

Chapter 1. Meiji Revolution: Start of Full-Scale Modernization

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It's a great pleasure to be with you and speak about Japan's modernization.

Japan was the first country and still is one of the very few countries that have modernized from a non-Western background to establish a free, democratic, prosperous, and peace-loving nation based on the rule of law, without losing much of its tradition and identity.

I firmly believe that there are quite a few aspects of Japan's experience that can be shared with developing countries today.

Section 1: Significance of Meiji Revolution

In January 1868, in the palace in Kyoto, it was declared that the Tokugawa Shogunate was over, and a new government was established under Emperor, based on the ancient system.

This was why this political change was called as the Meiji Restoration.

The downfall of a government that lasted more than 260 years was a tremendous upheaval, indeed. It also brought an end to the epoch of rule by "samurai," "bushi" or Japanese traditional warriors that began as early as in the 12th century and lasted for about 700 years.

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Following the government changeover, many changes began taking place in various sectors of the country.

The new Meiji government chose to rapidly introduce Western civilization.

Then it abolished the feudal system to establish a centralized political system within three years from the restoration.

Then it abolished the ruling class of “samurai” within eight years from the restoration.

Likewise, a modern cabinet system, the Meiji Constitution and the national parliament were installed only 17 years, 21 years and 22 years, respectively, after the restoration.

As such, I would like to call all these developments, including the years for them to take roots in Japanese society, the Meiji Revolution.

On the other hand, the event has been widely referred to as the Meiji Restoration, therefore I may use this term, Meiji Restoration, too, mainly to focus on the political change of 1868.

For a while in the past, the Meiji Revolution was not considered a thoroughgoing revolution, compared to the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution.

It is true that even after the Meiji government was established, the country was ruled by former “samurai” and that feudal-era leaders survived.

What happened in the Japanese revolution was not all-out destruction. The death toll from the Meiji Revolution, including those who died in the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, was limited to about 35,000 or the equivalent of 1 percent of that from the French Revolution if we include the number of victims of the Napoleonic war; and 0.1 percent of that from the Russian Revolution if we include the number of victims of the Stalin regime.

But the low casualty rate was not bad. Complete destruction might only trigger fierce counteroffensives by opponents of a revolution and a measure to suppress such counterattacks might be followed by the reign of terror.

Today, the Meiji Restoration or the Meiji Revolution is being re-evaluated. In fact, it is being praised as a rare historic event for promoting a sequence of major long-term changes within a low casualty rate.

In the modernization process, Japan realized greater popular participation in politics, while discarding a host of feudal-era prohibitions and opening the meritocratic way for able people to be assigned and promoted to key positions, regardless of social status.

In that sense, the Meiji Revolution can also be defined as a democratic revolution, a liberal revolution and a human resources revolution.

Section 2: Legacies of the Edo Period

Why such a revolution was possible? To answer this question, we have to, first of all, look at and analyze what the Edo period was like.

The Edo period started in 1603 when Tokugawa Ieyasu gained Imperial approval to establish a military government called “bakufu,” after the campaign to bring the whole country under his control in 1600.

The Edo period lasted for 265 years until 1868. The first shogun was Tokugawa Ieyasu and the last and the 15th shogun was Tokugawa Yoshinobu.

During the Edo period, the Tokugawa family controlled about 30 percent of land in the country directly or indirectly through their vassals.

The rest of the land was divided into 260 to 300 feudal domains or “han” and each feudal domain was governed by a feudal lord or “daimyo” with his own vassal samurai. All of those “daimyo” pledged their loyalty to the Tokugawa family.

Daimyo, or feudal lords were grouped into three categories. The first one included “shinpan daimyo” who were relatives of the Tokugawa family. The second category covered “fudai daimyo” who had been vassals of the Tokugawa family even before it established control over the nation in 1600. The third category embraced “tozama daimyo” who chose to be loyal and obedient to Tokugawa only after 1600.

Many of the “tozama daimyo” lords controlled large domains located far from Edo. “Fudai daimyo” controlled small domains, but were strategically located in order to defend the shogunate against any rebel move by “tozama” lords.

Among many han governed by “tozama” lords, Satsuma and Choshu were the most powerful and important. Actually, they became the driving force to bring about the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate later.

The bakufu or central government consisted of the Tokugawa shogun and a few selected “fudai daimyo” and took care of national politics.

On the other hand, other daimyo were permitted to govern their respective domains. The Tokugawa shogunate, however, exercised overwhelming control over those daimyo especially in the early decades of the Edo period.

Such a political system, feudal system, was not uncommon in various eras and areas, but the power of the (Tokugawa shogunate) shogun was stronger than other national leaders in

any other feudal systems.

Therefore, some historians call the Tokugawa system as the “centralized feudalism.”

In Japan, emperors continued residing in Kyoto, which was still the capital of Japan during the Edo period, as the country’s supreme authority as in the centuries prior to the epoch of “samurai” rule.

But they did so in name only. Each shogun from the Tokugawa family followed the traditional formality of being subservient to and entrusted by emperors to govern the country.

In reality, emperors had little power.

In the early years of the Edo period, a few rebellions against Tokugawa rule took place. But Japan was thereafter able to enjoy peace for more than two centuries. Such a long spell of peace would be quite rare in world history.

Over that period, especially in the early part of the period, the arable area was expanded by development, including reclamation. Those measures resulted in an increase in agricultural production, which in turn helped the population increase significantly. There have been multiple estimates about the population as of the beginning of the Edo period, ranging from 12 million to 17 million.

But there were couple of reliable estimates of the population in the early 18th century and a more accurate estimate of the population as of 1872. According to those figures, the population of Japan kept rising and reached an estimated 31 million in the early 18th century, and began to stagnate until the early Meiji period, when the population was estimated at 35 million.

In the latter part of the Edo period, commercial activities developed and Edo became one of the largest cities in the world, offering a thriving platform for townspeople or commoners to develop cultures unique to Japan, such as “kabuki,” a Japanese traditional drama, and “ukiyo-e,” a color print of everyday life.

As mentioned earlier, Japan enjoyed 260 years of peace. The most important dividend of peace was the prevalence of education. During the Edo period, small private elementary schools or “terakoya” were set up across the country to teach writing and reading to commoners’ children. Historians estimate that late in the Edo period, the literacy rates for adult males and adult females stood at 40 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

On the other hand, during the long period of peace there was no development of military technology. As a result, the state of its military infrastructure remained almost unchanged

for two and a half centuries.

At the outset of the Edo era, Japan had more guns than any other countries in the world, and was probably the world's largest military power, but, at the end of Edo period, the weapons got grossly outdated and the country became increasingly incapable of standing against Western countries.

In the final years of bakufu rule, as some powerful "daimyo" began to purchase advanced weapons from Western countries, the Tokugawa bakufu's supremacy over "daimyo" was terribly shaken.

Further, the bakufu's policy of national seclusion or strict control of foreign relations jeopardized the country's technology of navigation.

In the 16th century, Japanese sailing ships freely and frequently shuttled to and from Southeast Asia.

But, two and a half centuries later, Japanese vessels were capable of sailing only along the coastline of the country — they were not blue-water seaworthy at all.

Section 3: From the Opening of Japan to the Downfall of Bakufu, the Tokugawa Government

In 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the U.S. Navy, commanding a squadron of naval vessels including two steamships, sailed into Edo Bay, today's Tokyo Bay, for the first time. They were huge compared to the Japanese ships and armed with powerful guns that would be able to shell Edo directly.

Perry conveyed the U.S. government's demand that Japanese ports be opened to Americans. However, the bakufu was unable to respond immediately and asked all daimyo and the Imperial Court about how to deal with the U.S. demand for the opening of Japan.

During this process some of the powerful "han," such as Satsuma and Choshu, got encouraged to seek a greater say in national affairs by siding with the emperor, who had retained only nominal power up until that time.

Yet, despite such headwinds, the Tokugawa bakufu was still strong enough to keep the country under its control.

However, the hierarchical class system imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate ironically prevented the bakufu from modernizing its troops adequately. For instance, in modern warfare, foot soldiers had to move in unison on foot while carrying new, powerful infantry

firearms. Their field activities were not compatible with those of “samurai” moving while being mounted on horses.

In contrast, Satsuma and Choshu became superior to the bakufu in terms of modern warfare capabilities. The two domains’ smart leaders enthusiastically recruited and promoted competent and qualified subjects and even farmers while procuring modern weapons far more actively than the bakufu.

They had a good and urgent reason to do so. Satsuma fought a war with Great Britain in 1863 and Choshu was involved in the war at Shimonoseki in 1864, with a combined fleet of British, Dutch, French and U.S. warships. The leaderships in the two domains thus gained important firsthand knowledge about the overwhelming strengths of the Western powers.

Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the incumbent shogun, came to think that this government would not be able to prevail over the Satsuma-Choshu alliance on its own. Then, in October 1867, he returned the reigning authority to the emperor, abdicating his rule of the country.

He did so with an idea of creating a new political system in which a selected few “daimyo” would form a council to rule the country. His plan was to assume the leading position in the proposed council.

Satsuma and Choshu demanded that Tokugawa’s power be drastically weakened. To that end, the Satsuma-Choshu alliance then chose to advocate the restoration of Imperial rule to the country. This is the Declaration of Imperial Rule made in the palace in Kyoto.

In January 1868, three weeks after the restoration, the Satsuma-Choshu alliance provoked Tokugawa Yoshinobu into embarking on a war with it in the south of Kyoto. The alliance barely won this war named the Battle of Toba-Fushimi. Then suddenly the last shogun decided to stop any organized resistance against the emperor backed by the Satsuma-Choshu alliance, returned to Edo, and continued his policy of no-resistance.

As such, in May of the same year, Edo came under Imperial rule without bloodshed. Then, pro-Tokugawa domains in the Northeast and other regions surrendered, one after another, to the Imperial forces.

Now, Imperial rule was restored all over Japan.

The last shogun’s decision to avoid do-or-die resistance remains the biggest mystery surrounding the downfall of the bakufu. The real reason can be assumed in various ways, but it is difficult to pinpoint a decisive reason.

However, one thing is clear: Japan would have been thrown into a bloody civil war lasting several years, if the Satsuma-Choshu alliance and the Tokugawa shogunate had clashed

with the backing of Great Britain and France, respectively.

During such a civil war, Japan would have obviously been compelled to grant various rights and interests to those countries. It can be reasonably assumed that the leaders of the bakufu and the new government commonly wanted such consequences averted. They have shared such a perception to a considerable extent.

In other words, the long-standing peace in Japan during the Edo period enabled Japanese people to foster a mature way of thinking about affirming that “we are Japanese” and that therefore we should not allow foreign countries to invade into our country.

Section 4: New Meiji Government

Now let's move on to the new era, led by the new Meiji government.

The new government was initially seen as being under the influence of the Satsuma and Choshu domains and as advocating the expulsion of foreigners from Japan. But, to the contrary, the new government advocated the introduction of Western civilization.

In 1869, all “han” lords returned to Emperor Meiji the rulership over land and people in their domains. In reality, this event, called “hanseki-hokan,” did not entail a major structural change since the former feudal lords were assigned to head their respective domains as governors.

However, in 1871, the new government abolished all the “han” domains, including both Satsuma and Choshu. The Satsuma and Choshu domains had a history going back more than 700 years. Moreover, these were the domains where many of the new government's leaders were from.

Still, the new government announced that it would appoint officials of its choice as new regional heads. The new government ordered all the former daimyo lords to move to Tokyo, which had been renamed from Edo.

The Meiji government kept coming up with more new measures, including introducing private land ownership and scrapping the four-tiered class system. This class system put “samurai” at the top, while farming peasants came in second position, craftsmen and artisans in third position and merchants were at the bottom. The distinction between the classes did not disappear immediately, but faded away in a few decades.

Now, let me refer to Fukuzawa Yukichi, who was Japan's most important intellectual leader during the last years of Edo and the early Meiji period.

Fukuzawa once served in the Tokugawa bakufu and thought that the new government would press for the expulsion of foreigners in line with the original purpose of Satsuma-Choshu alliance's open defiance against the Tokugawa shogunate. So, he kept feeling let down by the installation of the new government.

However, when he learned that the new government took a bold measure to abolish "han," feudal domains and establish prefectures in place of "han," Fukuzawa enthusiastically welcomed this change and wrote a book titled, "Gakumon no Susume" or "Encouragement of Learning" to emphasize the importance of introduction of Western civilization in a determined way.

Fukuzawa did not uncritically admire Western civilization. Yet he called for the introduction of Western civilization as a stopgap measure to facilitate Japan's efforts to modernize itself as soon as possible.

Late in his life, Fukuzawa began emphasizing the importance of upholding the traditional ethos of "samurai" warriors.

Section 5: Iwakura Mission, Political Crisis of 1873 and the Civil War

Only a few months after the "han" system was abolished in August 1871, the new Meiji government astonished the nation by dispatching a high-profile diplomatic mission to the United States and Europe.

The mission was led by the Minister of the Right Iwakura Tomomi who held the highest post in the Meiji government after the Emperor effectively. Accompanying Iwakura were some of the top leaders of the new government, including Okubo Toshimichi and Kido Takayoshi who were regarded two of the three greatest leaders of the Meiji Restoration, as well as Ito Hirobumi, who later became Japan's first prime minister. All of them so eagerly desired to see Western civilization on their own that they toured the West for up to one year and nine months.

As members of the Iwakura Mission saw the power of Western civilization with their own eyes, they became determined to prioritize a new national goal of "enriching the nation" over another goal of "strengthening the military."

The mission returned home in September 1873 only to face a political crisis. While Iwakura and other top leaders were abroad, the remaining top leaders had decided to start a tough diplomacy toward Korea to force it to open its door. Okubo, Kido, and Iwakura opposed this decision and overturned it forcibly.

Several top leaders who had supported the former decision resigned from their posts of councilors or “sangi” in protest in October 1873. The biggest shock was the resignation of Saigo Takamori, who was the greatest hero of the war against Bakufu and considered as one of the three great leaders of the Meiji Restoration.

Just about two weeks later, Okubo Toshimichi, who served as the deputy in the Iwakura mission, created the Home Ministry and became its minister. That ministry was responsible for industrial development, police administration, postal services, transport and construction. Okubo vigorously pressed ahead with industrialization, holding on to his determination to prioritize ensuring internal security.

He decided to terminate the payment of salaries to former “samurai,” by providing them with stipend bonds issued by the government. The salary of the “samurai” was about the 30 percent of the national budget. It was inevitable to stop it, but it had been postponed a couple of times because it was so dangerous politically. But Okubo finally made this decision.

On the diplomatic front, the new Meiji government sent a military expedition to Taiwan in 1874 in the wake of the killing in Taiwan of about 50 fishermen from Okinawa. Then Okubo visited China for negotiations and successfully had the Qing government acknowledge the legitimacy of the Japanese expedition to Taiwan.

Up till 1872, the Ryukyu Kingdom ruled what is now Okinawa Prefecture. The kingdom was not only as a vassal state of the Satsuma domain but also as a tributary state of China. When the killing of Okinawa fishermen took place, the Japanese government had to move in order to show that Okinawa was a part of Japan.

In a related development, the Meiji government, examining the situations prevailing at home and abroad, began a gunboat diplomacy against Korea in 1875. In the following year, Korea agreed to open its doors to Japan under a treaty of amity.

Also in 1875, Japan signed the Treaty for the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kurile Islands with Russia, determining the borderline between the two countries in a peaceful manner.

In 1876, Japan declared its ownership of the Ogasawara Islands located south of Tokyo.

Let me go back to the circumstances surrounding “samurai.”

They were very enraged as they had been deprived of their social status and economic privileges. In addition, they were very critical of the diplomacy of the Meiji government. Groups of disgruntled “samurai” staged uprisings in several locations.

The biggest rebellion erupted in Satsuma in 1877, with Saigo Takamori as the leader. The

rebel army led by such a powerful leader was no match, however, for the new government's modern troops in the Satsuma War.

Saigo and his followers committed suicide in September 1877. Before the end of this war, Kido Takayoshi, died because of disease. And in May 1878, Okubo Toshimichi was assassinated by a group of discontented former samurais. The passing of the three key figures in the Meiji Restoration seemed to herald the end of an era.

But the positive themes underlying the Meiji Restoration, such as greater participation in politics, the enhancement of freedom and meritocracy, were surely inherited to the next era.

Section 6: Liberal Democratic Movement and the Constitution

The debacle of Satsuma's rebel prompted the nation to realize that it would be impossible to launch effective military campaigns against the government. Instead, there emerged a new way of challenging the government: a war of words, speeches and writings. Even farmers began taking part in the movement.

The movement, named the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, spread to the northeast of Japan, which was the area of the losers in the war of 1868. It continued gathering momentum to the extent that participants in it set a bold goal of having the Meiji government install a national Diet or a legislative body.

The government, for its part, harbored a sense of crisis in the face of the escalation in the Freedom and People's Rights Movement and eventually began considering to adopt a constitution.

The government had not necessarily opposed the idea of enacting a constitution. For instance, Okubo Toshimichi, who was criticized as "a dictator," thought as early as 1873 that a dictatorial government lacking popular participation would be weak and that it would be necessary for Japan to let its people participate in politics as a way of competing with Western countries.

However, opinions within the government varied as to the specific method, and the pace, for accepting popular participation in politics. In 1881, top leaders of the government were asked to clarify their positions in writing. Okuma Shigenobu, who was the most influential "sangi" of the top leaders at the time, submitted a radical proposal for establishing a national Diet just in two years' time. Coupled with other matters of political discord with other leaders, Okuma was eventually ousted from the government in October 1881.

In 1882, Emperor Meiji ordered Ito Hirobumi to go to Europe to study constitution. Ito had

visited Western countries three times already and was considered most knowledgeable about the Western civilization in the government. He studied extensively for more than one year under many leading constitutional scholars, notably University of Vienna Professor Lorenz von Stein.

When Ito returned home, he began reviewing the Imperial Family system, which he wanted the core of the Constitution as well as the system of peerage or aristocracy that would be the basis of the House of Lords or the upper house. He particularly wanted to establish a modern bureaucracy, as an indispensable step to set up a modern cabinet system of government. In 1885, Ito established such a cabinet system of government and became the first prime minister of Japan at the age of 44.

Ito was born into a lowest-ranking “samurai” family in Choshu. Within just 18 years after the Meiji era started, Ito climbed to the top of the government ladder, the Meiji Restoration or Meiji Revolution can be clearly defined as a meritocratic revolution as well. Then, Ito began to write a new constitution.

In 1889, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, or the Meiji Constitution, was proclaimed. The supreme law was said to have given too great a prerogative to the emperor, while being less considerate of the people’s rights.

But, compared to the standards of the time, the Meiji Constitution was considerably democratic because it conferred the House of Representatives the right to deliberate the government’s budget bills. The political parties thus acquired strong power to control the budget through the power of the House of Representatives.

The first general elections were held in 1890 and the inaugural session of the Diet was convened in the same year. In the lower house, the opposition camp held a majority, making it troublesome for the government to have its budget passed by the Diet.

Opposition parties used their superior parliamentary positions as a leverage for consolidating their political strengths. Only a few years after the launch of the Diet, the opposition group gained some key cabinet ministerial portfolios. Eight years after the opening of the Diet, a cabinet led by a leader of a political party, Okuma Shigenobu, was formed.

Such political dynamics did not happen at all in Prussia even though the Meiji Constitution was said to have been modeled after the Constitution of Prussia. Even nowadays, except for Western countries, it is very difficult to establish a system in which government change takes place depending on election results on the rule-of-law basis.

Section 7: End of the Meiji Revolution

The political landscape created by the Meiji Constitution had a big weakness. The weakness was a theory that the emperor had absolute power and, therefore, would make every decision.

This political fiction was forged as those who founded the Meiji statehood wanted to make Japan strong enough to stand against Western countries and thought that, to do so, the country needed to establish a centralized government system and get rid of feudalism.

However, it should be noted that the emperor system would be in peril if an important decision was or important decisions were made by the emperor ended up in failure. As such, the emperor was expected to accept advice from the chiefs of the Cabinet, the Diet, the military and the Supreme Court, among others, even though he held absolute power.

There existed no government body responsible for overall supervision over the country's political affairs on behalf of the emperor. This meant that there must be an informal body, or something like that, that would be influential enough to coordinate conflicting opinions from the Diet, the Cabinet, the military and so forth, if this was the case.

This role was subsequently assumed by the surviving founders of the Meiji statehood, who were also respectfully referred to as elder statesmen or "genro." However, every "genro" would get older and older and finally pass away like anyone else. At the end of the day, no other leaders became successors to any of the "genro" statesmen.

Instead, from the 1910s to the late 1920s, political parties that were active in the House of Representatives had strong power. Then, there was a rapid decline in the power and influence of political parties while the military began behaving independently of the government, not to speak of the Diet. However, there were already no organizations in Japan that were able to contain the rise of the military.

Such important leaders as Okubo Toshimichi and Ito Hirobumi anticipated in the early years of the Meiji that the military might become uncontrollable someday in the future. To avert such a situation, they exerted themselves to control the military.

Political party leaders, such as Hara Takashi and Hamaguchi Osachi, were also strong and influential enough to control the military. All the four leaders above, however, fell victim to terrorism.

In the 1930s, expansionism gathered pace, for which some scholars hold the Meiji Restoration responsible.

But no systems are free from demerits and weaknesses. Who are responsible for rectifying

such demerits and weaknesses?

In any period, it is the people who live in that period that should bear the responsibility to correct the demerits and weaknesses of the systems they have to live with.

In terms of the chain of responsibility, it is not advisable to go back as far as to the Meiji Restoration of 1868 or the 1889 proclamation of the Meiji Constitution to define them collectively as the cause of the War of Showa.

At the closing of my lecture, I sincerely hope that you look at the history of the world and compare what happened in Japan during and after the Meiji Revolution with what happened elsewhere in the world over the same time.

The Meiji Revolution was a really big success, indeed in historical perspective.