

## Japan Answers the Challenge of the Western World

In 1868 the Tokugawa shōgun ("great general"), who ruled Japan in the feudal period, lost his power and the emperor was restored to the supreme position. The emperor took the name Meiji ("enlightened rule") as his reign name; this event was known as the Meiji Restoration.

**The Reign of the Meiji Emperor:** 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. It 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
- 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.

One answer is found in the Meiji Restoration itself. 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 shōgun, 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 armies of each domain were disbanded, and a national army based on universal conscription was created in 1872, requiring three years' military service from all men, samurai and commoner alike. A national land tax system was established that required payment in money instead of rice, which allowed the government to stabilize the national budget. This gave the government money to spend to build up the strength of the nation.

**Ideology:** In an effort to unite the Japanese nation in response to the Western challenge, the Meiji leaders created a civic ideology centered around the emperor. He was the head of the Shintō religion, Japan's native religion. Among other beliefs, Shintō holds that the emperor is descended from the sun goddess and the gods who created Japan and therefore is semi-divine. The Meiji reformers brought the emperor and Shintō to national prominence, replacing Buddhism as the national religion, for political and ideological reasons. By associating Shintō with the imperial line, which reached back into legendary times, Japan had a powerful symbol of age-old national unity. The people seldom saw the emperor, yet they were to carry out his orders without question, in honor to him and to the unity of the Japanese people, which he represented. In fact, the emperor did not rule. It was his "advisers" who exercised political control, that devised and carried out the reform program in the name of the emperor.

**Social and Economic Changes:** The abolition of feudalism made possible tremendous social and political changes. 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.

The government led the way in this, building railway and shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, three shipyards, ten mines, five munitions works, and fifty-three consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products). This was very expensive, however, and strained government finances, so in 1880 the government decided to sell most of these industries to private investors, thereafter encouraging such activity through subsidies and other incentives. Some of the samurai and merchants who built these industries established major corporate conglomerates called *zaibatsu*, which controlled much of Japan's modern industrial sector.

The government also introduced a national *educational* system and a *constitution*, creating an *elected parliament* called the Diet. They did this to provide a good environment for national growth, win the respect of the Westerners, and build support for the modern state. In the Tokugawa period, popular education had spread rapidly, and in 1872 the government established a national system to educate the entire population. By the end of the Meiji period, almost everyone attended the free public schools for at least six years. The government closely controlled the schools, making sure that in addition to skills like mathematics and reading, all students studied "moral training," which stressed the importance of their duty to the emperor, the country and their families.

The 1889 constitution was "given" to the people by the emperor, and only he (or his advisers) could change it. A parliament was elected beginning in 1890, but only the wealthiest 1 percent of the population could vote in elections. In 1925 this was changed to allow all men (but not yet women) to vote.

To win the recognition of the Western powers and convince them to change the unequal treaties the Japanese had been forced to sign in the 1850s, Japan changed its entire legal system, adopting a new criminal and civil code modeled after those of France and Germany. The Western nations finally agreed to revise the treaties in 1894, acknowledging Japan as an equal in principle, although not in international power.

**The International Climate: Colonialism and Expansion:** In 1894 Japan fought a war against China over its interest in Korea, which China claimed as a vassal state – the Japanese were worried that the Russians might gain control of that weak nation. Japan won the war and gained control over Korea and gained Taiwan as a colony. Japan's sudden, decisive victory over China surprised the world and worried some European powers.

After Japan's victory over China, Japan signed a treaty with China which gave Japan special rights on China's Liaotung peninsula, in addition to the control of Taiwan. But Japan's victory was short lived. Within a week, France, Russia, and Germany combined to pressure Japan to give up rights on the Liaotung peninsula. Each of these nations then began to force China to give it ports, naval bases, and special economic rights, with Russia taking the same Liaotung peninsula that Japan had been forced to return.

The Japanese government was angered by this incident and drew the lesson that for Japan to maintain its independence and receive equal treatment in international affairs, it was necessary to strengthen its military even further. By 1904, when the Russians were again threatening to establish control over Korea, Japan was much stronger. It declared war on Russia and, using all its strength, won victory in 1905 (beginning with a surprise naval attack on Port Arthur, which gained for Japan the control of the China Sea). Japan thus achieved dominance over Korea and established itself as a colonial power in East Asia.