

To What Extent Had the Changes Introduced Under the Meiji Restoration Successfully Transformed Japan To A Modern State by 1912?

When the Meiji Emperor died in 1912 there had been a dramatic change in Japan from the fusion of Emperor and Shogun in 1868, after the Boshin War (1868-69). This was a response to the arrival of Perry's Black Ships and the introduction of the Western powers into the region. The transformation that occurred was in response to Western influence in Asia. This threat caused great military, economic, political and social change that could be said to have successfully modernized the country along Western lines. However, this change could be said to have been cosmetic in that despite such change, the underlying essence of Japan remained largely the same. By the time of the Emperor's death in 1912, Japan could be said to have been transformed into a substantial, modernized force in the region, having the ability to resist Western influence over Japan as seen in the overturn of the Unequal Treaties as. The previous treatment had caused Ulysses Grant to write 'I have seen things that have made my blood boil in the same way the European powers attempt to degrade the Asiatic ones¹'. Two tokens, strength and equality to the West were the ultimate goal of the Meiji Restoration and so a proxy to success.

Firstly one must recognize that change is not always modernizing. To do so would be an acceptance of Herbert Spencer's idea of continual modernization through progression², dictating that societies inevitably ended up like the nation states of the West. Therefore the change that occurred in Japan was an example of a more primitive society inevitably moving towards a more complex Western society, which was equated with success. Herbert Spencer's ideas on progression was embraced by Fukuzawa and other 'enlighteners' and led to the Social Darwinian idea of *jakuniku kyôshoku* (the strong eat the weak)³. Japan's change was an attempt to modernize itself by the embrace of Westernization and so avoid becoming prey to the Western

¹ Young, John Russell, and Michael Fellman. *Around the World with General Grant* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2002 Page 414

² Spencer, Herbert. *Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical and Progress: Its Law and Cause*. New York: Humboldt, 1880

³ Goto-Jones Christopher *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2009 Page 50

powers. The adaptation of a Western style constitutional government, a national army and an industrial economy made Japan a successful modern nation because of its similarities to the West. However, these comparative factors between the West and the East could be said to be arbitrary in that a nation is defined to be modern by how Western it is. This is because modernity is decided by picking a Western trait, such as the use of machinery in the economy then comparing how much the other society resembles it. Meaning that the Modernity is defined as the West.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski⁴ stated that it is not individual practices that make a society modern but a comparative review of how society operates in their own individual way. This moves away from the Eurocentric view that modernizing is the same as Westernization. Therefore the change of Japan from a traditional society into one that more resembled the West does not have to mean that it is more advanced or modern. Brian Platt criticizes the notion that '19th European and American concept of progress claimed a single path to modernity and that the West stood at its destination,' and the Spencer model that 'all societies must, and inevitably will, embrace these things, because they represent the destiny of humankind.'⁵ Brian Platt argues that modernity can take other paths a form of 'contested modernity.'⁶ However, if the Meiji Restoration was meant to resemble the West then firstly defining what is the West. Norman Davies found a dozen different ways academics defined the West⁷ and so 'can be defined by its advocates in almost any way that they see fit.' Change in Japan in comparison with the West may be unclear because of the 'elastic geography'⁸ of defining the West. The variety found in the West further complicates comparisons, as some regions were more modern than others. The comparison between Britain in the 1770's, the most modern region of the West, and the whole of Asia shows how the West was more modern but this ignores the variety found across both because at the same time the Yangtze Delta could be said to be more modern

⁴ Malinowski, Bronislaw *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967

⁵ Platt, Brian *Why Did Japan Succeed and China Fail And Isn't Modernization the Same Thing as Westernization?* Education about Asia Volume 8 Number 3 Winter 2003 Page 18

⁶ Jacques, Martin *When China Rules The World The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. New York: Penguin, 2009 Page 129

⁷ Morris, Ian. *Why the West Rules – for Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal about the Future*. London: Profile, 2010. Page 41 referencing Davies, Norman *Europe: A History* Oxford University Press 1994

⁸ Morris, Ian referencing Davis, Norman Page 41

than the average Western Region⁹. Comparisons across great continental regions will be unclear because of the great variety across both. Nevertheless a transformation occurred in Japan that made it more resemble the West and so modernity, for its time. As one could say that as technology and society are constantly evolving then modernizing can be described more as a process than an end goal as it is constantly adapting but the reforms that took place under the Emperor Meiji pushed Japan towards the frontier of this progressing modernity, defined here as a central Nation State with an industrial economy that can support a strong army such as Britain and the USA. Central power, industrialization and militarization could be then said to have successfully transformed Japan from an insular feudal country to a modern power in Asia by 1912.

The centralization of power, a key reform under the Meiji Restoration, was the driving force behind the transformation of Japan as the *Tennosai* system combined power in the national government underneath the Emperor who was a symbol who united the country and would implement top down reforms throughout the country spearheading Japan's modernization. 'The Emperor came before his people, not principally as a ruler, but as a symbol of the imperial lineage, stretching back beyond the state itself to the time of the world's creation.¹⁰ This new unified government left Japan by 1912 with an efficient meritocratic bureaucracy with effective control over Japan resembling Western Nations. The national government had control of all of Japan not the Daimyo, who were forced to give up their lands in 1871 and so the 'abolition of the more than 200 largely autonomous domains into which the country was divided during the Tokugawa period¹¹'. These enabled more efficient control over Japan as power was centralized and administrated directly to the national quasi-democratic plutocratic Meiji government. The franchise extended to the wealthiest 5% of the population who elected the Lower House of bicameral congress who could not initiate legislation¹². The Upper House was hereditary and appointed by the Emperor. This resembled the political structures of many Nation States. This was not a coincidence with the Japanese constitution being based on Ito Hirobumi's tour in

⁹ Pomeranz, Kenneth. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP

¹⁰ Beasley, WG *The Rise of Modern Japan*. New York: St. Martin's, 1990. Print. Page 80

¹¹ Platt, Brian Page 15

¹² Perrin, Richard *On the Turn- Japan, 1900* History Today, June 1992 Page 4

1882 of Western capitals such as London and Berlin, of which the latter would later form the model for Japan's, which began in 1884 and built upon Sakamoto Ryoma's theories on a Japanese Constitution. Although the Bakufu itself sent missions to the USA (1860) and Europe (1862, 1863) showing that its isolation was not absolute. Political structural change in Japan could not be seen in one giant leap forward by the adoption of Ito Hirobumi's model but rather as a series of small steps towards a more Western approach. These small changes continued from 1884 during the Restoration such as a cabinet style of government in 1885 and an increase in the franchise to 1,700,000 by 1902¹³. The incremental changes in Japanese political structure meant that by 1912 the government was truly national and democratic relative to the nation states as 'power in the hands of a small ruling elite with minimum interference from or responsibility to, the majority of the population.'¹⁴ Japan had an efficient civil service with a Western style examination system producing a meritocracy, as well as adapting its judicial system along a Western model (mainly French) with the Code of Criminal Procedure introduced in 1882¹⁵. The power shift from the feudal lords to a central government was a change that enabled greater reform to occur throughout Japan.

Perhaps the benchmark for success for a government is not whether it resembles a Western nation state but how effectively it improves the social development of the country, defined by Morris as being societies ability to best utilize its resources¹⁶. This improvement in Japan's ability to control its resources was a marked change from the beginning of the Meiji Restoration and a large aspect of this is the change that occurred in the political system that meant in 1912 there was a strong national government ruling over Japan unlike the divided feudal system under the Shogunate.

This reformed Political system allowed great spurs such as a change in the education system, which in turn, influenced other aspects of Japanese life through its reformist leavers. Education became therefore a crucial tool in allowing the government to transform Japan in response to the increased international competition from the West.

¹³ Perrin, Richard Page 4

¹⁴ Perrin, Richard Page 4

¹⁵ Perrin, Richard Page 6

¹⁶ Morris, Ian Page 24

A parallel may be drawn to Britain by Young's observation that 'it was no accident that the three great education acts of the first half-century, in 1902, 1918 and 1944 were put on the statute book at the end of the three wars¹⁷.' Education reforms often mirror changes in international competition. For Japan this started with higher enrolment numbers with 2/3 of boys in school by 1890¹⁸ and 95% in 1905¹⁹. Morris compares this with China who did 'virtually nothing to educate the masses.' By tapping into its resource of human capital Japan allowed further transformation to occur increasing social development, as Young wrote 'civilization depends on...the innovator who with one stroke can save the labour of 10,000.'²⁰ This capacity for Japan to create innovators and so transform its 'civilization' comes from its reformed education system. Times of international strife cause an increase in educational standards as Young's wrote how during World War One the USA put 2 million recruits through IQ tests to try and choose officers and this practice was widely embraced by World War Two by other powers because 'war stimulated the better use of human resources'²¹

Similarly a change in Japan's international competition, through the arrival of the West, appears to have the same transformative approach to utilizing its collective brain power by the establishment of more schools a western style teaching and making education compulsory. The reformist nature of western style teaching that encouraged scholars to learn from the West, like Ito Hirobumi, meant that a reforming nature spread throughout Japan in the minds of its increasingly educated class as 'political and military modernization, as well as industrialization, depended on new skills, new attitudes and broader knowledge²²'. This is a transformation from the Shogunate who locked scholar Yoshida Shonin in a cage for wanting to return to the US with Commodore Perry²³. Education was previously only in hands of the elite but by 1912 a seismic shift occurred in the role of the state to provide a universal, western education, which led to additional reformist changes that would be made by educating

¹⁷ Young, Michael Page 32

¹⁸ Morris, Ian Page 523

¹⁹ Perrin, Richard Page 4

²⁰ Young, Michael Page 15

²¹ Young, Michael Page 32

²² Perrin, Richard Page 4

²³ Buruma, Ian *Inventing Japan, 1853-1964*. New York: Modern Library, 2003. Print Page 9

the population as ‘intellectual modernization was a prerequisite to success in other fields.’²⁴

This radically different style of government led to other effective reforms such as industrializing the economy, which was the fastest of any society previously in history²⁵. The changes in the Japanese economy over the Meiji Restoration were profound as the impetus for reform came from the national government who made strategic investments ‘pump-priming’²⁶ key industries which spurred economic activities such as building railways. Comparisons to Western nations at the time could be flawed as they were heading towards the end of their industrialization, but perhaps China is the closest barometer to success as both had similar experiences with the West and that Japanese culture and its political system was heavily borrowed from China. The Japanese economy changed dramatically in comparison with China, Japan had 2,300 miles of railway in 1896 and China had 370 miles and the same could be said for ‘iron, coal, steam or telegraph poles.’²⁷ This scale of differences does not take into account the relative sizes of the two states or the availability of resources with China having the advantage in both making the Japanese lead even more successful. Trotsky said that war was ‘the locomotive of history,’²⁸ likewise the increased international competition from the West forced the pace of economic change instead of allowing ‘inefficient industries to shelter behind protective tariffs.’²⁹ However, one could say that this was the natural projectory for Japan as even before the arrival of the West it already had a high agricultural yield per head³⁰ which had allowed urbanization to occur leading to ‘embryo capitalism.’³¹ A market based economy by which ‘excess rice, could be converted into money’³².

Changes in Japan by 1912 could be said not have been transformative but rather a quickening of change already underway in Japan as ‘much of Japan’s growth after

²⁴ Perrin, Richard Page 4

²⁵ Morris, Ian Page 523

²⁶ Perrin, Richard Page 1

²⁷ Morris, Ian Page 524

²⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/12/comintern.htm>

²⁹ Perren, Richard Page 5

³⁰ Perren, Richard Page 5

³¹ Beasley, WG Page 2

³² Bornmann, M Gregory and Bornmann, M Carl *Tokugawa Law: How it contributed to the economic success of Japan* www.academia.edu 2002 Page 192

1868 was built upon the foundation of its pre-modern economy.³³ All of which could be linked to the Bakuhan period creating a ‘mini international competitive market scheme’³⁴ with the castletowns’ becoming ‘citadels of trade,’³⁵ especially Osaka and the coastal cities.³⁶ This led to the ‘phenomenon of the merchant class’³⁷ as a result of Tokugawa Economics banning Samurai from involving themselves in commerce. This created a vacuum for the merchants, a potential ‘advantage of backwardness,’³⁸ as the markets were loosely controlled because of the ‘at the time inept government’³⁹. Buruma argues that the Samurai warrior code, poetry and other art forms were a ‘sign of idleness’⁴⁰ as they ‘often became useless’ in times of peace. However, would this have resulted in the same outcomes as a western style economy, with its consumerism and industrialization is unknown. This ultimately hinges on whether one believes in Herbert Spencer’s view that progression follows the same course of modernization and so Japan was following the inevitable course from feudalism to western style capitalism or that modernity can result in different outcomes.

Regardless if Japan was going to inevitably resemble a Western style capitalism, potentially fulfilling Spencer’s view of progression, it is unfathomable to see that the scale and speed of change could have not occurred without western influence such as the invitation of 300 Yatoi (live machines)-Western experts ‘to help upgrade its industry’⁴¹. The change in industry was reliant upon western influence and could be said to have steered Japan away from its ingenious route of modernization because of the Yatoi and Western imports like Locomotives (94%) between 1897 and 1906⁴². Therefore by 1912 it could be said that Japan’s economy had been largely changed to the model of the western nation states with an emphasis on consumerism and

³³ Perren, Richard Page 5

³⁴ Bornmann, M Gregory and Bornmann, M Carl Page 188

³⁵ Bornmann, M Gregory and Bornmann, M Carl Page 188

³⁶ Buruma, Ian Page 11

³⁷ Charles David Sheldon referenced by Bornmann, M Gregory and Bornmann, M Carl Page 196

³⁸ Morris, Ian Page 34 referencing Alexander Gerschrenkon (an unintended positive effect stemming from a less modern system)

³⁹ Bornmann, M Gregory and Bornmann, M Carl Page 198

⁴⁰ Buruma, Ian Page 11

⁴¹ Perrin, Richard Page 2

⁴² Perrin, Richard Page 5

industrialization leading to a more efficient and successful utilization of resources for the State and so a higher social development score.

Potentially one could see the main benefit of economic change in the military. The transformation in the economy occurred because of the desire for a strong modern army. The change was again along western models as the disparities in military power between Japan and the West resulted in the western armies and navy being seen as the model for modernity that Japan must transform to have. Reform was installed which strengthened the military, such as introducing conscription in 1873, creating officer training schools and building a small but modern navy with 28 ships by 1894. The successful transformation of the military can be seen in Japanese foreign policy. For most of the Meiji Restoration the Japanese army was not strong enough to stand up to Western Powers, such as receding of the Liaodong Peninsula back to China following the triple intervention of Russia, Germany and France, in the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895). The transformation that occurred in Japan was that by 1912 the Japanese military was a powerful force in the East Asian region where it could be said that it had reached equality with the Western powers in terms of regional strength.

This is seen in the success of the Japanese army, firstly against regional China over Korea in 1895, but more so in the success against the Western Russian army sent by Tsar Nicholas II to defend 'Europe from the inroads of the Great Yellow Race'⁴³ after the sinking of the Eastern Russian Fleet and 'overwhelming its army in the biggest land battle ever fought.'⁴⁴ However, there was no Great Leap Forward under the Meiji Restoration but an incremental rising influence and power over the region steadily building so that it can involve itself successfully in wars against China in 1895, end extra-territoriality in 1899⁴⁵, contribute half of the force against the Boxers in 1900 and then build to fight and defeat Russia in 1905.

The change under Meiji did not occur all at once but incrementally by 1912 one could say that Japan had been transformed into having a modern army capable of competing with the Western Powers, unlike the submission to Perry's Black Ships in 1853 and the Unequal Treaties that followed, the catalyst for the Meiji Reform. This strength

⁴³ Morris, Ian. Page 524

⁴⁴ Morris, Ian. Page 525

⁴⁵ Perrin, Richard Page 7

brought equality and recognition as shown in the alliance with Britain in 1902 and its success later in the Washington Naval Conference and The Treaty of Versailles. However, this success could be seen as limited and disputed as seen in the rising objection to the civilian government's policy of 'Shidehara' diplomacy. This was because of rising Japanese nationalism that was increasingly hostile to the concessions Japan had to make, such as withdrawing from the northern half of Sakhalin as part of the Treaty of Portsmouth, after the Japanese Victory, in 1905 sparking the Hibiya protests in Tokyo with a cry of 'the war must go on' and up to a thousand casualties⁴⁶. This nationalism was led by the transformed military whose increasingly aggressive and independent actions could be said to be a 'paradox of development.'⁴⁷ The military's growing strength meant an increased urge for imperialistic domination, as well as making it increasingly detached from the civilian government who could no longer control its actions. For example the Kwantung army actions in Manchuria leading later to the Mukden Incident as the Emperor's combination of both Head of State and Commander-in-Chief meant that both the government and military claimed authority from him separately. This meant that the military was not subservient to the civilian government and their actions were not directly accountable.

While one could say that the military grew stronger and so could resist the Western powers this does not necessarily mean success as the increasing militarism of the country paved the way for a more aggressive foreign policy against the wishes of the civilian government entering ever more costly wars. The extent to which Japan's transformation into an equal nation in terms of foreign policy as a result of its military is also mixed. This was seen later in the Treaty of Versailles where Japan was successful in receiving a seat in the 5-member Security Council but unsuccessful in having a racial equality clause in the Charter of the League. While both Japan's military and international standing both improved by 1912 the success of both can be questioned as a stronger military led to costly wars and Japan's status never reached equality with the West.

⁴⁶ Buruma, Ian Page 52

⁴⁷ Morris, Ian Page 34 (an unintended negative effect stemming from a more modern system) referencing Alexander Gerschenkron

Although aspects of Japanese society changed dramatically during the Meiji Restoration by 1912 these changes were a response to the desire of Japan to strengthen and gain equality with the West and so aspects of Japan changed accordingly. Some may say that these changes were superficial because they were designed to deal with a change in international competition instead of a deep-rooted change. Indeed the message of reformers was to adopt Western technology and keep their Japanese essence. However one could say that having the military, economic and political system transformed onto a Western model leaves little in Japanese society unchanged. There was the adoption of a western style lifestyle such as clothing which by 1872 was 'prescribed for all court and official ceremonies'⁴⁸ as well as the rising popularity of handshakes. This was as Perrin argued because of the 'Western assumption of cultural superiority' because 'if it was necessary to use Western weapons there might also be a virtue in wearing Western clothes.' However, Perrin argues that this was a ploy by Japan to be seen as more equal so these changes were superficial in order to carry favour with the West and that despite the superficial changes such as clothing Japanese society remained unchanged. On the other hand, Beasley wrote that the West brought in 'something much more sweeping than an acceptance of force majeure',⁴⁹ reducing notion of Japanese essence. One could say that only religion remained largely untouched by the storm of Western change with Christianity converting only a quarter of one percent of the population.⁵⁰ Aspects of Japanese life had been transformed onto a Western Model-military, economics; politics and culture all profoundly changed, potentially pushing out a Japanese essence. However, one could say that even today Japan is not a Western country but rather 'outwardly Western but inwardly Japanese'⁵¹ and while there had been a 'furious process of Westernization' during the Meiji Restoration by 1900 there was 'a period of introspection' which sought to define and protect the nature of Japanese essence. Still today the influence on Japanese Confucian with its focus on loyalty and hierarchy is prevalent in Japanese society today, despite outward rejection of it by the notable Meiji era intellectuals like Fukuzawa who 'called on the Japanese to abandon their traditional (Confucian) approach to knowledge and social

⁴⁸ Perrin, Richard Page 2

⁴⁹ Beasley, WG Page 55

⁵⁰ Perrin, Richard Page 3

⁵¹ Chie Nakane interview with Martin Jacques Tokyo June 1999 in Jacques, Martin *When China Rules the World The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* Page 57

organization'⁵² possibly showing that modernity does not have to completely follow the Western model but can be build upon indigenous beliefs and values and that despite the vast outward change social values are more engrained within a population. For example lifetime employment 'which still predominates large firms' rather than the 'narrowly contractual- and often short term- nature of employment in the Anglo-American tradition,⁵³ Seniority is based upon age, which reflects the 'age-hierarchy of Japanese society.⁵⁴ This is also shown by the Dentsu Institute for Human Studies research, which compared countries with Japan scoring the lowest for Opportunity for Promotion at 5.8% compared with 66.2% for the USA and 45.1% in the UK⁵⁵. The Government is still dominated by the bureaucracy and has more electoral loyalty stemming from a more paternal relationship than in the West with the Liberal Democrats in Japan being 'in office almost continuously from the mid 1950's' until 2009⁵⁶. Even the higher suicide rates in Japan⁵⁷ could be because of Japanese essence, with suicide being seen as selfish and as a betrayal in the West due to Christianity, whereas historically suicide in Japan was seen as the 'ultimate way of settling one's *giri* (loyalty to your master) and, therefore, as a noble act.⁵⁸ If one could make the argument that there are fundamental differences between Japan and the West now, then surely those differences would have been more prevalent especially before the American occupation following the Second World War. While there are large similarities between the Japanese modernization during the Meiji Period and the West there is still a difference in approach, which stems from a different philosophical view. Modernity does not have to mean similarities with the West and so Western changes, such as handshakes and Western clothing, do not mean modernity by itself and so perhaps should be disregarded as measures of modernity as they are cultural labels, rather than being intrinsically superior to another.

The large scale Westernization had largely been a success for Japan because by 1912 they had strengthened greatly to become a dominant regional force in East Asia equal to the Western Powers and had improved its international standing, although never

⁵² Goto Jones Page 50

⁵³ Jacques, Martin Page 69

⁵⁴ Jacques, Martin Page 69

⁵⁵ Jacques, Martin Page 71

⁵⁶ Jacques, Martin Page 73

⁵⁷ Jacques, Martin page 69

⁵⁸ Jacques, Martin Page 69

reaching equality. Although with all developments Morris's paradox comes through with Japan facing increasing problems from its modernization like the Samurai uprisings against the *Tannosai* system notably in 1877. The increasing globalization of the Japanese economy left it dependent on exports and so vulnerable to changes in the world economy and as the military grew stronger it became more aggressive and independent. While there are repercussions to modernity Japan was largely successful in achieving the two overarching aims of the Meiji Restoration, strength and equality with the West.

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