

## Joshua 6.11

**“During the Meiji period, Japan changed its clothes but not its soul.” To what extent is this an accurate assessment of the modernisation of the country over that period?**

The Meiji era from 1868 to 1912 was a period of modernisation in Japan. To say that Japan “changed its clothes but not its soul” is to suggest that Japan only changed superficially in the political, economic and social domains, its “clothes”, and did not change on a deeper level in its institutions, beliefs and its mindset, its “soul”, in the political, economic and social domains. This essay argues that in Meiji Japan, there were aspects where Japan did change its “soul”, and others where it did not. This is reflective of the unique nature of Meiji modernisation – that it did not copy Western models of modernisation wholesale, but adapted them to the traditional Japanese context.

In politics, Japan did change its “soul” through adopting a centralised system of governance, but its adoption of representative government was limited and thus meant that in terms of introducing democracy, Japan did not change its “soul”.

In the political sphere, radical changes were made in the administrative institutions of Japan. In this, Japan did change its “soul”. Before the Meiji government, and under the Tokugawa Shogunate, the system of ruling was based on an accommodation made between the shogun, the ruler of Japan, and the daimyo, the feudal lords. The daimyo would be obliged to sign written oaths of loyalty to the Shogun. In turn, the shogun agreed to give a free hand to the daimyo in the running of their fiefs as long as they honoured their oaths of loyalty. Under the Meiji leaders, this feudal and relatively decentralised system of rule, based on a hierarchy of loyalties, was done away with. Ito and Kido, two of the Meiji leaders, wanted to replace the old domains, ruled by the daimyo, and there were nearly 280 of them, with a new system of modern prefectures controlled directly by the Grand Council of State, to achieve a permanent solution to the possibility of political fragmentation. The Meiji leaders thought that Japan was under threat from the West, after instances of gunboat diplomacy which had forced Japan to open itself to Western trade, and to them, national unity in the face of a powerful threat was paramount. Centralisation of the nation would be one way to keep the nation unified. The process of centralisation started with the appointment of Imperial officials to every daimyo fief in 1868, and resulted in the doing away of the domains through an edict by the Emperor in the summer of 1871. Created in the domains’ places were, initially, 302 prefectures and three administrative cities, each under the jurisdiction of a new governor. The number of prefectures was reduced to 42 later on, furthering the centralisation of power under the Meiji leadership. Thus, the transformation of Japan from having a feudal to a centralised governing system meant that at least in the administrative aspect of the political sphere, Japan did change its “soul”.

In the political sphere also, in appearance the Japanese established a form of Representatives was filled by a carefully limited elective process with about 450,000 persons, only slightly over one percent of the population, eligible to vote in the first election. The House of Representatives also had no real powers of initiative and even though it could withhold its vote on the national budget, this power was weakened by the

provision that if the budget for the year was rejected, that of the previous year would automatically go into effect. This system was based on a mindset in which the House of Representatives was seen as an instrument of nation-building and unity and as 'safety valves' for popular discontent rather than as instruments for establishing or maintaining democracy. Essentially, it was to play a merely consultative role. The government was in reality controlled by a very small clique of Satsuma and Choshu men who were known as the "Senior Statesmen", or genro, many of whom were in the Privy Council, which served as advisers to the emperor, but because the emperor appointed them, they could not be controlled by the voters. The political system in Japan was still shaped by Japanese political ideals whereby an ideal state was the patriarchal family headed by the Emperor as father of the nation, that government by men prevailed above government by law, and that group obligations took precedence over individual rights. Thus, there was little real development of actual representative government in Japan during the Meiji era, and this constitutes a lack in the change of Japan's "soul". However, this only highlights the unique path that Japan took in its modernisation. The Western democratic representative model of government was adopted to traditional Japanese ideals in resulting in the Japanese constitutional government based on the 1889 Meiji Constitution, which was heavily influenced by German political and legal ideas.

In the economic sphere, Japan was transformed in terms of its financial institutions and technologically in its industrialisation. In these ways, Japan did change its "soul". Previously, during the Tokugawa period, there was a confusing welter of coins and nearly sixteen hundred kinds of paper notes that circulated. A significant change to this came during the Meiji era in the form of the 1871 new currency regulation which established a common unit of currency for Japan, the Yen, constituting an institutional change in the financial system and thus a change in "soul". In addition, Japan's industry was shaped to be along Western lines, through increasing mechanisation and the influence of Western advisers.

Industrialisation was led by the textile industry. From the 1890s through 1913, output of silk quadrupled. By the eve of WWI three-fourths of these threads were produced by machine, whereas earlier, most silk had been reeled by hand. As a result of this mechanisation and industrialisation in the textile industry, cotton thread and cloth represented nearly 25% of the value of Japan's manufacturing output. This, along with the growth of light industries, which persons of ingenuity and ambition founded domestic workshops and labour-intensive small-scale enterprises that produced consumer products such as toys, clocks, cutlery, bicycles, tin boxes and many more, Japan transited from an agricultural to a manufacturing economy. This meant that the focus of Japan's economic activities changed fundamentally, and thus constitutes for a change in "soul" in the economic sphere.

However, in the economic sphere, the government continued to be a key force in the development of the economy. In keeping with Tokugawa traditions that business operated under the tolerance and patronage of the government, the government provided private entrepreneurs with aid and privileges of some sort. For example, monopolies such as the Zaibatsu had close ties to the government. These Zaibatsu were formed when the Meiji government forced weak companies to merge with the stronger ones in the 1880s to form large cartels. Examples of these Zaibatsu include Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda.

Having the benefit of being supported by the government favours and patronage, these Zaibatsu dominated the Japanese economy – that is, heavy industries such as mining, shipbuilding, and the manufacture of machinery, metals and chemicals. Continued government intervention in the economy was one way in which Japan's "soul" did not change in the economic sphere. Even so, the attitudes and mindset towards economic development by the government did change. To the government, economic development was no longer seen as a potential threat to political control and a force for destabilisation, but a necessary part of strengthening the nation, especially against the Western threat. The feudal system under the Tokugawa Shogunate was a rigid class system that meant that economic development, which made the merchant class more influential, and threatened the samurai's dominance threatened the existing class structure and was seen as a destabilising force in society and threatened the power brokers in the shogunate. Thus the Tokugawa shoguns had saw advantages to commercial development as long as they closely regulated it and kept it from upsetting the political status quo. Contrast this with the Meiji leadership, who saw economic growth as an important way to preserve Japan's sovereignty against a potentially dangerous West – and was also seen as supporting these leaders as it legitimised them as protectors and leaders of the nation. This support for economic growth was exemplified through the Meiji slogan of "Increase Production, Promote Industry". This was also seen by the willingness of the Meiji oligarchs to reduce government control to allow more private enterprise to emerge, especially when government control impeded the road to further economic development. For instance, Railroad development under state-run enterprises was a disappointment. By 1880 Japan had less than one hundred miles of track. In addition, the government struggled to support such state-run enterprises as it had to resort to deficit spending. The government responded by loosening its grip on the economy. Finance Minister Matsukata Masyoshi, between 1881 and 1885, placed many government-owned enterprises on the sales block. He dropped the government's programme of state construction and management of the railroads and inaugurated a policy of encouraging private railway development through subsidies and other forms of assistance. This shows that the government placed economic growth over state control, unlike the Tokugawa – this was a change in the mindset of the government towards economic development and is thus an example of how Japan changed its "soul".

One fundamental way in which Japan did not change its "soul" in the economic sphere was that the traditional family unit remained in the agricultural sector. The farm family remained the typical unit of production, as it was during the Tokugawa period, and most families continued to maintain small holdings that they could till mostly with their own labour. A typical farm remained small, averaging about two acres in size. Even so, the knowledge in the agricultural economy changed – and in is in this aspect that Japan's agricultural sector did change its "soul". During the Tokugawa period individual farmers in scattered villages had experimented with innovative agricultural methods, but the knowledge spread very slowly. During the Meiji period, however, there was the introduction of new knowledge and there were new ways of disseminating said knowledge. There was brought forth a system of paid itinerant agriculture lectures, the formation of agricultural discussion groups, and the organisation of seed exchange societies, all of which helped to broadcast information about

crop varieties, fertilizers, farming techniques and animal husbandry more rapidly and widely than before so that farm families, the traditional unit of agriculture in Japan, could make more productive use of existing land and labour. As a result, the average growth rate in grain production substantially outpaced population growth. The pace of innovation also accelerated in the early Meiji period as farmers expanded the stock of traditional knowledge such as farmers breeding new strains of rice that yielded greater quantities of grain per plant such as the Shinriki. The changes in the knowledge being utilised in the agricultural sphere brought a new and more innovative mindset, and thus contribute to a change in “soul” in Japan. Once again, this dynamic where in the agricultural sector, there were some aspects in which Japan did change its “soul”, and in others where it did not, reflects the unique way in which Japan modernised. In the case of agriculture, the traditional family-based agriculture system was adapted to the modern age through the integration of new knowledge. The new was incorporated into the old to create a modernised synthesis.

In the social sphere, in education, there was a change in “soul” insofar as a feudal system based on the privileges of inheritance was changed into a meritocratic one, but there was not a change in “soul” when the retaining of Japanese values, promoted through the education system, is concerned. Before the Meiji era, Tokugawa society was a class-based society in which attempts to restructure the existing class system was seen as a destabilising force. This changed under the Meiji leaders as they recognised that meritocracy and a merit-based education system was necessary to train capable national leaders for the future, and universal education would give all Japanese the skills necessary to enhance their economic prospects and thus build a strong nation. Education would be at the frontlines of the Meiji effort to make Japanese society more socially mobile. During the 1880s the Ministry of Education reorganised the school system to sort out students more efficiently according to ability and to place them to appropriate future careers. Graduates from primary school with the inclination for further study could advance to middle school, where for 5 years they learned skills to prepare them for careers, as low-level managers, plant foremen, and so forth. More promising graduates of middle schools who passed arduous examination could win admission into one of the newly created three year higher schools to be cultivated into bureaucrats, businessmen, top management, scholars and as experts in the arts and sciences. The Ministry also began to make good the intention to establish national universities to educate the most elite level of scholars, bureaucrats and business leaders. Beginning with Tokyo university in 1877, the government eventually founded imperial universities in Kyoto (1867), Kyushu (1910), and more. By the end of the Meiji era elementary school attendance for both boys and girls was approaching 100 percent, as people realised that education was a ladder one could climb to better jobs and more comfortable lifestyles. This conversion of Japan from a feudal to a meritocratic society through the education system constitutes a change in “soul”. At the same time however, traditional Japanese values and beliefs were promoted in education, and in this way Japan did not change its “soul”. In 1893, the ‘Imperial Rescript on Education’ was announced, which set out the ideological basis of the new education system. It emphasised values such as loyalty, duty, respect and obedience when reflected Japanese core values based on Confucianism and feudalism. In 1903 the Ministry of Education stipulated that all

elementary schools had to adopt identical texts, which it compiled and distributed, resulting in boys and girls in every town and village learned exactly the same story about Japan's past to learn about Japanese values and mores. In this new textbook edition, teachers taught students about the 'absolutist' interpretation of the emperor's position in the state, derived from Shinto, a 'family' concept of his relationship to his subjects, and a Confucian view of proper personal behaviour modified by the assertion that loyalty took pride of place over filial piety. Still, overall, in terms of the education system, there was largely a change in "soul". The new meritocratic education system gave ordinary Japanese the opportunity to go to school – previously in the Tokugawa era usually only the samurai class was educated – and all Japanese could be indoctrinated by the traditional Japanese values promoted in the schools.

In terms of the status of women, while traditional patriarchal values were promoted by the government, thus constituting a lack of change in "soul", there began to be a change in the mindsets of women about what rights they should have, and in this change of mindset, there was a change in "soul". It was felt by the government that a legal foundation should be created for the old *ie* system and the tradition of strong patriarchal authority that prevailed among samurai households in the early modern era. Consequently, the revised Civil Code, which became law in July 1898, subordinated women to the male head of the household. The primary obligation of a wife, as outlined by the code, was to provide the family with a male heir and the household with additional labour. Once married, the woman would not be able to testify in courts of law, bring legal action without a husband's permission, transact business without his consent or initiate a divorce. This Civil Code preserved the traditional Japanese belief that women had specified roles in the family and did not have the same rights as men. Still, there began to be opposition to such conservative values. Women began to challenge their existing status in Japanese society. The effort by the government to implement social legislation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century generated a vigorous discussion on women's domesticity. Even as traditional and conservative ideas about women remained, increasingly, Japanese women themselves entered the contest to define femininity as women graduates from women's secondary schools proceeded to raise questions about what constituted an ideal family. These developments led to the emergence of a more organised feminist movement towards the end of the Meiji era, with the founding of the Seito, or Bluestocking, feminist magazine in 1911 a key development. Thus, while conservative family values continued to dominate in Meiji society, there began to be opposition to such conservative values, and this suggests a change in mindset in some of the Japanese population, which can be considered a change in "soul".

Thirdly, the traditional religion of Shintoism was revived under the Meiji leaders. As part of its attempt to inculcate loyalty to the emperor and thus draw a mantle of legitimacy around itself, the new Meiji government embarked on a policy to bring Shinto at the heart of the nation's religious life, since Shinto encouraged devotion to the emperor and patriotism by reiterating the time-honoured concepts of divinity of the emperor and of Japan as a unique land of the gods. The Shinto religion had already been prominent during the Tokugawa era,

when the shogun also relied on the Emperor for legitimacy. The creation in 1869 of the Office of Shinto Worship above the organs of civil government was an effort to establish a Shinto-oriented government.. In 1871, Shinto shrines were officially designated as government institutions for the observance of 'national rites'. In 1900, the Home Ministry created a Shrine office and nationally certified priesthood and thus Shinto as a religion was elevated. The imperial and national shrines received generous financial support, and the priests enjoyed the status of national civil servants. The continued dominance of conservative values in society, through education, social legislation and the revival of Shintoism, was one way in which Japanese society did not change its "soul".

Hence, in the social sphere, there were aspects in which Japan's soul did "change", and others where it did not. Again, this reflects the unique nature of Japanese modernisation, where in the social sphere a base of traditional Japanese values were brought into the modern age through the development of a meritocratic education system in which to promote these values to a wider audience.

In conclusion, in the political, economic and social domains, Japan kept to some of its traditions, while incorporating new ideas and institutions. Thus, it is not fully correct to say that Japan did not change its "soul", and that the changes were only superficial.