



# Meiji Restoration

*By Dennis RM Campbell*

The arrival of American warships in 1853 destabilized Japan's political system and launched a transformation that made Japan into a major world power in less than 25 years.

740L



## Japan before the Meiji Restoration

In 1839 and 1856, Britain crushed China in the two Opium Wars. Industrialization had given Europeans more money and better weapons. China had been the main power and richest economy in China. But Britain had new weapons and gunboats. The British navy easily defeated China's much larger military.

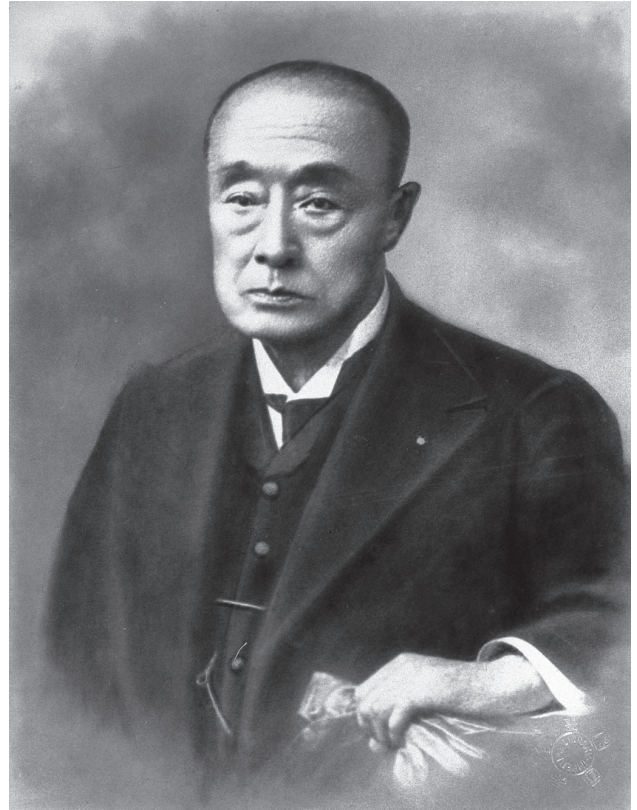
The Japanese were determined not to fall behind the Europeans. The result was a political change in 1868. It was called the Meiji Restoration. The changes allowed Japan to develop into a modern industrial nation-state.

By the 1800s, Japan had been ruled by emperors for 1,500 years. But from 1185 to 1868, the emperor held very little power. Instead, the Japanese government was controlled by a shogunate. This was a group of people called shoguns. These shoguns were military leaders. The emperor was just a symbolic leader. Japan was divided into several different regions controlled by *daimyo*. *Daimyo* were feudal lords. They controlled their lands with the aid of samurai. The samurai were an educated military class.

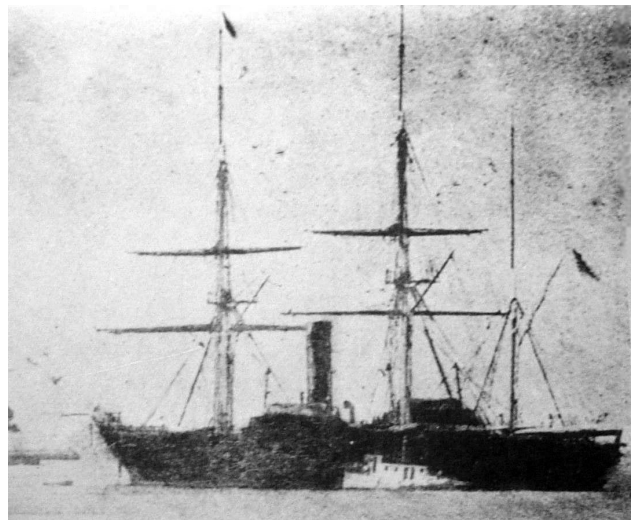
The Tokugawa family took control of the shogunate around 1600. They brought stable leadership after a period of unrest. The Tokugawa shogunate established strong control over local *daimyo*. Traditional, Confucian ways of life were enforced. Peasants were only allowed to work on farms. About 80% of Japanese people were peasants. The Tokugawa also did not want European influence on Japan. In 1636, the shogun announced the Act of Seclusion, which made it unlawful for Europeans to trade in Japan. Only the Dutch were given one post in Nagasaki. The Act of Seclusion effectively cut the Japanese off from Europeans.

## The fall of the shogunate

Japan's isolationist values worked for over 200 years. Still, the Tokugawa shoguns couldn't block foreign influence forever. On July 8, 1853, four American naval ships arrived in Tokyo under the command of Commodore Perry. The Japanese did not have a navy to fight Perry. So, the Americans forced Japan to open its harbors to US trade. This opened up Japan to European ideas. However, Japan's economy was not prepared for the sudden increase in foreign money.



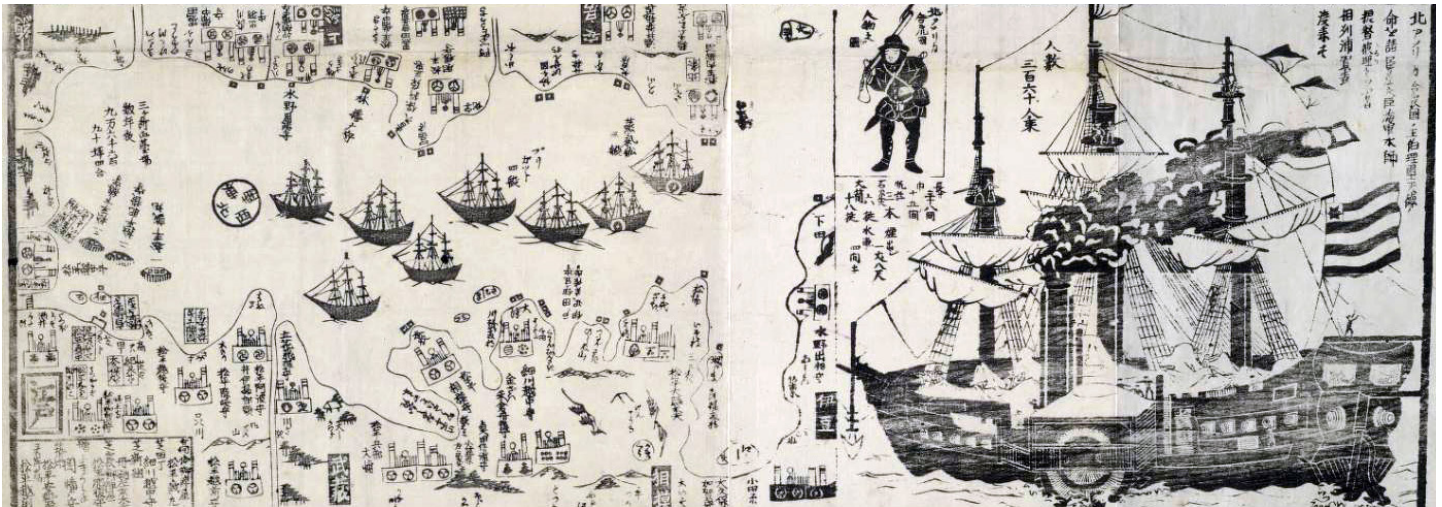
*Monochrome photograph of Yoshinobu Tokugawa, the last shogun of Japan. Public domain.*



*Photograph of one of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" that opened up Japanese markets to US trade. Originally published in the book *Bakumatsu Meiji Taishō kaiko hachijūnenshi* by Yonezō Ōsawa and Tōyō Bunka Kyōkai (Tokyo: 1933-4). Public domain.*



The Japanese people blamed the shogun for their problems. The shogun brought many lower-ranking samurai into the government. Normally this was a great honor. However, Japanese society had a strict class system. It stopped these men from actually having samurai-level power. Many of these lower-ranking samurai became frustrated. They already felt like the upper class was abusing them. Now they believed that the Tokugawa shogun was letting in foreign influence. The samurai turned their backs on the shogun and began to worship the emperor. Their slogan was *sonnō jōi*—"Revere the emperor, Expel the barbarian." Rebel groups attacked foreigners at Japanese ports. Local groups began to rise up in protest. The shogun's position among the elite and powerful had been weakened.



*Japanese print from 1854 showing a paddlewheel steamer belonging to Commodore Perry's squadron. Public domain.*

## The Meiji Restoration

The emperor at this time was a 14-year-old boy named Meiji. A group of samurai leaders from southern regions became his new advisors. The samurai used their influence to politically restructure Japan. They pressured the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, out of his role. The emperor's position as the true leader of Japan seemed to be stronger. But this was not really the case. Truthfully, Japan's government was now controlled by the new samurai advisors.

## Japan becomes a nation-state

On April 17, 1868, the emperor introduced the Charter Oath. This oath showed the emperor wanted to turn Japan into a modern nation-state. There were five points in the oath. All points were modeled after the values of European nation-states. These points gave the Japanese people new freedoms. People could now meet in assemblies, hold public discussions, and participate in government no matter their class. The oath also allowed people to pursue any type of job. Finally, the new government promised to actively learn from the rest of the world. This knowledge would improve and empower Japan.



*An 1861 image expressing the "jōi" or "Expel the Barbarians" part of slogan sonnō jōi. Public domain.*



The emperor brought many samurai into roles in government and education. But that meant these samurai no longer worked for individual *daimyo*. Over the next 20 years, the emperor and his government stripped the samurai class of many traditional privileges. They no longer had bonus pay. The samurai also lost the right to carry swords. The samurai were once the military and political strongholds of Japan. Now, they became just another privileged and wealthy class in the centralized Japanese nation-state.

## Military reforms

The Meiji Restoration made Japan a nation-state. During the age of the shogunate, each region had its own military. Each was controlled by samurai loyal to their *daimyo*. Under the Meiji emperor, Japan created a new national army. All male citizens were forced to serve in the military. The Japanese government accepted new ideas and technologies from Western merchants and diplomats. They also welcomed industrialism, specifically the building of factories. The Japanese military could now stand up against European armies.



*Samurai from the Choshu clan, who supported the emperor. Public domain.*



*Woodblock print from 1894 showing Japanese soldiers in European-style uniforms (right) chasing retreating Chinese troops (left) during the Sino-Japanese War. Public domain.*



Japanese leaders set their eyes on expanding into Korea. Back then, it was under Chinese control. Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) forced China out of Korea.

European powers quickly challenged Japanese control over the Korean peninsula. Feeling they could fight the Japanese, Russians invaded Korea. But Japan's military had grown since the Meiji Restoration. So the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) ended in victory for Japan. Europeans were shocked. After the Russo-Japanese war, Korea officially became part of the Japanese empire. Japan focused on modernizing the region. Sadly, many Koreans also suffered greatly at the hands of the Japanese.

## What did the Meiji Restoration accomplish?

The nineteenth-century revolutions in Europe and the Americas were about democracy. But in Japan, the Meiji restoration was different. Instead, Japan saw lower-ranking elites pushing for change in the political organization of Japan. The new government did adopt Western technologies and made reforms based on Western models. But Japan did not become a European-style state.

Rather, the reformers used Western ideas to restructure the government while maintaining some Japanese traditions. The Meiji Restoration transformed Japan. The government became centralized around the figure of the emperor. The political system now allowed people to try new opportunities. Japan also underwent fast industrialization. That meant the Japanese people experienced social changes. Among them were better education and increased rights and opportunities. At the same time, it created new tensions as focus (and money) was concentrated on industrializing cities. Rural farmers were left behind. Japan was so committed to keeping pace with Western developments, it quickly became recognized as a world power.



*Political cartoon about the Russo-Japanese War. A confident Japanese man is shown beating a Russian opponent at the game of dai shogi. Public domain.*



*[Photograph by Uchida Kuichi of the Emperor Meiji \(1872\) in his formal court outfit. Public domain.](#)*



*[Photograph by Uchida Kuichi of the Emperor Meiji \(1873\) in his military outfit. Public domain.](#)*



## Dennis RM Campbell

Dennis RM Campbell is an associate professor of History at San Francisco State University. He primarily conducts research on esoteric topics in ancient history and writes about ancient language, religions, and societies.

### Image credits

**Cover:** Illustration depicting Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1858) meeting the royal commissioner at Yokohama, 1853. Undated painting. © Bettmann/Getty Images

**Monochrome photograph of Yoshinobu Tokugawa**, the last shogun of Japan. Public domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa\\_Yoshinobu#/media/File:TOKUGAWA\\_Yoshinobu.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa_Yoshinobu#/media/File:TOKUGAWA_Yoshinobu.jpg)

**Photograph of one of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships"** that opened up Japanese markets to US trade. Originally published in the book *Bakumatsu Meiji Taishō kaiko hachijūnenshi* by Yonezō Ōsawa and Tōyō Bunka Kyōkai (Tokyo: 1933-4). Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kurofune.jpg>

**Japanese print from 1854 showing a paddlewheel steamer** belonging to Commodore Perry's squadron. Public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japanese\\_1854\\_print\\_Commodore\\_Perry.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japanese_1854_print_Commodore_Perry.jpg)

**An 1861 image expressing the "jōi" or "Expel the Barbarians"** part of slogan sonnō jōi. Public domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Foreigner\\_and\\_Wrestler\\_at\\_Yokohama\\_1861.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Foreigner_and_Wrestler_at_Yokohama_1861.jpg)

**Samurai from the Choshu clan**, who supported the emperor. Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Satsuma-samurai-during-boshin-war-period.jpg>

**Woodblock print from 1894** showing Japanese soldiers in European-style uniforms (right) chasing retreating Chinese troops (left) during the Sino-Japanese War. Public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Episode\\_of\\_the\\_First\\_Sino-Japanese\\_War\\_Image\\_from\\_book\\_of\\_1902.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Episode_of_the_First_Sino-Japanese_War_Image_from_book_of_1902.jpg)

**Political cartoon about the Russo-Japanese War.** A confident Japanese man is shown beating a Russian opponent at the game of dai shogi. Public domain. <https://publicdomainreview.org/collections/kobayashi-kiyochikas-cartoons-of-the-russo-japanese-war-1904-5/>

**Photograph by Uchida Kuichi of the Emperor Meiji (1872)** in his formal court outfit. Public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji\\_tenno3.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji_tenno3.jpg)

**Photograph by Uchida Kuichi of the Emperor Meiji (1873)** in his military outfit. Public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji\\_Emperor.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji_Emperor.jpg)



Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: [www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/](http://www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/)

To learn more about Newsela, visit [www.newsela.com/about](http://www.newsela.com/about).



### The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at [www.Lexile.com](http://www.Lexile.com).