Meiji and Taishō Japan: An Introductory Essay

by Ethan Segal, Ph.D., Department of History, Michigan State University

Japan underwent amazing transformations from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In the 1850s, Japan was politically divided into many competing warlord domains. The people were socially divided into hierarchical classes. The most powerful warlord, the shogun, ruled almost as a dictator. He did not allow popular participation in government. Leaders severely limited contacts with the outside world. Japan was seen as a "closed country" that engaged in diplomacy with few of its neighbors.

By the 1920s, things had changed. Japan had become a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected parliament. It had a modern military that had won two major wars overseas. Japan was an active member of the international community. It participated in the League of Nations and ruled colonies of its own. Despite these successes, Japanese leaders were frustrated. They saw signs that other world powers did not regard them as equals. They were also concerned about rising nationalism in the colonies and popular protests at home. All these factors led officials to move toward militarism and fascism in the 1930s.

Along with political transformations, the Japanese experienced many changes in daily life. People began wearing Western style clothing and eating new foods. Trains, cars, and electricity came to Japan's cities. Women became active participants in public life as workers, consumers, writers, and intellectuals. Interactions with Europeans and Americans inspired many of these changes. Some Japanese thought such moves were necessary for Japan to become part of the modern world. Others were concerned they would lose their own traditions. How could the Japanese create a shared sense of national identity? Did "modern" mean "Western"? Could Japan modernize and industrialize without losing its sense of self? These were questions Japanese of the time asked themselves. We might ask the same questions today as we think back on these decades of Japan's history.

This essay briefly describes some key events in Japan's Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishō (1912-1925) periods. More importantly, it highlights the long-term steps Japanese leaders took to create a unified, modern nation. These steps included teaching respect for the emperor and requiring universal education and military service. These actions were designed to convince people that they were all Japanese citizens. Leaders wanted to give the people of Japan a "national" identity as they also became modern. Of course, people did not accept such ideas overnight. It took decades. Studied together, the Meiji and Taishō periods thus provide a window into how Japan became the first nation outside of Europe and North America to industrialize and earn respect as a world power.

What Came Before: Tokugawa Japan

In the early 1600s, the Tokugawa warrior clan established an enduring samurai government. It was known as the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Its leader, the shogun, ruled from the city of Edo (modern day Tokyo). The Tokugawa shoguns directly controlled about one-fourth of the country. The remaining lands were divided among more than 200 warlords. These warlords were known as *daimyō*. Some *daimyō* were allies of the Tokugawa. Other "outside" *daimyō* were enemies who submitted after being defeated in battle. The *daimyō* could set some policies within their own domains. However, they also had to follow the directives of the *bakufu*. Thus, Japan was politically divided during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.

The first three Tokugawa shoguns established a number of policies to ensure stability and prevent the *daimyō* from rising up against them. For example, they instituted the "alternate attendance" system. This system required warlords to live in Edo every other year. During the years that the warlords returned to their domains, they had to leave their wives and children in Edo. If they attacked the *bakufu*, their families would be killed. The Tokugawa also established a rigid class system inspired by Confucian thinking. Samurai were at the top. They were to be respected because only they could rule the country. Next were farmers and craftsmen. Merchants were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They were looked down upon because they did not make or grow anything. Instead, they profited by selling things produced by other people. Even among the samurai, distinctions in status were very important. Samurai from "outside" domains were never allowed to serve in the *bakufu* government. Positions were reserved for samurai from allied domains. These positions became hereditary over time. Finally, the Tokugawa very carefully regulated contacts with the outside world. They outlawed Christianity and only permitted trade with the Dutch, Chinese, Koreans, and Okinawans.

From Tokugawa to Meiji

Initially, these policies worked quite well in keeping the peace. But by the early nineteenth century, they had become the source of many problems. *Daimyō* were spending more than half of their domain incomes on the alternate attendance system. Middle- and lower-ranked samurai were frustrated because they were excluded from higher positions in government, as were samurai from "outside" domains. Meanwhile, some merchants became rich while some samurai lived in poverty. This fact seemed to contradict the class ideology, which taught that samurai should be respected. As these domestic problems were leading more and more people to question the Tokugawa *bakufu*, foreign ships started appearing in Japanese waters, pressuring the Japanese to open their ports. The *bakufu* was unable to turn them away. In 1854, Japan reluctantly signed a trade agreement with the Americans. This was the first of several "unequal treaties" the Japanese signed with Western colonial powers.

The treaties were seen as unequal for several reasons. First, they forced the Japanese to accept tariff rates set by foreign powers. Second, they provided for "extraterritoriality." This meant that foreigners accused of crimes were to be judged in courts in their own countries, not in Japanese courts. Third, the treaties forced the Japanese to open certain ports to foreign merchants. Japanese saw the treaties as further signs of Tokugawa weakness. Yet opinions varied greatly on how to respond to the West. Some felt Japan needed to be opened so the Japanese

could learn from the rest of the world. Others were more hostile to Westerners. Their slogan was "revere the emperor and expel the barbarians." The most radical members of such groups attacked foreigners living in Japan as well as *bakufu* officials. In the 1860s, samurai—particularly lower and middle ranked samurai from "outside" domains—unified the opposition to the Tokugawa. They destroyed the *bakufu* and founded a new government with the goals of eliminating class distinctions, modernizing the country, and standing up to the Western powers.

Building a Modern Nation

The establishment of this new government in 1868 marked the beginning of Japan's Meiji period (1868-1912). It is also sometimes called the Meiji Restoration. In theory the new government restored power to Japan's ancient line of emperors. (The emperors were powerless figureheads in Tokugawa times.) In reality, the young Meiji emperor was controlled by his leading advisors. These advisors were samurai who had become ministers of state.

The ministers implemented important programs and policies to unify the country. First, they abolished the warlord domains. In their place, Meiji officials created prefectures (similar to the 50 U.S. states). The former *daimyō* were given large settlements to compensate them for the lands they lost. In exchange, the Meiji government gained control over the entire country. Second, national leaders formally eliminated the hierarchical class system. This reform did away with the special status of samurai. All of Japan's people were declared to be equal citizens. Third, the government required children to attend elementary school. It also required young men to serve in the military. Education and military conscription helped create a sense of common identity among people of different backgrounds and regions. It also gave the government a chance to teach loyalty to the new Japanese government. Students were taught to revere the emperor. Every classroom had an image of the emperor on the wall. Such beliefs were further strengthened by state sponsorship of the Shinto faith, which taught that the emperors were divine descendants of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu.

Learning from the West

The new government was committed to learning from the West. In so doing, it hoped to strengthen itself and revise the unequal treaties. In 1868, it issued the Charter Oath. The Oath was a five-article document outlining the principles of the Meiji administration. It declared that "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world." It also said that "evil customs of the past shall be discontinued."

Japanese began studying abroad. In 1872, the Iwakura Mission—a group of diplomats that included some of the new government's most important figures—began to travel around the world. Members of the mission were to observe other countries. Along with touring factories and industrial facilities, the Japanese studied social customs. They found strange, for example, the high status and personal freedoms women enjoyed in the United States. It would have been unthinkable in Japan of that time for wives to accompany their husbands to social events such as costume balls. Members of the Iwakura Mission also hoped to negotiate the revision of the unequal treaties Japan had signed in the 1850s. But they found that they had little leverage. The Western nations, they perceived, were unlikely to negotiate unless Japan became more

"civilized." In the minds of many Europeans and Americans, this meant Japan had to become more Western.

The Meiji leaders also believed that they needed to become more like the Western imperial powers if they hoped to retain their independence. They hired a number of foreign experts to help train the Japanese in various aspects of modern life. French legal experts were hired to advise on the creation of a new legal code. British advised on industry, and Americans aided with agriculture and education. The army drew largely on Prussian models. Meiji officials also started acting—and dressing—like Western bureaucrats. Japanese diplomats used to wear kimono and samurai swords. They now started wearing European coat-and-tails. This was true even for the emperor and empress of Japan. Official photographs from the early 1870s show them in traditional kimono. Only a few years later, they looked very different: the emperor in a Western military uniform, the empress in a formal Victorian style gown. One important slogan of the time was "*bunmei kaika*" ("civilization and enlightenment").

Japanese government officials were supposedly trying to learn from the West in order to strengthen Japan. In some cases, however, things went to excess. The most infamous example was the Rokumeikan. This extravagant French-style hall opened in 1883 to entertain foreign dignitaries. European visitors were not impressed, and Japanese conservatives disapproved of men and women dancing together at balls. Construction and maintenance cost far more than had been anticipated. Rumors spread that the government was raising taxes to pay for parties at the hall. Such criticisms led the government to sell the building in 1890.

Financing Change

These social and political programs were expensive. Thus, the government had to come up with new sources of revenue. Taxation was one area for reform. Most of the economy was still agricultural, so land taxes were an important source of income. In the Tokugawa period, taxes were assessed as a percentage of the harvest. This was not very reliable, however. The amounts collected varied with good and bad harvests. The Meiji government switched to a tax system based on assessments of the land's value. Thus, it could count on regular tax income whether harvests were good or bad. The government also took steps to strengthen its currency. In the 1880s, Finance Minister Matsukata shrank the money supply to stop inflation. His policies helped bolster the value of government money. Tax reform and deflation hurt farmers, however. They had to pay the same amount in taxes even if they had a bad harvest. But the prices they could charge for their produce went down with deflation. Many lost their land in the 1880s and 1890s. Some became tenant farmers, working lands owned by others.

Meiji leaders also tried to help the economy industrialize. They promoted industrial technology by importing cotton mills, spinning machinery, and the like. Model factories set up with government support were then sold to private businessmen. Of course, those private entrepreneurs also played important roles in the growth of the economy. The most successful, such as Iwasaki Yataro, founder of the Mitsubishi conglomerate, were similar to the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts of the United States.

Finally, the workers themselves made important contributions to economic growth. Japan desperately needed Western "hard currency" to pay for technology and foreign experts. In the early Meiji period, silk was one of the few Japanese products foreigners wanted to buy. Young women, often working in very poor conditions, produced silk for export. Their labors played a key role in Japan's ability to purchase foreign goods and industrialize so quickly.

Popular Rights, Resistance, and Tokugawa Legacies

Not every aspect of the government's reform program was by the design of officials. The Meiji Constitution, for example, was largely the result of pressure from the Japanese people. Citizens sought a more active role in government in the 1870s and 1880s. Some formed political parties to push for a constitution and a popularly elected parliament to represent the people. In 1881, disagreements over these matters became intense. Some members of the government even resigned from office. Those remaining promised a constitution by 1890. A key government figure, Itō Hirobumi, traveled to Europe to study constitutions. Drawing heavily on Prussian and Austrian models, he drafted the Meiji Constitution.

The emperor presented the constitution to the people in 1889. It proclaimed that the highest authority resided with the emperor. He could appoint ministers, control the army and navy, and dissolve the parliament if he thought it necessary. But it also provided for a legislative parliament that consisted of two houses. The upper house included members of the nobility and others appointed by the emperor. Lower house representatives were elected by popular vote. Only male citizens who paid 15 yen or more in taxes were allowed to vote. (This was around 5 percent of the total male population.) The Meiji Constitution might not seem very democratic today. At the time, however, it was widely praised. It provided for more popular involvement and many more checks and balances than earlier rule by the shoguns.

Things changed quickly in the first decades of the Meiji period. Not everything was completely new, however. In reality, the Japanese built on a foundation for economic growth that had been created in the Tokugawa period. For example, many Japanese were already literate at the start of the Meiji period. One estimate suggests 40 percent of boys and 15 percent of girls knew how to read. Widespread trade and commerce in Tokugawa times meant the Japanese already had sophisticated banking institutions, even if they were not nationwide. These and other legacies from the Tokugawa gave the Meiji economy a head start.

Not everyone was happy about the changes Meiji leaders brought to Japan. Some samurai opposed the abolition of their status in the 1870s. They fought a war in southwestern Japan against imperial forces. Although they were defeated, the war was costly for the new government. Commoners resisted sending their children to the new elementary schools. Some school buildings were burned to the ground. But most Japanese seem to have eventually been persuaded that the Meiji policies were good ones—or at least that resistance would not succeed.

Joining the Great Powers

The Japanese proved able students of industry and technology. The first train line, linking Tokyo and Yokohama, opened in 1872 (just four years after the Meiji Restoration!). Trains

quickly became the symbol of the new, modern Japan. Woodblock prints from the Meiji period often featured trains as part of the new landscape. Major cities soon gained the use of electricity. By 1880 people in most cities could communicate with each other by telegraph. The government also created a standard currency (the yen) and a system of national banks to promote savings and investment. Along with "civilization and enlightenment," another important slogan of the era was "*fukoku kyōhei*" ("enrich the country, strengthen the army"). While successful businessmen worked to make Japan a rich country, the government continued to invest in its military. Those investments paid off. In 1876, Japanese gunboats forced the Koreans to sign an unequal treaty of their own. A military expedition that same year helped the Japanese assert control over the Ryūkyū Islands. But Japan's greatest military achievements of the Meiji period were its victories over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905.

Both of these wars were fought in part to protect Japanese interests in Korea. By the 1880s, some Japanese were trying to support Korean reformers, who were interested in Meiji-style reforms for their own country. Other Japanese were simply concerned that Korea was too close to Japan to allow an unfriendly government to control it. Conservative Koreans saw themselves as allies of the Chinese. Tensions between the Chinese and Japanese over Korea led to war in 1894. China was bigger, more populous, and the traditional power in East Asia. Most people therefore expected the Chinese to win. But Japanese forces were better trained, better equipped, and employed more effective tactics. They defeated the Chinese and won major concessions. The concessions included control of Taiwan and a large monetary payment. The victory was a source of great pride. Japanese intellectuals and the general public were overjoyed at the news of their nation's success. But that joy was short lived. Russia, France, and Germany intervened to prevent the Japanese from taking over all of the Chinese territories they had won. This incident was known as the Triple Intervention. Many Japanese felt it was unjust. But they were not ready to challenge three European powers.

Meanwhile, Korea sought to keep its independence by balancing the great powers against each other. With China no longer a player, some Koreans turned to Russia as a counter to Japan. The Japanese were preparing for war against Russia. But they were concerned that the French and Germans might help the Russians. Such fears were eased in 1902, when the Japanese and British entered into the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Knowing that the British would help them if Germany or France tried to help the Russians, the Japanese in 1904 launched a surprise attack on Russia's Pacific fleet at Port Arthur. They later sank Russia's Baltic fleet as well. The Japanese also won some important land battles, but they incurred heavy losses. By 1905, the Japanese were at the limits of their manpower and supply capabilities. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt helped the two sides negotiate a peace agreement. The Japanese gained rights in Korea and Manchuria as well as the southern half of Sakhalin Island.

Japan and Imperialism

Around the world, Japan gained the respect of many. The Russo-Japanese War was the first major conflict in which a non-Western country had defeated a Western imperial power. Yet the Japanese were not fighting to help free Asian states from Western colonial rule. In fact, Japan had decided to join the Western powers and acquire colonies of its own. It already administered Taiwan as a result of the Sino-Japanese War settlement of 1895. Following the Russo-Japanese

War, it made Korea into a protectorate in 1905 and then a colony in 1910. Many Koreans tried to oppose the Japanese and keep their independence. But no outside power was willing to stand up to Japan in East Asia. The United States secretly agreed to Japan's actions in exchange for Japanese respect for U.S. control of the Philippines.

A number of factors explain Japan's push for colonies. The Japanese sought raw materials like iron and oil that were hard to come by in Japan. They also wanted overseas markets where they could sell goods made in Japan. Colonies also offered land. Since the Japanese thought their own islands were overpopulated, they encouraged citizens to settle in the colonies. Finally, the Japanese wanted their country to be thought of as the equal of the great powers of the West. On this last point, they were only somewhat successful.

The Age of Uneasy Success

The Japanese had an impressive list of accomplishments by the early twentieth century. They had reformed their country's government, social structure, educational system, and more. They were the first non-Western people to industrialize. They had won two foreign wars and acquired territories overseas. But these successes provided little comfort to government leaders. Leaders were increasingly uneasy about Japan's future. At home, Japanese officials feared that new ideas like anarchism and new groups like trade unions and the women's rights movement would disrupt the social order. Abroad, the colonization of Korea led Japanese leaders to seek to expand further in order to protect the new borders of their empire. They set their sights on Manchuria. It offered railroads and natural resources, and it was close to Korea. But continually expanding military budgets meant higher taxation and conflicts with the parliament. The Meiji novelist Natsume Sōseki wrote that he feared his country would suffer from a "nervous collapse." Japan may have "arrived" (that is, joined the ranks of the world's leading nations), but like many other industrialized countries, it still wrestled with serious problems in the early twentieth century.

Although the Russo-Japanese War brought Japan the respect of the world, not everyone viewed the war as an unqualified success. The war was very costly. More than 100,000 men had died in battles or from disease. The Japanese had borrowed heavily to pay for the war. Now they needed to repay those loans as well as maintain troops overseas. The treaty ending the war did not require the Russians to pay a large war indemnity like the Chinese had ten years earlier. The Japanese public had been expecting more. When the terms of the treaty were released, people in Tokyo rioted. They were disappointed by the terms of the treaty and frustrated by the fact that many people were still excluded from the political process. Early political parties worked closely with bureaucrats. They did not spend much time trying to win popular support. Prime ministers were usually chosen from among the ministers and advisors to the emperor. It was not until 1918 that Hara Kei, a party politician, was selected as prime minister.

Meanwhile, harsh working conditions in Japan's factories and agricultural fields led people to question the existing order. In 1900, the government, hoping to avoid labor problems, passed laws that made strikes and other union activities illegal. It also closed down the office of Japan's socialist party only hours after it opened in 1901. But some people chose to join trade unions anyway. Tenant farmers marched in protest over the high rents charged by landlords. As

was true in many countries, some people became radical in their opposition to the government. In 1911, a small group of anarchists were executed after being convicted of plotting to assassinate the Meiji Emperor. In other cases, regular citizens protested against specific problems without any intention of overturning society. In the summer of 1918, housewives and farmers mobilized against increases in the price of rice. More than one million people took part in riots across the country. They attacked rice dealers, shops, and government buildings. Their actions led the prime minister to resign.

From Meiji to Taishō

In 1912, the Meiji Emperor died at the age of 60. A charismatic figure, the emperor was beloved by many of the people. His personal transformation from traditional, reclusive emperor to head of a modern world power seemed to parallel the changes Japan itself had undergone since the 1850s. When he had taken the throne, few Japanese had any reason to think about the emperor. But 45 years later, every Japanese knew of the emperor. The entire nation mourned his passing. It might seem ironic that the emperor, whose family lineage extended back into ancient times, had become a symbol of modernity. But during the Meiji period, the emperor had been transformed into a leader for the entire nation of Japan. Regardless of their class or home region, people developed a strong sense of common identity as *Japanese* with respect for the emperor as their head of state.

The Meiji emperor was succeeded by his son, who became the Taishō Emperor. In many ways, the process of building national identity was completed in the Taishō period. Japan had matured into a stable, prosperous nation. But the new emperor was unable to take an active role in government. As an infant, the Taishō Emperor had contracted cerebral meningitis. He remained sickly for much of his life, had difficulty with his studies in school, and was mostly kept out of public view. According to one account, on the opening day of parliament in 1913, rather than read the speech that had been prepared for him, he instead rolled it into a tube and peered out through it as though it were a telescope. By 1919 he was no longer able to carry out any official duties. His son, the future Shōwa Emperor, began serving as regent soon thereafter. Although the Taishō Emperor was not an effective head of state, this did not prevent artists from representing him as a tall, proud monarch. Nor did it hinder government or slow down the pace of economic growth.

The Prosperous ’20s and Taishō Democracy

More and more people were living in cities and suburbs by the 1920s. Cars, buses, and trolleys allowed people to commute to work. In 1927, Tokyo opened the first subway line in East Asia. White-collar jobs and an expanding economy helped create a true middle class. Families had money to spend at restaurants, on entertainment, and for travel. Japan’s universal education system and very high rates of literacy led to a boom in the publishing of books, journals, and newspapers. Social and cultural changes generally do not occur as quickly as political changes, and this was true for Japan. Many men wore Western suits to work, but they changed into Japanese clothing when they returned home. Some women also started wearing Western dress, though most favored kimono even outside of the home. Although restaurants offered a wide

range of foreign fare, most home meals featured rice, fish, and other foods the Japanese had been eating since Tokugawa times.

The prosperity and confidence of Japan's capital city was shaken when a major earthquake struck Tokyo in 1923. Many of the city's buildings were built of wood and paper. They collapsed or caught fire. More than 130,000 people died. In the aftermath, false rumors spread blaming Korean residents for poisoning wells. As a result, vigilante Japanese attacked and killed thousands of innocent Koreans. The police also took advantage of the confusion to arrest left-wing political activists, some of whom they killed. This was a dark chapter in the generally bright history of modern Tokyo.

As noted earlier, party politicians—elected officials—gained power during the 1910s. Bureaucrats were appointed officials who had passed civil service exams. They did not stand for elections. Party politicians gained power by working closely with bureaucrats and by sponsoring local and regional development projects. But their most powerful tool was the ability to veto the budget. According to the constitution, the lower house of parliament had to approve the budget. If they did not approve it, then the previous year's budget would be used. In these decades, as Japan's economy was growing, the military was expanding, and overseas commitments were increasing, the previous year's budget was never enough. Party politicians negotiated with bureaucrats, offering to support budget proposals in exchange for things on their own agendas. Between 1918 and 1932, most of the prime ministers were party politicians. Some scholars label this the period of "Taishō Democracy." But not all party politicians had popular support, and parliament did not extend voting rights to all male citizens until 1925. The same parliament also passed a "Peace Preservation Law" that year. This law strictly regulated the things people could debate or advocate. For example, political groups that wanted to overthrow the government or abolish private property were declared illegal.

New Roles for Women

Women became more active in public life, though they were still barred from voting or standing for election. The Meiji Empress tried to set a model for women by visiting wounded soldiers in hospitals. During the Russo-Japanese War, several hundred thousand women joined the Ladies' Patriotic Association to help support the war effort. Others served as nurses in the Japan Red Cross. Women were discouraged from taking part in politics. Instead, they were taught to be "good wives and wise mothers." They were to support their husbands, raise the children, supervise their education, and manage household affairs. The Meiji government actively promoted this ideal for women. The government publicly praised and gave awards to women who exemplified the spirit of sacrifice for family. Of course, only women of the upper and upper-middle classes could afford to be full-time wives and mothers. Many other women needed to work. Urban jobs included work as secretaries, teachers, sales girls, and bus attendants. In the countryside, women often worked on farms or in textile mills.

Other women rejected the "good wife, wise mother" ideal. Writers and poets such as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raicho created new literary journals and became key figures in the women's rights movement. Equally controversial, however, were the so-called *moga* or "modern girls." These young women, like many around the world in the 1920s, adopted short hairstyles,

short hem lines, and freer attitudes toward dating and sexuality. They favored Western fashions and were seen as trendsetters. Some worked as café waitresses, attracting male customers. The most famous modern girl was the fictional character Naomi of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel *A Fool's Love* (available in English as *Naomi*). In the novel, Tanizaki seems to poke fun at Japan's obsession with Western things as his protagonist wastes his love and money on Naomi. The story, first published serially in a newspaper, caused great controversy. But it was a thoughtful reflection on Japan's struggle for cultural identity in the modern world.

Japan and the World: Diplomatic and Economic Troubles

Japan's "modern girl" clearly paralleled trends in the United States and Europe. Her emergence can be seen as evidence that Japan had become part of international society. In the realm of diplomacy, the signs were more mixed. Some Japanese leaders favored working closely with the West in the international system. The most famous advocate of this view was Shidehara Kijūrō, a pacifist who served as Japan's ambassador to the United States and twice as Japan's Foreign Minister. Other political leaders and military figures felt Japan would not be treated as an equal in the international system. The evidence provides support for both sides. Japan joined the Allies during World War I. It became a founding member of the League of Nations. But the Japanese could not get the Americans and Europeans to agree to a "racial equality clause" at the Versailles peace negotiations. Two years later, Japan participated in the Washington Naval Conference, a meeting of the world's great powers to negotiate disarmament. However, the Western powers forced Japan to agree to limit its battleships in the Pacific so its fleet would be much smaller than the British and U.S. navies. In 1924, the U.S. Congress passed an act barring Japanese nationals from moving to the States. Many Japanese saw these moves as insulting and proof that the rest of the world still looked down on them.

The Japanese also had to deal with increasing resistance from the peoples of their colonies. On March 1, 1919, over one million Koreans began peaceful demonstrations against Japan's occupation. In some cases, these demonstrations turned into riots. Japanese police forcefully suppressed the riots. Many arrests and deaths resulted. But the protests forced the Japanese to change their style of administration in Korea. Similar student-led protests erupted in China on May 4, 1919. Although China was not a Japanese colony, Chinese nationalists were upset that former German concessions in China were awarded to the Japanese rather than returned to Chinese control after World War I. Protestors boycotted Japanese goods and attacked Japanese businesses. China's delegation to the Versailles peace negotiations refused to sign the treaty. Back in Japan, some saw this as evidence that the Japanese should be wary of rising Chinese nationalism and cultivate friendship between China and Japan. Others, however, looked at the same evidence and felt that they needed to strengthen the Japanese presence in China in order to protect Japanese interests.

Japan's connections to world financial markets were also questioned when a banking crisis in 1927 and the Great Depression of 1929 hurt Japan's economy. Over the next two years, exports fell by over 50 percent. The numbers of unemployed rose both in the cities and the countryside. Capitalists and businessmen were blamed for putting their own profits ahead of national interests. Party politicians who favored cooperation with the international community were also blamed for the economic crisis. Criticism became even louder in 1930 when Japanese

diplomats signed another disarmament treaty that limited the size of the Japanese navy. Right-wing extremists attacked businessmen and politicians. They even shot the prime minister in November of that year. Political leaders who favored diplomacy and working within the international system found it increasingly difficult to operate in this climate.

The following year, a group of Japanese army officers staged an attack on a Japanese railroad in Manchuria. They blamed the Chinese for the incident, which led to combat in northeastern China. The Japanese won and established a puppet state in Manchuria. The rest of the world condemned Japan's actions. As a result, the Japanese quit the League of Nations in 1932. They continued to build up their military and industrial strength over the rest of the decade, but found themselves increasingly isolated from the international community.

A Mature, Modern Nation

The Meiji and Taishō periods were years of momentous change in Japan. At least one observer noted that he had seen Japan move from medieval to modern times in the course of his own lifetime. But we must remember that these were changes with very specific purposes. The Meiji reformers and their successors in government worked to foster a strong sense of national identity. They did this in part by learning from the Western powers and promoting "civilization and enlightenment." They also supported industrialization and helped Japan realize its goal of becoming a "rich country with a strong army." Not every policy worked, of course. At times, people at home, in the colonies, and/or in other countries resisted the Japanese government's plans. But they did find an amazing degree of success. By the 1920s, most Japanese shared a strong sense of national identity, their country was home to the first non-Western industrialized economy, and the other nations of the world recognized Japan as a leading power. We can see evidence of these changes in art, from Meiji woodblock prints of trains and factories to Taishō postcards showing Japanese victories in the Russo-Japanese War. Such images are valuable because they show what people of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found interesting. But they are also valuable because they influenced the ways in which Meiji and Taishō period Japanese understood their own world.

