

Was the Meiji period a restoration or a revolution?

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Was the Meiji Period a Restoration or a Revolution? The Meiji restoration occurred during the last half of the nineteenth century in Japan. This period is one of the most important events in Japanese history as it brought about significant transformations to Japan's social and political structure. This explosion of change began with the adoption of Western ideologies which had previously been shunned in Japan. With the flood of new technology and other important ideas, Japan was able to reshape itself into a much stronger, country ready to take on the world. To catapult Japan into a position of power and recognition among other countries, the lords of Choshu and Satsuma decided to adopt the technology and secrets of the West. First they forced they forced the resignation of the Shogun in 1867. The lords of Choshu and Satsuma then restored the emperor, named Mutsuhito, back to power. The revolution occurred in years that spanned both Japan's Edo period and the beginning of the Meiji Era. Meiji Era is known as enlightened peace because of the influx of knowledge that created a "better" Japan. The Meiji restoration was a chain of events that led to enormous changes in Japan's political and social structure. The roots of this sudden change in ideology can be attributed to the arrival of Commodore Perry's American naval squadron in 1853, appearing to open Japan but in actuality the country had exploded from within. None the less the success of Perry's expedition triggered a collapse of Japan's self-imposed isolation and the fall of the feudal shogun government. This allowed for a complete overhaul of the country creating a Japan in 1912 that faintly resembled itself forty-five years prior. Though throughout the Meiji period, conflicts arose over how much Japan should emulate or borrow from the Western powers. Just as opinions divided

between *kaikoku* (open the country) and *jaiki* (expel the barbarians) after Commodore Perry landed in 1853, tensions continued throughout the Meiji period regarding Japan's policy toward foreigners and foreign ideas. Within a short time after 1868, the majority of Japanese went from xenophobia to xenophilia. Not only did the Japanese adopt many outward aspects of Western civilization such as ballroom dancing, men cutting their hair, and beef eating, they also adopted many Western ideas and institutions as the Meiji oligarchs pursued a policy of *fukoku kyōhei* (rich country, strong military) to catch up with Western countries and to gain national strength and wealth. 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. The country 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. It 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. 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 shogun, 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. The new installed emperor still had much influence though, as his first major act, the Meiji emperor created the Charter Oath -- five promises to the people of Japan to bring fundamental change to the political system. Although the promises were general and vague, the Charter Oath became the foundational document that effectively set the government's course for the rest of the Meiji period. The Charter Oath of 1868 compiled by Ryusaku Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore de Bary and Donald Keene, served as the key document to set the model of the new government system. This document originated in 1868 when a small group of Meiji leaders decided what they had hoped to create in the new Japanese society. The purpose of The Charter Oath of 1868 was to illustrate the goals of the nation and to provide a loose framing for the constitution and laws. This document can be considered Japan's first constitution. It exemplified the adaptability of western ideologies to other countries. However, it failed to capture the needs or wants of the public merely the aims of one small group leading the country. The Meiji period is often called a restoration which can be rationalized through one singular, though major, event. This key event is the restoration of the

emperor to authority in place of the throne abdicated by the shogun. This is the only reason that the reform is called a restoration. To truly be a restoration the country would have had to be prosperous and powerful as it was in the early twentieth century before the shogun came to power, but this is not the case. There is also a change in ideologies within the newly installed government, in the past Japan had been isolated from the western world and its philosophies, but during the Meiji period western ideologies were adapted and utilized in the rebuilding of the country. So initially the Meiji period resembles a restoration (to bring back to a former state) but as it progresses this view changes. This restoration was in response to weakening foreign relations and Western influence in Japan. Also the reform can be viewed as a restoration because the government that overthrew the shogun had no other governing body in mind at the time of rebellion but decided on one after the abdication occurred. The Meiji period can be seen as a revolution (the overthrow of one ruler or government and substitution of another by the governed) in numerous respects. The most obvious is that the Tokugawa shogun was removed from power and the authority was given to Mutsuhito, the Meiji emperor. The revolution began when the lords of Choshu and Satsuma decided to adopt the ideas of the West and remove the failing government in place. These Western Ideologies were described to the lords by American Commodore Perry. After the new emperor was in place the government also changed to an oligarchy made up of the senior members of the loyalist faction that had overthrown the shogun. Even though the loyalists gained support for their cause by promising to expel all foreigners, pragmatism quickly displaced impractical idealism. A total makeover of the

government began promptly, on the model of a modern constitutional monarchy. Using the Charter Oath of 1868 as a framework the Meiji Constitution was written. This is very similar to the United States Revolutionary War. After the new government was created the country underwent a great industrialization and economic boom. Zaibatsu (huge industrial and financial conglomerates), began to form in the Meiji period and were responsible for much of Japan's rise to an industrial world power. Not only did the economic infrastructure, such as markets, banking, and transportation, develop rapidly during the Tokugawa period, the people also developed basic skills to allow them to support the rapid economic growth of the Meiji period. Merchants gained entrepreneurial and financing skills that would be valuable to economic growth in the Meiji period. These results after merchants were at the very bottom of the social structure only a few years earlier. 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. They led the way in this, building railway and shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, shipyards, mines, consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products). Though the shogun was gone there was still a positive effect created by his policies. The educational achievements and the high respect for learning of Tokugawa in Japan played a large role in the country's transition to the modern age in the Meiji Revolution period. With a large number of schools for both samurai and commoner children, the country had achieved a high general literacy rate by the beginning of the

Meiji Restoration in 1868. The shogun supported "Dutch studies" (rangaku), which included the translation and study of Western works on science, geography, medicine, military science, and other subjects. These studies allowed Japanese to be exposed to Western technology and ideas, which facilitated the transition of Japan to a modern country in the Meiji period. Overall the revolution encompassed the entire country where as the restoration was just a rise to power. Difficult economic times in Japan, marked by increasing episodes of rioting, led to calls for social reforms. In addition to the old taxes, interest rates, and high rents, the average citizen was now being billed for new taxes, military mobilization, and tuition for required education. The people needed more time for creative pursuits while still correcting social mistreatments of the past. To achieve these reforms, the old class system of samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants was abolished by 1871. Even though old prejudices continued amongst the people, all citizens were equal before the law. Former samurai found new careers as bureaucrats, teachers, scholars, bankers, and businessmen. These occupations helped reduce some of the tension between the people of Japan. Additionally, between 1871 and 1873, a series of land and tax laws were enacted as the basis for modern fiscal policy. Private ownership was legalized, deeds were issued, and lands were assessed at fair market value with taxes paid in cash. Undeterred by the resistance, the Meiji leaders continued to modernize the nation through government-sponsored telegraph cable links to all major Japanese cities and the Asian mainland. Still concerned about national security, the leaders made significant efforts at military modernization, which included establishing a small standing army, a

large reserve system, and obligatory military service for all men. Foreign military systems were studied, foreign advisers were brought in, and Japanese cadets sent abroad to European and United States military and naval schools. The Meiji Restoration accelerated every aspect of Japanese society. Japan was rapidly industrialized leading to the modern Japan currently known to the world. The Meiji reform can be seen as a restoration only in the instilment of the imperial power. The reform can be called a revolution in every aspect of Japanese society from 1868 to 1912. Based on the evidence gathered, Japan underwent a revolution similar to the French or American Revolution, after the restoration of a past power. Nearly, every aspect of Japanese society was changed during this period, so a revolution should be the proper way to refer to this period. Bibliography Akamatsu, Paul. Meiji, 1868; Revolution and Counter-revolution in Japan. Trans. Miriam Kochan. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. Craig, Albert M. Choshu in the Meiji Restoration. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. Harootunian, Harry D. Toward restoration; the growth of political consciousness in Tokugawa Japan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. Marius Jansen. Sakamoto Ryoma and the Meiji Restoration. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1971. Nagai, Michio and Miguel Urrutia. Meiji Ishin: restoration and revolution. Tokyo: United Nations University, 1985. Totman, Conrad D. The Collapse of the Tokugawa Bakufu, 1862-1868. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980. Toson, Shimizaki. Before the Dawn. Trans. William E. Naff. Honolulu: University of Honolulu Press, 1987. 339-383. Walthall, Anne. The weak body of a useless woman : Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.