

MEIJI AND THE DAWN OF MODERNIZATION IN JAPAN

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A century and a half after the Meiji Period (1868-1912) began, we wondered what value the period had for Japan, and whether the path the country took as a result had meaning. We asked political history scholar Takashi Mikuriya about the period's changes, the path to modernization, and Japan's parliamentary system.

It has been 150 years since the start of Meiji. What value and meaning did the period have, and how did it lead to the modernization of Japan?

In this day and age, many young Japanese think in years according to the Gregorian calendar. However, the emperor's upcoming abdication—which will end Heisei in its thirtieth year—has revived interest in the names of Japanese eras, along with an interest in history.

Political history scholar Takashi Mikuriya





Mikuriya looks back on the swift modernization brought about during the Meiji Period.

To put it simply, the 150 years that started with Meiji brought about the modernization of Japan. During the Middle Ages, Japan was the land of the samurai. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, however, Japan transformed itself from a monarchy into a global community and created the Meiji Constitution, which became the constitution of Japan. That was when Japan went from being a monarchy to a democracy.

From the first twenty years of Meiji, you can vividly see what kind of nation the politicians envisioned building. The push for industrial development, land development through afforestation, flood control and infrastructure maintenance, the rapid establishment of a constitution, development of a cabinet and parliament—early Meiji was a time when people sought to create a nation that could govern.

The reason Japan quickly established itself—despite being a country of sword-bearing samurai only a few decades before—was the nature of the Japanese people, who made a huge, concentrated effort, basing their values and society on the Western world. Along with a strong motivation to learn, they were conscious of the gaze of the Western world upon them. Japan was also nervous about being the first example of modernization in Asia. Many students, politicians and engineers went abroad to Europe and America to obtain knowledge of society and technology, which then led to Japan’s modernization.

In 1968, the hundredth year since Meiji began, Japan was in the midst of an economic boom. In the five decades between then and the 150th anniversary, Japan has experienced an economic drop, the change of the millennium from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, and many natural disasters. However, when one thinks about it, at the turn of the previous century Japan was still in the Meiji Period. From there, you can see how the path of the 150 years from Meiji played an essential role in Japanese history.

In light of post-Meiji modernization, what are important factors to know to understand Japan?

During the Meiji Period, many young men and women wanted to study abroad in Europe or America. The knowledge and communication skills they obtained were essential during the period of “Rokumeikan diplomacy” and political conferences. During this time, Japan created facilities for female teachers and fostered human resources regardless of workers’ birthplace and gender, simply according to their abilities, and made schools with equal education.

Buildings constructed during the Meiji Period are highly rated due to the Japanese learning from Western professionals that were invited to Japan to educate local architects. The Japanese used those skills to develop their own techniques with a combination of Japanese and Western styles. The Yawata Steel Works and Tomioka Silk Mill have been added as World Heritage Sites for their historical value, but Japan was also talented at flexibly adapting metalwork, railways and architectural skills.

Most of all, though, Japan did not reject the parliamentary system and created a political party that made the structure of this country. Western countries thought it would take two hundred years for us to move away from a system of monarchy, but Japan managed to accomplish that in twenty years. From there, we created two major political parties, and despite international volatility in the early 1900s Japan became Asia’s first country with a modern constitutional monarchy. One can say that after the Meiji Period what supported Japanese democracy was the nature of making decisions by group consensus. ■