

The Nature of Sovereignty in Japan, 1870s-1920s

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Introduction

From the 1870s through the 1920s, Japan underwent rapid and widespread modernization and nation-building. In the Meiji period, Japanese leaders looked to European models of constitutional monarchy, adopting a system of imperial government modeled most closely on the Prussian model. As Japan transitioned from the Meiji to the Taishō periods, government and politics were increasingly influenced by Western liberal ideas. Tensions arose between the growing interest in liberal political thinking and the established political context, established through the Meiji Constitution of 1889, of a constitutional monarchy, headed by a hereditary emperor.

This lesson looks at those tensions through close reading of historical texts. Among the questions students explore in this lesson is the guiding question: How did prominent thinkers craft notions of sovereignty in this time period, when the relationship between the voice of the individual and the authority of an imperial state was in flux?

The lesson begins with a brief review of Japanese history from 1868 to 1926. Students are then engaged in crafting preliminary definitions of *national*, *polity*, *constitutional*, *democracy*, *imperial*, and *sovereignty* to begin to consider the relationship between the individual and the state in this time period. Using a cooperative jigsaw, students then analyze three documents from the 1870s-1920s to compare and contrast their preliminary definitions with those of the document authors. After sharing their analyses and revised definitions, students attempt to synthesize the vocabulary terms to begin to understand (1) the construct of the Japanese government in the early 20th century and (2) tensions that evolved between individual rights and expressions, on the one hand, and the powers of the Japanese state on the other. Armed with these definitions, students then work in pairs to compare and contrast two documents from 1925 to further their inquiry. The closing discussions focus on the power that the individual and the state each possessed by the end of the 1920s.

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

Time Required: 2 class periods

Materials:

For Students:

- Handout 1: Historical Background on Japan, 1870s-1920s
- Handout 2A: Excerpts from the Meiji Constitution of 1889
- Handout 2B: Excerpt from Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Western Civilization as Our Goal”
- Handout 2C: Excerpt from Yoshino Sakuzō, “On the Meaning of Constitutional Government and the Methods by Which It Can Be Perfected”

Handout 3A: Law Governing Election to the House of Representatives, as Amended, Extending Suffrage, May 5, 1925

Handout 3B: Peace Preservation Law, April 12, 1925

For Teachers:

Equipment for projecting responses to Handout 1 and class discussion

Handout 2/3 Answer Key

Final Discussion Answer Key

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

1. Define and discuss characteristics of Japanese government in the Meiji and Taishō periods, from roughly 1870-1926.
2. Understand the complexity of sovereignty in Japan during this period.
2. Analyze the influence of global ideas and ideologies on Japanese society and political institutions of the 1870s-1920s.
3. Analyze source documents to synthesize alternative views of the relationship between the individual and the state in Japan during this period.

Essential Questions

- Where did sovereignty reside in 1870s-1920s Japan? How did prominent thinkers craft notions of sovereignty in this time period, when the relationship between the voice of the individual and the authority of an imperial state was in flux?
- In what context does the struggle for power between different Japanese individuals and organizations appear in selected documents?

Teacher Background

The Meiji oligarchs of the late 19th century did not create and did not intend to create a democratic system of government. However, by the early Taishō period, popular interest in a voice in government was growing. Historians present Japan's Taishō period, from 1912 to 1926, as a period of growing democracy in Japan. This narrative is based on evidence of increased political activity by a widening array of political interests, the emergence of political parties, increased incidences of popular expressions via social protest and unrest, and on the passage of the 1925 Universal Law of Male Suffrage. Often referred to as the period of Taishō Democracy, this complex period might be better understood as a negotiation for some popular rights within the context of an imperial political system. The people of Japan remained subjects of the emperor even as some sought greater rights as citizens.

The Beginnings of Modern Constitutional Government in Meiji Japan. In 1868, a group of young samurai successfully challenged and replaced the Tokugawa shogunate (*bakufu*) with a government based in part on Western political ideas and models. These samurai established the newly crowned 15-year-old emperor, known as Emperor Meiji, as the head of the new government, drawing on the centuries-old imperial line to legitimize this new government. This overthrow of the

Tokugawa government is known as the Meiji Restoration, for the return of the imperial family to leadership of the nation following 250 years of rule by the Tokugawa family. The Meiji period, which lasted for the life of the Meiji emperor, until 1912, was a period of enormous change in all aspects of Japanese life, from government and international relations to economy, social structure, and culture. For the new modern nation, the emperor served as the face of modern government and represented to the average Japanese the state of Japan to whom they now owed their loyalty. The samurai leaders who engineered the restoration of 1868 became the oligarchs of the new Japanese government. As in many modern nations at the turn of the 20th century, Japanese people were subjects ruled by a monarch, rather than citizens with a voice in the government.

One of the primary goals of the Meiji government was to create a modern nation on par with the leading Western nations of the world. A symbol of this status would be to achieve international power and respect sufficient to renegotiate the unequal treaties imposed on Japan by Western leaders in the waning days of the Tokugawa government. Starting with the Harris Treaty of 1858, Japan was coerced into granting a range of trading advantages to the Western powers. For example, Japan lost the right to set tariffs on imported goods. Westerners in Japan were exempt from Japanese laws (extraterritoriality). An increasing number of ports had to be opened to foreign vessels.

The Meiji government very selectively chose aspects of Western industrial, economic, and political systems that could best help them achieve their goal of strengthening Japan's international position. The oligarchs' intention was to create a government based on a written constitution and headed by a monarch, in this case Japan's hereditary emperor. Their intention was not to create a representative government or a democratic society. After studying many models, Japan's leaders drafted a constitution based on the German (Prussian) model of the time.

In 1889, the Meiji Emperor bestowed this constitution upon the people of Japan. The constitution did not have to be ratified by the people or their representatives. It was presented as a gift to the people from the emperor. The constitution created a bicameral parliament but extended the right to vote to a very small, very elite minority. All decisions of the parliament could be vetoed by the emperor, and the power within the government remained with the oligarchs who continued to rule through their appointment by the emperor. The constitution recognized the emperor as the source of ultimate authority in Japan's government and the people of Japan became citizens of an imperial state.

Also beginning in the 1880s, intellectuals began to discuss how Western ideas and values could be adapted to Japan's situation. While these discussions represented an end to the unquestioned acceptance of Western ideas early in the Meiji period, they were still primarily concerned with how Japan could establish itself as an equal of the West. One leading intellectual of the time, Fukuzawa Yukichi, focused on Japan's need to follow its own course towards modernization—a course in which the values of the past would not inhibit Japan's modernization and the values of the West would not alter Japan's essential identity. Part of this discussion focused on resolving the tension between the need for Western forms of government and the need to establish the emperor as the source of government power. Ironically, the imperial system was as much a construction of the Meiji oligarchs as was Japan's new modern military and its industrial economy. Intellectuals like Fukuzawa were doing as much to explain the imperial system to the Japanese people as they were explaining Western ideas.

Pressure for Democratic Reforms to Government in Taishō Japan. While the 1889 Constitution resolved the pressure for a constitutional government, by the second decade of the 20th

century, the early years of the Taisho Emperor, political parties had begun to form. These parties called for a government that was more responsive to the needs of the Japanese people. The extension of suffrage tended to be the centerpiece of these calls for greater representation. Over the course of the 1910s and 1920s, a variety of new political parties emerged, both liberal and conservative. Some were very short-lived. Some were the result of the merging of older parties. In addition to political parties, other more radical groups appeared during these decades. These groups were influenced by global movements in socialism, Marxism, and anarchism. They advocated for greater suffrage and greater protections of the working classes. They furthered their goals through public protest and mobilization of the proletariat. While riots during this period are often characterized as examples of democratic movements, the actual agendas of the groups involved do not always fit with ideas of democracy today. These radical groups also faced enormous pressure to conform to more mainstream political ideas. Many members of these groups were arrested, regularly followed by police, and could become targets of mob violence like that following the 1923 Kanto Earthquake.

This period of political activity is often called Taishō Democracy. The period is strictly defined by the reign of Emperor Yoshihito from 1912 to 1926. As his father was known as the Meiji Emperor, Yoshihito was known as the Taishō Emperor. Unlike his father, Yoshihito was not healthy, and for most of his reign, his son Hirohito ruled as regent. This lack of a strong imperial presence may have contributed to a less constrictive political environment, which allowed movements for individual rights and popular input into government to grow. At the same time, the Taishō period saw the end of the Meiji oligarchs who had controlled the government since 1868. Some of the most powerful new political leaders rose from the ranks of the political parties, who had some ties to a constituency, no matter how small the electorate actually was. This shifting of power from one generation to the next may also have provided some opportunity for greater political discussions.

A significant document of this period, Yoshino Sakuzō's "On the Meaning of Constitutional Government..." (1916) demonstrated the ongoing need to align Western ideas of representative government with Japan's specific situation. Yoshino tried to resolve the tension in the Meiji Constitution between the sovereignty of the people and the sovereignty of the emperor by articulating the concept of *minpon shugi*, which can be roughly translated as "people-as-the-base-ism." Unlike the concept of *minshu shugi*, in which sovereignty resides wholly in the people, this new concept of *minpon shugi* credited the government as working always with the people in mind, even though the people had little or no direct influence on the government.

The 1925 Universal Male Suffrage Law seemed to be the culmination of the "democratic" movements of the Taishō period. Yet, another law, passed the same year, provided a stark contrast to the Universal Male Suffrage Law. While the Male Suffrage Law provided the vote to men—a significant step in democratic government—the 1925 Peace Preservation Law, a response to the unrest following the Kanto Earthquake, greatly restricted the opportunities for political activism. Together, these two laws demonstrate the potential for democratic reform in the first three decades of the 20th century and the very real limits on those possibilities.

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Prior to starting the lesson, read the full lesson, including background essay, procedures, handouts, and answer keys.
2. Set up projection equipment and copy Handout 1 for all students.

3. Prepare enough copies of, or technology to access, each version of Handout 2 for one-third of the class and enough copies of, or technology to access, each version of Handout 3 for half of the class.

Lesson Plan: Step by Step Procedure

Day 1

1. Distribute Handout 1 and read aloud in class using student readers. The essay provides an overview of Japanese history from the 1870s-1920s, roughly the mid-Meiji period through the Taishō period, Japan's period of rapid modernization and nation-building. Upon completion, use the following questions to conduct a brief discussion considering the influence of Western political thought upon Japanese government and society during this time period:
 - What words would you use to describe Japan's system of governance in the 1870s-1920s? (*Modern, western, imperial, constitutional, oligarchy, Japanese, subjects*)
 - What aspects of Western governance or political thought appeared in Japanese society during this time period? (*Constitutionalism, political rights, political parties, suffrage, democracy, citizenship*)

During the discussion, write student responses on the whiteboard or type onto computer screen/projector for all students to review. This discussion should provide context for analyzing the documents on sovereignty in Japan, which the students will consider later in this lesson.

2. Put the students into pairs or small groups. Ask students to write down brief definitions of the following terms: *national, polity, constitutional, and popular sovereignty*. Depending on the background of the class, students may need to consult dictionaries, texts, or the Internet to define these terms.
3. When groups have completed their definitions, ask the groups to consider how the terms are interrelated.
4. Debrief Steps 2 and 3 through group sharing and class discussion. Ask each group or a few volunteers to share definitions of each term: *national, polity, constitutional, popular sovereignty*. Have successive report-outs build on or challenge the information so that a composite and more complex definition for each term is reached. Additionally, ask students to offer examples that illustrate the meaning of each term, to help assure that all students understand the definitions. Finally, spend some time discussing how the terms are related to one another.

During the process, write student responses on the whiteboard or type onto computer screen/projector for all students to review. Answers should include the following ideas from standard dictionary definitions:

- *national (of or relating to an entire nation or country; owned and controlled or operated by a national government)*
- *polity (something, such as a country or state, that has a government; a politically organized unit; a form of government)*
- *constitutional (of or relating to the system of beliefs and laws that govern a country; of or relating to a constitution; allowed by a country's constitution)*

- democracy (*a form of government in which the people hold the ultimate power, which they may delegate to elected representatives; a country ruled by democracy; an organization or situation in which everyone is treated equally and has equal rights*)
 - relationship of terms (*National and polity are related in that both terms reference a designated area that has a government. The second two terms both reflect beliefs about how governments should operate*)
5. Introduce the concepts of *imperial* and *sovereignty* through writing or projecting the following definitions on the board:
 - imperial: of, relating to, befitting, or suggestive of an empire or an emperor; sovereign
 - sovereignty: unlimited power over a country; a country's independent authority or right to govern itself.

Explain to students that these definitions, in addition to the previously discussed background and terms, will prepare them to read several foundational documents of the early modern government of Japan. Explain that their goal is to determine where sovereignty and power resided in Japan from the 1870s-1920s through a close reading and analysis of several representative documents.
 6. Ask the students to count off by threes to form three teams. Have each group meet in a designated section of the room. Using paper copies or technology, give Group 1 members copies of Handout 2A (Excerpts from the Meiji Constitution of 1889), Group 2 copies of Handout 2B (Excerpt from Fukuzawa Yukichi), and Group 3 Handout 2C (Excerpts from Yoshino Sakuzō). Note: Alert students that proper names appear in Japanese word order, with family name followed by given name. Thus, Fukuzawa and Yoshino are family names.
 7. Instruct students to read their respective materials individually with their definitions of the previously discussed terms in mind. Ask them to consider how their assigned document uses and challenges their original definitions of the key terms.
 8. As the final task for Day One, or for homework, depending on time, ask students to read their document a second time, this time jotting down notes as they read to answer the following question: What is sovereignty and where does, or should, sovereignty reside in Japan according to the document you read? These notes will be used by the students to discuss the terms and documents in the next class period.

Day 2

1. Ask students to sit with their group from the previous class period. Remind students of the overarching focus of the lesson: determining where sovereignty and power resided in Japan during the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
2. Review the previous day's lesson by writing the six terms on the board and asking students to share their definition of each term. Then give time for each group to review and discuss their document and notes from the previous class period.
3. Ask each group to share their responses to the question you posed on Day One: What is sovereignty and where does, or should, sovereignty reside in Japan according to the document you read? Write student responses on the board or type via projector. The Handout 2/3 Answer Key provides a matrix for teacher use in leading discussion.

4. Based upon the different groups' responses, ask each student to revisit his/her definitions and answers to the questions and revise them.
5. Next, put students in pairs. Distribute Handouts 3A and B to each pair. Instruct one student in each pair to read Handout 3A (Law Governing Election to the House of Representatives, as Amended, Extending Suffrage, May 5, 1925) and the other student in each pair to read Handout 3B (Peace Preservation Law, April 12, 1925).
6. After they have read the documents, alert students that the two documents, both made into law in 1925, seem to reflect very different philosophies and goals. Allow time for pairs to discuss and compare the two documents, looking for conflict or contradiction in the tone, language, and goals of the two documents.
7. Ask students to reconsider and revise their terms and answers to the question of sovereignty in light of these new documents.
8. To begin the final discussion, pose the following questions to students, writing or typing them on the board:
 - Where is the tension between the power of the individual and the state in Japan at this time apparent in the documents?
 - How does this tension appear in the ideas presented in the documents about the governed and governance in Japan?
 - Where did power reside in 1870s-1920s Japan?

Give the pairs time to discuss these questions and then have groups share their ideas and interpretations with the class. Write, or type, their responses on the board. Possible answers are shown in the Final Discussion Answer Key.

Assessment

Have students conduct further research and write a short opinion piece on the question: *What was the nature of sovereignty in 1870s-1920s Japan?*

Standards Alignment

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

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8: Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.10: By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

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 3: How Eurasian societies were transformed in an era of global trade and rising European power, 1750-1850.

Standard 3E: Demonstrate understanding of how Japan was transformed from feudal shogunate to modern nation-state in the 19th century.

Standard 5: Patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic domination, 1850-1914.

Standard 5C: Demonstrate understanding of transformations in South, Southeast, and East Asia in the era of the “new imperialism.”

Standard 6: Major global trends from 1750 to 1914.

Standards in Historical Thinking (<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/historical-thinking-standards>):

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.
- G. Compare competing historical narratives.

References

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Additional Resources

The Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889). From Hirobumi Ito, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan*. Trans. Miyoshi Ito. Tokyo: Igrisu-horitsu gakko, 22nd year of Meiji, 1889. Hanover Historical Texts Project. <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/1889con.html>.

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