

Evaluate whether Japan became a modernised nation during the Meiji Period (1868-1912)

The Meiji Restoration from 1868 to 1912 was carried out by the Meiji oligarchy, the ruling class that aimed to return Japan to imperial rule from the Tokugawa shogunate. The reforms were carried out under the name of the Meiji Emperor and used Western institutions as a basis of comparison, emulating various industrial, economic, social, political and legal European models. The primary aim of the restoration was to achieve parity with Western powers, in the hopes of escaping semi-colonial status and removing the unequal treaties that had been imposed on Japan in 1858 through extraterritoriality and 5% tariff control. Achieving modernisation in the context of the time period will be evaluated using Western models as comparison as to whether the Meiji reforms achieved *fukoku-kyohei*, the motto “enrich the country, strengthen the military”. The following essay will evaluate the success of the Meiji period according to economic, military, social, political and legal sectors.

On the one hand, the Meiji Restoration saw reforms in terms of industrialization and development of *zaibatsu*, which helped to modernize Japanese economy and increase parity with Western powers. Industrialization was crucial in developing domestic infrastructure through the construction of railway and telegraph lines. By 1906, the miles of railway had increased to 5000 miles from 350 miles in 1885. By 1880 nearly all major cities were connected by telegraph. A modern postal system was also established in 1871 between Tokyo and Osaka, with all foreign postal offices replaced by local Japanese ones by 1879. Thus it can be seen that within a span of roughly a decade of reforms, basic infrastructure had been developed to form the basis for the growth of local businesses known as *zaibatsu*. This was significant as all domestic infrastructure was privatised, giving Japanese firms the opportunity to grow and develop. Employment was given to local citizens, generating jobs from blue-collar jobs building infrastructure, to white-collar jobs managing companies. This was also strategic as the Meiji government would start construction and then relinquish control to private Japanese companies, not allowing foreign powers to control vital communications and transport systems. *Zaibatsu* were industrial and financial business conglomerates which dominated sectors of Japanese economy. The big 4 *zaibatsu*: Sumitomo, Mitsui, Yasuda and Mitsubishi were crucial in firstly, providing raw materials for economic growth seen where coal production reached 5 million tons in 1895, and 21 million tons by 1912, powering steam-powered mills. They further manufactured goods such as tea and raw silk to serve as exports, aligning with the **Boeki Rikkoku strategy** in building an international trade economy. The *zaibatsu* imported British technology in the 1880s to achieve more efficiency in cotton textile production, allowing them to compete with British products by the 1890s. In analysis, these *zaibatsu* were crucial in propelling Japanese economy from the agriculture and manufacturing industries-dominated Tokugawa period, rapidly developing a range of industries from banking, foreign trade, mining, insurance, textiles, sugar, food processing and machinery. The rapidity of economic development seen in a 3450% increase of coal production and 39 400% increase in miles

of railway track is evidence of the extreme efficiency of industrialisation. The zaibatsu's influence was also long-term where they continued to develop the economy post-Meiji Japan, being a continual source of innovation and employment where more second-tier zaibatsu emerged post-Russo Japanese War such as Okura and Nissan. Out of the above economic achievements, the creation of zaibatsu is particularly significant in demonstrating that Japan managed to achieve economic modernisation. Establishing institutions modelled after the West created long-term economic growth and supported military armament by providing necessary raw materials, facilitating Japan's development into a modern economic and military nation. However, there are limitations to the success of economic reforms as the Meiji government had to heavily finance and invest in early industrial ventures until 1880. The government owned 52 industrial concerns, 3 shipyards, 10 mines, 5 munition works and all the railway mileage up to 1877. The cost of investment in private industries and the trade deficits from 1867-1880 led to the government printing money to fund their policies, resulting in chronic inflation. This inflation is seen where the price of rice rose from 5.7 yen per koku to 12.2 yen within 3 years from 1877-1880, damaging the peasant class of Japanese society.

Japan also became a modernised military power during the Meiji period through the development of their army and navy, evidenced by their military victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) which led to them gaining more power on both regional and global levels. In 1869 the Imperial Japanese Navy was established, a centralized navy modelled along British lines replacing the shogunate fleet. Intensive naval construction saw the number of warships rise from 17 in 1872 to 76 in 1903. The Conscription Law of 1873 also saw nationwide conscription enforced for all able-bodied men, breaking away from the traditional Tokugawa system of an elite Samurai warrior class. This created a national army under the Ministry of Military Affairs which by the 1880s had a peacetime establishment of 73 000 and total wartime strength of 200 000. Therefore it can be seen that efforts to bolster military strength were undertaken in the early period of Meiji reforms, aligning with their aim of *Fukoku-kyohei* and elevating their modern status as military strength in that period was the marker of a nation's strength. These had long-lasting impacts on providing a sustainable source of defense through the staggered developments of first establishing a basic defence force, then engaging in training specialised military personnel with training schools established for officers (1875) and navy (1888), and Japanese officers sent to American and European naval academies to gain expertise. The success of military modernisation is evidenced by their achievements in maintaining domestic stability through the Imperial Army suppressing the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion of disgruntled samurai led by Saigo Takamori. Military operations abroad also achieved success where Japan won a decisive victory against China in the first Sino-Japanese War through naval superiority with 24 modern ships and 24 torpedo boats; and the Russo-Japanese War where Russia was defeated. In analysis, both victories signified first a shift in the regional balance of power, propelling Japan to be viewed as the superior Asian power after centuries of China being viewed as the overlord; and then an elevation of Japan's global status as accomplishing the first major military

victory of an Asian power over a European one in the modern era. This was significant in boosting Japan's status in the eyes of the West once they had proven their military capability and this newfound authority gained after the Sino-Japanese War resulted in the extraterritoriality being suspended by the Western Powers in 1899 and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 where Britain recognised Japan's claims in Korea. This shifted the balance of power in the region from China to Japan, as Korea had historically been a tributary state of the Qing. It was a culmination of military power as well as a sound financial and legal system that allowed them to fulfil their aims of modernization which was to end the unequal treaties and gain parity with the West, successfully achieving the end goal of modernisation. Domestically, the modernization of military had further ripple-on effects on the society. With everyone given the opportunity to join the army and bear arms, this reinforced the narrative of equality in the new social structure. However, there are limitations to the success of modernization with regards to Japanese military. Although the Japanese became a modernised military power, their political weakness meant that Japan was still weak against Western allies. The Triple Intervention of 23 April 1895 saw Russia, France and Germany band together to prevent Japan from acquiring the Liaodong peninsula of China by threatening force through the bombardment of Japanese ports. Therefore despite gaining military strength, Japan's diplomatic isolation meant that they were unable to be elevated on the same status as the West as a modernised leading military power.

Japan became a modernized nation in social terms as well through increased liberalization and education of society, seeing a rise in social mobility and equity promulgated through governmental domestic policies regarding land tax and voting; and educational reforms. The previous Tokugawa tax system was inequitable and even oppressive, and corruption was rife. Taxes formed around 40% of the annual crop yield, unfairly targeting the peasantry. The Meiji reforms engaged in major restructuring from 1870-73 where new land tax was assessed according to the cash value of the land and did not take a fixed percentage of crop yield, which previously hurt farmers during bad harvests. The land taxes further established right to private land ownership for the first time and issued over 109 million certificates of land ownership. In analysis, the standardised uniform tax system of 3% shows how Japan was moving away from a feudal system which prioritized a handful of elites, instead making society more equitable for the lower-middle class. This had an incredibly wide scale of impact as 80% of the population was engaged in farming and many Japanese benefited from more equitable taxation. Japan also established a voting system in the Meiji Constitution of 1889 and had their first general election in July 1890, the first popularly elected national assembly in Asia, showing how Japan was spearheading liberal ideals and democratic representation in the Asian region. Social reforms in education were also carried out by the Ministry of Education established in 1871 with 4 years of compulsory education instated and based upon French and American models, offering learning of Western languages and scientific and technical training. Evidence of success is seen in the incredibly high statistic of 98% of children at statutory

school age being educated by the start of the 1900s, resulting in Japan having one of the highest literacy rates globally. This is significant in providing avenues of social mobility for the majority of the population stuck in lower-middle class as education and literacy were the pathway to political and governmental power, historically associated with positions of power and prestige. Furthermore, success in educational reform in particular even surpassed the West in welcoming more meritocratic ideals that increased equity in society, demonstrating how Japan became a modernised nation. This is clearly shown in the 1868 Charter Oath which has broad principles of meritocracy for “all classes” and “the common people”. In evaluation, Japan’s specific success in improving their education system clearly shows their modernised society with extremely high literacy rates, surpassing many Western nations with respect to access to education and social mobility. However, although the government passed policies to encourage social upheaval of archaic social castes, many of them did not translate on the ground. Liberalisation through educational reforms was limited by the Imperial Rescript of 1890 where the Emperor urged loyalty to tradition and promoted a collective mindset. This encouraged shintoism with native traditions like ancestor-worship and Confucian ethics of loyalty to superiors and state. Therefore it can be argued that education was still designed to foster loyalty to state and emperor rather than promote more radical liberal notions of meritocracy and individual success, and Western technical education was merely a means to an end to strengthen imperial and influence.

On the other hand, the political aspects of Meiji Japan exhibited that Japan had not become modernised as political power still lay in the hands of the oligarchy and political ideology was couched in traditional Shinto mythology. Following the Minken Movement in the 1870s where people demanded for representative institutions, a Cabinet was established in 1885. However, these cabinet ministers were responsible to the Emperor and not elected. The real political power lay in the privy council established in 1888 made up of the Genro, high-ranking oligarchy whom advised the Emperor directly as the highest advisory body of the state. The formerly feudal class who ruled in Tokugawa Japan became the genro who unconstitutionally advised the Emperor. There was also an emphasis on militarism leftover from the bakufu Tokugawa government with army and navy general staffs having veto power over the cabinet. The Military Chief of Staff was independent of civil government and had right of direct access to Emperor. In analysis, this shows that similar to the Tokugawa period, the elite oligarchy and military officials still monopolised key governmental positions and had unchecked power. The bulk of politics was still not subject to democratic will and thus Japan failed to modernise their backwards political system. The political system was also backwards in the sense that the new political institutions were couched in the ancient Shinto mythology. The Emperor was the highest power and deified by Shinto mythology. His decisions were transcendent and not subject to public discussion, the Meiji constitution presented to the public as a “gift” from the Emperor. The constitution could only be altered through his will, hence political reforms were essentially manipulated to the Genro’s liking. The reverence of

the Emperor reinforced the asymmetry of political power by making him a powerful puppet for the oligarchy who used imperial institution to preserve their leadership of the country. Thus modernisation of politics failed by continuing to enshrine Emperor worship in the constitution and Meiji culture. Even the limited political democracy seen in the election of the lower house of the Diet, the House of Representatives, could be dissolved by the Emperor. The upper house of the Diet, House of Peers served as a conservative check with the power to veto legislations passed up by the lower house, which made the House of Representatives essentially toothless. Furthermore, the voting of the lower house was restricted to a mere 1.13% of the population with the high barrier of qualification of being an adult male over 25 years who paid national taxes of 15 yen or more. The high tax requirements resulted in the limited electorate being heavily weighted towards upper-middle class individuals such as rural landowners and urban entrepreneurs thus there was still a failure to achieve representation of the majority lower-middle class. In evaluation, the imbalance in power towards the Meiji oligarchy is most significant in diminishing Japan's modern status as it showed that modernisation of Japanese politics was only surface-level where it appeared to grant more democracy, but in reality solidified the power of the oligarchs and allowed them to manipulate the imperial institution in favour of their agenda by rooting political reform in tradition. However, historians like Pyle, Reischauer and Craig are generally positive of constitutional governmental reforms in modelling after the Western-style representative government and facilitating the removal of the unequal treaties, elevating their status as a modern nation with their own sovereignty and political autonomy. While their comments are true in nature, they neglect the domestic impacts of the constitution and how it legitimised and reinforced the autocratic rule of the oligarchy, preventing true modernisation of the political system to take place internally.

The judicial system of Meiji Japan further proves lacking modernisation through new laws that encouraged authoritarianism and suppression of people's opinions outside of government-sanctioned narratives. After Itagaki formed the Public Party of Patriots in 1873 and led the People's Rights Movement, in 1875, the government passed new laws to prevent attacks on the government, curtailing freedom of expression and speech. This was reinforced in 1880 by a law that gave the government the power to control and prevent public meetings. These judicial reforms exhibit that from early on in the Meiji restoration, the government was intentionally restricting the potential for political opposition. In 1882 after Okuma set up the Constitutional Progressive Party and Itagaki re-organised his party as the Liberal Party, laws controlling public meetings were strengthened. This showed a lack of true interest in modernisation as limiting political opposition through judicial measures meant that there was no competition to challenge the oligarchy and hold them accountable as a viable alternative for the population. This also prevented any organic change of political leadership in the future. In 1887, the Peace Preservation Law further allowed the government to expel from Tokyo anyone considered to be a threat to public order. These laws directly contradicted the 1868 Charter Oath issued by

the Meiji Emperor upon which the Meiji government was to be based upon, where they claimed “all matters (would be) decided by public discussion”. This reflected the national outlook of Kokutai where the oligarchy aimed for national polity and the Shinto-Confucian idealisation of Japan. In analysis, this promoted a collective mindset on a state-level and any divergent ideas were deemed Anti-Japanese, which was dangerous towards modernisation. This meant that any new concepts or innovations that challenged traditional ideals and values could be banned by the state as long as it did not align with their national agenda, running the risk of not only stagnation in modernisation and change; but more drastically authoritarian oppression of the population. Therefore it can be seen that new judicial reforms were used to clamp down on political dissent and consolidate the government’s control, instead of encouraging public discourse and divergent narratives that signify true modernisation of a liberal society. Historians such as Leon Trotsky and E.H. Norman support the argument, stating that the top-down nature of reforms were inherently oppressive and reactionary in nature which discouraged political opposition and prioritised the elite Genro and zaibatsu. However, in the context of the late 1800s, Japan’s judicial and political system could be considered modern as the Western powers themselves, seen as the benchmark of modernisation, did not have perfectly representative institutions either. The Meiji constitution was modelled upon imperial Germany also had limitations. Thus the Meiji Period had achieved commendable modernisation in context of the era.

In conclusion, to a larger extent, Japan did achieve modernisation during the Meiji Period as even though there were flaws in some of their policies, the rapidity of economic industrialisation and military development allowed Japan to escape their semi-colonial status and achieve greater parity with the West. This fulfilled the aims of Fukoku-kyohei, bolstering Japan’s status as a military power in the long-term. Even though the political ideology of the leaders were still rooted in tradition, that does not detract from the tangible developments that affected a wide range of Japanese population.