

On the Turn - Japan, 1900

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By [Richard Perren](#) | Published in [History Today](#) Volume: 42 Issue: 6 1992



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From isolation to Great Power status - Richard Perren explains how a mania for Westernisation primed the pump of Japan's transformation at the turn of the century.

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when rule by the emperor replaced the government of Japan by the Tokugawa shogun, the country embarked on a process of modernisation. In the next thirty years Western experts were imported to train the Japanese at home, selected Japanese were sent abroad to learn from the West, and Japan's new leaders embarked on a programme of radical reform. By these means they aimed at transforming a country that was weak and backward into a strong modern industrial nation. This new Japan would be capable of dealing with Western powers on equal terms and of throwing off the humiliating 'unequal treaties' they had imposed between 1858 and 1869.

When the Emperor Meiji died in 1912, control was concentrated in a highly centralised state whose functions were carried out through Western-style political, administrative and judicial institutions operating in the name of the emperor. Western-style armed forces upheld the position of the Japanese state at home and abroad. A modern and efficient education system served the aims of the state. Western-style economic and business institutions were in place, and factory-based industry firmly established. Japan had already been victorious in two major wars, against China in 1894-95 and Russia in 1904-5. She had not only achieved the much-desired revision of the unequal treaties, but was a world power with an alliance with Britain, and a possessor of colonies. Yet the country still retained many traditional features, and had only adopted those characteristics of the West that were absolutely necessary to achieve its desired aims.

How far had the transformation process gone by 1900, and can the decade of the 1890s be described as a 'turning point'? To answer this we need to judge when Japan passed beyond that point in time when her modernisation could not have been reversed. Because the whole process of Japanese modernisation involved a complex interaction of social, economic, and political change it is not possible to ascribe a precise date to its completion. Nevertheless, there are a number of factors to suggest that by 1900 it had reached a stage where it was unlikely to be reversed.

It was the authorities that had to provide the necessary pump-priming and make strategic decisions about which areas of Japanese life needed to be transformed. It had become a traditional habit of the Japanese to look to officialdom for example and direction in almost everything, and this habit naturally asserted itself when it became necessary to assimilate a foreign civilisation which for nearly three centuries had been an object of national repugnance. This required the education of the nation as a whole and the task of instruction was divided among foreigners of different nations. The Meiji government imported around 300 experts or *yatoi* – a Japanese term meaning 'live machines' – into the country to help upgrade its industry, infrastructure and institutions. Before the Franco-Prussian War, Frenchmen were employed in teaching strategy and tactics to the army and in revising the

criminal code. The building of railways, installing telegraphs and lighthouses, and training the new navy was done by Englishmen. Americans were employed in forming a postal service, agricultural development, and in planning colonisation and an educational system. In an attempt to introduce Occidental ideas of art, Italian painters and sculptors were brought to Japan. German experts were asked to develop a system of local government, train Japanese doctors and, after the Franco-Prussian War, to educate army officers. A number of Western observers believed that such wholesale adoption of an alien civilisation was impossible and feared that it would produce a violent reaction.

Although this did not occur, many early innovations were not really necessary to modernisation but merely imitations of Western customs. At that time the distinction between the fundamental features of modern technology and mere Occidental peculiarities was by no means clear. If it was necessary to use Western weapons there might also be a virtue in wearing Western clothes or shaking hands in the Occidental manner. Moreover, Meiji Japan had good reason to adopt even the more superficial aspects of Western culture. The international world of the nineteenth century was completely dominated by the Occident, and in view of the Western assumption of cultural superiority, the Japanese were probably correct in judging that they could not be regarded as even quasi-equals until they possessed not only modern technology but also many of the superficial aspects of Western culture. The resulting attempts in the 1870s and 1880s to borrow almost anything and everything Western may now seem to us to be amusingly indiscriminate, but it is perfectly understandable.

As the object of modernisation was to obtain equal treatment by the West many of the cultural innovations, besides being more than outward for»s to the Japanese themselves, had an important psychological influence on Western diplomats and politicians. Under the shogun, members of the first Japanese delegation to the United States in 1860 wore traditional samurai dress with shaved pate and long side hair tied in a bun and carried swords. Under the emperor, Western-style haircuts were a major symbol of Westernisation. Soldiers and civilian functionaries wore Western-style uniforms, and politicians often adopted Western clothes and even full beards. In 1872 Western dress was prescribed for all court and official ceremonies. Meat eating, previously frowned on because of Buddhist attitudes, was encouraged, and the beef dish of sukiyaki was developed at this time. Western art and architecture were adopted, producing an array of official portraits of leading statesmen as well as an incongruous Victorian veneer in the commercial and government districts of the cities and some rather depressing interiors in the mansions of the wealthy.

Though the pace of change was hectic at first, and the adoption of Western forms seemed indiscriminate, it soon slowed as the Japanese became more selective about which aspects of their society they wanted to transform. Their adaptability meant the contracts of most Western experts and instructors only needed to be short-term, the average length of service being five years, and yatoi were less in evidence by the 1890s. The craze for Westernisation reached its height in the 1880s, but thereafter there was a reaction against unnecessary imitations and many of its more superficial features, like ballroom dancing, were dropped. Other social innovations subsequently abandoned were the prohibition of prostitution and mixed bathing, both of which were initially enforced to placate the prejudice of Western missionaries.

In reforming the legal system, Western concepts of individual rather than family ownership of property were adopted. But for purposes of formal registration of the population the law continued to recognise the old extended family or 'house', known in Japanese as the ie. This

consisted of a patriarch and those of his descendants and collateral relatives who had not yet established a new ie. Within this structure the position of women was one of obedient subservience. In the 1870s the theme of liberation of women from their traditional Confucianist bondage was taken up by a number of Japanese intellectuals, influenced by Western writers on the subject. At the same time a number of women activists publicly engaged in politics. As both movements lacked public appeal they waned in the 1880s. In 1887 the Peace Preservation Ordinance, which remained in force to 1922, banned women from political parties and meetings. Women under the Civil Code of 1898 had no independent legal status and all legal agreements were concluded on a woman's behalf by the male to whom she was subordinate – either father, husband, or son. Women had no free choice of spouse or domicile and while they could in theory protest against this situation, they could do so only in a non-political manner. Such action posed a challenge to the whole social orthodoxy on which the Japanese state was founded, so in practice few women protested.

One Western institution whose adoption would have made a very favourable impression on the West, but which made next to no headway in Japan, was Christianity. Like the women's movement it had some impact among Japanese intellectuals, but prejudices against it ran too deep. In 1889 less than a quarter of one per cent of Japanese were Christians. The only religion that did flourish was Shinto which was one of the traditional faiths of Japan. Revived interest in it had been a key element in the intellectual trends that led to the imperial restoration. But there was little deep interest in religion among Japan's new leaders. Though the government continued to control and support the main Shinto shrines, the many cults that made up the faith lapsed into a traditional passive state forming no more than a ceremonial background to the life of the Japanese people.

There was greater enthusiasm for Westernisation over the matter of constitutional reform, and this dated back to the early 1870s when Meiji rulers realised change here was necessary to gain international respect. In the next decade the major tasks for building a modern political constitution were undertaken. In 1882 the statesman Ito Hirobumi led a study mission to several European capitals to investigate the theories and practices he believed were most appropriate for Japan. Before his departure he decided not to slavishly reproduce any Western system but that whatever example was taken as a model would be adapted to Japan's special needs. Most of his time was spent in Berlin and Vienna, and after his return to Japan work on the new constitution began in the spring of 1884. A new peerage was created, in December 1885 a cabinet type government was introduced, and to support it, a modern civil service with entry by examination was established. The Meiji constitution which took effect from November 1890 was essentially a cautious, conservative document which served to reinforce the influence of the more traditionally-minded elements in Japan's ruling class. While distinctively Japanese, it compared most closely with the German model of the monarchy.

This constitution, though nominally democratic, retained power in the hands of a small ruling elite with minimal interference from or responsibility to, the majority of the population. There was to be a bicameral parliament, called, in English, the Diet. The House of Peers was mostly made up from the ranks of the new nobility and the lower house chosen by an electorate limited to adult males paying taxes of fifteen yen or more. In 1890 this was limited to 450,000 persons or 5 per cent of adult males. Even when the taxation qualification was reduced to ten yen in 1902 it only increased the electorate to 1,700,000 males. The constitution's architects hoped that the provisions for democratic government it contained would be counterbalanced by other safe-guarding provisions. Most important of these was the position of the emperor, who was accorded a position of primacy in the state. The imperial

family were said to rule over Japan in perpetuity, and under the constitution the emperor was the repository of absolute and inviolable sovereignty. This was underlined by making cabinet and armed forces responsible not to political party, nor to the Diet, or the Japanese people, but to the emperor alone.

The emperor as an individual had little personal influence on events, and was not strong enough to unify the various factions that vied for political power. This was only possible by reference to pre-existing traditions of Japanese culture. These were invoked to stress the duties of loyalty and obedience to the sovereign, and through him to the state. As early as October 1890 the Imperial Rescript on Education, often seen as the basic tool for inculcating the orthodox philosophy of the state, showed the strong influence of the Confucian view that the state was essentially a moral order. This edict made only passing reference to education itself, but showed the revived influence of Confucian ideology in its stress on harmony and loyalty to the throne. Its central concept of mass indoctrination through formal education was an entirely modern emphasis. Intensive drilling of Japanese children with lessons in patriotism became possible when funds were available for universal compulsory education. In 1885 only 46 per cent of children of statutory school age were in school, though by 1905 this had risen to 95 per cent.

The purpose of educational reform, at its most basic level, was to turn out efficient recruits for the army, factory, and farm. This was because political and military modernisation, as well as industrialisation, depended on new skills, new attitudes and broader knowledge. Japan's leaders realised from the 1870s that social and intellectual modernisation was a prerequisite to success in other fields. But in the social and intellectual areas, as in economics, the responsiveness of thousands of individuals was more important than the exhortations of authority.

While political and social reform and cultural change were limited in extent and selective in their nature by the end of the 1890s, the same picture emerges in economic life. Industrial modernisation took two forms – the reorganisation of traditional industries, and the transplantation of new industries from the West. Some traditional industries, like cotton-spinning, experienced radical change and the introduction of factory production, while others made slower progress. Japan was an important exporter of raw silk but that industry was not dependent upon elaborate or expensive machinery. The production of cocoons was a labour-intensive industry, already carried out as a by-employment in peasant households. Gradually small factories equipped with improved but relatively simple and inexpensive power-driven machines were introduced. The investment in this industry was thus spread thinly over a large number of producers. Where large investments of capital were absolutely necessary, as with Japan's strategic heavy industries like iron and steel, armaments, and ship-building, the initial investment was made by the government. But even here success was not immediate and these early concerns were sold off to Japanese businessmen at low prices in the 1880s. In some of the new industries success came sooner than in others. In 1897-1906, 90 per cent of railway rolling stock was built in Japan but 94 per cent of locomotives were still imported, mainly from England and Germany. It was not until after 1900 that the basis of heavy industry in Japan was firmly established.

Indeed, the whole of Japanese economic and social life in 1900 was still firmly rooted in traditional forms with quite a small modern superstructure. But for Japan the term 'traditional' needs qualification because it does not necessarily mean that pre-modern Japanese economy and society was antagonistic to change. In spite of Japan's decision to isolate itself for almost

300 years, features evolved that could be built upon once the country was forced to accept Western influence. The growing volume of research on the period before 1868, in the form of local and regional studies, has reinforced the view that Japan was a relatively advanced pre-industrial economy. For an underdeveloped country it was already well provided with a basic infrastructure by the time the process of modernisation began in earnest. Agricultural output per head of the population was quite high and pre-modern Japan possessed a substantial degree of commerce. In the more backward northern regions, on the island of Hokkaido, and also parts of the extreme southern island of Kyushu, medieval forms of social and economic organisation persisted until quite late. But on the more advanced regions of the main island of Honshu, especially the Kanto Plain around Edo – the old name for Tokyo – and Osaka, there was a thriving urban-centred commercial economy. Merchants and traders supplied the wants of the towns of the region and production for exchange, and not just subsistence, was carried on in the countryside.

Much of Japan's growth after 1868 was built upon the foundations of its pre-modern economy. Partly under the protection and encouragement of government most of the capital-intensive investments went into railways, steam-ships, and mechanised heavy industrial plants. But just as important in promoting development at that time were a vast number of small improvements and minor capital undertakings. Before 1940 the majority of roads were of unsurfaced dirt and bridges were simple wooden structures. Agricultural construction, represented primarily by irrigation works, changed little from Tokugawa times. Only after the turn of the century did most Japanese make Western products a part of their daily lives, and they were adapted to a traditionally Japanese life-style. In Tokyo in 1910 most of the dwellings were made of wood and only about an eighth used brick, stone, or plaster. Within the houses most furniture was still the traditional kind and most of the food eaten was of a traditional type. This meant that there was still an enormous market to be supplied by peasant farmers, village entrepreneurs, small businesses and traditional craftsmen. In 1890 nearly 70 per cent of Japanese investment was in the traditional sector and it still accounted for 45 per cent, fifteen years later.

But the success of Japan's modernisation efforts needs to be judged not only by what happened within the economy itself, or by the changes within Japanese society. Reform was undertaken as a means to an end and that end was recognition as an equal by the West. This was necessary before there was any chance of removing the unequal treaties of the 1850s and 1860s and contained two major restrictions on Japanese sovereignty. Firstly, there was the provision of 'extra-territorial jurisdiction'. Under this Westerners accused of crimes were not tried by Japanese courts, but by consular courts within the foreign settlements of the seaports of Japan set out in the treaties. The other restriction was the loss of tariff autonomy. Eager for markets, the Western powers placed severe limits on Japanese import and export duties. These measures were the usual way for nineteenth-century Western powers to regulate diplomatic and commercial relations with Oriental countries, the model being the treaties imposed on China after the Opium War of the 1840s. For Japan the actual consequences of the treaties were not particularly damaging. No great market for opium was developed, and the opening of Japanese industry to competition from the West forced the pace of economic 'change instead of allowing inefficient industries to shelter behind protective tariffs. Foreigners resident in Japan were restricted to the treaty ports and needed official permits to travel out- side so were never a great intrusion into Japanese life. And the justice dispensed in the consular courts was generally fair to both Japanese and Westerners.

Nevertheless, the fact of these treaties' existence was rightly regarded as a great humiliation as they usurped functions which are the proper preserve of a fully independent state, They came up for renewal periodically and from 1871 onwards Japan asked for their revision. In that year refusal was a foregone conclusion, as even the Japanese could see that the conditions originally necessitating extra-territorial jurisdiction had not undergone any change justifying its abolition. In later years Western nations were reluctant to allow their citizens to come under the power of a legal system that was still not fully reformed, despite the abolition of torture as an accepted legal practice in 1876 and the introduction of a Code of Criminal Procedure, framed in accordance with Western ideas, in 1882. But this was the start of what the West wanted and when negotiations were reopened in 1883, Japan included as compensation for the abolition of consular jurisdiction a promise to remove all restrictions on trade, travel, and residence for foreigners within the country. These and subsequent discussions in the 1880s reached no definite conclusion, mainly because the Japanese refused to grant foreigners living in the country the right to own freehold property. It was not until 1894 that a final settlement of the consular question became a real possibility when Britain agreed to abolish consular jurisdiction by 1899.

The five year delay was for two reasons. Before the new treaty came into force Japan had to fully implement a new legal code. The thorough recodification of the law this required was a slow and difficult task as most legal reforms were introduced piecemeal. This area is probably the strongest example of direct Western pressure being applied to change a fundamental feature of Japanese life. Drafts drawn up, largely under French influence, were submitted in 1881 and again in 1888, but a completely revised legal code only went into effect in 1896, removing the final impediment to ending extra-territorial jurisdiction in 1899. The other cause for delay was to allow Japan to renegotiate the rest of its treaties – of which there were over fifteen – with other Western powers, so that all nations were on an equal footing. This aspect was undoubtedly made possible by the successful outcome with Britain. Tariff autonomy was not finally restored to Japan until twelve years after 1899, but up to 1911 she was allowed to increase import and export duties.

The successful negotiations in 1894 were important as a turning point for the Japanese and for the West. The greatest opponents of the loss of extra- territorial jurisdiction were the few hundred foreign merchants and businessmen who lived and worked in the treaty ports. But for Japan this was a national political question that had provoked fierce debates in the Diet and in the press. The first treaties between Japan and the West were signed when the nation was still in a state of torpor from its long slumber of seclusion, and under circumstances of duress. The redemption of her judicial and fiscal authority had been, for thirty years, the dream of Japanese national aspiration, and both domestic and foreign policies had been shaped with this one end in view. For Japan's rulers, innovation after innovation, often involving sacrifices of traditional sentiments, were introduced for the purpose of assimilating the country and its institutions to the standard of Western civilisation. By 1900 Japan was still not regarded as a full equal by Western nations, but she was now accorded greater respect. In the next decade this was built upon with the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, the defeat of Russia in 1905, and the annexation of Korea in 1910. By 1912 there was no doubt that Japan had achieved 'Great Power' status.