Voices from the Past:
The Human Cost of Japan's Modernization, 1880s-1930s

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Introduction

In many world history curricula, the study of modern Japan moves from the Meiji Restoration (1868) directly to the beginnings of World War II. If time allows, a quick overview of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars may be included as the beginning of Japan's trajectory towards empire and World War II. The "big idea" taught about Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is that Japan played rapid "catch up" to the West with a deep and broad transformation and modernization. The complex dynamics of this rapid modernization—both its benefits and costs—are often overlooked in a crowded curriculum, but it is an important story, paralleling the story of the costs and benefits of modernization in the Western nations that preceded Japan in this process.

This lesson considers Japan's domestic stories of modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a focus on segments of Japanese society that did not immediately reap the benefits of modernization and change—people in the lower levels of the social order, particularly the peasantry (Hane 1982, 9-10). The mining and textile industries were fueled by the labor of women recruited from poor rural areas. While the industries boomed, these workers, typically, did not share in the prosperity experienced by their employers (Bingham and Gross 1987, 157). Sharon Sievers (1983, 57) emphasizes the role of women in modernization, "Without the work of Japan's women, the apparent miracle of Japan's economic growth might not have been possible."

Several groups of people did not benefit immediately from this modernization; in fact, their situations may have declined. Farmers, factory workers, women who went into prostitution, and miners were among those people who worked long hours at dangerous jobs for low pay or who contracted tuberculosis as a result of their working conditions. Japan's historical outcasts, the *Burakumin*, whose lives had always been disadvantaged due to a caste system, also bore the burdens of industrialization. Of course, it is important to note, and to make the connections in the classroom, that the "downside" of modernization was not unique to Japan. Virtually every country that underwent modernization beginning in the mid-19th century experienced similar paths, and students should be aware of the situations, and parallels, through their study of U.S. and European history.

In recent decades, historians have conducted extensive research into the modernization experiences of previously unrecorded voices, contributing to a rich social history of this period that draws on memoirs, diaries, newspapers, and other accounts. In this lesson, students have the opportunity to work with some of this research, tapping into sources and narratives that are often omitted in textbook coverage of the period. Students will apply reading, document interrogation, and analysis skills, using a variety of primary sources, to consider the stories of the "under classes" of Japan's modernization. Through these voices, students begin to build a

representational "picture" of those who did not experience the prosperity of Japan's rapid modernization. These voices will add another dimension to students' understanding of the complex process of modernization, as experienced globally, and some of its costs in Japan from the 1890s to the 1930s in particular.

Grade Level/Subject Area: High School/World History, Global Studies, Asian Studies, World Literature

Time Required: 1 pre-class homework assignment and 1 class period

Materials

Handout 1: Voices from the Past Primary Source Packet
Handout 2: Voices from the Past Reading Guide
Handout 3: Voices from the Past Graphic Organizer

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will better be able to:

1. Identify and describe some of the various groups most negatively impacted by the rapid industrialization of Japan.
2. Develop primary source analysis and interpretation skills.
3. Apply primary source analysis to articulate the personal experiences represented by those voices.
4. Begin to evaluate the human cost of modernization, formulating a list of costs/benefits based on the stories of five different social groups in early 20th-century Japan.

Essential Questions

- What were some of the costs of rapid industrialization and modernization in Japan in the late 1800s and early 1900s?
- How did different segments of society experience these costs?

Teacher Background

The word "miracle" is often used to describe Japan's economic and political rise during the Meiji era, 1865-1912, into the Taishō era, 1912-1926. Although most historians now agree that the foundations of modernization began in the Tokugawa era, dramatic political, economic, and social changes were undertaken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As in all countries in the process of modernizing, some segments within Japanese society greatly benefited from the process, while others faced increasing hardships, at times working and living in extremely challenging conditions.

Through the Meiji Restoration of 1868, disgruntled and disempowered members of the privileged samurai class restored the Emperor as leader of the nation and both constructed and led a modern government in his name. The samurai elite who gained power by re-establishing

the emperor ushered in an extensive reform program that touched virtually every aspect of the Japanese political, economic, and social fabric, launching a new era for the country.

For the new Meiji leaders, achieving equal status with the Western powers was a paramount goal, and the means to that end were high-speed industrialization and modernization of all aspects of society. Three slogans embodied this modernization effort:

- *Bunmei Kaika:* Civilization and Enlightenment
- *Fukoku Kyōhei:* Enrich the Nation; Strengthen the Army
- *Shokusan Kōgyō:* Encourage Industry

Among the widespread changes that went along with industrialization were the development of infrastructure, modern banking, national mandatory education, and modern armed forces. In the process, the family modernized, established gender roles were questioned, and women entered the paid labor force. Urban centers grew and reflected a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle that linked them to centers of culture in Europe and the United States (Faison n.d.).

The national government was the main driver and funder of the Meiji economic miracle. Taxes provided much of the capital used to fund the building of new economic infrastructure. Large-scale public works projects, including overhauling the communication and transportation systems, building roads and railroad lines, and implementing postal and telegraph systems, dominated the era. Selected industries were targeted, and capital was delegated for the building of shipyards, factories, and technical institutions.

In rural areas, land was privatized, allowing farmers to sell their property, and, in an attempt to increase productivity, farmers were allowed to grow crops of their choice. Although such changes gave the appearance of benefiting the rural population, the implementation of the land tax reforms, which had to be paid in cash instead of in rice as previously paid, resulted in an enormous burden on land-owning farmers.

During this technological leap forward, the government and business owners promoted the ideals of a "ladder of success": this was the idea that, through education, determination, and modernization, anyone could be successful. This ideal, however, was unrealistic for the Japanese men and women who made up the working classes, much as was the case in Western societies. Instead, the effects of industrialization created greater challenges and miserable conditions for many (Yonemoto 2014).

Although the reforms mentioned above resulted in great profit for some and overall greater wealth for the nation, not everyone benefited from the nation's race to modernize. During the period from the 1880s to 1930s, thousands of Japanese found themselves in situations of great inequality and economic hardship. Again, in situations that mirrored the experiences of other nations that had undergone industrialization and modernization, the laborers who formed the backbone of Japan's economic miracle were generally oppressed by poor wages, poor work and living conditions, and economic instability. Men, women, and children from Japan's lower social classes—including the hereditary outcast class, the *burakumin*—labored in the textile and silk reeling factories, in the coal mines, on farms, and in the brothels (Hane 1982). Contemporary historical research has given greater voice to these groups' experiences, enabling us to gain a deeper and more detailed picture of modern class and gender history in Japan, as well Japan's experience of modernization. With access to these experiences, students can consider parallels in the modernization process of nations globally.

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Read through the entire lesson plan, paying special attention to the **Introduction**, **Teacher Background**, and **Primary Source Packet**.
2. Handout 1, Primary Source Packet, contains five readings. Print the appropriate number of each reading for one-fifth of the class to have each.
3. Print copies of Handout 2, Voices from the Past Guided Reading, and Handout 3, Voices from the Past Graphic Organizer, for each student in the class.
4. The day before the lesson, divide the students into five groups, assign a primary source to each group, and have students complete Handout 2, Voices from the Past Guided Reading, Part A as homework.

Lesson Plan: Step-by-Step Procedure

1. Begin the lesson with the following prompt: What do you already know about the process of modernization? Think about the United States or other countries you have studied in world history—how does a country modernize? What are some short- and long-term benefits of modernization for a country? Who tends to benefit? Who might not benefit from modernization, at least in the short run? Why? Give students five to seven minutes to write out their responses. Have students turn to their neighbors and share their answers.
2. Solicit several responses to share with the entire class. (*Student responses should indicate an understanding that modernization involves the following: (a) infrastructure changes: roads, railroads, bridges, construction techniques; (b) political changes: written constitution, suffrage, land reforms, taxes; (c) economic changes: banking, creation of wealth, tax reforms, global marketing; (d) increased industrialization: manufacturing and mining, growth of international trade, growth of wage labor force; (e) societal changes: clothing, family and gender roles, social mobility, universal/compulsory education*.)
3. Transition into today's lesson by letting students know that today they are going to examine firsthand accounts from different groups of people who were involved in Japan's modernization process from approximately the 1880s-1930s.
4. Based on their homework readings, have students form five groups, with all students who read Document A in one group, Document B in another, etc. Explain that these groups will be "experts" on their assigned case study for this class examination. Have the groups spend 5 to 10 minutes sharing and discussing their individual responses to Part A of Handout 2, which they completed as homework.
5. After groups have had time to share, turn students' attention to Handout 2, Part B. Have them work collectively to complete Part B. As students are working, circulate among the groups to check for understanding. Each student should understand the content of his/her reading and should be able to discuss and fulfill the role of "expert" as students move into jigsaw groups in Step 6.
6. Jigsaw the groups so that each new group includes an "expert" representing each primary source. Each group will consist of one farmer, *burakumin*, factory worker, prostitute, and miner. Distribute Handout 3, Voices of the Past Graphic Organizer, to all students.

7. In each jigsawed group, explain that each "expert," in turn, will share the experiences of the Japanese group he/she studied. As the other students in the group listen to the "expert," each fills in his/her own graphic organizer.
8. When the groups have completed the graphic organizer, dissolve the groups and reconstitute the class as a whole for a guided class discussion. Some possible questions include:
   - How did modernization affect the lives of the lower levels of Japanese society?
   - What experiences and sentiments do all of these social groups seem to share?
   - What experiences and sentiments are different across these social groups?
   - Whose voices are missing here?
   - What could these people do to solve some of their problems? Are there any solutions?
   - Who is responsible for solving these problems?
   - What picture of modernization do these passages convey?
   - When looked at collectively, what argument about the process of modernization do the documents allow you to make?
   - What else would you need to know in order to draw a wider conclusion about the impact of Japan's modernization?
   - Can you make any connections between the modernization process in Japan and the modernization process in other countries?

Assessment

Option A: Have students apply their findings by creating a unified action agenda based on shared concerns across the five groups that they studied. Let students know that social and political activism was an outgrowth of the poor conditions of many workers during this time, not just in Japan but in countries around the world.

In their groups from Step 7, ask students to turn their attention to identifying common problems that groups shared, despite their different conditions. What issues united them? If they could make conditions better for all five groups, what would they ask for? Have groups identify specific examples and specific wishes or actions by the government or the industry owners that would improve their conditions. Either in their groups or for homework, have students draft a petition to the government for action to improve the lives and working conditions of Japan's early 20th-century laborers. Petitions should include a rationale for why these workers deserve better conditions and at least four specific grievances and improvements.

Option B: Students can apply their learning through the following written assessment activity. Drawing on their group/class discussions and using specific supporting evidence from the primary sources, assign students to write a reflection paper answering the question: "What was the human cost of Japan's rapid modernization (1880s-1930s) for the lower social classes?"

Standards Alignment

Common Core (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/):

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

National Standards for World History (http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/world-history-content-standards):

Era 7, An Age of Revolutions, 1750-1914, Standard 5: Patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance, 1800-1914.

Standard 5D: The student understands transformations in South, Southeast, and East Asia in the era of the "new imperialism."

Grades 7-12: The student is able to analyze Japan's rapid industrialization, technological advancement, and national integration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. [Formulate historical questions]

Standard 6: Major global trends from 1750-1914.

Standard 6A: The student understands major global trends from 1750 to 1914.

Grades 9-12: The student is able to assess the importance of ideas associated with nationalism, republicanism, liberalism, and constitutionalism on 19th-century political life in such states as Great Britain, France, the United States, Germany, Russia, Mexico, Argentina, the Ottoman Empire, China, and Japan. [Identify issues and problems in the past]

Standards for the English Language Arts (http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira)

Standard 1: Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works

Standard 2: Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions [e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic] of human experience.

Standard 7: Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources [e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people] to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes [e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information].

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Additional Resource

"The Mill Girls." Lowell, MA: National Park Service, n.d. http://www.nps.gov/lowe/planyourvisit/upload/mill%20girls.pdf.

