

MEIJI AND THE MAKING OF MODERN JAPAN (1868- 1912)

Overview

The story of Japan's transformation in the 19th century from an exotic samurai-infested backwater, 'off the grid' of modern civilization, to a world-class imperial power is arguably unique in world history. The existential challenge presented by the incursion of Western powers was met by a cadre of samurai warriors who renounced their pedigree and exchanged their swords and topknots for tailored suits and Western know-how. With the 1870s, they set to work fashioning a modern nation that could compete on the global stage while retaining a native identity that would resist Western cultural hegemony. The Meiji period oversaw an extraordinary program of modernization, which left a legacy of industrial growth, great cities, modern transportation and communication, universal education, political liberalization, a vigorous economy, and a vibrant social and cultural scene. The nation's center, though, was occupied by a throwback to a mythical past—an Emperor worshipped as a living god. Early on, Meiji leaders promoted a code of ethics that stressed obedience and loyalty, together with a nativist ideology of Japanese exceptionalism and Shinto-inspired reverence. Thus, the Meiji reformulation of the national agenda—and the collective identity of its people—was predicated upon an uneasy marriage of tradition and modernity.

The Meiji Mission

The so-called Meiji Restoration (*ishin*) began with the transfer of the imperial center from Kyoto to the erstwhile shogunal castle in Edo, renamed Tokyo—modern Japan's new capital. The Meiji Emperor (1852-1912), a lad in his teens, officially launched the new ship of state by issuing a Charter Oath in 1868—in effect a mission statement that emphasized the need for modern knowledge and broad-based education under the aegis of imperial authority. Here was the basis for a defining Meiji motto: 'Japanese Spirit, Western Know-how'—*wakon yōsai*.

The first order of business was to dismantle the outmoded *baku-han* feudal system, which was accomplished over a period of around five years. The *bushi* class was disenfranchised, and the erstwhile samurai—from lofty daimyo to lowly clerk—would now have to compete within the new economic order. Some succeeded, others failed. The yen was established as the national currency, and a modern postal system was established. The Western solar calendar was adopted, as was standard clock time, the modern work week, and other accommodations with international economic, political, and technological standards.

The erstwhile *han* domains were reconfigured as prefectures (*ken*), and these lands were placed under national jurisdiction. Tokyo was the new seat of government, and its reconstruction as a Western-style capital became a tangible symbol of the Meiji vision for the new nation. On the economic front, the government invested heavily in order to stimulate industrial growth, trade, and business activity.

Bunmei kaika

Under the rallying-cry of *bunmei kaika*— ‘Civilization and Enlightenment’— Meiji leaders set about creating a nation that emulated and assimilated the institutions, expertise, and collective knowledge of the West. Technical specialists from Europe and the U.S. were brought in as mentors, and many Japanese went abroad to learn at the source. The 1870s witnessed the advent of modern transportation, in the form of a rail system that initially linked Tokyo and Yokohama and expanded to provide, by the turn of the 20th century, an unprecedented freedom of movement for the Japanese. Modern communications— telegraph, then telephone— were established, and the advent of mass media— newspapers, journals, and large-scale publishing enterprises— in effect created a nation of readers with a shared access to news, information, and ideas. The new Education Ministry— *Monbushô*— was tasked with creating a national educational system on the Western model, with up-to-date curricula that included math, science, history, literature, and the arts. Higher education was established in the form of both national and private universities— most of which were located in Tokyo.

A secular gospel of ‘enlightenment’ values was promoted by an important coterie of Meiji intellectuals. Its key proponent was Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), who established a leading private university and newspaper— in a manner reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin— and ardently espoused egalitarianism, rationalism, empirical science, and civil rights. Japan’s avatar of modern civilization, Fukuzawa’s image adorns the nation’s 10,000 yen banknote.

In terms of consumerism and ‘lifestyle,’ the material culture of the West— from clothing and hairstyles to household goods, foods, and entertainment— was introduced and adapted to Japanese tastes. Overall, Western styles appealed mainly to the new urban middle class, and the divide between urban and rural society— in material, social, and cultural terms— became increasingly marked. The famous Ginza shopping street in central Tokyo became the nation’s consumer showcase and a tangible symbol of the nation’s drive to Westernize.

As for their political strategy, Meiji leaders adopted the Western parliamentary model— a constitutional government, a system of ministries and legislative body (the Diet, or *kokkai*) at the national level, political parties, and a modern judicial system. It took several decades to implement the full range of political bodies. The establishment of a party system, an electoral process (male-only), and the dissemination of the new political ideology among the Japanese populace proved time-consuming, insofar as the very notions of— and words for— liberty, freedom, civil rights, and social justice were essentially unknown prior to the Meiji period.

Behind the façade of Western political innovation, however, Meiji politics was heavily manipulated by a small oligarchy— the so-called ‘*genrô*’— who pulled the levers of power behind the scenes. This is a familiar pattern in Japanese political history, and it would have serious implications for the newly-modernized nation.

Fukoku kyôhei

Meiji Japan was essentially the product of two overriding objectives— industrial and economic growth, and imperial expansion. This is the upshot of the famous motto, *fukoku kyôhei*—

‘Wealthy Nation, Strong Military.’ Accumulation of wealth was indeed promoted among the rising middle class, in line with the newly-coined virtue of ambition and success-striving—*risshin shusse*. But it was the imperial nation itself that was to be the principal beneficiary of economic expansion. Moreover, the creation of a modern army and navy was a top priority, a military force that would be manned by conscripted soldiers drawn from the general population.

This ‘democratization’ of Japan’s military was a radical departure from the age-old samurai monopoly of the martial domain. An early military engagement, the so-called Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, pitted the new conscript army against a recalcitrant samurai force under the leadership of Saigō Takamori (1828-1877). Refusing to be coopted by the new political regime and proudly hoisting the samurai banner in the face of the juggernaut of modernization, this force went down to defeat. And Saigō, its legendary leader, has since been immortalized as Japan’s ‘Last Samurai.’ The Hollywood version, with Tom Cruise improbably leading the charge, is very loosely based on this important chapter of early Meiji history.

Meiji Culture and Arts

Key to the Meiji cultural mission was the role of translation— with English having displaced Dutch as the target language. Gaining knowledge, across the spectrum of arts and sciences, required the translation of texts, and this in turn became a strong incentive for many to go abroad for their studies— and for first-hand experience of the West. What resulted was a new paradigm of cultural bifurcation— in place of the old *wa-kan* division of native and Chinese styles and genres, there emerged a ‘*wa-yō*’ binary of native and Western styles and genres. An important contribution was made by the Christian missions that flourished during the Meiji, with the advent of a new openness to religious diversity. Mission schools became important outlets for modern education, English-language study, and a Christian humanism that derived from Bible study.

In the literary domain, Meiji writers were drawn to Western models of fiction, poetry, and drama, and some— for instance, Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916)— emerged as culture critics and public intellectuals in the periodical press, which expanded as of the 1890s.

The Meiji in Retrospect

Meiji history is fascinating in many respects. It was punctuated by two wars of empire— against China (1894-95) and Russia (1904-05). Both involved military victory for Japan and the acquisition of colonial territories and concessions, although the Russo-Japanese War came at a great cost of blood and treasure. In retrospect, these wars were rehearsals for what proved to be the ultimate test of Japan’s imperial ambitions. But the Meiji transformation is equally noteworthy on the economic and social level— the advent of a new industrial and commercial order, with an educated and skilled urban-based citizenry. The death of the Meiji Emperor in July of 1912 was a watershed in the nation’s history. And on September 13, the day of his state funeral, Japan’s leading military figure, General Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912), took his life in an archaic gesture of samurai fealty known as *junshi*— ritual disembowelment to honor one’s liege lord. This seeming anachronism fueled widespread debate concerning the character of the

Japanese people, the specter of their samurai legacy, and the question of a modern national identity.

By 1912, Japan had emerged as a world power, albeit not on a par with the Western powers. The nation had achieved a remarkable level of modernization, leveraging Western know-how and fostering a strong sense of cultural uniqueness and national pride. The old Tokugawa order was initially spurned, in favor of rampant Westernization, but as of the 1890s there was a rebirth of nativist sentiment and a revalidation of traditionalism. The newly-imported individualism and egalitarianism vied with the strong collectivist values promoted by the state and its support for an imperialist ideology bolstered by Shinto symbols and myths. Foreign goods, ideas, and fads were widely popular, but foreigners per se were not easily integrated into the society. The Meiji Constitution of 1890, which set forth the framework for a free and independent citizenry, was in effect countered by a state-sponsored dogma of allegiance to the Emperor.

Much as the courtly splendor of the Heian Period was captured in Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, the complex and conflicted 'spirit of the Meiji' is epitomized in Natsume Sôseki's 1914 novel, *Kokoro*, through its ill-fated protagonist, Sensei—a 'Meiji man' par excellence.

Readings

Gluck, Carol, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton, 1985)

Gordon, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan* (Oxford, 2014), 60-137

Natsume, Soseki, *Kokoro: A Novel and Selected Essays* (Madison Books, 1992)

Jansen, Marius (ed.), *The Emergence of Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, 1995)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 235-303

Discussion Questions and Topics

In what sense is Meiji Japan a crossroads of traditionalism and modernity? What developments during the 1890s contributed to the emergence of Japan as a modern imperial state with a dual identity?

How does Meiji Japan most resemble the Tokugawa regime? How is it most different?

How did the Meiji leaders manipulate the Emperor as the defining symbol of the new nation? How did Shinto emerge as a state-sponsored religion? In what sense can the Meiji leaders be said to have adapted the *bushidô* code to a modern context?

Meiji writers and intellectuals have been seen as both complicit with, and critical of, the social and political order. Using Natsume Sôseki's *Kokoro* as a case in point, give thought to the character of individuals caught in circumstances that test their identity and values.

Compare Japan's two imperial wars fought during the Meiji period— first against China, then Russia.

Selection from Natsume Sôseki, *Kokoro* (1914)

“Don’t put too much trust in me,” Sensei remarked. “You will learn to regret it if you do. . .”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The memory that you once sat at my feet will begin to haunt you and, in bitterness and shame, you will want to degrade me. I do not want your admiration now, because I do not want your insults in the future. I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves.”

(Based on Edwin McClellan’s translation of *Kokoro* (Regnery, 1957, p 30)

Images



Meiji Emperor, in a mid-1880s illustration (Wikipedia)



Fukuzawa Yukichi, as his image appears on the 10,000 yen Japanese banknote (Wikipedia)



Photograph of Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916) in his mid-40s (Wikipedia)



Model of the Ginza, circa 1880, housed in the Tokyo-Edo Museum (Wikipedia)



Woodblock print of Chinese surrender to Japanese forces, October 1894, during the Sino-Japanese War (Wikipedia)