

# Meiji Japan's Pursuit of a Modern Nation-State: An Interpretation

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to revisit the central position of Meiji Ishin (Meiji Restoration) in 19th Century Japan as it was considered a watershed point in the history of Japan. The Japanese and Western scholars generally agreed that the event had paved the way for the modernization of Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Thus, it seems little doubt that the event was considered of great importance for Meiji insurgents who later took up the country's leadership in the country to safeguard and protect the suzerainty of Japan at the expense of steady Western encroachments into Japanese waters since the 1850s. In so doing, the study uses a method of content analysis to examine the essentiality of the Meiji Ishin based on Japanese and Western literature. The study demonstrates that the Meiji insurgents who had taken charge of transforming Japan as a modern and strong nation-state economically and militarily in the 1870s until 1890s pointed out that this revolution was indeed their utmost step otherwise Japan would succumb to Western imperialism. The study also demonstrates that Meiji leaders (names include Ito Hirobumi, Saigo Takamori, and Kido Takayoshi to name but a few) who later had paved the way for Meiji Restoration in 1868, had strategically realized the dangers that the Western Powers posed towards Japan which then partly explained their attempts of overthrowing the Shogunate administration in 1868. Eventually, the occurrence of Meiji Ishin in 1868 set the stage for the creation of modern administrative, political, and economic changes in Japan.*

**Keywords:** meiji ish-in, meiji restoration, Tokugawa, meiji insurgencies, imperial factor

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## 1. Introduction

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a steady Western presence in the East Asian region which alarmed the Japanese leaders that the very position of Japan as an independent and sovereign state would soon be exposed to Western expansionism in the region. It is safe to note that, in the context of this worrying situation, some far-sighted Japanese leaders had engineered the *Meiji Ishin* in 1868 that replaced then the obsolete Bakufu administration with reform-minded leadership under the tutelage of the Meiji Emperor. For many, the Meiji Restoration has been considered as a breakaway in Japanese history that provided a springboard for much-awaited reforms in Japan. It seemed to the Meiji leaders that they should emulate the West in whichever way possible and in so doing, however, interestingly, they were not merely copying the West, yet they filtered them, to a greater extent, into a Japanese style.

Moreover, given the extent through which the *Meiji Ishin* had impacted Japan from 1868 onwards, many have attempted to explore and examine the event and its significance towards Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This interest among the Japanese and Western scholars was well continued even until today though they looked at the event from different dimensions which would certainly enrich the field. Nevertheless, it seems to the researcher that there is very minimal discussion is ever made on the question of whether the Meiji Ishin was the only viable option left for some Japanese leaders who in turn sought to remedy the worrying situation that befell Japan in the later years of Shogunate administration.

These conscious Japanese leaders (names include Kido Takayoshi, Ito Hirobumi, Okuma Shigenobu, etc) realized that they had to do something to rectify the current situations that embroiled with growing political and economic uncertainties following the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S Navy to Japan in 1853. Matthew Perry had demanded that Japan would be opened to foreign trade with a strong impression that failure to do so on the part of the Shogunate administration would result in the physical attacks inflicted on the latter. The Shogunate administration left with no other option had to sign the consent for opening a few Japanese ports to the United States in the following year.

This had brought about the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Friendship with the United States in 1854. The event led to the signing of similar treaties with other Western Powers (Britain, France, Russia, Netherlands to name a few). For some far-sighted Japanese leaders, these undesirable circumstances were unacceptable to them. Soon afterward, the anti-Western sentiment (*sonno-joi*) among the Japanese people was getting strong to the point when some Westerners were killed. Of course, the Western Powers demanded the Shogunate administration to punish the culprits. Another instance was where the Choshu domain had taken a serious measure by attacking foreign ships traversing Shimonoseki Strait between 1863-1864. Nevertheless, the Western Powers via joint naval forces of Britain, France, Netherlands, and the United States retaliated by bombarding the Choshu forces that led to the surrender of the latter. The Western Powers demanded indemnity from the Shogunate administration and the Choshu *han* and opening of ports to foreign trade which the former had to forcefully accept.

## 2. Historical Analysis

To begin with, the *Meiji Ishin* was carried out mainly, according to both Western and Japanese historians, by lower-ranking samurai from the four powerful *hans* (domains), namely Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Saga besides few other more interested parties against the *Bakufu* administration. This came about due to many reasons such as the signing of unequal treaties with the Western Powers (such as the United States and Britain to name a few) which led to the opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade. The opening of Japanese ports in the 1850s to the foreign powers had given birth to a steady wave of anti-foreign sentiments across the nation. This feeling was manifested in one certain slogan called *sonno-joi* (revered the emperor, expel the Barbarians).

In addition, clashes also took place between the feudal lords and Westerners, and on some occasions some of the Westerners were killed by some dissatisfied samurai (of course the famous incident involving the Westerners was the Richardson Affair'. In reaction to this, as expected, the Western powers demanded that the Shogun punish the culprits and their feudal lords (*daimyos*) who were involved in these conflicts (Jean-Pierre Lehmann, 1982). On the other hand, some far-sighted Japanese individuals realized that, especially in the 1860s, to confront the Western powers, militarily, face to face, was almost impossible. This assumption

proved to be true following the bombardment of Kagoshima in 1863 and Shimonoseki in 1864 respectively. The samurai of these two areas, without doubt, could only watch these military demonstrations with hard feelings.

To make things worse, the Bakufu administration was found to have its hands tied in the middle; at one side, the shogun needed to cool down this anti-foreign sentiment while on the other side, he needed to assure the Western powers that the order and security in the state under control as the Japanese administration remained committed to the treaties signed previously (Kitajima Masamoto & G. Cameron Hurst, 2020). This political uncertainty was also seen when samurai in a few other domains had also revealed their dissatisfaction with the *bakufu*'s management of national affairs. The classic example would be the Choshu domain which had demanded a serious commitment from the Shogun to deal with this sort of national affairs. As mentioned previously, this had triggered waves of anger both from the Western powers and the Shogun.

Choshu domain in particular was hostile towards the Bakufu administration and the former's samurai believed not to put their trust anymore in the Shogun. They wanted to restore the government's power and authority in the hands of the Emperor. Sooner Choshu became the centre for disgruntled samurai from other domains who were found to be impatient with their leaders' caution (Kitajima Masamoto & G. Cameron Hurst, 2020). In 1866, Choshu took a step ahead by allying with its neighbouring domain, Satsuma, as an attempt to resist any Shogun-led military expeditions (which took place in 1866) against them. However, Choshu forces were able to defeat the shogun's forces which further embarrassed the latter. Additionally, 1866, also saw the death of the shogun Iemochi which then paved the way for the succession of the last shogun, Yoshinobu.

The newly appointed Shogun had realized the irresistible need for national unity. In 1867, he, therefore, decided to tender his resignation with the belief that he could avoid a full-scale military confrontation from the two powerful domains, namely Satsuma and Choshu. He had also believed that while anticipating there was a change of national administration in near future, he would be able to retain any significant role in that administration. Yet he proved to have wrongly judged this critical situation in the country. Yoshinobu then decided to march forward his forces against opposing forces which would be known as the Restoration movement but to no avail. In January 1868 a substantial number of the *daimyos* were summoned to Kyoto to be informed of the establishment of an Emperor-led government. The Emperor later moved to Edo and renamed the city Tokyo. As the new Japanese government was in place, the effort towards modernization of Japan has begun (Kitajima Masamoto & G. Cameron Hurst, 2020).

### 3. Discussion

In their pursuit of modernization, the Japanese leaders had introduced a few changes in the administrative and socio-political structures in the country. In doing this, the new leadership looked at the West as a model where they can implement intended reforms or change in the country. In doing so, they did not entirely depend on one single Western country to look for suitable ways or approaches to reorganize Japan's socio-economic and political systems whichever they saw fit.

In getting a fuller picture of what sort of greatness and splendour is visible in the West, the Meiji Government had decided to send a mission (Iwakura Embassy, 1871-1873) abroad which

was joined by distinguished members of Meiji leaders and students. It is not an exaggeration therefore to note that this mission served as a golden opportunity for the Japanese leaders to witness by their bare eyes the widely coined terms of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ achieved in the West besides attempting to renegotiate the previous unequal treaties signed with the Western Powers. They seemed determined to learn from the West and eventually translate those ‘arts’ and ‘crafts’ into their own country. In hindsight, this was in fact in line with the famous national slogan of the late Edo period and early Meiji rule, namely *fukoku kyohei* (“enrich the country, strengthen the military”).

In addition, upon returning from the mission, many of these Meiji leaders assumed prominent positions as ministers, vice-ministers, high ranking officials in government agencies and bodies. Some of them later took up the highest ladder of government positions as Prime Ministers (such as Ito Hirobumi and Yamagata Aritomo). Imbued with the high spirit of modernization, these leaders later carried out a series of reforms agendas across various socio-economic and political realms. Many of them, however, agreed that for such last-lasting reforms to be effectively implemented, changes to the country’s education system were pivotal. On the same note, one of the foremost Japanese scholars, Michio Nagai, observed that the efforts towards modernization in Japan had later given birth to a certain process which he termed as ‘*Japanization*’.

He termed this process as ‘*Japanization*’ to indicate the adoption of western ‘tools’ into the country concerning education, administration, economy, and military affairs to name a few which were later being refined and implemented based on Japanese values and traditions. In doing so, of course, they faced some difficulties and setbacks as there seems to have been no single perfect model from the West that could meet the Japanese ‘moods’ and ‘circumstances’. This largely explains why, for instance, in the education sector, they had tried different kinds of Western models from one country to another (from the French type to the American and then to the Prussian models) (Michio Nagai, 2005).

Nonetheless, in terms of educational reform in the country, the efforts towards the reorganization of Japan's education system were without doubt steadily taking place following the return of the Iwakura Mission from abroad in the early 1870s. The gesture towards a new compulsory system was officially authorized through the Education Ordinance of 1872 that called for the establishment of eight universities, 256 middle schools, and 53,760 elementary schools. Meanwhile, compulsory education was set at four years. In doing this, the Meiji leadership thus had decided to impose a compulsory education system, modelled after the Western type of schooling system. Yet, after all, it is important to bear in mind that the process of educational reform did not constitute a full adoption of Western models in its entirety (Shunsuke Sumikawa, 1999).

Moreover, while in matters concerning the reforms in Japan’s administrative and political landscapes, it also seemed that Prussia became one of the most influential countries through which Japan looked to it as a model. (Augustus Flottman, 2012). In this respect, Ito Hirobumi together with his fellow Japanese embarked on another observation mission in Europe. This mission was purposely meant to study and investigate the Western political systems as means to prepare for the creation of a much-awaited Japanese constitution. Interestingly, Ito found his way in Germany and Austria. In Germany, he came into contact with Rudolf von Gneist, and later he went to the University of Vienna (Austria) through which he studied arts of monarchical government under Lorenz von Stein. Von Stein emphasized that supreme legislative and administrative power resided in the monarch and in that the monarch and the

state were synonymous. It seemed that Ito was fascinated by the ideas of this Austrian thinker where the former believed that those who followed the models of liberal countries like England, America, and France had led Japan in the wrong direction.

Upon his return to Japan from his visits to Austria and Germany, Ito took the government's leadership to commit a series of promises and commitments towards modernization and the creation of the Japanese Constitution assumed among the foremost agenda of the government. Among the measures he implemented was firstly to lift the very position of the Emperor as the Imperial Household was to be put under a separate administration. A specific law governing the Imperial Household was also enacted. Moreover, the ancient court title *Naidaijin* (Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal) was also revitalized in 1885. Another important creation was the institution of a peerage system in 1884. It consisted of several conservative leaders who would convene in 1890. In 1888 he instituted the creation of the Privy Council (Sumitsu-in) as he gave up the Council of State (*Dajokan*) which was previously in practice in the early years of Meiji administration. He had also led the way for the creation of a strong executive cabinet based on the German model. Additionally, in terms of the state's administration, a civil service examination was introduced in 1887 to select and appoint qualified government officers in the country. (Eugene Soviak, 2005).

Furthermore, according to Meiji leadership, another critical area that would have to be restructured was the military. One bitter fact is that the Meiji leaders knew, at least since the 1850s, that Japan would not stand a chance to fight against the Western Powers militarily. Therefore, at the expense of growing Western trading and commercial interests in Japan on one hand and to protect Japanese's suzerainty on the other, this calls for military reorganization. To illustrate this, the Meiji government had introduced compulsory military conscription in the country (promulgated in January 1873); the Japanese military was later modelled after the Prussian model, while its navy followed closely that of the British navy. One certain scholar opined that introducing the Japanese youths of all classes to the arts of military life, had thus created a sense of nationalistic spirit within themselves (Ernst L. Presseisen, 1965).

Additionally, the government had also founded an autonomous General Staff in 1878 and created an Army War College in 1883. Following the introduction of The Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors of 1882, this had strategically linked a direct relationship between the Japanese Emperor and the military. This was further substantiated formally via the promulgation of the Japanese Constitution in 1890. The constitution designated the Japanese Emperor as the Commander-in-chief. Moreover, the ministers of army and navy only can be filled in by officers on active duty as spelled out in two Imperial Ordinances in 1900 (Leonard A. Humphreys, 1995).

Moreover, in terms of military's strength, at least before 1886, Japan could only have eight modern warships, however, in the late 1880s, with the presence of one able Japanese farsighted military, Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922), he had started the programme of transforming the small-scale Japanese troops into that of large-scale, mobile, self-sufficient operational units combining infantry, cavalry, artillery engineers, and supply troops (the division). There had also been some military experts invited from abroad to come over to Japan to help the Japanese government to modernize its army. Such names include Klemens Wilhelm Jacob Meckel (1842-1905), who had been appointed as a professor at Army College and concurrently the advisor to the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff in 1885 (James B. Crowley, 1966).

In terms of political transformations, it seemed also vital for the Japanese leadership to restructure the country's institutions according to standards of Western countries, of course, some of the Japanese leaders differed in their views and preferences on how much they could emulate the West. As a matter of fact, among the first things that the Meiji government did following the takeover of the Shogun-led administration was the grant of the Charter of Oath on April 6, 1868, by Emperor Meiji. This outlined the commitment of the Meiji government to provide justice and equality to all Japanese society through several reforms that they were about to set up and implement in the country. For instance, the new leadership promised that a sort of national assembly would be established to deal with all public and state matters through public discussion at one hand. Additionally, all the non-civilized customs and acts of the past would be put to an end.

To elaborate on this Charter, specifically, it was said that the underlying intention of this Charter was "to reject despotism in politics and expand political participation, to build a society in which individuals could exercise their talents, and to acquire knowledge by joining the ranks of the international community, especially developed countries, without adhering to old customs". In this respect, there had been a series of early attempts to implement the government's commitments towards the creation of "assemblies and public discussions" mentioned in the Charter Oath, nevertheless, it took some time before the Meiji government could actualize those promises. Then came a momentous event in 1889 when Japan introduced its first constitution which was modelled along the Western lines. A parliament, called the Diet, was established and the emperor was placed as the sovereign figurehead (Shunsuke Sumikawa, 1999).

With the return of the Imperial court to the state's affairs (though it may lack direct power), the two opposing sides, the former pro-Bakufu, and the newly created Meiji leadership parties, however, seemed to agree that the Imperial Court should refrain itself from direct intervention in the political affairs of the state, yet still, there was a need for the participation of former feudal lords in the running of the state's affairs through '*Kogi*' or assembly. Another similar move was seen in June 1870 when the government released one certain document called the 'Document of the Form of Government'. This then led to the creation of one certain political body, called the Grand Council of State. With this document, elements of fundamental governmental mechanisms such as the separation of Powers, the authority and jurisdiction of the main state's institutions, and the appointment of officials came into existence.

In this respect, in July 1873, Kido Takayoshi, who returned to Japan earlier than the rest of the Iwakura Mission to Europe and the United States, submitted a memorandum to the emperor, proposing that it was imperative to expand the Charter Oath and to create a Japanese Constitution. He saw the significant roles the Emperor could play (for instance in mobilizing the support from the masses) in securing the independence, wealth, and power of the country. Thus, it was not surprising to observe his preference of creating a strong government under the active roles of the Emperor. This, according to Kido, shall be realized through the establishment of the constitution. Kido's ideal proposal was a constitutional monarchy accompanied by a growth in the national consciousness. On the same note, Kido's fellow statesmen, Okubo Shigenobu had also expressed his views in matters concerning the types of government possible for Japan to adopt as he favoured the kind of "co-governance" by the monarch and the people (which refers to constitutional monarchy). (Takii Kazuhiro, 2014).

In terms of models of the constitution that are suitable for Japan to adopt in the state, especially following the passing of Kido Takayoshi, it seemed that Japanese statesmen like Ito Hirobumi

and his close circles were looking at Prussian-style constitution as a right model for the Japanese Constitution. Others like Okubo favoured the British-based constitution. Takii Kazuhiro (2014) mentioned that it seems vital for the Japanese leaders to establish an executive branch that could exert its influence *vis-a-vis* the parliament. In this respect, such a prominent leader like Ito Hirobumi came into the scene. He had been working on the country's constitution since his return from second and third visits to Europe in the 1880s. He had at first worked on putting aside the Emperor and its Imperial Household outside the perimeter of the cabinet's control. Under his premiership in 1885, Ito had successfully created a strong cabinet system as well as a clear-cut separation between the imperial house and the executive branches (Takii Kazuhiro, 2014; Kenichi Ohno, 2017).

Furthermore, in terms of economic transformation, Alexander David Brown (2005) for instance observed that economic changes in Japan were characterized by a considerable increase in technological capabilities of the state's industry which allowed the country's economy to rapidly industrialized. He commented that the Meiji government had initiated a policy of replacement which is called *kokusanka* that denotes 'converting to domestic production. Without a doubt, this aspiration was to be achieved through the borrowing of Western 'tools' and know-how into the country's industry. The Meiji leaders reasoned that by doing this, as a result, it would lead to 'technological diversification in the industry which then increased the competitiveness of export industries. This of course required a state's direction and or intervention and close cooperation with the private sectors.

Interestingly, in the early years of the Meiji administration, the strategic aim of Meiji economic policies (which primarily focused on the build-up of the military capacity of the country) led to the development of heavy industry along the way though it was not intended for industrialization per se (Alexander David Brown, 2005). Upon their return home, it was said that Okubo was very enthusiastic about promoting an industrialization plan into Japan's economy. This was possible when he assumed the post of Minister of Finance and later as a Minister of Interior during the early Meiji administration. Among his known policies were hiring foreign experts, reorganizing public infrastructures including the construction of roads, railroads, and the creation of specific research centres. In short, these initiatives proved to be extremely vital so that proper infrastructure was put in place so that it could significantly drive Meiji's economic growth at an accelerated pace.

In addition, to facilitate the borrowing of Western technology, the government had also created state-owned industries which catered mainly for military production, shipbuilding, and silk reeling to name but a few besides the establishment of technical institutes and sending students abroad. In addition to that, new reorganized systems of weights and measures, monetary system, banking system, and joint-stock companies were later introduced to support the intended pro-Western economic environments in the country. Nevertheless, Okubo was not able to see the fruits of his policies as he was assassinated in 1878 yet his keen followers like those of Kuroda Kiyotaka and Okuma Shigenobu continued his policies. (Kenichi Ohno, 2006).

#### 4. Methodology

The article aims to revisit the essentiality of the Meiji Ishin and its impact on the efforts of modernization undertaken by the Meiji Government in Japan. Sources for this analysis will be taken from studies on a wide range of scholarly works which are written by Western and Japanese scholars and are selected for their relevance to the study. Furthermore, using mainly library research methods and archival documents, this paper used existing published works and

documents on events relating to the Meiji Ishin and reforms agenda in the country. Additionally, archival documents obtained touched on a wide range of political and social-economic commentaries (both in Japanese and English languages) relating to the Meiji era that is accessible via digitalized copies (most of them) contributed by the National Archives of Japan, National Archives of the United Kingdom, the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, and the National Institute for Defense Studies of the Ministry of Defense of Japan.

Lastly, this article also uses a method of content analysis which can be defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use”. That said, the researcher uses analytical constructs or inferences, making sense of texts found in contexts where the current study is conducted. In this respect, two domains, the texts, and the contexts are logically independent, and the researcher makes conclusions by looking at these two domains (White & Marsh, 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate here that in the height of high imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a notable number of ‘conscious’ non-European societies felt alarmed with steady Western encroachments into their shores. In this regard, the Meiji leaders felt the same as they realized there was a dire need to remedy their existing situations. The Western Powers, on their part, cited that they were tasked to bring the most used expressions, none other than ‘civilization’ and ‘enlightenment’ into these non-Western societies. Of course, from the standards of the Western world of the time, Japan was left behind in many aspects (military, economic and administrative structures to name but a few).

Therefore, to meet the mighty Western Powers, the newly created Japanese leadership had mobilized their men of influence and intellect to reorganize their society in the post-restoration era. The sorts of reform policies planned and carried out throughout the 1870s until 1890s indicate their enthusiasm towards putting Japan at equal footing with the Western world which without a doubt showed a remarkable feat. Thus, it is safe to note that the *Meiji Ishin* was indeed extremely essential in creating a path for Japan to become a strong and modern nation-state, militarily and economically.

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