

The Japanese Success and its Roots in the Meiji Restoration

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The country of Japan has achieved a level of economic and political success that is unparalleled throughout the non-western world. Along with Germany, it is the United States only real economic competitor. To many developing countries, Japan serves as a role model on how to succeed through western-style modernization yet at the same time be able to retain its own unique cultural heritage. The Japanese have shown that being European does not have to be a prerequisite for success in the modern world. Although the causes behind Japan's success is are too complex and varied to be examined by this paper, a major component of that success would undoubtedly be the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji Restoration made Japan the first and most successful self-modernized non-Western country.

Rutherford Alcock, a British diplomat writing in 1863 after spending three years in Japan, described Japan in terms of Europe's medieval ages. Feudalism, he said, was found in Japan "with sufficient identity and analogy in all its leading features to make the coincidence striking."¹ Indeed, members of the Japanese ruling class, the samurai, remained bound to each other by ties of vassalage and extracted from the landed peasantry a portion of their crop as feudal dues. This all radically changed, when in 1868 a group of samurai reformers seized control of the country from the unstable Tokugawa shogunate. They wanted their regime to be known as the "Meiji Restoration," which purportedly "restored" the imperial family to its proper role after years of de facto rule by shoguns.

The political and economic changes that were instituted in the 21 years between 1868 and the acceptance of the Meiji Constitution in

1889, were truly revolutionary in scope and magnitude. These changes needed to be of such a dramatic nature, considering the purpose for which the Meiji Restoration was undertaken. This purpose, was the importation of western institutions, finance, and technology necessary for the establishment of a strong industrialized economy capable of keeping foreigners at bay. This was achieved first through political centralization, which resulted in the abolition of feudal domains and the end of administrative localism. It was believed by the reformers that only through the establishment of an absolutist and centralized state could they avoid the social upheaval that such rapid modernization might bring. Probably the most significant reform was the establishment of a centrally commanded conscript army and the subsequent abolition of the samurai as a class.² With the end of the samurai's monopoly on warfare came the destruction of the samurai's basis for power which removed the threat of opposition from the old feudal order. The ultimate Meiji goals were reached when the Meiji leaders managed to begin the industrialization process by a series of government initiatives. Just as the present Japanese government, the Meiji leaders saw economic development in nationalist terms. Japan pursued a policy of state capitalism, by which the government served as the principal manager and financier of modern industry. The government took on a number of plant operations, buying whole factories overseas, assembling them in Japan, and bringing in foreign technicians and workers to get them started.³

As an island nation, Japan's fundamental predicament is that it is vulnerable to foreigners who might overtly or subtly force their ways on

Japan. In this predicament Japan had two choices. Either to wall itself off from the outside world as it did during the isolationist period of the Tokugawa era, or to attempt to control the surrounding environment so it will not be able to spring any surprises on the Japanese. Thus, Meiji Japan underwent a radical transformation not only from handicrafts to modern industry but also from reclusive feudalism to expansionism. This new expansionism is seen through Japan's opening of Korea through the Treaty of Kangha, the Sino-Japanese war and the Russo-Japanese war. The victory over Russia was especially significant since it was the first time an Asian country

triumphed over a major European power. Japan had established itself as a peer of the other Western powers.

Japan stands today as the world's only non-white first world country. It has done this, not just through vigorous western adaptation, but also by the use of its unique cultural strengths such as its enormous drive and emphasis on community. As any visitor to Japan can easily testify, it has remained true to its own cultural identity. It has shown us that in this highly polarized world of poverty and power, there is alternatives to the white, western model of success.

Notes

¹ Paul Akamatsu, *Meiji 1868* (London: Ruskin House, 1972) 142.

² W.G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) 61.

³ Beasley, 66.