

How Much Did Japan Change During the Meiji Era?

Introduction:

This lesson is designed for students in grades 10-12. Depending on the pacing of the lesson and the homework assignments, this lesson may take 2-4 45-minute class periods.

The Meiji Restoration represents one of the most significant events in Japan's history, representing a shift in power that ended the 250 year reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate. As a result of the change, Japan "modernized," beginning an economic path of industrialization and initiating a social shift in eliminating social classes.

In this lesson students will first examine various sources about Japan during the Tokugawa and Meiji eras and will then apply that knowledge to the interpretation of Japanese woodblock prints from the Meiji era. In both parts of the lesson students should focus on analyzing the changes Japan faced during the era, as well as on which aspects continued from the Tokugawa era to the Meiji era.

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to analyze changes and continuities in Japan from the Tokugawa to the Meiji era.
2. Students will be able to discuss cultural changes in Japan by analyzing woodblock prints.

Essential Questions:

1. To what extent did the Meiji Restoration change Japan?
2. How do Meiji-era woodblock prints depict changes and continuities in Japan 1850-1900?

Lesson Procedure:

1. After giving student context about the Japan in the nineteenth century, separate students into three groups, jigsaw the following readings, and provide graphic organizers for students to complete based on their source set. The most efficient option would be to assign the readings for homework, although readings and accompanying charts can be completed during class time if necessary.

Source set 1:

- [Meiji Overview \(University of Pittsburgh\)](#)

- [Tokugawa Period Influence on Meiji Restoration](#)

Source set 2:

- [The Meiji Restoration and Modernization](#)
- [Key Points - Japan and the West: Meiji Restoration](#)

Source set 3:

- [Establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate](#)
- [Japan's Missed Opportunity in the Pacific](#)
- [Meiji Restoration/Revolution](#)

Optional with source set 3 (skim for general information)

- [The Zaibatsu of Japan](#)

2. Arrange students in “expert groups” with other students who were assigned the same source set to process readings and develop discussion questions. Teachers may choose to provide students with a Bloom’s Taxonomy chart or a Costa’s Levels of Thinking chart to help scaffold the process of developing questions.
3. Arrange students in groups of 6 to 9 students for small group or fishbowl discussion. Each discussion group should have representatives from each of the “expert groups.” Discussions should be student led, with students using the discussion questions they developed during step 2 to drive the discussion. Discussions could be simultaneously occurring throughout the room in small groups or could be fishbowl style with groups rotating out of the fishbowl (inner circle) periodically. The teacher should process the material with the students to emphasize salient points prior to moving on to the analysis of woodblock printing.
4. Teachers and students can learn background knowledge about the Japanese woodblock printing art form, called Ukiyo-e, from [this Wheaton College article](#). The artwork began during the Tokugawa period and continued into the Meiji era. There are many websites featuring Japanese woodblock prints from the Meiji era, however the following two sites are featured in this lesson:
 - [MIT Visualizing Cultures](#)
This source provides contextualizing information, helpful for both teachers and students. This site focuses on the “Westernization” of Japan during the period.
 - [Becoming Modern, Becoming Global: Japanese Prints from the Meiji Period \(1868-1912\)](#)
This source exhibits a collection of Japanese woodblock prints exhibited in the

Princeton University Art Museum. These prints feature a range of subjects, from a series entitled “Lives of Great People of the Occident” to battle scenes to cultural activities.

[OPTIC is a visual source analysis](#) process that many students and teachers find helpful in helping students to think about visual sources. Teachers may choose to use the OPTIC format to scaffold the document analysis process. Teachers are free to use any or all of the prints featured on the websites, however this lesson plan features the following activities:

Comparing Steamships

In this document study, students will examine [Utagawa Yoshikazu's 1861 America: A Steamboat in Motion](#) and [Sadahide's 1863 Complete Picture of a Steamship: Scenery of Uraga from the Sea](#).

- How do the two Japanese artists interpret American steamships versus Japanese steamships?
- How might the colors chosen by the artist, the setting of each print, and the activities shown indicate the artist's message?

Women in Meiji Japan

In this document study, students will examine [Album of Ten Prints Illustrating Sericulture: Unwinding Strands from Cocoons by Means of a Silk Reeling Machine](#) by Toyohara Chikanobu, [Summer Moon at Imado](#) by Kobayashi Kiyochika, and [Illustration of Singing by the Plum Garden](#) by Toyohara Chikanobu.

- What can students infer about the social roles and social classes of the women featured in the two prints?
- What do the prints suggest about the role of Westernization in Japan's economy, society, and culture during the Meiji era?

Politics of Meiji Era Japan

In this document study, students will examine [Gakyojin's The Humane Great Japanese Red Cross Medical Corps Tending to the Injured in the Russo-Japanese War](#) and [Maple Leaves at New Palace](#) (artist unknown).

- How does each print portray Japan politically?
- How do the prints represent changes begun by the Meiji Restoration?

5. To assess student learning, teachers may choose to close the lesson with a writing assignment. Teachers may choose to assign a thesis statement, a short answer question, or a full essay in response to one or both of the lesson's essential questions.