



# 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.

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## Japan before the Meiji Restoration

In 1839 and 1856 Asian nations were shocked by Britain's crushing victories over China in the two Opium Wars. Industrialization—it was now pretty clear—gave massive advantages to European nations, including more money and better weapons. In Asia, China had been the dominant power and richest economy. But the British navy, using new artillery and gunboats, easily defeated China's much larger military.

These wars demonstrated that European technology had far outpaced China's. Across the East China Sea, the Japanese were determined not to fall behind the Europeans the way China had. The result was the 1868 political transformation known as the Meiji Restoration. Drawing from both Western models and Japanese traditions, the Meiji Restoration allowed Japan to develop into a modern industrial nation-state that rivaled European nations in both military and economic power.

By the nineteenth century, an emperor had reigned in Japan for around 1,500 years. But from 1185 to 1868, the actual emperor held very little power. It was the shogunate (government run by a shogun) that dominated Japanese politics. The shogun was a military leader who held power as a hereditary dictator. While the emperor reigned as a "god on Earth", he was really just a figurehead with some religious authority. Japan was divided into several different regions controlled by *daimyo*. *Daimyo* were feudal lords who controlled their lands with the aid of samurai. The samurai were an educated military class who were granted land in return for military service to a *daimyo*.

The Tokugawa family took control of the shogunate around 1600, bringing some welcome stability after a period of unrest. The Tokugawa shogunate established strong control over local *daimyo*, and enforced traditional, Confucian policies. This prohibited peasants (around 80% of the population) from working any job other than farming. The Tokugawa were also extremely suspicious of European influence. In 1636, the shogun announced the Act of Seclusion, which made it illegal for Westerners to trade in Japan. (Well, the Dutch were granted a single trading outpost in Nagasaki, but they were treated with suspicion.) Though Japanese merchants could still trade in China and Korea, the Act of Seclusion effectively cut the Japanese off from Europeans.

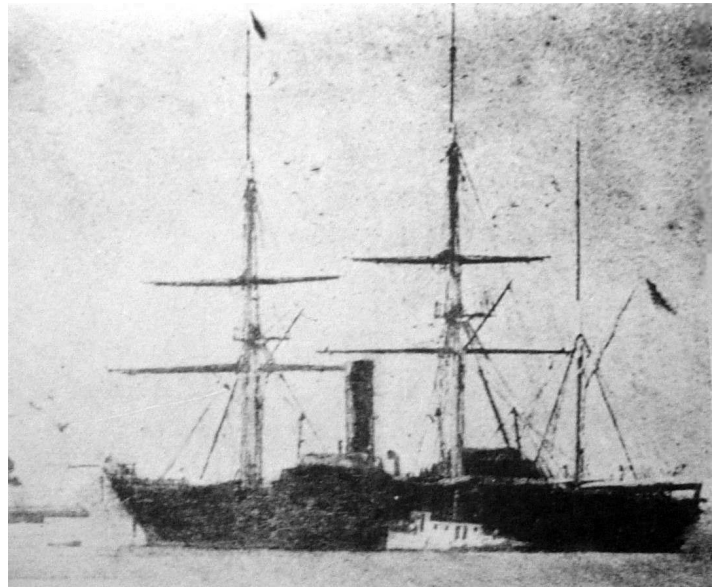


*Monochrome photograph of Yoshinobu Tokugawa, the last shogun of Japan. Public domain.*

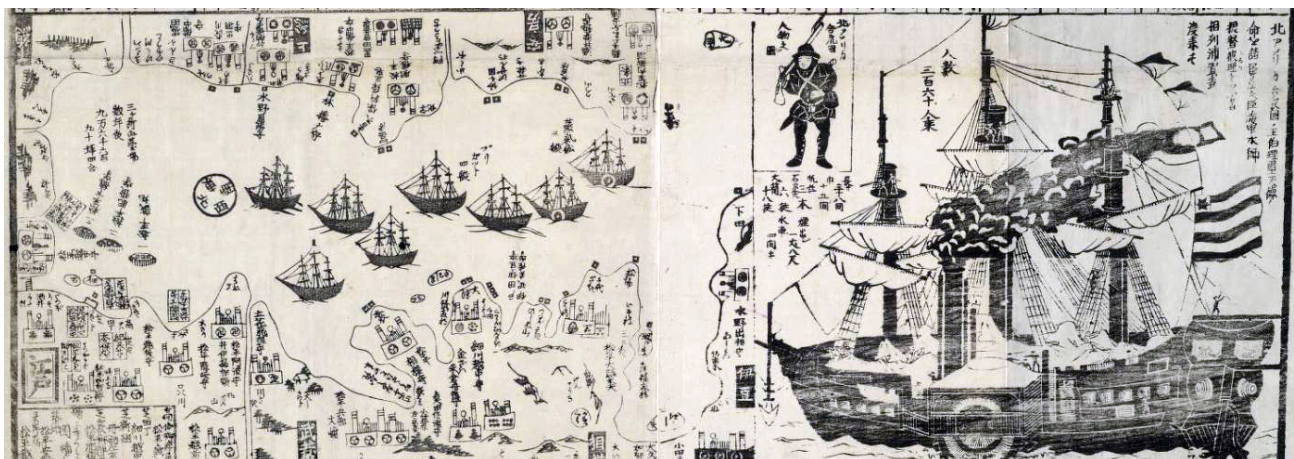
## The fall of the shogunate

Japan's isolationist policies worked for over 200 years, but the Tokugawa shoguns couldn't block foreign interference forever. On July 8, 1853, four American naval ships under the command of Commodore Perry anchored in Tokyo harbor as a kind of "shall we trade or shall we fight?" message. Since the Japanese didn't have a navy, they knew they couldn't fight Perry's small squadron. Instead, they opened up negotiations with the Americans. Through Perry, US President Fillmore forced Japan to open its harbors to US trade, breaking the centuries-long prohibition against foreign trade. This opened up Japan to European ideas, but the introduction of foreign money into Japanese markets happened too quickly. It destabilized the economy. Japan had just witnessed the Opium Wars in China—an apparent outcome of doing business with the West—and were now on high alert to avoid a similar conflict.

The shogun's domestic policies made matters worse and tensions arose as people blamed the shogun for their problems. The shogun appointed many lower-ranking samurai to official government positions. Normally this was a great promotion, but Japanese society had a rigid hierarchy that prevented these men from actually having samurai-level power. Many of these lower-ranking samurai became disillusioned. They already felt like the upper class was abusing them, and now they believed that the Tokugawa shogun was endangering Japanese sovereignty by letting in foreign influence. So they used their loyalty as a weapon. The lower-ranked samurai undermined the shogun by glorifying the emperor. Their slogan was *sonnō jōi*—"Revere the emperor, Expel the barbarian." These rebellious factions attacked foreigners at Japanese ports, and caused local uprisings against the shogun. The attacks alone could not end the shogunate, but they greatly weakened the shogun's position among the elites.



*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.*



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

## The Meiji Restoration

Samurai leaders from southern regions began to advise the new emperor, Meiji. The emperor was only 14 at the time, and the samurai used their influence over him to politically restructure Japan. They increased pressure on Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the last shogun, stressing the shogunate's failure to protect Japanese interests. Yoshinobu stepped down, then soon rebelled against those who had replaced him, only to be even more firmly defeated. The emperor's position as the sovereign leader of Japan had been reasserted... in theory. In reality, the Japanese government was now controlled by the emperor's new samurai advisors.

## Japan becomes a nation-state

On April 17, 1868, the emperor announced something called the Charter Oath that all would swear to him. This oath presented the emperor's commitment to transforming Japan into a modern nation-state. The five points of the oath were modelled on the ideals of European nation-states. They included the creation of assemblies, public discussion, and allowing people of all social classes participation in government. The oath also said people could pursue jobs that they wanted, rather than being limited to class-specific traditional occupations. Finally, the new government pledged to openly seek out knowledge all over the world to improve and empower Japan.

The emperor appointed many samurai to roles in government and education. But that meant these samurai now worked for the state, not for individual *daimyo*. Slowly, over the next two decades, the emperor and his government stripped the samurai class of many traditional privileges, like stipends (bonus payment) and the right to carry swords. Though some resisted, the samurai went from the military and political backbone of a divided country to just another privileged and wealthy class in the centralized Japanese nation-state.

## Military reforms

So it was the Meiji Restoration that made Japan a nation-state. During the era of the shogunate, each region had its own military, controlled by samurai loyal to their *daimyo*. Under the Meiji emperor, these regional armies were replaced by a national army, and all male citizens were required to serve in the military. The new government embraced new ideas and technologies brought to Japan by Western merchants and diplomats. By adopting industrialism—specifically factories—the Japanese military could now rival European armies.



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



*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.*

Within two decades, Japanese victories illustrated the success of these military reforms. They set their eyes on expanding into Korea, which was under Chinese control. Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) forced China out of Korea.

However, Japanese control over the Korean peninsula was quickly challenged by European powers, like Russia. Anti-Asian biases in Europe made the Russians believe that they had nothing to fear from Japan, so Russia invaded Korea. But the Japanese military had grown since the Meiji Restoration so the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) ended in victory for Japan. This sent shockwaves through Europe and told the world that European militaries were not invincible. Over the next 15 years, Japan dominated Korea's economy as it exerted military control over the peninsula. After the Russo-Japanese war, Korea officially became part of the Japanese empire. Becoming part of the Japanese empire would benefit Korea in many ways, as Japan focused on modernizing the region, but many Koreans also suffered greatly at the hands of the Japanese.

## What did the Meiji Restoration accomplish?

Unlike many of the revolutions in Europe and the Americas during the long nineteenth century, the Meiji restoration was not a liberal, democratic event. The uprising was not led by oppressed masses fighting for more rights. Instead, it was the elites (okay, lower-ranking elites, but still much higher status than most of the population) who forced a change in the existing political organization of Japan. Though the new government adopted Western technologies and instituted reforms based on Western models, Japan didn't become a European-style state.

Rather, the reformers used Western ideas to reconfigure and reorganize the government while still holding on to some Japanese traditions. In many ways, Japan became a model for colonized people around the world. They had learned from their enemies' strategies and beaten them at their own game.

The Meiji Restoration transformed Japan. The government became centralized around the figure of the emperor, and the political system now allowed people to pursue new opportunities. Japan also underwent rapid industrialization. That meant the Japanese people experienced social changes, including better education and increased rights and opportunities. At the same time, it created new tensions as focus (and money) was concentrated on urban industrialization at the expense of rural farmers. 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.](#)*



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### Image credits

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