

**HIST 3970: Modern China**  
**Dr. Joong-Jae Lee**

**Understanding the Meiji Restoration**

The Meiji Restoration began as an aristocratic Coup Detat.

Yet the term Meiji Restoration is applied not only to the events leading up to the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate, but also to the whole cluster of reforms that followed.

For more than two decades, from 1868 to 1890, a series of reforms established a constitutional government and put Japan on the road to industrialization.

**I. A Political Revolution: Centralization**

The Meiji Restoration radically transformed political cultures and institutions.

**A. Abolition of Domains (1871)**

Meiji oligarchs abolished domains and created prefectures governed by appointees of the central government.

Together with the court nobles, the former daimyo formed a new peerage, receiving generous pensions and residing in Tokyo.

**B. The Conscription Army (1873)**

This unification, in turn, made possible the replacement of separate samurai armies of many domains with a single national army based upon universal conscription.

Meiji oligarchs had become convinced in the superiority of civilian conscripts to samurai units.

**II. A Social Revolution**

**A. The “Revolutionary” Samurai**

The young samurai who came to power in 1868 carried out sweeping reforms that included doing away with the privileges of their own class.

After centuries of existence as the hereditary elite, the samurai had by 1876 lost all their exclusive privileges.

**B. The End of the Samurai Class**

The new government could not afford to continue supporting the hereditary elite.

It also needed to cast a wider net of talent in administration.

Meiji oligarchs decisively ended the dominance of the hereditary elite, which they deemed was no longer consonant with national unity and efficient government.

**III. A Cultural Revolution**

**A. Wholesale Attack on Old Society and Cultures**

Significant numbers of the Meiji Generation began to see old society and culture no longer as a source of strength in the time of both foreign threats and domestic crisis.

As they searched for alternatives to the old order, Japan’s new leaders drew heavily for inspiration on the ideas and institutions of western societies.

**B. Learning the Western “Civilization”**

Meiji leaders organized the Iwakura Mission in 1871, in which more than 100 leaders of society went overseas to discover the sources of western power and wealth.

The report of the Mission indicates a bold self-confidence that what the West had accomplished was of recent origin and that Japan through careful planning and hard work could catch up.

Reforms started in the minds and bodies of these people who began to adopt many of the trappings of the Western civilization.

**C. Creation of Japanese “Civilization”**

Meiji oligarchs tried to construct a Japanese version of Western “civilization” in order to maintain the parity with Western powers.