satsuma rebellion, when the government's newly drafted army, trained in European infantry techniques and armed with modern Western guns, defeated the last resistance of the traditional samurai warriors. With the exception of these few samurai outbreaks, Japan's domestic transformation proceeded with remarkable speed, energy, and the cooperation of the people. This phenomenon is one of the major characteristics of Japan's modern history.

Ideology

In an effort to unite the Japanese nation in response to the Western challenge, the Meiji leaders created a civic ideology centered around the emperor. Although the emperor wielded no political power, he had long been viewed as a symbol of Japanese culture

and historical continuity. He was the head of the Shintô religion, Japan's native religion. Among other beliefs, Shintô holds that the emperor is descended from the sun goddess and the gods who created Japan and therefore is semidivine. Westerners of that time knew him primarily as a ceremonial figure. The Meiji reformers brought the emperor and Shintô to national prominence, replacing Buddhism as the national religion, for political and ideological reasons. By associating Shintô with the imperial line, which reached back into legendary times, Japan had not only the oldest ruling house in the world, but a powerful symbol of age-old national unity.

The people seldom saw the emperor, yet they were to carry out his orders without question, in honor to him and to the unity of the Japanese people, which he represented. In fact, the emperor did not rule. It was his "advisers," the small group of men who exercised political control, that devised and carried out the reform program in the name of the emperor.

Social and Economic Changes

The abolition of feudalism made possible tremendous social and political changes. Millions of people were suddenly free to choose their occupation and move about without restrictions. By providing a new environment of political and financial security, the government made possible investment in new industries and technologies.

The government led the way in this, building railway and shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, three shipyards, ten mines, five munitions works, and fifty-three consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products). This was very expensive, however, and strained government finances, so in 1880 the government decided to sell most of these industries to private investors, thereafter encouraging such activity through subsidies and other incentives. Some of the samurai and merchants who built these industries established major

corporate conglomerates called zaibatsu, which controlled much of Japan's modern industrial sector.

The government also introduced a national educational system and a constitution, creating an elected parliament called the Diet. They did this to provide a good environment for national growth, win the respect of the Westerners, and build support for the modern state. In the Tokugawa period, popular education had spread rapidly, and in 1872 the government established a national system to educate the entire population. By the end of the Meiji period, almost everyone attended the free public schools for at least six years. The government closely controlled the schools, making sure that in addition to skills like mathematics and reading, all students studied "moral training," which stressed the importance of their duty to the emperor, the country and their families.

The 1889 constitution was "given" to the people by the emperor, and only he (or his advisers) could change it. A parliament was elected beginning in 1890, but only the wealthiest one percent of the population could vote in elections. In 1925 this was changed to allow all men (but not yet women) to vote.

To win the recognition of the Western powers and convince them to change the unequal treaties the Japanese had been forced to sign in the 1850s, Japan changed its entire legal system, adopting a new criminal and civil code modeled after those of France and Germany. The Western nations finally agreed to revise the treaties in 1894, acknowledging Japan as an equal in principle, although not in international power.

The International Climate: Colonialism and Expansion

In 1894 Japan fought a war against China over its interest in Korea, which China claimed as a vassal state. The Korean peninsula is the closest part of Asia to Japan, less than 100 miles by sea, and the

Japanese were worried that the Russians might gain control of that weak nation. Japan won the war and gained control over Korea and gained Taiwan as a colony. Japan's sudden, decisive victory over China surprised the world and worried some European powers.

At this time the European nations were beginning to claim special rights in China — the French, with their colony in Indochina (today's Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), were involved in South China; the British also claimed special rights in South China, near Hong Kong, and later the whole Yangtze valley; and the Russians, who were building a railway through Siberia and Manchuria, were interested in North China. After Japan's victory over China, Japan signed a treaty with China which gave Japan special rights on China's Liaotung peninsula, in addition to the control of Taiwan. But Japan's victory was short lived. Within a week, France, Russia, and Germany combined to pressure Japan to give up rights on the Liaotung peninsula. Each of these nations then began to force China to give it ports, naval bases, and special economic rights, with Russia taking the same Liaotung peninsula that Japan had been forced to return.

The Japanese government was angered by this incident and drew the lesson that for Japan to maintain its independence and receive equal treatment in international affairs, it was necessary to strengthen its military even further. By 1904, when the Russians were again threatening to establish control over Korea, Japan was much stronger. It declared war on Russia and, using all its strength, won victory in 1905 (beginning with a surprise naval attack on Port Arthur, which gained for Japan the control of the China Sea). Japan thus achieved dominance over Korea and established itself a colonial power in East Asia.

The Period 1912-1941

The Meiji reforms brought great changes both within Japan and in

Japan's place in world affairs. Japan strengthened itself enough to remain a sovereign nation in the face of Western colonizing powers and indeed became a colonizing power itself. During the Taishô period (1912-1926), Japanese citizens began to ask for more voice in the government and for more social freedoms. During this time, Japanese society and the Japanese political system were significantly more open than they were either before or after. The period has often been called the period of "Taishô democracy." One explanation is that, until World War I, Japan enjoyed record breaking economic prosperity. The Japanese people had more money to spend, more leisure, and better education, supplemented by the development of mass media. Increasingly they lived in cities where they came into contact with influences from abroad and where the traditional authority of the extended family was less influential. Industrialization in itself undermined traditional values, emphasizing instead efficiency, independence, materialism, and individualism. During these years Japan saw the emergence of a "mass society" very similar to the "Roaring 20s" in the United States. During these years also, the Japanese people began to demand universal manhood suffrage which they won in 1925. Political parties increased their influence, becoming powerful enough to appoint their own prime ministers between 1918 and 1931.

At the end of World War I, however, Japan entered a severe economic depression. The bright, optimistic atmosphere of the Taishô period gradually disappeared. Political party government was marred by corruption. The government and military, consequently, grew stronger, the parliament weaker. The advanced industrial sector became increasingly controlled by a few giant businesses, the zaibatsu. Moreover, Japan's international relations were disrupted by trade tensions and by growing international disapproval of Japan's activities in China. But success in competing with the European powers in East Asia strengthened the idea that

Japan could, and should, further expand its influence on the Asian mainland by military force.

Japan's need for natural resources and the repeated rebuffs from the West to Japan's attempts to expand its power in Asia paved the way for militarists to rise to power. Insecurity in international relations allowed a right-wing militaristic faction to control first foreign, then domestic, policy. With the military greatly influencing the government, Japan began an aggressive military campaign throughout Asia, and then, in 1941, bombed Pearl Harbor.

Summary

The most important feature of the Meiji period was Japan's struggle for recognition of its considerable achievement and for equality with Western nations. Japan was highly successful in organizing an industrial, capitalist state on Western models. But when Japan also began to apply the lessons it learned from European imperialism, the West reacted negatively. In a sense Japan's chief handicap was that it entered into the Western dominated world order at a late stage. Colonialism and the racist ideology that accompanied it, were too entrenched in Western countries to allow an "upstart," nonwhite nation to enter the race for natural resources and markets as an equal. Many of the misunderstandings between the West and Japan stemmed from Japan's sense of alienation from the West, which seemed to use a different standard in dealing with European nations than it did with a rising Asian power like Japan.

Discussion Questions

1. What were some of the political, economic and social changes that occurred during the Meiji Period?
2. What personage was at the center of Japan's new civic

ideology? Why was using this personage as a symbol of national unity effective?

3. What role did the central government play in growing industry? Providing education?
4. How did colonization affect Asia in the late 1890's? What was the West's response to Japan's colonization efforts?
5. The terms "modernization" and "Westernization" are often used interchangeably. What do these terms mean to you? Why do you think they often mean the same thing?
6. Why is the period 1912-1945 sometimes referred to as the "Taishô democracy"?
7. How would you describe the political situation in Japan at the end of World War I?