

Lesson Plan 1

Meiji Imperialism: Japan Joins the Western Imperial Order

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Objectives: To enable students to interpret the radical transformation of Japanese views of the world and Japan's engagement with East Asia and the West from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century.

Note: To avoid a simplistic "Western impact, Eastern response" perspective, this topic should be approached by situating Japan in relation to China as well as the Western imperialist powers. Such an approach would emphasize China's traditional dominance in East Asia as the self-proclaimed center of civilization, and the Tokugawa shogunate's determination not only to remain detached from the Chinese regional system but also to define Japan as the true civilized "middle kingdom" to which others paid tribute. The advent of Western imperialism in East Asia revealed the weakness of Qing China. Hence, although the leaders of the Meiji Restoration acted to prevent what they saw as the threat of Japan's colonization by the West, they also seized the opportunity presented by the shifting geopolitical configuration to directly challenge Chinese power over the Ryūkyūs (Okinawa), Taiwan, and Korea. Meiji "civilization and enlightenment" and imperialism can thus be seen as a Japanese engagement with two very different world systems at the same time.

Suggested reading for instructors (PDF file included):

Joseph M. Henning, "Breaking Company: Meiji Japan and East Asia," *Education About Asia* 5, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 40-43

Background reading for students:

Students should have been assigned a textbook or supplemental reading that introduces the history of Japan in the Tokugawa (1600-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) eras.

Lesson outline:

I. Instructor's presentation:

Recapitulate textbook points regarding Japan's international position in the Tokugawa and Meiji eras.

- Western encounters, 1540s-1630s, and the fear of Christian penetration
- Seclusion policies, 1630s ff. – but with continuing openings and controlled foreign relations: e.g., Dutch and Chinese at Nagasaki
- New stage of Western imperialism in Asia: English conquest of India (1757), opium trade and demands for free trade in China, leading to Opium War (1839-42).
- Renewed Western overtures toward Japan, 1780s ff.: Russians, British, Americans
- Perry mission and unequal treaties – "opening" of Japan
- Political conflicts over response to West – lead to the Meiji Restoration.
- Meiji policies to create a "rich nation and strong army": universal compulsory education, military conscription, industrialization and economic reforms, development of new legal system and constitution.
- Highlight views of Korea: as strategic "dagger pointed at the heart of Japan," as part of Chinese tribute system that needs to be broken away and "reformed" to accord with Japanese

interests

- Highlight Japan's victory in war with China (1894-95), which gave Japan a new colony (Taiwan) and forced China to recognize Korean "independence"
- Also highlight growing rivalry with Russia in Manchuria and Korea; Anglo-Japanese Alliance to check Russian expansion (1902); and Japan's victory in Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), which gave it a free hand in Korea, leading eventually to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910.

II. Exercise: Analyzing the rhetoric and images of Meiji Japanese imperialism (Can be done as a class or in small groups, with each group writing down its thoughts and reporting back to the class.)

A. Read before class: Fukuzawa Yukichi, "Good-bye to Asia" (1885) and Baron Suyematsu, "The Problem of the Far East" (1904, excerpt). (PDF files included.)

B. Look at Images: Sino-Japanese War print, *Tokyo Puck* cartoons on Russo-Japanese War and annexation of Korea, Chicago Tribune, "School is about to open in the Far East." (PowerPoint file included.)

Discussion questions:

- How did Japanese statesmen and opinion leaders represent Japan in relation to its Asian neighbors?
- How did they represent Japan in relation to the Western powers?
- What were the "rules of the game" that Japan was trying to master?
- What did "civilization" mean to the authors of these texts and images? Who had the authority to judge whether a nation's behavior was civilized or not?
- What do you think accounts for Japan's "success" in gaining Western respect? Did Japan's "success" vis-a-vis the West depend on its assertion of power over its Asian neighbors?
- What kind of voice do you think Japan's Asian neighbors could have had in shaping the regional order at this time?
- Do you think Japan had achieved equality in the eyes of the Western powers?

Note: Instructors should strive to make students aware of their own presuppositions regarding the word civilization; to inform them of long-standing East Asian concepts of civilization according to which Europeans were considered "red haired" or meat-eating barbarians; and to consider how the definitions of "civilization" and "barbarity" imposed by Westerners in the nineteenth century were the product of shifts in the balance of power between Asia and the West.

III. Topics for homework/reflection:

- How do ideas of who is "civilized" and who is not operate in international relations today? Who defines the terms, and what do they mean? What problems might confront countries or societies deemed to be uncivilized? Do you see any continuities or parallels between the readings and images from East Asia a century ago and anywhere in the world today?