

THE JAPANESE EMPIRE

Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration
to the Pacific War



— S. C. M. PAINE —

The Japanese Empire

The Japanese experience of war from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth presents a stunning example of the meteoric rise and shattering fall of a great power. As Japan modernized and became the one non-European great power, its leaders concluded that an empire on the Asian mainland required the containment of Russia. Japan won the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) but became overextended in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–45), which escalated, with profound consequences, into World War II. A combination of incomplete institution building, an increasingly lethal international environment, a skewed balance between civil and military authority, and a misunderstanding of geopolitics explain these divergent outcomes. This analytical survey examines themes including the development of Japanese institutions, diversity of opinion within the government, domestic politics, Japanese foreign policy, and China's anti-Japanese responses. It is an essential guide for those interested in history, politics and international relations.

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to the Pacific War*

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United States Naval War College



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To John P. LeDonne
scholar, mentor, teacher, and friend

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Map 1 Meiji Japan

1 The Meiji Generation

The average Westerner ... was wont to regard Japan as barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace: he calls her civilised since she began to commit wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefield.¹

Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), philosopher, art critic, in
reference to the Russo-Japanese War

The Book of Tea (1906)

During two periods in the last century and a half, Japan has been governed by extraordinary generations of leaders, whose choices brought their citizens prosperity and their country the accolades of the world. They were the Meiji generation, which transformed Japan in the late nineteenth century into the first modern, non-Western great power, and the post-World War II generation, which transformed Japan after the disastrous Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–45) into an economic powerhouse soon emulated by all of its neighbors. These two generations bookend the narrative told here of a meteoric rise ending in a shattering fall encompassing all of Asia and destroying imperial Japan. It is a story beginning with brilliance and ending in tragedy.

Few nations have solved the conundrum of economic development. Yet the Japanese in the late nineteenth century became experts at economic development and their story has much to offer others concerning both the prerequisites and the pitfalls of transforming a traditional society into a modern country. Japanese leaders modernized and westernized their homeland in order to defend against the predations of increasingly intrusive Western powers. From 1894 to 1945, they fought a series of three wars to contain the march of Russian imperialism into Asia that became the march of Communist imperialism post-1917. While their strategy delivered rapid economic development and victory in the first two conflicts, the third war escalated into a global war that destroyed imperial Japan and produced mayhem on a scale unprecedented for

¹ Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1958, reprint, first published 1906), 6. Paraphrase in Donald Keene, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852–1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 510.

humankind. Although the goal to become and remain a great power had not changed, the conflicts produced antithetical outcomes. The question is, why?

Traditionally, governments have wielded power through the creation of large armies to dominate citizens and neighbors, but since the Industrial Revolution, this approach has yielded low standards of living and often only fleeting military triumphs. In the twentieth century, some educated their young on a diet of xenophobic nationalism glorifying their own achievements and, if not demonizing others, then discounting the achievements of others. But this approach provided no basis for economic growth, which depends on expertise, not anger, for sustenance. Still others have used resource sales to underwrite political ambitions, but this leaves human resources to languish and generates insufficient wealth for more than a few to prosper.

Japan had no special resource endowment. Its archipelagic geography impeded national integration. Its mountainous topography limited agriculture. It had never been the richest part of Asia, nor the dominant regional power. In the nineteenth century, it was technologically backward when compared to the West. Yet in the twentieth century, Japan became the only non-Western great power by two defining measures: a high GNP and a high per capita GNP. In the late twentieth century, the only other non-Western countries to achieve that status were its former colonies, South Korea and Taiwan. Today, Japan remains the only non-Western member of the prestigious Group of Seven that requires economic achievements of the highest order. In other words, the Japanese made possible what others have found to be impossible.

The Industrial Revolution and the New World Order

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan's world changed, not because of anything it had done, but because of exogenous events taking place on the other side of the globe in Western Europe. Suddenly, Japan faced an unprecedented national security threat in the form of the Industrial Revolution, which began in England in the late eighteenth century and bore down upon East Asia by the mid-nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution, which initially produced 3 percent economic growth rates, was a catastrophic event for traditional societies – none of which emerged unscathed or unchanged. It transformed once comparatively static societies into juggernauts of economic growth and scientific innovation, with per capita standards of living doubling every generation. This opened a growing chasm between those who joined the forced march to industrialize and those who stood apart. After several generations of compounded growth, it upended the global balance of power, when traditional societies suddenly felt powerless to defend themselves. Over two centuries later, the Industrial Revolution continues to define the international balance of power, leaving the least industrialized

countries, whatever their preindustrial cultural glories, to form the ranks of the poor and powerless.

Japan witnessed its immediate neighbor, China, defeated twice in war. During the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), Britain and France imposed what became known as the treaty port system. It had four defining characteristics: First, a series of bilateral treaties designated certain ports “treaty ports” open to international trade. Second, the West, not China, set, collected, and paid to the Chinese government the tariffs on the trade. Third, expatriate Westerners were subject to the laws of their home countries, not Chinese law, whereas Chinese received no such extraterritorial privileges when in the West. Fourth, the treaties contained most-favored-nation clauses that meant that the benefits negotiated by one accrued to all the favored.

As China proved ever less capable of countering the industrializing powers, Russia stood poised to fill the developing power vacuum. It took advantage of the Opium Wars to negotiate treaties to set a very advantageous boundary. It gained land at Chinese expense exceeding U.S. territory east of the Mississippi river and acquired a 3,000-mile eastern coastline that eventually enabled it to become both a Pacific Ocean power and a force in Asia.

The Japanese looked at Western commercial and Russian territorial expansion to conclude that they would be next. In 1854 the United States imposed the treaty port system on Japan. That year, U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry, in command of modern naval vessels dwarfing local ships, coerced Japanese leaders into signing the Treaty of Kanagawa (the prefecture where Yokohama, the port city to Tokyo, is located). The agreement turned Hakodate on Hokkaido, and Shimoda at the outer entrance to Tokyo Bay, into treaty ports and established a U.S. consulate in the latter. In Japan the U.S. naval vessels became known to future generations as the “black ships.” They symbolized the war-fighting capabilities of the industrial age and the West’s many impositions on Japan. Just as China was losing the Second Opium, or Arrow, War, in 1858 the new American consul in Shimoda, Townsend Harris, negotiated a second treaty, bringing Japan’s total number of treaty ports to five and establishing the principle of extraterritoriality for Americans residing in Japan, foreign control of Japan’s tariffs, and most-favored-nation treatment. The other powers followed suit.

China soon became Japan’s negative example of what not to do. The Chinese regarded Western civilization as barbaric. They intended to preserve theirs, which like all civilizations embodied an entire way of life and an international order encompassing the known world. China’s leaders wanted no part of the Western trade or the accompanying “spiritual pollution” (a modern Chinese term), but the Western sampling of Chinese exports did not sate but whetted the foreign appetite for commerce. So China’s leaders tried to compel the Westerners to leave, as did the leaders of so many other traditional societies

when confronted with the intrusions of the Industrial Revolution. Like these other civilizations, China's leaders employed strategies of military coercion that had long proven effective against past enemies.

The strategy of military resistance did not address the unprecedented technological gap that left China poorly prepared to defend itself. Chinese elites' pervasive contempt for foreigners had discouraged the study of the West. They failed to appreciate the unprecedented nature of the threat, let alone the need to counter with an unprecedented strategy. Even the importation of military technology did not address the fundamental security problem, which was the rapid pace of change in the West. So coercion counterproductively inspired Western countermeasures backed by the military technology of the Industrial Revolution that China could not match.

As Japanese leaders observed these events with growing horror, some rapidly concluded that they needed to learn more about the nature of the threat. Serious study of the West began in 1857 with the Tokugawa shogunate's establishment of the Institute to Study Western Books – a think tank of its era. Government missions abroad soon followed. Not only the central government but also the large domains sent students abroad, initially to study law, navigation, and medicine, but the fields of inquiry rapidly expanded to encompass the full array of Western institutions, both military and civil.

The intrusions of the industrial West greatly contributed to the fall of the Tokugawa house. The West challenged, not by intent but in practice, the legitimacy of traditional governments worldwide. Those on the receiving end of westernization via foreign policy initially perceived the military underpinnings of Western power. The process of learning the mechanics of the weapons systems to counter the intrusions entailed the study of mathematics, engineering, and the natural sciences, all subjects based on logic. One of the fundamental principles of logic going back to the ancient Greeks is that of noncontradiction – what Westerners call logical consistency. Westerners applied this principle to traditional societies to devastating effect, highlighting revered practices that fell short when evaluated in terms of consistency, efficiency, or efficacy, and detailing the logical roots of these failings. Before long, those in traditional societies studying Western subjects applied the principles of Western logic to their own societies with tumultuous effects. Logic gives no quarter to tradition.

The reforms to redress the perceived failings of traditional societies have been highly destabilizing, generally entailing domestic unrest, revolution, and regional war. Reform undermined traditional societies from two directions: unprecedented change tended to alienate the traditional power base essential for regime continuity while simultaneously galvanizing the opposition in the expectation of even more radical reforms, so that competing new orders gathered strength just as the old order lost control. While a consensus might develop that the old order must go, there was rarely agreement on

the optimal new order to follow; rather, as venerable old institutions teetered toward collapse, bitter disagreements arose over what should come next.

In Japan key deaths provided an opportunity for change. In 1866 the twenty-year-old shogun, Tokugawa Iemochi, who had been nominally in charge since the tender age of twelve, died only to be replaced by the same twenty-nine-year-old distant cousin, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, who had been runner-up during a preceding contentious leadership struggle back in 1858. Later in 1866, the virulently antiforeign Emperor Kōmei also died at a youthful thirty-six, leaving the throne to his fourteen-year-old son. At this juncture, mid-level samurai predominantly from the domains of Satsuma (Kagoshima), Chōshū (Yamaguchi), Tosa (Kōchi), and Hizen (Saga) organized to overthrow the government. These domains had been among the losers in the decisive Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 that had brought the Tokugawa clan to power. These “outside” domains had suffered discrimination thereafter.

In the 1860s, key samurai from these domains believed that Japan’s response to the Western challenge required more radical changes than the shogunate would allow. As Satsuma and Chōshū prepared their armies, the last Tokugawa shogun initially resigned but reconsidered upon the outbreak of the Boshin War (January 1868–June 1869), only to reconsider again and step down for good when his forces lost the Battle of Toba-Fushimi (27–31 January 1868). Loyalists in the northeastern domains fought on until the surrender of the Tokugawa navy in Hakodate, the southernmost port on the northernmost main island of Hokkaido.

The war put the so-called Meiji generation in power. The coup leaders sought legitimacy through the now fifteen-year-old Emperor Meiji and used his name to designate an era, known as the Meiji Restoration, to suggest the restoration of imperial rule and the end of shogun usurpation. In fact, the Meiji generation promoted not the restoration of tradition but a program of rapid westernization.

The emperor, like his predecessors, reigned but did not rule. For thousands of years, the imperial house had legitimated the de facto rule of others, who until modern times were Japan’s military leaders. The relationship eventually became formalized into shogunates. (*Shōgun* is the Japanese word for “general.”) Each shogun clan ruled for generations until overthrown by a successor shogunate. Various shogunates ruled from 1192 to 1867 (the Kamakura period through the fall of the Tokugawa). Notably, the Meiji generation created not only new military but also new civil institutions in a land historically dominated by those in military, not civil, employ.

The government formalized its assumption of power with the Charter Oath of 1868 that promised to strengthen imperial rule by uniting society behind economic development, governing through a new public assembly, allowing all classes to pursue legitimate aspirations, discarding obsolete customs, and, most critically, seeking knowledge worldwide. The new government sent

even more delegations of high-level civil servants and officers abroad on year-long fact-finding missions to study the full array of Western civil and military institutions.

The most famous was the Iwakura mission. Until his death in 1883 Iwakura Tomomi was among the most influential of the Meiji reformers. His delegation of fifty senior statesmen plus students and others spent nearly two years in Europe and America, visiting twelve countries, to study their military, political, economic, legal, social, and educational institutions. Included in his entourage was Itō Hirobumi, who would go on to draft the Meiji Constitution. Its members thought Japan should emulate American one-room schoolhouses and British industrial and naval development, but Prussia impressed them most. They arrived in Europe just as Otto von Bismarck was completing the unification of the numerous Germanic principalities under Prussian hegemony to create the modern state of Germany. The Japanese took note because until 1868 their country had also been divided into numerous competing semi-independent domains, so Prussia seemed to offer a highly relevant model to transform Japan into a unified state and regional power. They emulated its constitutional monarchy with a dual line of authority between the emperor and the legislature, which predisposed military power to trump civil authority.

Modernization and Westernization

The Iwakura mission concluded that the sources of Western power were not merely technological or military, but also institutional and civilian. That is, the problem was not simply modernization, meaning the acquisition of the most up-to-date technology and particularly military technology and armaments, but also westernization, meaning the introduction of westernized institutions – and not simply westernized military institutions, but a whole array of civil institutions as well.

The decision to modernize with versus without westernization has divided the responses of traditional societies to the Industrial Revolution ever since. Most, like the Qing dynasty of China, have embraced modernization, while reviling the westernized societies that created the coveted technologies. Most have correctly understood that to change domestic institutions is to change a way of life. Therefore they have correctly perceived westernization as a mortal threat to their way of life and have responded accordingly. China chose the first variant, modernization without westernization, while Japan chose the second. The ramifications of their choices have been both consequential and enduring.

The question remains: can one have modernization without westernization? Is it possible to have the fruit without the garden? Can a country become modern, meaning to have available the full array of modern technologies and to enjoy a

high general standard of living, without a wide array of westernized civil and military institutions? The Japanese in the late nineteenth century concluded that the answer was no. They believed that some degree of westernization was necessary to become a producer and creator of these technologies, rather than a mere consumer of them. It is interesting that they reached this conclusion and that they did so early.

In contrast, the Chinese government set a course of modernization without westernization. Their overarching policy objective became the preservation of Confucian civilization untainted by the pollution of Western civilization. Japan's decision to westernize marked the parting of the ways for Japanese and Chinese economic and political development, and also for their friendship. Previously, the Japanese had patterned many of their institutions on Chinese models. Henceforth they would emulate Western models instead. This defied the Chinese conceptualization of civilization as a single one-way street, forever in their direction. Japan took a U-turn on the road to civilization when it traded in sinification for westernization and the Chinese have never gotten over it.

Prior to the prolonged trips abroad, Japan's most senior leaders, like those of China, had favored armed resistance, but after observing railways, telegraph systems, steam navigation, steam-powered manufacturing bases, and gaslit cities, they concluded, like it or not, that should Japan fight the Western powers, it would lose. Instead they set their country on a path to rapid westernization and modernization in order to deal with the West on an equal footing. They did not do so out of any cultural affinity with the West, but out of a hardheaded appraisal of the balance of power. The institutional changes entailed the sacrifice of many venerated traditions, such as the privileged position of the samurai, or warrior, a status that many of the reformers held. They replaced the virtuosity of the samurai with the massed power of the conscript army. Children received westernized instead of sinified educations. Old and young, privileged and unprivileged, all faced great changes in the way they lived. Only elements of traditional Japanese culture, most notably Shintō, survived the hybridized westernization promoted by the Meiji reformers. The reformers used Shintō beliefs to serve as the social glue, binding citizens to the state via loyalty to the divine emperor, who became the symbol and legitimator of the state. The decision to westernize upended tradition and angered the general population, who resented imposed changes in the way they had lived for generations.

On the basis of an assessment of the international situation made during the fact-finding missions, the Japanese government set a policy objective and a grand strategy to reach it. Grand strategy, in distinction to military (or operational-level) strategy, integrates all relevant elements of national power. It extends far beyond military power to encompass economic influence, co-ordination with allies, intelligence gathering and analysis, propaganda, institution building, international law,

etc. In modern governments, cabinet positions tend to represent many of the elements of grand strategy.

The Meiji generation's overarching objective was the preservation of Japan's security and independence in the face of accelerating Western and Russian imperialism. Since empire was the hallmark of a great power at that time, Japan would follow the model. They devised a sequential grand strategy: first a domestic phase of institution building, followed by a foreign-policy phase of wars to win an empire. Domestic reforms would both lay the foundations for Japan to become a great power and also remove the restrictions of the treaty port system, impinging on its sovereignty. Wars would both stake a claim to an empire on the Asian mainland and also contain Russian expansion that would preclude empire. A key 1873 document makes this sequence clear: "The first thing is to revise the treaties [with the European powers], the Korean business [the conquest of Korea] comes after that."²

During the ensuing two decades, Japan westernized a whole array of institutions. The list of reforms is impressive: In 1869, a year after the new government formed, it overturned the internal distribution of power by eliminating the feudal domains that had long fragmented Japan. It then turned from the top of the social pyramid to the bottom, children. In 1872, it made elementary education compulsory in recognition that modernization depended on an educated citizenry. In 1882, it turned to financial and legal institutions: it founded the Bank of Japan and promulgated a westernized criminal code. In 1885 it began reforming political institutions by creating a Cabinet subordinate to a prime minister. In 1886, it founded Tokyo Imperial University to become the center of higher westernized learning. In 1887, it instituted a modern civil service examination system. In 1889, it promulgated a Constitution, and in 1890 it convened the first Diet, reorganized the judicial system, and introduced a westernized code of civil procedure. These collectively became known as the Meiji reforms.

The Meiji reforms included a major military buildup. In 1873, the year after elementary education became mandatory, universal conscription became law. In 1878 the Meiji reformers created an army General Staff based on the Prussian model in order to provide continuity in military leadership and to smooth the transition from peace to war. In 1881 General Yamagata Aritomo, the father of the modern Japanese army, described the imperative for Japan to become a "floating fortress" able to "exercise power in all directions."³ In 1883 the General Staff established the Staff College to educate officers to lead the

² Ōkubo Toshimichi cited in Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868–1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 48.

³ Quoted in Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (New York: Random House, 1991), 43.

new westernized army and soon employed Prussian-trained faculty members. In 1888 the army jettisoned its organization based on static garrisons in favor of mobile divisions, capable of sustained operations abroad, and created the Army Service Corps for logistical support. In 1892, the army engaged in comprehensive war games. Japan also built an extensive railway grid linking its military bases to facilitate mobilization.

The same year that conscription became law, Japan also created a Navy Ministry separate from the War (Army) Ministry. In 1882 the Imperial Japanese Navy formed its first fleet, in 1889 it established the Standing Fleet of first-line non-reserve warships, in 1893 it created a second standing fleet known as the Western Seas Fleet, and in 1894 it unified the Standing and Western Seas Fleets into the Combined Fleet. The navy rapidly grew from just nineteen warships in 1882 to thirty-one by 1894, plus numerous torpedo boats. The largest four warships were completed between 1892 and 1894. The Meiji government modeled this fleet on the British Navy and its naval doctrine on the teachings of a U.S. admiral, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the world-renowned naval theorist of the 1890s. More of his writings were translated into Japanese than into any other language.

Once the domestic reforms were in place, the government turned to renegotiating its treaties on the basis of juridical equality. Japan played back the law of noncontradiction on the West: domestic westernization removed the Western rationale for the treaty port system because the Japanese judicial system now followed Western practices, obviating the need for special legal protections for expatriates. Therefore Japan should be treated like any European power. On 16 July 1894, it concluded a new treaty with Britain, the international precedent-setter and greatest of the great powers. The other powers soon followed suit and renegotiated their treaties. Treaty revision marked the end of extraterritoriality and fruition of the domestic phase of Japan's grand strategy.

Thus Japan eliminated the treaty port system a full half-century before China did in the 1940s with the West and in the 1950s with the Soviet Union, and arguably not fully until the 1990s with the return of Macau and Hong Kong. During this domestic phase, the government had carefully avoided foreign wars to avoid derailing the domestic reform program. In contrast, a strategy of resistance entangled China in one conflict after another so that it accomplished little reform of any kind and the industrializing powers imposed ever more onerous treaties after the Opium Wars, the Sino-French War (1883–85), and the Boxer Uprising (1899–1900).

During the domestic phase of Japan's grand strategy, the reforms remained unpopular. The political parties populating the Diet were mainly hostile to the unelected senior statesmen, also known as the oligarchs, or *genrō* (元老 original elders), who actually set policy. Prior to Japan's gambit for empire that began with the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), there was constant