Did the Meiji Restoration Constitute a Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Japan?


NO: W.G. Beasley, from *The Meiji Restoration* (Stanford University Press, 1972)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Historian Andrew Gordon states that the Meiji Restoration created fundamental changes in Japanese society, thus meriting the term “revolution.”

NO: Historian W.G. Beasley argues that when compared with other revolutions like the French and Russian, the Meiji Restoration did not constitute a revolution in the classical sense.

In 1603, the Japanese closed themselves off from the rest of the world. Fearful of Western economic and religious influences, which could corrupt their traditions and mores, they banned foreign contacts and meted out severe punishments (including death) to any who violated the ban. Part of this process was the outlawing of Christianity as a recognized religion in Japan. This self-imposed exile would last for more than 250 years.

The decision to isolate was made by Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868), Japan’s ruling power during that period. Since the feudal period of Japanese history, the country had been ruled by *shoguns*, who were hereditary leaders. Like dynastic rulers anywhere, their right to rule lasted as long as their ability to maintain control, and they could always be replaced by another leader who could then establish his family’s rule over the country. Thus, for most of the second millennium, Japan was ruled by successive shogunates: Kamakura (1192–1333), Ashikaga (1335–1673), and Tokugawa (1603–1868). During this time, civil wars became prevalent, as there was no shortage of ambitious men to test the waters of political supremacy.

The shoguns were assisted in their rule by *daimyo*, feudal lords who sometimes posed threats to their masters. The *samurai*, Japan’s legendary
warrior class, provided the power base for any shogun (For more information of the samurai, see Volume I, Issue 12 of this series.) Under this system, the Japanese emperor, whose office dated back to the fifth century C.E., had been reduced to an isolated figurehead. With the modern world casting covetous eyes around the globe, many wondered how long Japan's self-imposed exile would last, and whether it would end by outside force or national choice.

In 1853, U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Tokyo, seeking and receiving a treaty from the Japanese government. Although its terms were not seriously detrimental to Japanese hegemony, it did start a trend that resulted in similar treaties with other foreign nations. In Japan, these actions had the dual effect of forcing the Japanese to consider what they could do to limit further Western intervention and causing the rise of nationalist sentiment against foreign elements. This resulted in an overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate by an alliance of feudal lords and samurai in 1866, which returned the emperor to a position of authority in the new Japanese government. The new emperor took the name Meiji (enlightened government), and since that time, the period in Japanese history from 1868 to 1912 has been known in the West as the Meiji Restoration. Thus began Japan's modern history.

The transformation of Japan seemed to be profound; no part of Japanese life escaped the winds of change. Although those who overthrew the Tokugawa government had no set plan—and many of them had diametrically opposed goals and objectives—change was the order of the day. Some of the most important results of Meiji rule were the growth of Japan's industrial and military power, presumably accomplished to counterbalance Western power in Asia. This was done under the aegis of a highly centralized government that featured a "top down" power structure. Under such a system, a premium was placed on nationalism as a unifying force. Some of the Meiji-made decisions were to have a positive impact on Japan's modernization; others, such as imperialism, were to have drastic consequences for the nation and its people.

Some basic questions about the Meiji Restoration concern the nature of the movement. How much and what type of change did it effect? Was it revolutionary? How does it compare to its French and Russian counterparts? A problem facing one who attempts to answer those questions lies in definition, and in this case, an accurate translation of words. The Japanese word to describe the Meiji movement is "Ishin," which may be closer in meaning to "renovation" than the Western-translated "restoration." Keep this in mind as we assess the revolutionary nature of the Meiji restoration through the work of Andrew Gordon and W.G. Beasley, who present complementary, yet differing opinions on the subject. The former refers to the Meiji Restoration and its reforms as "breathtaking and fully meriting the term revolution." The latter agrees that the Meiji Restoration was revolutionary, but argues that it "lacked the avowed social purpose that gives the 'great' revolutions of history a certain common character."

A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present

The Samurai Revolution

The "restoration" of the young Emperor Meiji in 1867–68 was little more than a coup d'état. A relatively small band of insurgents had toppled the Tokugawa bakufu. They stated their intent to restore direct imperial rule, but this was not likely to occur. Strong emperors who exercised power directly had been exceptional in Japanese history. Political contenders at the time feared that the rebels from Satsuma and Chōshū would simply form a new bakufu and use the name of the emperor to rule from a narrow base of power. After all, beyond the political upheaval in Kyōto and Edo, little had changed. The islands of Japan were still divided into nearly two hundred relatively autonomous domains. Each maintained its own treasury and army. The samurai were still receiving stipends, which they viewed as a hereditary birthright. The daily life of the countryside and cities had gone through some tumult. But the scattered peasant rebellions were short-lived.

However, if we compare this situation of 1868 in any aspect—political, economic, social, cultural—to that of just a decade later, the changes are breathtaking and fully merit the term revolution. Of course, no society ever totally severs itself from its past, and Japan was no exception. But the range and depth of change were astonishing to observers at the time. It remains so when looking back after 150 years. One of the most insightful contemporaneous observers was a British scholar named Basil Hall Chamberlain. He lived in Japan for over thirty years beginning in 1873. In 1891, he wrote:

To have lived through the transition stage of modern Japan makes a man feel preternaturally old; for here he is in modern times, with the air full of talk about bicycles and bacilli and "spheres of influence," and yet he can himself distinctly remember the Middle Ages. The dear old Samurai who first initiated the present writer into the mysteries of the Japanese language, wore a queue and two swords. This relic of feudalism now sleeps in Nirvana.

His modern successor, fairly fluent in English, and dressed in a serviceable suit of dittos, might almost be European, save for a certain obliqueness of the eyes and scantiness of beard. Old things pass away between a night and a morning.

Andrew Gordon
Although Chamberlain here stresses how unusually swiftly the events of this “transition stage” unfolded, his writing also suggests that Japan’s transition was part of a broader global shift. And indeed, the revolution that began in the 1860s was a Japanese variation on a global theme of modern revolution. Changes that took place in societies around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also unfolded in Japan.

Although sharing much with a global history of modernizing societies, the Japanese revolution took place through a process that differed from the revolutions in Europe of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In Europe, members of newly powerful classes, especially the urban bourgeoisie, challenged and sometimes overthrew the privileges of long-entrenched aristocrats. By contrast, in Japan of the Meiji era it was members of the elite of the old regime, the samurai, who spearheaded the attack on the old order. Their role has led many historians to describe Japan in the nineteenth century as undergoing a “revolution from above” or an “aristocratic revolution.”

In the twentieth century, other modernizing revolutions also unfolded through a process in which members of elite groups undermined their own well-established positions while they restructured the political order. The Japanese mode of modern revolution was not unique. Rather, it contrasted with earlier Western revolutions and resembled some later ones. This sort of elite-led revolution took place in Japan because of particular features of the samurai class, both weaknesses and strengths. On the negative side, change was possible because the samurai were not a securely landed elite. They were essentially salaried employees of their lords. Although this status was hereditary, it was less rooted in property than a European-style feudal estate, a Chinese gentry holding, or a Korean aristocratic status (yangban). The samurai had less to lose than elites in such societies. They were hard-pressed to protect their privilege as hereditary government employees once the new rulers decided to revoke it. Some did protest the actions of their former comrades bitterly, but others were either unable or unwilling to resist. On the positive side, many of the activists in the restoration movement had already developed a commitment to serving and building a realm that went beyond the narrow confines of a single domain. This emerging national consciousness offered a compelling reason for many to accept programs of far-reaching change.

Programs Of Nationalist Revolution

The leaders of the new Meiji government in 1868 were thrilled at the ease and speed with which they overcame the Tokugawa. They remained insulted by the unequal and coerced foreign presence and worried about the prospect of continued foreign encroachment. They were simultaneously fearful of resistance from domestic opponents. Domain armies remained in place, after all. Some had considerable stocks of Western arms.

The Meiji revolutionaries were motivated by fear of these challenges. They were also moved by their own sense of the ongoing problems of the Tokugawa order: military and economic weakness, political fragmentation, and a social hierarchy that failed to recognize men of talent. Propelled by both fear and discontent with the old regime, they generated an ambitious agenda, through a process of trial and error, aiming to build a new sort of national power.

Political Unification and Central Bureaucracy

Their first dramatic step was to abolish all the daimyō domains, thus dismantling a political order in place for 260 years. By 1868, almost immediately after the restorationist coup, top leaders of the new provisional government such as Kido Kōn of Chōshū and Saigō Takamori of Satsuma decided that the politically fragmented system of domains had to be overhauled. They acted with careful tactics and reached their goal in just three years. One British observer marvelled at this and other changes in 1872: “[F]our years ago we were still in the middle ages—we have leapt at a bound into the nineteenth century—out of poetry into plain useful prose.”

The move toward an integrated national polity began in March 1869. The new government convinced key daimyō of prestige and power, especially those of Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa, and Hizen, to voluntarily surrender their lands back to the emperor. As the patrons of many of the coup planners, these men were guaranteed respect and a voice in the new order if they wished. In fact, they were all quickly reappointed as domain governors with handsome salaries. Nonetheless, the “return of lands” established the principle that all lands and people were subject to the emperor’s rule. By early 1870, all daimyō had formally returned their lands and taken appointments as governors of their domains, but they retained significant autonomy, as in the past.

Preparing the ground for the complete abolition of the daimyō domains, the Meiji reformers worked to place domain governments in sympathetic hands. They pressed the daimyō to appoint men of talent and often modest rank to key administrative posts. Such people would be likely to welcome further reform. Kido Kō in and other top officials in the Meiji government also won support of powerholders in many domains, both daimyō and their followers, by promising them posts in the new central government. They backed such persuasion by threat of force, creating an imperial army primarily from Satsuma and Chōshū samurai. It was untested, but it was stronger than any single domain’s forces or any likely combination of forces.

Having bought off potential opposition leaders and built support in key domains with these measures, the government in August 1871 had the emperor announce that all domains were immediately abolished. They were replaced with “prefectures” whose governors were appointed from the center. This was much more than a renaming of domains into prefectures. It was a stunning change, with immediate visible consequences. The central government would now collect taxes from domain lands. The daimyō were ordered to move to Tokyo. Many castles were dismantled. Within just three months, the number of political units was consolidated dramatically, from 280 domains to 72 prefectures. Most of the new governors were not former daimyō. They were middling samurai from the insurgent domains now controlling the government.
The creation of this bureaucratic state was a step of great importance in the history of modern Japan. The Meiji rulers inherited a Tokugawa legacy of bureaucratic rule by civilianized samurai. They extended its reach by eliminating domains. They deepened its reach by replacing the clumsy Tokugawa administrative machinery of overlapping jurisdictions with functional ministries with clearly defined responsibilities. They bolstered its legitimacy by putting the meritocratic ideals of the Tokugawa system into practice. And finally, they elevated its prestige by defining the bureaucratic mission as one of service to the emperor. They gave the state a greater legitimacy and power than it had ever held in the past.

Simultaneously, of course, the Meiji leaders had to erect a new national political structure to govern these domains turned prefectures. For several years they groped in this direction, experimenting with a confusing variety of political forms. They bolstered their claim as restorationists by labeling these first government offices with ancient Chinese terms used by the Japanese court in the Heian period (794–1192). In early 1868, the Sat-Chō rebels and court officials placed themselves atop a provisional government to rule in the name of emperor. Later that year they established the Council of State as the highest political authority and monopolized its highest posts. The organization of this council was revised in 1869 and again in 1871. Later in 1871 it was replaced by a tripartite set of ministries of the Center, Left, and Right, further subdivided into various functional ministries (Finance, Foreign Affairs, Public Works, Home Affairs).

This format proved relatively effective. It persisted until 1885, when the Meiji leaders inaugurated a cabinet system modeled explicitly along European lines. At the head of this government was a prime minister. He presided over a cabinet that ran the bureaucratic agencies—the several ministries—of the Japanese state. This structure was codified in the Meiji constitution of 1889, discussed in detail later in this chapter. Although this constitution provided for a deliberative assembly (the Diet), state ministers were responsible not to the Diet but to the emperor.

In the early Meiji years, the ministerial staff was recruited mainly by personal connections from the ranks of Satsuma and Chōshū samurai and their allies. But the government rather quickly moved toward a more impersonal, merit-based mode of recruitment. In 1887 it began a system of civil service examinations. From this point on, performance on this exam became the primary qualification for service in the prestigious ranks of the ministries of the Japanese imperial state.

This decree was accompanied by a large payoff to the daimyō themselves. They were granted permanent yearly salaries equivalent to roughly 10 percent of their former domain’s annual tax revenue. Daimyō were simultaneously relieved of all the costs of governing. Most were quite content to take early retirement on such generous terms. Thus, within the short span of three years, a political order in existence for over two and a half centuries simply disappeared. The Tokugawa bakufu, on the one hand, and the hundreds of semi-autonomous domains on the other, no longer existed.

The second great change of early Meiji was even more remarkable. It was achieved at greater cost. By 1876, less than a decade after the restoration coup, the economic privileges of the samurai were wiped out entirely. The coup leaders expropriated an entire social class, the semi-aristocratic elite from which they came. They met some stiff, violent resistance, but they managed to overcome it. This remarkable change amounted to a social revolution.

The government moved to expropriate the samurai primarily for financial reasons. The government reduced samurai stipends when it abolished the domains, but in the mid-1870s these payouts still consumed a huge chunk—roughly half—of state revenues. The new rulers had other uses in mind for this money. They believed that the samurai gave back relatively little value for their high costs. Their ranks included many talented people sitting idle. Their time-honored military skills, focused on swords and archery, were useless. Thus the samurai’s stipends were basically welfare for the well-born.

This case for expropriating the samurai was clear enough to government leaders soon after the restoration. But taking this step was a major undertaking. It took nearly a decade and enraged many former samurai. In particular, many of those who had supported the restoration drive, but remained in their domains after 1868, felt betrayed by their former comrades now running the Meiji government. The latter moved in small steps first, as they had with domain abolition. In 1869 they reduced the large number of samurai ranks to two, upper samurai (shizoku) and lower samurai (sotsu). In 1872 a large portion of the lower samurai were reclassified as commoners (heimin), although they retained their stipends for the moment.

In 1873, the government announced that stipends would be taxed. The next year it announced a voluntary program to convert stipends to bonds. The right to a stipend could be traded for an interest-bearing bond with a face value of five to fourteen years of income (in general, the lower the stipend, the higher the multiple). The bond would pay interest ranging from 5 to 7 percent, with smaller bonds paying higher rates. The income stream from all but the most generous bonds was a good bit lower than the annual stipend. Few samurai volunteered for this program.

The government made this program compulsory in 1876: All stipends were converted to bonds. In contrast to the well-compensated daimyō, many samurai suffered significant losses. Their annual incomes fell by anywhere from 10 to 75 percent. They further lost pride and prestige: The right to wear swords was denied to all but solidiers and policemen.

The elimination of samurai privilege allowed the new regime to redirect financial and human resources alike and was part of a larger transformation of society from a system of fixed statuses to a more fluid, merit-based social order. The other side to the abolition of samurai privilege was the end to formal restrictions on the rest of the population. At least in theory, this constituted social liberation. In 1870, all nonsamurai were classified in legal terms as commoners (heimin). With some important gender-based exceptions noted later, the restrictions of the Tokugawa era on modes of travel, dress, and hairstyle were eliminated. Restrictions on occupation were abolished. The government endeavored...
legal discrimination against the hereditary outcaste groups of Tokugawa times such as eta and hinin. These terms came to be considered slurs and were replaced in official language by the label burakumin (literally, “village people,” in reference to their segregated villages). The descendants of these outcastes, however, continued to face prejudice and discrimination.

Some commoners fared well. Not surprisingly, many of those with education and money, in particular the landowners, moneylenders, and petty manufacturers at the upper levels of rural society, thrived in the more open social order of the Meiji era. Others, especially those with weak claims to farmland, lived in desperate poverty. They depended on the unreliable benevolence of landlords to survive illness, crop failures, or price declines. Although the samurai lost their income and social privilege, they were educated and ambitious. Many landed on their feet. Others invested their bonds in new businesses and failed miserably. Still others took up arms against the new government or joined political movements on behalf of a parliament and constitution.

The literature of the Meiji period offers one window into the excitement, the opportunities, and the risks of this era of change. One example is this comment by the narrator of Footprints in the Snow, a vibrant and widely read novel set in the 1880s and written in 1901 by Tokutomi Roka:

The race will go to the swift, not the empty-headed! The real testing-time in politics will come after the Diet gets going in 1890—and in everything, not only politics: the further Japan advances on the world stage, the more opportunities for the really able!

The Conscript Army

Even before the samurai were fully dispossessed, the Meiji leaders decided they had to renovate the military from the bottom up. Key figures from Chōshū were deeply impressed at the superior performance of their mixed farmer-samurai militias in the restoration wars. These men—Kido Kōin, Ōmura Masujirō, and Yamagata Aritomo—argued forcefully for a conscript army drawn from the entire population. Their views were controversial, to say the least. In October 1869 a group of samurai in Kyoto, outraged at the conscript proposal, assassinated Ōmura. And among top government figures, the Satsuma men saw things differently from the Chōshū clique. They came from a domain where nearly one-fourth of the population had been samurai. They feared arming ignorant and potentially rebellious commoners. They wanted to ensure a major role for samurai in the new Meiji order. The champion of this position was Ōkubo Toshimichi, who ranked with Kido as one of the two most powerful leaders in the first decade of the Meiji era. At first he prevailed, with the support of Iwakura Tomomi, the most important court noble in the Meiji government. In April 1871 the government created an imperial army of just under ten thousand samurai recruited from the restoration forces.

The conservative military leadership seemed to be in control, but their ascendance was short-lived. Yamagata Aritomo returned from a trip to Europe fully convinced that mass conscription was the key not only to building military strength but also to disciplining a loyal populace. By 1873 his arguments had prevailed. The government decreed a system of universal conscription. Beginning at the age of twenty, all males were obligated to give three years of active service and four years on reserve status.

The draft was not popular. The 1873 decree noted several exemptions, for household heads, criminals, the physically unfit, students and teachers in many prescribed schools, and government officials. It also allowed people to buy their way out for a huge fee of 270 yen. This sum represented more than the annual wage of a common laborer. Large numbers of people sought to qualify for exemption or somehow scrape together the buyout fee. The army had trouble meeting the quotas for what the government itself labeled a “blood tax” (following European terminology). In 1873–74 angry crowds attacked and destroyed numerous registration centers in sixteen riots; nearly 100,000 people were arrested and punished.

As this resistance makes clear, the strong discipline and fierce loyalty shown by Japanese soldiers in later decades were by no means timeless traditional elements of Japan’s “national character.” Such resistance also took place in Europe and in the United States, where large anti-draft riots erupted during the Civil War. In Japan as elsewhere, a patriotic spirit that could induce willing military service—a key element of modern nationalism—had to be drummed into the masses of people over several decades. Japan's army passed its first major test when it put down a large samurai rebellion in 1877. An imperial rescript of 1882 addressed to soldiers and sailors enjoined youths to serve the emperor with loyalty and valor. Teachers and texts in the new public school system echoed the message. The navy was built up in the 1880s and 1890s. By the mid-1890s, Japan's military was strong enough to move from the task of keeping order at home to that of imposing its will overseas. Military service came to be accepted as the patriotic obligation of Japanese men by most recruits and their families.

Compulsory Education

Parallel to its program of military reform, the Meiji government instituted a new system of education with remarkable speed. With grand language, in 1872 it declared four years of elementary education to be compulsory for all children, boys and girls: “In a village there shall be no house without learning, and in a house, no individual without learning.” This important step reflected the new leaders’ understanding of the sources of Western power. Observation of European and American societies convinced leaders such as Kido Kōin that mass schooling, like mass conscription, was a fundamental source of the economic and military power of the West. Their initial models were primarily American and French, and the 1872 decree established a system of elementary and middle schools and national universities. At the outset, the government announced that schools were to encourage practical learning as well as independent thinking. By this means commoners would find their own way to serve the state.
Mass compulsory education was a bold initiative, and a risky one for the government. Tokugawa thinkers such as Aizawa Yasushi had complained endlessly of the “stupid commoners” who would easily be tricked by demagogic Christian missionaries into betraying the authorities, even the emperor. Such attitudes could have led the Meiji leaders to hold back from imparting literacy and potentially subversive “enlightenment” to imperial subjects who were expected to follow orders. The Meiji leadership consciously took this risk. They concluded that an ignorant populace would be a greater danger to their projects to build political and economic power. They also developed rather different views of the value of learning for girls and boys. The former were expected to learn the skills needed for future domestic roles as wives and mothers as well as loyal subjects of the emperor. The latter were expected to take their knowledge into a wider public realm of endeavor in the cause of building the nation.

Reactions to compulsory education were mixed. The era’s literature conveys the excitement of many young men at the opportunity to better themselves and serve their country, if possible in the new capital of Tokyo. In Footprints in the Snow, Tokutomi also evoked the enthusiasm for learning of the early 1880s:

About the end of August a letter came from Matsumura with a tremendous piece of news. “Tremendous news.” For us boys, in those days, these words could have only one meaning: Matsumura was leaving next month, to study in the capital—in Tokyo! You could feel his excitement in the hardly legible scrawl; his handwriting was none too firm at the best of times, but this! The characters fairly danced their way down the page in a kind of dishevelled ecstasy.

Not everyone was so happy at the obligation to attend school and the opportunity to graduate. The elementary schools were to be financed by a 10 percent local surcharge to the national property tax. In the 1870s angry taxpayers reacted to compulsory schooling as they had to the draft: They rioted. Crowds of people destroyed at least two thousand schools, usually by setting them afire. This represented close to one-tenth of the total number of schools. The passive resistance of simply not going to school was even more widespread. Rates of attendance for school-age boys and girls stood at 25 to 50 percent of the eligible population for the first decade of the new system. But eventually, as with serving in the military, attending school became a well-accepted obligation of the emperor’s subjects. By the end of the nineteenth century, rates of elementary school attendance reached levels of 90 percent or more. By 1905, 98 percent of school-age boys and 93 percent of girls were attending elementary schools as the law required. As compulsory education took root, the idea that one’s life course—at least that of young men—should be open at the outset and should reflect one’s talent and efforts became one of Japan’s most fundamental and widely held social values. In Tokugawa Japan, a major tension set the merit ideal—that men of talent should hold office—against the hereditary status system. The Meiji social revolution resolved this ideological tension clearly in favor of merit.

The Monarch at the Center

Finally, one of the most portentous new departures of the revolutionary years of early Meiji was the decision to put the emperor at the very center of the political order. The restoration activists carried out their coup in the name of the Meiji emperor. But once in power, they held no consensus on what to do with him. The populace was not particularly committed to the emperor as a political symbol. Nor was the emperor an impressive young man, whether in court garb or in Western military uniform.

After the emperor’s triumphant progress from Kyoto to Edo in 1868, the early Meiji government struggled to decide where to locate a permanent capital. Some officials supported moving the capital permanently to Edo (renamed Tokyo, or Eastern capital), some wished to send the emperor and capital back to Kyoto, and still others spoke of establishing two capitals. Not until 1889 was the decision for Tokyo made permanent. The government called the emperor’s Tokyo residence a “temporary court” until that year, when it officially renamed it the “Imperial Palace.”

Over these same two decades, as the capital moved, the image of the monarchy was transformed as well. The government heaped more and more symbolic weight upon the emperor and empress. The empress and her retinue adopted Western clothes in the 1880s as part of the effort to project an image of the monarchy as a modern institution. The emperor also underwent a striking metamorphosis to become the symbol of a modern monarch. The contrast between his earlier portraits and the famous portrait prepared by an Italian artist in 1888 best illustrates this dramatic change. The painting was subsequently photographed and enshrined in schools throughout the nation. It has defined the Meiji emperor’s image ever since.

At the same time, the constitution greatly elevated the emperor’s legal and cultural authority. From the 1880s through the 1930s, the imperial institution became an all-too-powerful unifying force. It served as a touchstone for personal, social, and national identity. It came to link individuals to immediate communities of family, workplace, and neighborhood—and beyond that to the imagined community of nation and empire.

Building A Rich Country

The Meiji leaders, especially those who traveled abroad, were profoundly impressed with the energies unleashed by industrial capitalism. Manufacturing and trade seemed as important a source of European national power as did battleships and cannons. Economic strength, in fact, appeared to be the base that supported the military superstructure of European states. Kido Kō in was typical of his colleagues in the new government. While traveling in the United States and Europe in 1872 he filled his diary with references to the “astonishing,” the “indescribable,” or the “magnificent” achievements of Western architecture, education, and industry.

Motivated by such awestruck views of Western learning and industry, government leaders undertook numerous steps to realize the foremost Meiji slogan of building a “rich country, strong army” (fukoku kyō hei). Some initi-
tives were indirect measures to build the infrastructure of an industrial economy. Others were direct measures to construct and operate mines and factories as government projects.

The most important economic reform of the 1870s was the new tax system. The new Meiji government began its life in poverty. It drew revenue from a narrow base of former Tokugawa lands and borrowed funds from some of the major Osaka merchant houses. When it replaced autonomous domains with centrally managed prefectures in 1871, it inherited the huge obligation of samurai stipends and daimyō pensions, but it also gained the opportunity to draw taxes from all the former domains. In 1873, the government announced a new national land tax designed by Ōkubo Toshimichi. It was intended to stabilize state revenues at a level roughly comparable to the sum total of bakufu and domain taxes.

The significance of the new tax system went beyond securing revenue. It changed the economic relationship of individual landowners to the state and to each other. In the Tokugawa system, land ownership had been decided by custom in villages. Revenues were collected in lump sums from villages, not from individuals. There was no state-supervised system of title deeds or land registration and no officially sanctioned market in the purchase and sale of land. In addition, taxes were based on assessed yield, not assessed value. They were usually collected in kind (in rice). This meant that the government and not the taxpayer stood to lose (or gain) from fluctuating commodity prices: If the price of rice fell, so did government revenue.

For more than a century, historians have been arguing over how to describe the profound changes of the first decades of the Meiji era. Early historians typically used the French and other European revolutions since the late eighteenth century as their model, describing the changes set in motion by the Meiji restoration as an incomplete or distorted revolution. If one accepts the premise that France in the 1790s furnishes the paradigm for a true revolution, then the changes in Japan indeed were not “complete.” If one argues that the untrammeled ascendance of a capitalist bourgeoisie that attacks and defeats an aristocratic old regime is the essence of modern revolution, Japan’s changes do appear “distorted.” After all, it was a faction of the samurai “aristocracy” more than an emerging class of bourgeois capitalists that imposed the Meiji changes.

Even in recent years, many historians, both in Japan and outside it, have explicitly or implicitly understood the history of the Meiji era and the early twentieth century from this sort of comparative perspective. But such an analysis is not helpful. It arbitrarily imposes a Eurocentric model onto world history and does not make sufficient effort to understand the history of other places on their own terms.

The great changes of the Meiji era constituted a sort of modern “revolution from above” because they were imposed by members of the hereditary samurai elite of the old regime. But until 1868, many of these leaders had been frustrated, insecure, and ambitious men in the middle to lower ranks of the samurai class. They held greater privilege than the mass of the population, but to call them aristocratic revolutionaries from above and leave it at that is misleading. It leaves us with an image of men who were coddled in privilege and then gave it up. It was precisely their intermediate status and their insecure salaried position, coupled with their sense of frustrated ambition and entitlement to rule, that account for the revolutionary energy of the Meiji insurgents and their far-reaching program of reform. This was a revolution of a frustrated subelite.

In addition to avoiding Eurocentric comparisons, it is crucial to recognize that the Meiji revolution, like modern revolutions the world over, was an ongoing, turbulent process. Public schools, the new tax system, and the draft were imposed upon an often defiant population. The unequal treaties remained extremely controversial. Beginning with the birth of the new Meiji regime, the question of who would participate, and on what terms, was of the greatest importance to a quickly expanding public. The Meiji revolution had changed much but settled little.
The Meiji Restoration

Introduction

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century China and Japan both faced pressure from an intrusive, expanding West. This entailed, first, a political and military danger, manifested in two Anglo-Chinese wars and in the use of force on many other occasions, threatening their independence; and second, a challenge to their traditional culture from one that was alien in many of its fundamental concepts, as well as superior in technology and science. Emotionally and intellectually, Chinese and Japanese reacted to the threat in similar ways: with simple hostility, with manifestations of cultural chauvinism, with a grudging recognition of their own inferiority in "wealth and power." Yet they differed greatly in the kind of actions that this response induced. In China, the Confucian order proved strong enough to inhibit change, whether in polity or ideas, thereby bringing about a union of conservatism at home with concession abroad that led eventually to dynamic decline and an age of revolutions. In Japan, men succeeded in "using the barbarian to control the barbarian" so as to initiate policies that produced a "modern" state, powerful enough in the end to meet the West on equal terms. Hence Japan, unlike China, moved to empire and industry, not poverty and civil war.

The Meiji Restoration is at the heart of this contrast, since it was the process by which Japan acquired a leadership committed to reform and able to enforce it. For Japan, therefore, the Restoration has something of the significance that the English Revolution has for England or the French Revolution for France; it is the point from which modern history can be said to begin. For this reason it has been much studied. Equally, it has been the subject of enduring controversy, for its significance—and thus the way in which it is to be explained—has changed with every change of attitude toward the society that it brought into being.

Conclusions

The history of the Meiji Restoration ... is relevant to a number of themes that are important not only for Japan. In part it was a response to the nineteenth-century expansion of the West in Asia. Hence studying it raises questions about the nature of imperialism and nationalism and of their relationship to change in the modern world. Equally, the Restoration was at least in some respects a revolution. One must therefore ask, what kind of revolution was it? How does it compare with other great political upheavals in other parts of the world at other times? And are the features that mark it off from them idiosyncratically Japanese, or do they arise from the fact and nature of the West's involvement? Finally, since the Restoration is the historical starting point for the modernization of Japan, a process that is highly significant for theories of economic growth, it poses yet another question, to wit: How far is a radical restructuring of society a necessary condition—and not merely a consequence—of the transformation of a pre-modern into a modern economy.

Clearly, though the example of Japan is an element in the discussion of all these matters, it is not necessarily a decisive one. Therefore a [selection] like this, which approaches the Restoration from inside, as it were, that is, as a part of Japanese history, ought not to offer itself as providing answers that are universally valid. What it can do, what these closing remarks are intended to do, is to present its conclusions in such a way that others might be able to use them to these ends. As a preliminary to this, it might be helpful to recapitulate the story in a rather more generalized form than was possible when setting out the detailed narrative.

Under the Tokugawa, Japanese society was gradually modified by economic change in such a way as to bring about by the nineteenth century a disjunction between contemporary reality and the inherited ideal. This was manifested in a number of phenomena for which the traditional order had no place: samurai whose debts turned them into ambitious office-holders or impoverished umbrella-makers; farmers abandoning subsistence agriculture to become commercial producers and rural entrepreneurs or laborers and quasi-tenants; and city merchants enjoying feudal patronage in a kind of symbiosis with authority or escaping into an urban subculture of their own.

Because these things happened at different speeds in different areas, they disturbed the balance of power between the Bakufu [or "tent government" because soldiers lived in tents] and the domains, which had depended originally on a carefully calculated distribution of land. Because they happened at all, they produced social upheaval: a blurring of status distinctions, stimulating samurai unrest; and economic disruption, provoking peasant revolt. These were reflected in turn in a "what-is-wrong-with-the-world" literature and attempts at "reform," the latter seeking either to reconstitute an ideal past (a restoration of feudal authority and its agrarian base) or to exploit commercial growth for the benefit of the ruling class (if at some cost to its ethos). One result was to give more samurai a degree of participation in active politics than hitherto. Another was to make the concept of "reform" familiar and to prompt a feeling that society was in danger of destruction from within.

Yet the country's social and political institutions proved to be remarkably durable: eroded but far from demolished, they did not seem in 1850 to be on the point of being swept away. Not least, this was because the system of institutional checks and balances coupled with deliberate regional fragmenta-
tion that had been devised to restrain the anticipated disaffection of samurai and feudal lords proved capable also of imposing controls on the new “men of substance” who might have challenged the established order from outside the samurai class. Accordingly, most of these men sought their opportunities of advancement through conformity, not revolution, acquiring status by purchase or marriage, but remaining politically passive.

It was into this situation that there were injected the West’s demand for trade relations in the years 1853-58, leading to “unequal” treaties. The manner in which the treaties were obtained, that is, by gunboat diplomacy, was as important as their content, for it helped to produce in Japan an upsurge of emotion greater than any that had been aroused by domestic issues. Its importance was not merely that the blow to Japanese pride led to a call for “action” (not necessarily of any specific kind); it was also that this was a “national” dishonor in the sense that it could be felt in all areas and at all levels in Japanese society. It thereby helped to break down the regional and social fragmentation that had been one of the foundations of Tokugawa power.

Moreover, the humiliation at the hands of the West precipitated struggle and controversy. The struggle arose when men questioned the efficiency of the country’s leaders, especially their ability to defend Japan; and it brought to the surface many of the latent divisions in the national polity by asking, if only implicitly, who their replacements should be in case they failed. The controversy concerned both short-term diplomatic issues and long-term cultural ones, but it had a single, central thread: the extent to which Japan must abandon custom in order to save herself, first in the context of technology, or particular institutional devices to serve particular ends, and then, more generally, in the context of radical changes in society, such as industrialization had induced in the countries of the West....

History offers many different examples of the kind of motivating force that is capable of overcoming inertia and the bonds of tradition: imperial ambition, religious faith, the pursuit of social justice, the aspirations of a newly emergent class. For Japan in the nineteenth century, nationalism had this function. Again and again in the documents of the years we have been considering there are phrases that put policy of every kind—economic and political, as well as diplomatic—into the context of the “national” interest, justifying proposals on the grounds that they would “restore our national strength” or “make the imperial dignity resound beyond the seas.” What is more, most of the major political crises centered on the question of Japan’s relations with the outside world: that of 1858, when the signing of the treaties became linked with the question of the Tokugawa succession; that of 1863-64, when the fate of the “men of spirit” was decided against a background of foreign bombardment; that of 1873, when the debate about Korea brought into the open a struggle about priorities at home. Throughout, Japanese opinion was moving from a consciousness of foreign threat to an awareness of national identity, expressed in demands for unity and independence.

The contrast with China underlines the extraordinary speed and thoroughness of Japan’s response. Despite widespread anti-foreign feeling among gentry and officials, Chinese continued to behave, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, as a people defending a civilization that was threatened, not a nation defending a country that was under attack. Long before then, the Japanese, subscribing to a more articulate and sophisticated version of the Restoration’s search for “wealth and strength,” had found in nationalism a means of reconciling the conflict between cultural tradition and imperative circumstance.

The “liberal” constitutional movement was heavily influenced by that new-found nationalism. “The one object of my life is to extend Japan’s national power,” Fukuzawa Yukichi wrote in 1882. “Compared with considerations of the country’s strength, the matter of internal government and into whose hands it falls is of no importance at all. Even if the government be autocratic in name and form, I shall be satisfied with it if it is strong enough to strengthen the country.” This is Fukuzawa the nationalist overcoming Fukuzawa the liberal, if only temporarily.

Taking a wider framework, the newspaper Nihon celebrated the announcement of the Meiji Constitution in 1889 by urging that a limit be set to the adoption of foreign ways. It had no desire “to revive a narrow xenophobia,” Nihon declared, for “we recognize the excellence of Western civilization. We value the Western theories of rights, liberty and equality.... Above all, we esteem Western science, economics and industry.” Nevertheless, it continued, these things “ought not to be adopted simply because they are Western; they ought to be adopted only if they can contribute to Japan’s welfare.” In Tokyo in 1889 this was a conservative warning not to go too fast or too far. In contemporary Peking it would have been reformist.

One is bound to ask, why did Japan evolve in a generation a nationalism that in China came much more slowly and with much less effect, given that both countries had long traditions of political and cultural unity? Difference of size was a factor, of course. In Japan, which was smaller and had a very long coastline, the presence of the foreigners and their ships was evident to a higher percentage of the population, making the danger from them easier to believe and act on. China was not only larger, but more varied—in spoken language, social patterns, types of crop—so that there were great practical obstacles to imposing administrative and economic unity in the nationalist sense, just as there were in India and the Ottoman Empire, for example. China did not lend herself very readily to being made into a “country,” Japan did.

In addition to all this, however, there are historical differences between the two that have a particular relevance to the study of the Meiji Restoration. One is Japan’s relative freedom of cultural choice: she was less bound than China to a single view of her society and her place in the world. Japan had already imported elements of Chinese civilization, which coexisted with others that were her own; thus to adopt a part of Europe’s civilization was not to damage an entity that was whole and unique, but to add a third possibility to an...
Japan. The samurai, it is true, had accepted the Confucian ethic and some of the ideas about how Japan could best be defended from the foreigner. Indeed, it may well be that a military habit of mind, variously applied, was the samurai’s most important contribution to Meiji society—and hence, to the making of the modern Japanese state.

What has been said [earlier] amounts to an assertion that nationalism had a double function in Japan in the twenty years after 1853: first, that it provided a motive compelling men to act; second, that it shaped their aims and priorities. Unhappily, this pleasingly simple explanation of what took place is incomplete. Side by side with the story of nationalism and the foreign threat, there is another, that of social change; and in turning to it, we move from a discussion of men’s purposes to a discussion of the circumstance in which they found themselves. It was from the interaction of the two that history was made.

...[H]ow, then, are we to set political struggle and social change in relation to each other? I would suggest, as follows:

1. The class composition of the politically active minority in late-Tokugawa Japan already reflected the results of economic change in that it did not accord with the formal allocation of authority in society: a few daimyo, a few upper samurai, a good many middle samurai, a much larger number of lower samurai and “men of substance” from outside the samurai class. Proportionately, this corresponds fairly well with the number of men within each of these groups. Yet no Japanese of the time would have been prepared to argue that participation in decision-making should be proportional to numbers in this way; traditionally, it should have been almost entirely the prerogative of lords and senior retainers. Departure from traditional norms in this respect therefore suggests that at the beginning of the period with which we have dealt, the outlines of a new ruling class were emerging from within the old. It was within this class that most of the crucial debates took place.

2. In the various proposals for curing the country’s ills after the conclusion of the treaties, there was usually an element of class or group interest, though not necessarily a dominant one. Bakufu and feudal lords, despite their rivalries, both sought to defend Japan without much disturbing its society; by promoting “men of talent,” the middle samurai meant principally themselves; and the “men of spirit,” despite an inability for the most part to get away from feudal terminology, clearly envisaged that the success of their plans would bring them a status they did not already have. Thus the defeat of kōbu-gattai, “unity of Court and Bakufu,” and of kinnō, “serfdom,” were defeats for socially conservative and politically radical formulations of reform, respectively, as well as for particular ideas about how Japan could best be defended from the foreigner.

3. The men who emerged as leaders in succession to the reforming lords and dissident samurai, mostly after 1864, were realists, pragmatists, bureaucrat-politicians whose social origins matched their role: that is, they were nearly all middle or lower samurai, not high enough in the feudal hierarchy to be bent on preserving it, not excluded from it to the point of wanting above all to break it down. Moreover, they were convinced that national defense required national unity. Accordingly, they believed as much in conciliation as...
5. Several factors came together to ensure that the society which Japan received and the models she studied; the Western solutions Tokugawa anomaly, that of merchant wealth, by bringing the entre­
village, landlords got confirmation of their landed rights. Indirectly, similarly centralized form of capitalism. This resolved one effects of foreign trade, then because of the nature of the advice and commercial growth, coupled with an unusual degree of govern­
class, the well-to-do commoners whose power had until then been only latent.

4. Victory over the Tokugawa made these men responsible for government, that is, for implementing on a national scale the policies that would bring Japan “wealth and strength.” In much of what they then did they acted still as samurai-bureaucrats trained in Confucian ideas: manipulating the Emperor as they had their lords; caring for the people's welfare, subject to the tax needs of the state; framing an education system that contributed to good order and to the citizen's skills. Concepts of government and its functions did not change as much from Tokugawa to Meiji as the emphasis on modernization sometimes makes us think. Yet some of the differences were vital. Since feudalism contributed nothing to efficiency and was an obstacle to military strength, it had to go. Equally, since land tax was an essential resource and defining it involved the recognition of what had happened in the village, landlords got confirmation of their landed rights. Indirectly, they also obtained an extension of their economic opportunities. In fact, though the purpose of it all was not to change society, but rather to identify the least degree of social adjustment that would make possible fukō kukyōhei—a militarily strong Japan rich enough to sustai­n a position of independence in the world—the application of these policies produced something very different from the Japan of twenty years before. For the minimal change, once identified, proved to be substantial. Consciously, there was an attack on sam­urai privilege; but consequentially this made possible the emergence into a position of influence of a new class, the well-to-do commoners whose power had until then been only latent.

5. Several factors came together to ensure that the society which emerged at the end of these years would be a capitalist one. Some of the long-term trends in the Tokugawa period were already moving in that direction, providing a basis on which to build. They were given a stimulus by contact with the capitalist West, initially through the effects of foreign trade, then because of the nature of the advice Japan received and the models she studied; the Western solutions that were applied to Japanese problems were inevitably those of the contemporary industrial state. Development was also given a particular direction by the nature of the policies that were devised for the promotion of national strength—the encouragement of industrial and commercial growth, coupled with an unusual degree of govern­ment intervention in the country's economy—so that Japan's transition from the “centralized feudalism” of Tokugawa days was to a similarly centralized form of capitalism. This resolved one Tokugawa anomaly, that of merchant wealth, by bringing the entre­preneur, like the landlord, into the dominant class and giving him a means to fulfill his aspirations legally. It left another, that of peasant unrest, aside. In the short term the second issue was settled by force; but as the pressures on the cultivator increased with the growth of industry it re-emerged to become a problem of the twentieth century in a different form.

Does all this amount to a revolution? Perhaps to ask the question is to invite an argument about the meaning of words, since the reader is likely to have and to apply criteria of his own in finding an answer. Nevertheless, there are a number of points that can be made by way of a final gloss on what has been said [earlier]. For example, the Bakufu had some of the classic characteristics of an ancien régime; it had grave financial problems; it tried unsuccessfully to effect reform; it was indecisive and ineffective at the end in suppressing opposition; and for a variety of reasons it lost the confidence of a considerable segment of the ruling class. Also, those who overthrew it included men of many social origins (but not the lowest); they were generally of some respectability and experience; and they produced what might well be called “a dictatorship in commission.” One could even argue that Restoration politics moved through appropriate stages of moderation and extremism before eventually bringing about, not “a brand-new ruling class,” but “a kind of amalgamation, in which the enterprising, adaptable or lucky individuals of the old privileged classes [were] for most practical purposes tied up with those individuals of the old submerged classes, who, probably through the same gifts, were able to rise.”

There are other tests, too. There was a considerable shift in the locus of political power, which was downwards by pre-Restoration standards. Broadly speaking, there was—if one takes a long enough time base—a change from feudalism to capitalism as the organizing principle of Japanese society. There was even an application of force to politics to bring about these things, or at least to bring about some of the specific decisions that went to make them up.

Yet despite it all, I am reluctant to call the Restoration a revolution in the full meaning of the term. In part, this is because what happened in Japan lacked the avowed social purpose that gives the “great” revolutions of history a certain common character. But it is also because of the nature of the society to which the Restoration gave rise, in which “feudal” and “capitalist” elements worked together in a symbiosis dedicated to acquiring national strength. The political movement that brought this society into being cannot properly be called “bourgeois” in view of the dominant role samurai played in it and the power they retained when it was done. It was certainly not “peasant,” given the fate of peasant revolt. Nor was it “absolutist” or “rightist,” if that is to imply that the primary stimulus was a fear of popular unrest. What then is left, when none of these standard categories satisfactorily apply? Only to call it a nationalist revolution, perhaps, thereby giving recognition to the nature of the emotions that above all brought it about.
Did the Meiji Restoration Constitute a Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Japan?

An interesting question raised by this issue is the nature and meaning of the term “revolution.” The criteria used would have an impact on the debate. A good starting point to begin this issue would be a brief exploration of the term “revolution,” with comparisons made with other noted world revolutions. In *The Anatomy of Revolution*, rev. ed. (Random House, 1966), Crane Brinton (1898-1966) presents an interesting model for studying the nature of revolutions and uses the English, American, French, and Russian ones as case studies. From his data, Brinton drew the following conclusions regarding the revolutionary process:

1. The countries were generally prosperous prior to the revolution; however, government machinery was clearly inefficient. Discontent was strongly felt by those wealthy citizens who felt restrained by the titled aristocracy who contributed little to the country’s well-being. The intellectuals eventually transferred their loyalty from the ruling monarchy to the discontents.

2. The revolutions generally passed through three phases: (a) the moderate stage where reformers who overthrew the monarchy and now controlled the government worked to gradually solve the country’s problems in a moderate, non-violent way; they are opposed by the extremists who argue for immediate change, if necessary, through violent means; (b) the radical phase in which the extremists take control of the government, get rid of the moderates, and begin a radical restructuring of society; they are assisted by the people who demand a strong central government to bring stability at home and provide the military forces to deal with foreign countries who oppose their revolution; (c) the counter-revolutionary phase in which the tyranny of the extremists is overthrown by a coalition of forces who desire an end to the violence and a return to a peaceful, secure society.

3. Results: While the revolution brings many changes to the country, it ends with a government that is similar to the one in place before the revolution.