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A SLEPT Analysis of the Transition from the Edo Period to the Meiji Restoration

Isolation was the catapult launching Japan to progress from the world's only remaining feudalistic society into the imperialistic world. Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the first shogunate, led Japan to be the well-oiled machine it was during the Edo Period: early 1600s to late 1800s. The caste system kept the society working efficiently and in turn produced a fruitful economy, which allowed Japan to make the transition from feudalism rapidly and successfully. However, when looking more in detail at the circumstances during the changing of power, much more than a well-oiled machine had to do with Japan's success.

Meiji took control of Japan as a teenager, just more than 20 years after Matthew Perry landed in Japan and proposed the treaty for US-Japanese relations. The sudden Western influence played a large role in the outcome of Japan, as did the newfound emperor's knowledge of Japan, majority of which involves the Western influence due to his young age. Diving into imperialism and forgetting the feudalistic thoughts both propelled Japan and came as a disadvantage. Other societies took much longer than a few years to leave the dark ages, but Japan had assistance from America, which saved time when it comes to invention of new ideas. All in all the social, legal, economic, political, and technological factors are the main influences on Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration, as well as before and after this time period. Each has a significant role in the becoming of Modern Japan and analytically plays as important background knowledge when discovering and understanding Japan.

Socially speaking, the Japanese mindset at the transition time was purely revolving around the proverb "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." With this mentality people followed orders and truly honored their leader, mimicking even the later constitution. Regarding the working behavior, whichever skill needed for the job was perfected: farming, trading, selling, creating, etc. Opposing to the climbing ladder society, Japan followed a system focusing solely on each rung of the ladder instead of the act of climbing; one would be sure their rung did its job well and shined while doing it.

A great influence on the Japanese was that of the West. In 1852, Matthew Perry came to Japan to “open diplomatic and trade relations.” Keep in mind Japan was still following the emperor and was in the midst of the Edo Period. Despite the feudalistic mindset and weariness of Japan, Perry persisted to open the island nation to the western world. By 1854 Perry had managed to secure two ports in Japan for trade and refueling stations, accompanied by the promise of future trading relations.

By the sudden presence of western people and philosophy, Japan’s people became discontented. “Nationalists felt the Shogun had desecrated the sacred soil of Japan by allowing foreigners to come ashore freely,” and this thought existed strongly until Meiji came into power around 1868. Once the adolescent emperor took lead, he encouraged the Japanese to dress and act as the Westerners did; for example, the empress wore Westernized clothing to formal events, and actions like this had a ripple effect on Japan.

However, the style was not the only transformation apparent. The caste system slowly deteriorated and the samurai class disappeared with it. These warriors integrated themselves into the newfound society as merchants or other necessary occupations: “Many samurai became bureaucrats or took up a trade. At the same time, they were expected to maintain their warrior pride and military preparedness, which led to much frustration in their ranks”.

The Code of Bushido withholds moral obligations and virtues one must carry, especially one of the samurai. Strictly revolving around honor, this code affected the mindsets of the people greatly, and explains the willingness to proceed with Meiji’s orders no matter the apprehension. The samurai class is included in this generalization and continued to live life with honor in their newly assigned roles. It is said “rectitude is the bone that gives firmness and stature. Without bones the head cannot rest on top of the spine, nor hands move nor feet stand”. In this thought process encouraged by the Code of Bushido, the people are encouraged to stick to their roles, their rungs of the ladder. This code of ethics is proof of the Japanese mindset and provides explanation to the social impact of the Meiji Restoration.

With any change in power comes legal changes, and the switch from feudalism alone was enough to get the tables turning. Suddenly the caste system was pushed out as the West pushed in and the loyal Japanese went with the flow; the samurai learned new

professions and farmers no longer had to stick to the agricultural field. The mindset was still that of loyalty and honor, but the encouragement to climb was now as equally as present as the encouragement to stay on one rung; whether or not civilians took advantage of the possibility. Isolation was the driving force for Japan's feudalistic society since the island nation was segregated from influence of imperialism or democracy.

Public education was a first step leading Japan away from a tiered society to a 'community-ruled' society: "The national government created some programs, such as public education, by declaring that it must be done and leaving it to the villages to finance and arrange for its provision." Smaller groups of people lead to community effort, known as a 'Han': quality over quantity, but the overarching government still had it's hand in the cookie jar. This type of governing system took place during the Edo Period and later ceased when Meiji's rule brought the Diet. Although, some qualities of larger government figures controlling smaller organizations continued: "The Meiji Era of using private business to promote government policy objectives proved successful." The Diet did not necessarily overpower the businesses though, as the Bakufu had the ability and willingness to.

"In medieval Japan, there was not even a pretense of equal justice for all. Civil rights didn't exist." Regarding the caste system, this is relevant and status quo. The rankings ordered the Japanese and kept them on their rung, and if laws were broken prosecution was obvious and death may be the penalty. There were no laws abiding to the 'innocent until proven guilty' mindset and court was out of the question. Similar to ancient Roman times, if you stole, your hand would pay the consequences. However, a slight difference from Rome is the act of 'seppoku', ritual suicide. If a Samurai dishonored his master he would use a sword to stab himself in the torso. This painful and difficult death was an honorable way to die despite the actions which caused its necessity. Seppoku was not a written law in the government during the Edo Period, considering it applied to a minority of the population, but rather existed as an unwritten rule in the mindset. With this said, seppoku continued with Meiji's power even though prior punishments were left behind with feudalism.

Despite the heavy Western influence and separation from feudalism, Japan became more legally strict in some senses. During the Edo Period Japan was like a

machine, all wheels working together smoothly. However Meiji's attempts to be more Western led Japan down a dictatorship-like path. While rules were not as forbidding as they were in Feudalistic times, Meiji still managed to micromanage the society. The contradicting directions between honoring the emperor, but following Western model produced an array of commodities in the Constitution supporting either. For example an increase of free will is stated in Article 23 of The Constitution: "No Japanese subject shall be arrested, detained, or punished, unless according to law." However, it is to be noted Article 3 is proof of the God-like status the emperor withheld: "The Emperor is sacred and inviolable." Both work towards opposite directions that created a sort of grey area. After Japan left behind feudalism and began to legally construct the constitution they grey zone was documented, but even more apparent. This allowed civilians the choice to climb the ladder, stay on their on rung, or float somewhere in between.

At the end of the day the emperor ruled Japan, but the Zaibatsu ruled the economy. The monopoly of family business accompanied the international trade and the catalyst for this economic start-up is traced back to Matthew Perry himself. Western influence overthrew the 'reap-what-everyone-sows' mentality and produced the ultimate monopoly. Not only did the Zaibatsu rule Japan, but the international trade brought outside nations into play as well.

Trade with the West began in 1854 with the treaty from Matthew Perry and the US Government; specifically Japan providing and selling supplies to the US. Clause 4 of the treaty states, "Permission for American ships to buy supplies, coal, water, and other necessary provisions in Japanese ports." Along with the treaty came requests for peace, alliance, and allowance to build two more points at Shimoda and Hakodate. With the signature of the emperor, action made way and the first pebble was dropped in the water; little did Japan or the World recognize how much of a ripple effect this would have.

Since foreign trade became a necessity, the samurai class had to join society as a merchant or bureaucrat in order to allow the system to work efficiently. The tiered system of the Edo Period allowed Japan to be stable and created a strong economic basis for the catapult into imperialism. With the assistance of America, Japan built their military from the basics and worked to skill; all the while following the theme "fuoku kyohei", or "wealth and arms." Industry had a large impact on military, considering without the

production of arms there would be none. However, Japan's industry made a spin on "family-owned" businesses.

The Zaibatsu are family based financial cliques. Some of these families that joined the industry business in the Meiji Era are still known in the world today, like Mitsubishi and Suzuki. Since these families collaboratively reached all of Japan, and outside of the nation, they controlled the majority of the financial resources; at one point the government of Japan came to the Zaibatsu with a request of revenue. No matter their influence and power, these families started at the same state as many other Japanese; being one of the most prominent examples of Japanese moving up the ladder. The Mitsui family, for example, started by selling high quality kimonos and goods in Kyoto and Tokyo, and eventually opened the Mitsui Bank, a large organization and investment company. Employees and members of the families themselves did not necessarily have higher education, in fact a finance manager for the Mitsui "was uneducated and illiterate but he was a very sharp political operator." His name was Minokawa, and despite his lack of formal education, he used his natural skills to support Mitsui by discussing finances with the Shogunate: "Minokawa got the payment demanded of Mitsui reduced by two-thirds." Truly climbing the rungs of the ladder, and in contempt of the nationalistic aspects of the Constitution, the Zaibatsu argued to get what they needed and in turn controlled the economy.

During the Edo Period "the Bakufu (central government) had absolute political power over the fate of hans (local government)." The farmers looked up to their Han, and the Hans looked up to the Bakufu. This worked while the tiered society was in place and attributed to the machine-like qualities of Japan during the Edo Period. However, once Meiji came into power this system faded with the Feudal mindset and the Diet was brought into action.

By 1900 the Diet was in order and the emperor became a symbol representing the system and state, not a higher godly figure. Composed of a legislature, executive, judiciary, and a constitution, the Diet allowed elections and more voice was since heard in this form of government when compared to the Bakufu. No doubt the West influenced the outcome of the Diet in Japan: "Young Japanese leaders traveled around Europe and the United States studying the political systems, the constitutions, the education systems,

all aspects of life in modern Europe and the United States.” Along with travel, the Japanese had a rush of influence in their own country as trade grew increasingly.

In the midst of the Bakufu falling and the Diet stepping up, the samurai class dissolved. This is a reoccurring theme throughout the whole of the Meiji Restoration, but similarly to an animal going extinct, the samurai class seemed to disappear more than fade as more information is gathered: “The revolution was called a restoration of the Emperor, what it was more fundamentally was an overthrow of the seven hundred-year rule by the warrior class of samurai.” Often when discussing the environment thoughts of the lowest or the highest animal on the food chain is contemplated going missing, and perhaps new ones coming into play. If the Bakufu was the conclusive leader of the food chain, then it is perfect example of an animal going extinct and a new replacement coming in, the Diet. However, if the middle caste disappears it affects the entire chain more so than either the top or the bottom.

As review, the long life of the samurai caste seemingly evaporated with the Meiji Restoration. These warriors had to join the other castes as merchants and traders, effecting the other people in these castes as well. Relatable to police officers, the samurai protected the civilians and lead my example the code of bushido. Zen Buddhism influenced their practice and mindset, as did martial arts. The samurai perfected his rung of the ladder and held the other rungs together, as does the middle predator in the food pyramid. The political changes of Japan as Meiji came to power devoured this caste, but the unseen presence of the samurai is still visible in even the daily lives of the Japanese.

The political changes made when introducing the Diet affected all civilians of the country and destroyed the all mighty stigma of the Bakufu. Yet mindsets do not fade over night so the people still honored the emperor and were loyal to their country; the only difference in that aspect is it was no longer by law. Increased free will was introduced with the Constitution and the entire feudalistic society disappeared as Meiji came into power, with the outcome of the samurai dissolving into society.

Though there is one aspect where the samurai had been ultimately replaced: weaponry. In the Edo Period, samurais were the warrior class, the protectors. They fought in wars and battles using their martial arts skills, honor being their fuel. Nonetheless, even as the caste disappeared the need for military did not. Men were sent to study

Western sciences and technology and came back to Japan with an extensive knowledge of each. “Military modernization was a key goal of the Meiji government” and this goal was reached with the newest weapons and tactics. The Japanese army learned European tactics, taught by hired Westerners.. The “national army <was> based on the Prussian model and a modern navy based on the British Royal Navy were established.” Meiji took no short cuts when building Japan’s military.

Industry was another influential and learned aspect of Meiji’s technological push. With the drive of the Zaibatsu, a plethora of efficient companies and goods were produced. The monopoly mass produced and delivered goods from rice to naval equipment to a number of other essentials: “building railway to shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, three shipyards, ten mines, five munitions works, and fifty-three consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products).”

These products would have already been in use during the Edo Period, but the push for Western influence increased efficiency and production. Yet, it was not only the Japanese interested in the West during this time. Many western scientists and engineers were curious about Japan and the motives behind the sudden technological push. Japan received assistance from these scientists, but also took their own individual approach. The collaboration between the West and Japan when regarding this trade was weary but not apprehensive, neither showing “chauvinism or resistance” but alliance nonetheless. Working with the West let Japan learn with its own walls, which on a large scale is much more beneficial to having leaders be sent to explore and study. Once in the country Westerners were able to lead by example and the Japanese work mentality grasped onto the information and skill provided.

Social, legal, economic, political, and technological factors all played as crucial factors in the transition from the feudal Edo Period to the Imperialistic Meiji Restoration. Each piece is connected in one way, shape, or form and often by the most unsuspecting lights; the samurai is affected across the board and the Zaibatsu have a huge impact from not only an economic standpoint. Through analyzing this historical evidence it is made possible to learn from history and develop a stronger understanding of factors. Looking at

specifically Japan, influence did not only come from within, but the support and knowledge from the West withholds the underlying impact.

Feudalism was left behind when a new emperor took charge, leading Japan into the restoration of the emperor. The caste system faded with the samurai and the Japanese were then able to climb the social ladder, no food chain holding them back. The power, mindset, and effort of the Edo Period allowed Japan to propel into Imperialism and the West guided Japan with it's own knowledge and tools. Together the influences vary, but the chain of reactions lead Japan to the nation Meiji imagined.

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