



## World History

### The Meiji Era and the Modernization of Japan

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Directions: As you read along make notes in the margins to summarize each paragraph. Only use about one to two sentences to give a general idea of the content and point of the paragraph. Once completed answer the questions at the bottom of the next page.

## The Meiji Era and the Modernization of Japan

By Maria Christensen

For nearly 250 years, the islands comprising the nation of Japan kept a silent vigil in the far reaches of the Pacific Ocean. By the early 1600s, foreigners had been expelled and Christianity outlawed. Occasional attempts at contact by western nations, who alternated between intrigue and frustration, met with stony faced orders to leave. All this changed in 1853, when the United States sent Commodore Matthew C. Perry to Japan with a letter from President Millard Fillmore to the emperor, and orders (actually written by Perry himself) to obtain a treaty. Two connected factors necessitated these actions. The first involved the lucrative China trade, driven by profit and the alluring scents of tea and peppers, the luxury of exotic silks and the delicacy of fine porcelains. The second was the need for a refueling station for the coal-powered, smoke-billowing steam ships which had so astounded the Japanese upon Perry's arrival. These ironclad monsters needed huge amounts of coal, leaving little room for cargo on the trips to and from China and San Francisco. Japan happened to have plenty of coal deposits and found itself encompassed within the American idea of manifest destiny as the stepping stone to China. Perry completed his mission in 1854 and within the next few years, technologically inferior Japan was intimidated into a number of unequal treaties with America, Britain, France and Russia. The Dutch also pressed their advantage in having been the only outside western contact with Japan during the isolation years through a small, tightly controlled trading post on the island of Deshima outside of Nagasaki. It appeared as if Japan might be headed for the same fate as China, to eventually lose central control to competing spheres of foreign influence.

China and Japan, however, took separate paths in their reaction to the Western powers. Many Japanese were alarmed at these events and anti-foreign sentiment grew among samurai (the warrior class) and the daimyo (feudal lords) who had already resented Tokugawa rule. The Tokugawa clan, headed by the shogun, (the military leader) had ruled Japan since 1603, and was now blamed for the shame which the unequal treaties had inflicted upon Japan. In the end, the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown and a new group of leaders emerged at the same time a new emperor ascended the throne. Every emperor of Japan is known by a title named "for the era during which he would rule"**(1)**. Thus was born the Meiji Era, which means "enlightened rule." The emperor served mainly as a figurehead and a small group of men, who would become known as the Meiji oligarchs, ruled the country. What followed, from 1867 to 1912, remains unparalleled in history.

As deeply humiliating as the western show of force had been, many realized that until Japan caught up with the west technologically, the unequal treaties and their own perceived inferior status would remain intact. While culture and the arts had flourished during the period of isolation, the scientific and industrial revolutions had raged around the blissfully unaware Japanese. This had to change for Japan to compete in the modern world. Accordingly, the oligarchs set the nation upon a course of modernization which would produce dramatic results. The first step was to foster a sense of nationalism and unity. Until then, most Japanese had identified themselves as loyal to their daimyo first. The emperor was a revered but very distant figure. The oligarchs placed the Meiji emperor upon a high and sacred pedestal and every reform was carried out in his name. Education in this highly literate nation promoted patriotism and the military were taught the virtues of "unquestioning obedience and sacrifice"**(2)**.

With this sense of national pride in place, the oligarchs were ready to administer sweeping reforms, the first of which ended the status of the samurai. By 1876, samurai were forbidden to carry their traditional swords and the warrior class evolved into bureaucrats. Peasants who had previously been forbidden to carry arms were conscripted into a centralized army. The old class system of Japan was abandoned. With astounding speed, universities were founded, telegraph and railroad lines cross-crossed the country and a national postal system was set up. The shipping and textile industries took off, as shown by the facts that "by the end of the Meiji period, more than a third of the world's supply of silk came from Japan" and the percentage of exports carried on Japanese built and owned ships rose from 7% in 1893 to 52% by 1913**(3)**. How was such progress at such a rate possible? The answer lies in the Japanese traits of flexibility and adaptability. Simply put, they borrowed the best of the West and molded it to fit Japan's needs.

A simple story illustrates how enthusiastically and effectively the Japanese borrowed and adapted from other countries during the Meiji Era. It is no secret that baseball (*besuboru*) is one of Japan's most popular sports. What is less well known is that the first baseball team in Japan formed in 1873. A Christian missionary teacher by the name of Horace Wilson taught students the game at what would later be Tokyo University. Unfortunately for Wilson, baseball became much more popular than did Christianity. In 1891, a Japanese team challenged the Americans in Yokohama to a game. The American Athletic Club initially did not take the challenge seriously. Convinced of their own superiority as the masters of an American game and sure of a win over the smaller Japanese, it took five years before they finally agreed to a game. The game took place at the Club, where Japanese had previously not been allowed to enter, and the Japanese team showed no reaction to the boos and catcalls of the *gaijin* (foreigner) crowd. What happened next shocked the complacent Americans. The Japanese won 29-4. In a later rematch the Japanese once again won with another large gap in the scores. They had been playing for national honor.

Many characterize what Japan did at this time as "rational shopping." They borrowed technology, social systems, infrastructure, and educational methods from countries around the world and adapted and fitted them to their own needs and culture. They used what worked and abandoned what did not. To do this, the Meiji oligarchs set off on an around the world junket in 1871 known as the Iwakura Mission, named for the head of the delegation, Iwakura Tomomi. They spent several months each in the United States, England and Europe, and studied everything they encountered from banking systems to zoos. They brought home anything which might be useful to Japan, in one form or another, including a police system modeled somewhat on the French system, an educational system influenced by both America and Prussia, and new forms of agriculture.

Exchange of bodies also occurred during and after the mission. Several students, including young children, were a part of the Iwakura Mission. These students stayed behind in different countries with host families for years of foreign education before returning home. Many of them would later play important roles during the Meiji Era. Upon return to Japan, the oligarchs also invited foreigners to serve Japan in an advisory capacity. Well over 2,000 people from 23 countries ended up on the Japanese payroll for a period of time.

Despite the open relations marking this time period, and the growing international popularity of Japanese art, cultural misunderstanding thrived. Some astute analyses were made about Japan in the West, but for the most part, reports in the media and books by uninformed people perpetuated ignorance and prejudice. Practices such as public bathing and tattooing shocked Westerners, and reports circulated that the Japanese had no business sense (an idea rather amusing to modern readers). The role of Japanese women also suffered an image problem of a different kind. Westerners fell in love with the stereotype of a docile, selfless, beautiful, charming and obedient sex, which failed to address the inner lives of Japanese women or their own views on the role they played in society. This kind of willful misunderstanding later followed Japanese immigrants to America and plagued relations between the two countries for a very long period of time.

As far-reaching and wonderful as the new innovations seemed, they also came at a price. Taxes on farmers rose to pay for urban development and, especially in the countryside, people were often confused and apprehensive about new technology. A very literal correlation was made by the peasants between the new "blood tax," which was actually mandatory service in the military, and the new telegraph wires lining the landscape. Many believed

that their blood would be used to coat the wires and mysteriously carry messages. Japan's own industrial revolution brought many of the same problems Britain, America and Europe had faced, with harsh working conditions and exploitation of workers. Resentment also existed as Western styles of clothing and customs became popular. Many worried that this threatened traditional culture.

The infatuation with all things Western reached a zenith, however, and then retreated as Japan came to the realization that the national priority lay in a phrase adopted at the beginning of the Meiji Era: *fukoku kyohei*, meaning prosperous nation and a strong army. That simple phrase provided the foundation for Japan's modernization and would direct the course of the nation for decades to come. Japan had never forgotten the effectiveness of Western military might in opening up their country, and they had earlier watched in alarm as the Chinese suffered through the Opium Wars. Determined not to suffer the same fate, one of the most influential of the Meiji oligarchs, Fukuzawa Yukichi, wrote in 1885, "We cannot wait for our neighbor countries to become so civilized that all may combine together to make Asia progress. We must rather break out of formation and behave in the same way as the civilized countries of the West are doing...We would do better to treat China and Korea in the same way as do the Western nations."**(4)** In this idea lay the roots of Japanese Imperialism.

*Notes: All notes except where otherwise noted taken from Modern Japan: The American Nexus by John Hunter Boyle. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993.*

1. The fourteen-year-old emperor's actual name was Mutsuhito (p.82).
2. These 2 factors played a prominent role in the national consciousness as Japan later embraced imperialism and moved ever closer to WWII (p.84).
3. Also astonishing was the growth of the railway system, which went from non-existent in 1867, to 39,000 miles of railroad track by 1906 (pp.102-5).
4. *Through Japanese Eyes*, by Richard H. Minear. Edited by Leon E. Clark. A CITE Book, 1994.

Christensen, Maria. "The Meiji Era and the Modernization of Japan." The Samurai Archives, n.d. Web. 08 July 2014.

#### Thought Questions:

1. What factors led to Japan becoming an industrialized nation itself?
2. What impact did industrialization have on the political and social structure of Japan?
3. Once Japan was industrialized what types of advantages did Japan have over its other Asiatic non-industrialized rivals?
4. How did Industrialization impact Japan's relations with countries in East Asia? The West?