

# Meiji Restoration (1868-1890)

## Introduction

### Topic:

- The Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked the end of the Tokugawa period with the restoration of Emperor Meiji to power in Japan
- The restoration was triggered by discontent towards the Tokugawa Shogunate following its inability to resist the Western powers
- As a result, many of the reforms introduced during the restoration aimed at strengthening feudal Japan and resisting Western aggression through the creation of a “rich country, strong military”

### Terms:

- Modernization: Developing Japan’s culture, military, economy and political institutions to match the Western nations which were the benchmark for modernity

### Thesis:

- While Japan successfully modernized its political, economic, military and cultural domains, certain traditional Japanese values remained unchanged

<b>Political</b>	<p><b>Topic Sentence</b> Japan made inroads into political development through the establishment of a representative government and a centralized state.</p> <p><u>Abolishment of domains</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Meiji government was able to centralize the state</li><li>• In August 1871, the Emperor announced that all domains were immediately abolished and replaced with prefectures whose governors were appointed from the centre</li><li>• The number of political units were consolidated dramatically from 280 domains to 72 prefectures</li></ul> <p><u>Meiji Constitution</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In 1889, the Meiji Constitution was established; was heavily influenced by German political and legal ideas</li><li>• Established a bicameral legislature resembling those of European countries</li><li>• The Diet parliament composed of an elected House of Representatives and a House of Peers</li><li>• Had the power to write, pass laws, and approve or veto the annual state budget</li><li>• Political parties were established such as the Liberal Party and Progressive Party</li></ul> <p><b>Limitations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Despite these political changes, a truly democratic government based on the West was never established</li><li>• Suffrage was limited to about 1% of the population</li><li>• The House of Representatives had no real powers of initiative</li><li>• The elected assembly which featured political parties was intended to play a merely consultative role</li><li>• In reality, it was the emperor’s ministers, the Sat-Cho oligarchy, who retained power and acted in his name to pass laws and policies for Japan</li><li>• <b>Kenneth Henshall:</b> The Meiji Constitution had been a democracy on the oligarchs’ terms – an “authoritarian democracy”</li><li>• Feudal principles were merely transferred from the old feudal leaders to the Emperor and the oligarchs</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Meiji Constitution embraced some time-honoured Japanese political concepts</li> <li>• Included the ideas that the ideal state was the patriarchal family headed by the emperor as the father of the nation, government by the genro prevailed above the parliament, and that group obligations took precedence over individual rights</li> <li>• However, despite all the limitations and shortcomings, the 1889 Constitution was a great step forward for Japan in establishing the political foundations of a modern nation-state</li> </ul>
<b>Economic</b>	<p><b>Topic Sentence</b> Japan saw significant economic modernization taking place with strong emphasis on industrialization and urbanization.</p> <p><u>Industrialization</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government took a direct role in industrial development and turned to a German philosophy of state-led development</li> <li>• In 1870, the government established a Ministry of Industry and the state financed and ran a number of “model enterprises”, about two dozen in total</li> <li>• Eg. Shipyards, coal and copper mines, engineering works, arsenals, cotton-spinning, silk-reeling, glass and sugar</li> </ul> <p><u>Agriculture</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Japan grew internally as new agricultural techniques, a new modern transport system, communications network system and efficient industries developed</li> <li>• From 1880-1890, rural agricultural population declined slightly as more people migrated from villages to towns and cities</li> <li>• Agricultural productivity doubled as new crops, seeds and fertilizers came into use</li> </ul> <p><u>Currency and Land Tax</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By the mid 1880s, a uniform national currency, the yen, backed by a central modeled along European lines was established</li> <li>• A new national land tax was established, which gave the government predictable annual revenue</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thus in the economy, with the help of Western advisers and technology, Japan was able to become an important economic power in a very short span of time and establish itself as a formidable industrial powerhouse</li> </ul> <p><b>Limitations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• However, elements of traditional Japan were still present in the economy, particularly the Zaibatsu, which were industrial and financial business conglomerates</li> <li>• Eg. Mitsubishi, Mitsui and Sumitomo</li> <li>• They had close links with the government, and received generous government contracts based on favoritism</li> <li>• Thus, the Tokugawa tradition where businesses operated under the tolerance and patronage of the government persisted during the Meiji Restoration</li> </ul>
<b>Military</b>	<p><b>Topic Sentence</b> Japan was able to centralize the military and adopt the use of Western technology to create a strong and modern military force.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By the 1870s, Japan had a new army of about 9,000 men based on the French model</li> <li>• In 1872, the government divided the ministry of military affairs into the army and navy ministries</li> <li>• In order to eliminate the feudal role of the samurai, the samurai’s military role was undercut by a move to a conscript army in 1873</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All men, regardless of social background were made liable for 3 years of active military service followed by 4 in the reserves</li> <li>• The new conscription law made the masses the foundation of a greatly expanded and centralized modern military system</li> <li>• Military experts from Europe and the USA were sent to Japan to train the new army in the use of modern firearms and munitions</li> </ul> <p><b>Limitations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Though the army and navy were modernized and built on Western models, the Japanese leaders still emphasized the ancient tradition of Bushido, the “way of the warrior”</li> <li>• Bushido was used to boost the morale of Japanese soldiers, and they were constantly reminded of the importance of absolute obedience and loyalty to the state and the emperor, who became commander-in-chief of the military</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cultural</b></p>	<p><b>Topic Sentence</b> In an attempt to construct a modern nation, Japanese leaders and citizens began to explore the Westernization of the entire spectrum of cultural life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 1872, Western dress was prescribed for all court and official ceremonies and women donned Western dresses complete with bustles</li> <li>• Western-style haircuts became fashionable and became a major symbol of Westernization</li> <li>• Moreover, Western uniforms were adopted by schools and universities</li> <li>• Western literature, music and theatre also made inroads into Japanese society</li> <li>• Eg. Western literature such as “Robison Crusoe” and Samuel Smiles’ 1859 publication of “Self-Help” were well-received by the society</li> <li>• In the 1880s, Japanese writers such as Natsume Soseki and Futabatei Shimei began to produce widely read works of prose fiction in forms comparable to Western novels</li> <li>• In addition, playwrights brought in Western dress and plots centered on modern life, though these plays were not popular with the Japanese</li> </ul> <p><b>Limitations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite attempts at Westernization, Japanese culture continued to flourish</li> <li>• Though statistics are not available, <b>Andrew Gordon</b> states that the musical traditions from shamisen and koto playing to the chanting of puppet-theatre narratives could have increased in popularity during the Meiji period</li> <li>• The Japanese Kabuki survived and leading actors called for the preservation of these classical plays</li> <li>• Moreover, the Edo era repertory remained popular in Japanese society</li> <li>• In 1870, Shinto as a religion was elevated and the government issued a proclamation stating the nation was to be guided by the “way of the kami”</li> <li>• This huge emphasis on Shintoism could be argued as a limitation of Japan’s development of a modern state as scholars would consider a modern state to emphasize the importance of rationality and reason rather than superstition</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social</b></p>	<p><b>Topic Sentence</b> Changes in the class structure of society, as well as education, also resulted from the Meiji Restoration.</p> <p><u>Social system</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The four-class feudal social system was overturned completely by 1871, especially with the reduction in the prominence of the Samurai class</li> <li>• The Samurai were made to alter their special appearance by removing their topknots, Samurai clothing and ability to wear swords</li> <li>• Their stipends were reduced and eventually converted to government bonds</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hence, the old Confucian social hierarchy was done away with and meritocracy was promoted</li> </ul> <p><u>Education</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 1871, the Ministry of Education was established and in 1872, compulsory education was introduced based on the French model and later incorporated American practices</li> <li>The new government was able to put into practice Western concepts of a uniform, government-operated education system</li> <li>By 1905, over 95% of children were in school</li> </ul> <p><b>Limitations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>However, emphasis was placed on retaining traditional Japanese ways of thinking</li> <li>The Imperial Rescript on Education was announced in 1890, which emphasized principles of loyalty, respect and obedience based on Confucianism and feudalism</li> <li>The emperor's authority as the father of the people was stressed, and copies of the emperor's portrait and the Education Rescript were placed in every school as objects of ritual reverence</li> </ul>
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### Conclusion

- In conclusion, in the creation of a modern state, the Meiji leaders were neither doctrinaire traditionalists nor blind followers of the West
- While modernization was achieved through the direct borrowing of Western knowledge, technology, systems and customs, Japanese values and traditions remained the heart and soul of the modernization process
- Hence, the embrace of modernity in Meiji Japan was successful to a larger extent, although it was ready to preserve the distinctive features that made them "Japanese"

### Revolution?

- Andrew Gordon** argued that the changes occurring in Meiji Japan's political, economy, social and cultural spheres were breathtaking and fully merit the term revolution
- Nevertheless, no society could ever totally sever itself from its past and Japan was no exception

### Revolution from the top?

- Meiji Japan was led by members of the elite of the old regime, notably Sat-Cho oligarchy, who spearheaded the attack on the old order