

Meiji: Emperor of Enlightened Peace in Japan



After a decade of trying to resist Western encroachment, the Japanese Tokugawa shogunate resigned in 1867. To modernize and hopefully preserve Japan, reformers installed Prince Mutsuhito on the throne as the Emperor Meiji when he was 15 years old. Over the next 44 years, the new emperor reversed two centuries of isolation, choosing to embrace some of the ideas of the West in a period known as the Meiji Restoration.

Under Meiji's guidance, the Japanese adopted legal changes to treat all citizens equally before the law. He eliminated feudalism, and organized and centralized Japanese society for the first time in centuries. Under the Meiji Constitution of 1889, the Imperial Diet was established on the basis of two houses with coequal powers. The upper house, the House of Peers (Kizokuin), was intended to represent the top rank and quality of the nation and to serve as a check upon the lower house. The House of Representatives (Shūgiin) was composed of 466 freely-elected members. Without Diet approval, no bill could become law. This centralization of powers allowed for a stronger, more effective government. Further, the country industrialized, rapidly modernizing Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Meiji Era saw the transformation of the Japanese financial and industrial systems. Japan borrowed money from the top military powers of the day. Prussian advisors helped them to develop their army, and the British lent their ships and shipbuilding expertise. Meiji's willingness to allow advisers from the most powerful military nations in Europe allowed Japan to build an empire, defeating China in the Sino-Japanese War and seizing land along Asia's Pacific coast.

Meiji realized that in order to remain modern, some sacrifices would have to be made. Education became less centered on Japanese culture and more dedicated to math and science. The government now frowned on Buddhism, preferring the indigenous Japanese religion, Shinto, which they modified to include a strong message about serving the state and the emperor. The government forbid samurai, warriors of the former clans, from dressing and carrying their traditional swords, and eliminated their government stipends.

While these efforts served to overhaul the look of Japanese society in a number of ways, the Meiji Reign ensured that Japan never lost its independence in an era where many Asian and African countries fell to European overlords.

The efforts paid off. Under the Meiji's rule, Japan dominated their traditional enemy, China, in the Sino-Japanese War in the 1890s. But their crowning achievement came a decade later, when the Japanese defeated the Russian Empire in the Russo-Japanese War. This major victory cemented Japan's status as a great world power, helping to prove the worth of Meiji's reforms.