The Meiji Restoration
During this period, also known as the Edo Period, Japan experienced peace and relative prosperity.

- Edo (Tokyo) was Japan’s de facto capital even if Kyoto was still Japan’s official capital.
- The Tokugawa Shogunate, essentially a military dictatorship, pursued a policy of isolationism.

- Japan decided to avoid contact with foreigners and thereby protect itself against foreign interference in Japanese affairs.
- Japanese were not allowed to travel overseas and only one small port (Deshima) in Nagasaki harbor remained open to a limited number of foreign (mostly Dutch) traders.
How long could Japan remain a closed society?

-As Western influence grew throughout Asia, Japan felt increasingly threatened
-Throughout the Tokugawa Period, Japan may have had limited contact with other societies but its leaders did know of changes elsewhere
-For example, there were some cases of shipwrecked sailors who were given shelter and told the Japanese of other countries
-Japan also had diplomatic contact with Korea and exercised a sphere of influence over the Ryukyu Islands (including Okinawa) several hundred miles to the south of mainland Japan
Eventually foreigners forced Japan’s hand by establishing contact with them

- In 1853 American Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Edo (Tokyo) harbor with four steam-powered warships
- He asked to meet with representatives of the Japanese government in order to negotiate a trading treaty between Japan and the U.S.
- The Japanese resisted at first but were unable to muster forces modern enough to challenge the U.S. “black ships”
Commodore Perry in reality and as a barbarian

Perry in Japan – an early example of “gunboat diplomacy?”
The westerners were often looked upon as barbarians

Yet the Japanese cannot realistically keep them out.
The Japanese and Americans negotiated the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854. The Japanese agreed to open two ports where American ships could refuel with coal and take on other supplies. The Japanese also agreed to let the U.S. establish an embassy in Japan.

By 1860 other western powers were able to negotiate favorable treaties with Japan. Most of these treaties granted these western states some trading privileges as well as extraterritorial rights.
Many Japanese felt humiliated by the Treaty of Kanagawa

-This treaty was clearly unequal.
-Many Japanese felt that the shogun and his government had let them down.
-Increasingly there was a clamor for the government to respond more forcefully to the barbarian threat.
-Some, the so-called Sat-Cho reformers, demanded that the shogun relinquish his power and that the shogunate, perceived by many as a feudal relic, come to an end.
-Those in favor of change also believed that Japan needed to learn from other countries, particularly western nations, so as to modernize their country.
To this end the Japanese sent a trade mission to Europe in 1862, with Shibata Sadataro as its leader; Yukichi Fukuzawa accompanied the mission as a translator.

Over the next 25 years, French, British, German and American political models were intensively studied by Japanese reformers.
Still unhappy with the shogun’s response to the foreigners, in 1867 the Japanese rallied around the new 15-year-old emperor, Mutsuhito

-For centuries the Japanese emperor had largely been a figurehead ruler; real power had been wielded by the shogun
-But because of the shogun’s perceived weakness, the young emperor Mutsuhito and his supporters will now be in a position to do away with the shogunate and rule the country instead.
-Leading samurai will rally around the emperor’s banner whereas others will cling to the Tokogawa shogunate and tradition.
-Japan is at an important turning point in its history.
In general, what were Japan’s options?

- It could cling to tradition
- It could accept western ways and abandon tradition
- It could choose to do something in between the first two options
The Japanese decided to back the emperor; many hope that by modernizing their country, they could resist foreign domination.

The last shogun resigned in 1868 and Mutsuhito, as Japan’s sole ruler, chose Meiji, or “enlightened rule,” as the new name for his reign.

His divine status was emphasized and Shinto worship again became important.

The emperor Meiji encouraged his people to borrow and adopt western ways; what he and many other Japanese leaders wanted, was for Japan to learn from western nations and perhaps even beat them at their own game.

Germany was often held up as a role model.

In 1890, Japan adopted a conservative constitution that resembled Germany’s and developed a strong central government, with power in the hands of an oligarchy of elders (or genro); theoretically the emperor was in charge but in reality others (like Prince Ito Hirobumi) ruled in his name.

Japan also adopted the American system of universal public education.
The Satsuma Rebellion and Saigo Takamori

- Some of the changes were happening too quickly for some traditionalists
- Some of these samurai had initially supported the emperor but now believed that some reforms went too far
- Chief among these samurai was Saigo Takamori, a man renowned for his bravery and incorruptibility
- By 1877, Saigo and others were in open rebellion against the emperor’s troops, esp. in the south of Japan; but the rebellion would fail and Saigo would die in the fighting
Japan's effort to industrialize was immensely successful. By the turn of the century, Japan had developed itself into one of the most modern economies in the world. Railroads were built throughout the country. Factories produced steel and many other modern goods; production of silk and tea was also significant. Japan's army and navy also expanded, in part with the assistance of foreign advisors. By 1894 Japan was strong enough to get western powers to give up their extraterritorial rights.
There were, however, many Japanese who didn’t benefit much from this period of great economic growth.

- The government was very autocratic; even if Japan had a bicameral legislature, its government was hardly democratic.
- Suffrage (or the right to vote) was limited.
- **Zaibatsu** (large conglomerates often formed with government backing) dominated the economy.
- Working conditions in some places (e.g., in mines near Nagasaki) resembled those found in Great Britain during the Early Industrial Era.
- Women, many of whom worked in silk or textile mills, had few rights.
The Sino-Japanese War (1894-5)

-As Japan’s strength grew, it developed imperial ambitions much like those of the western nations that it sought to emulate.
-By 1894, its ambitions clashed with those of China, which had long had a tributary relationship with Korea.
-When the Korean king asked the Chinese to send in troops to put down a rebellion, Japan felt threatened and sent in its troops to fight the Chinese.
-Within a few months, Japan drove the Chinese out of Korea, took over land in Manchuria, and received Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands in a peace treaty signed with China at the end of the war.
The Russo-Japanese War (1904-5)

- As a result of the Sino-Japanese War, Japan emerged as a major power in East Asia.
- China was perceived to be weak and unable to defend its interests, particularly in Manchuria.
- Like Japan, Russia wished to expand into Manchuria. It also wanted to gain power in Korea. Eventually Russia was drawn into a war with Japan over these lands.
- Many Westerners expected the Russians to triumph easily over the Japanese.
In 1904 Japan launched a surprise attack against the Russian navy, which was anchored off of Manchuria. Soon Japanese forces were also fighting Russian troops on land.
In 1905 the Japanese demolished the Russian fleet at the battle of Tsushima.

As the battle demonstrated, the Japanese not only had more advanced cannons and ships than the Russians but also their naval leadership was better. Russia’s Pacific and Baltic fleets were significantly weakened and Japan eventually won on land as well.
Results of the Russo-Japanese War

- Japan and Russia signed a peace treaty, the Treaty of Portsmouth, in 1905. U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt helped broker this agreement.
- As a result of this treaty, Russian forces had to leave Manchuria and agree to stay out of Korea.
- Japan first established a protectorate in Korea, and then, in 1910, annexed that country.
- Korea became part of the Japanese empire as Japan brutally repressed Korean nationalists and imposed its culture on the Koreans.
- Japan’s victory over the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War called into question the myth of western superiority over non-western peoples.
Japanese culture also flourished during the Meiji Period

- Many important writers, such as Natsume Soseki, Mori Ogai, and Ichiyo Higuchi, wrote numerous short stories and novels increasingly focused on the individual.
- Others like Ryunosuke Akutagawa experimented with unreliable narrators and changing points-of-view in their writings.
- These writers were strongly influenced by their exposure to western literature and culture.
- Other thinkers such as Yukichi Fukuzawa (see his photo to the right) emphasized the value of western thought, political and philosophical as well as scientific; not all Japanese agreed.
The emperor’s death in 1912 represented the end of the Meiji Era.