



# 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 China's defeat in the two Opium Wars by Britain. Industrialization had given massive advantages to European nations. They had more money and better weapons. China had been the dominant and wealthiest power in Asia. But the British navy had new artillery and gunboats. Although China's military was larger, British technology was better. China's military was ultimately defeated.

Across the East China Sea, the Japanese were determined not to fall behind the Europeans. The result was the 1868 political transformation known as the Meiji Restoration. Influenced by Western models and Japanese traditions, the Meiji Restoration allowed Japan to develop into a modern industrial nation-state.

By the nineteenth century, Japan had been ruled by emperors for around 1,500 years. But between 1185 and 1868, the emperor held little power. Instead, the government was run by a shogunate, or a group of shoguns. Shoguns were military leaders. While the emperor reigned as a "god on Earth," he was really just a symbolic leader. Japan was divided into several different regions controlled by *daimyo*. *Daimyo* were feudal lords who controlled their lands with the aid of samurai, an educated military class. The samurai received land in return for military service to a *daimyo*.

The Tokugawa family took control of the shogunate around 1600, bringing some stable leadership after a period of unrest. The Tokugawa shogunate established strong control over local *daimyo* and enforced traditional Confucian policies. Peasants, who were around 80% of the population, could not work 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 Western merchants to trade in Japan. Only the Dutch were granted a single trading post in Nagasaki. Japanese merchants could still trade in China and Korea. However, the Act of Seclusion effectively cut the Japanese off from Europeans.

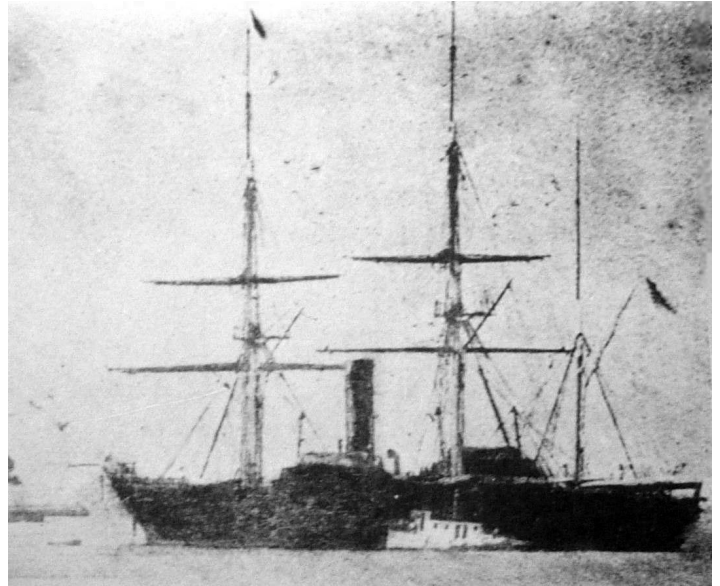


*Monochrome photograph of Yoshinobu Tokugawa, the last shogun of Japan. Public domain.*

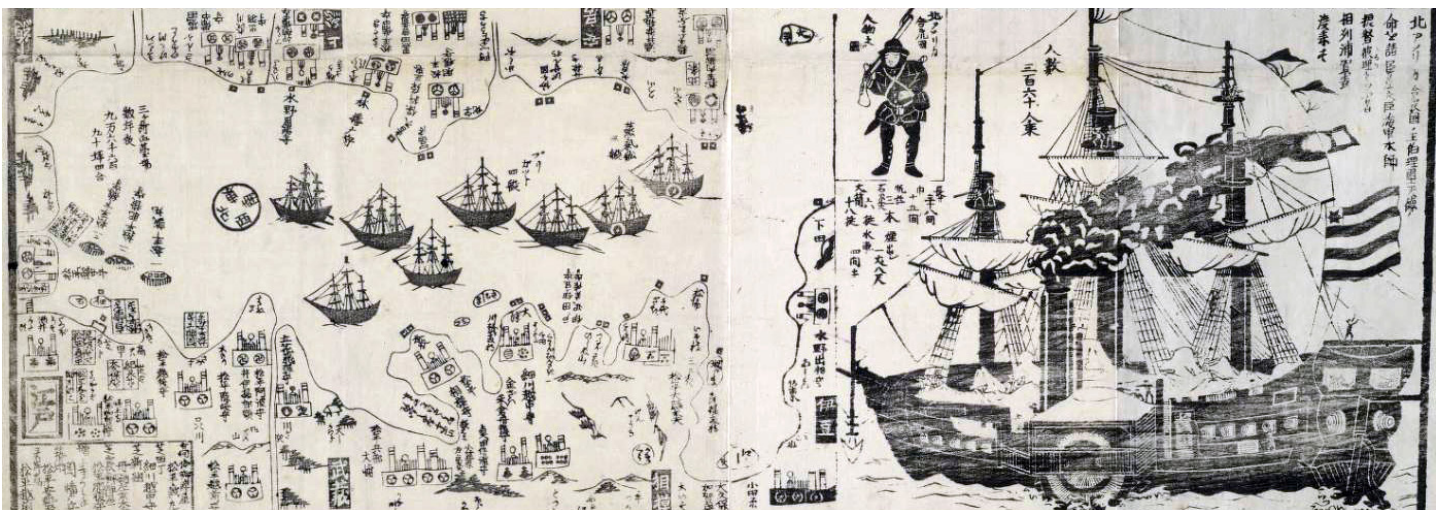
## The fall of the shogunate

Japan's isolationist policies worked for over 200 years. Still, the Tokugawa shoguns couldn't block foreign interference forever. On July 8, 1853, four American naval ships commanded by Commodore Perry anchored in Tokyo as a kind of "shall we trade or shall we fight?" message. Japan had no navy, so fighting wasn't much of an option. Instead, Japan was forced to trade with the U.S., breaking the centuries-long ban on foreign trade. This opened up Japan to European ideas. However, foreign money entered the Japanese markets too quickly. It destabilized the economy. Japan had just witnessed the Opium Wars in China, showing a possible effect of doing business with the West. Japanese leaders were now hoping to avoid a similar conflict.

The Japanese people began to blame the shogun for their problems. The shogun appointed many lower-ranking samurai to official government positions. Normally this was a great honor. However, Japanese society had a rigid class system that prevented these men from actually having samurai-level power. Many of these lower-ranking samurai felt like the upper class was abusing them. Now they believed that the Tokugawa shogun was endangering Japanese independence by letting in foreign influence. So they used their loyalty as a weapon. The lower-ranked samurai weakened the shogun by turning their worship to the emperor. Their slogan was *sonnō jōi*—"Revere the emperor, Expel the barbarian." These rebellious groups 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 became advisors to the new emperor, a 14-year-old named Meiji. The samurai used their influence over Meiji to politically restructure Japan. They pressured the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, to step down. Yoshinobu tried to fight against his replacement, but he failed. The emperor's position as the true leader of Japan had been strengthened... 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. This oath had five points and proved the emperor would transform Japan into a modern nation-state. The points were modeled on the ideals of European nation-states. These points included the creation of assemblies, public discussion, and allowing all social classes to participate in government. People would also no longer be limited to traditional class-specific 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. They no longer had stipends, or bonus payments, and lost the right to carry swords. Some of the samurai resisted these changes. The samurai were once the military and political backbone of a divided country. 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 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. All male citizens were required to serve in the military. The new government welcomed 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 showed 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.

European powers quickly challenged Japanese control over the Korean peninsula. The Russians believed that they had nothing to fear from Japan, so they invaded Korea. But the Japanese military had grown since the Meiji Restoration. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) ended in victory for Japan. Europeans were shocked to learn their militaries were not undefeatable. After the Russo-Japanese war, Korea officially became part of the Japanese empire. Japan focused on making the region modern, but many Koreans also suffered greatly at the hands of the Japanese.

## What did the Meiji Restoration accomplish?

Unlike the nineteenth-century revolutions in Europe and the Americas, the Meiji restoration was not aiming for democracy. Instead, the Meiji restoration was the lower-ranking elites forcing a change in the political organization of Japan. The new government did adopt Western technologies and instituted reforms based on Western models. Still, Japan didn't become a European-style state.



Rather, the reformers used Western ideas to re-organize the government while still holding on to some Japanese traditions. 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. The political system now allowed people to pursue new opportunities. Japan also underwent rapid 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 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.*



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### Image credits

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