

The Origins of Japan's Modernization: The Iwakura Mission

By Izumi Saburo

The Secret of Japan's Modernization

It is often asked how Japan alone was able to achieve modernization so quickly. The question is an important and interesting one for countries in Europe and America, but even more so for countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East where modernization has lagged behind. Why is it that among all the non-Western countries, only Japan was able to achieve the level of success in modernization that it did? What was Japan's secret?

Suddenly faced with Western modernity with the arrival of the "*kurofune*" black ships (or Western battle ships), Japan created a unified state to oppose the West and promoted a policy of a "rich and powerful country" to ensure its independence. Japan defeated Russia, a major Western power, in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), and as a result of its efforts to "strengthen its power," rose to become one of the world's five great nations. Then, within just 40 years after suffering total defeat in the Pacific War, Japan became an economic power capable of rivaling the United States, a world superpower. As a result of its efforts to become a "rich country," Japan succeeded in becoming a key member of the international summit conferences. Within just 135 years of the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan had achieved two major accomplishments. The question is, how did this happen? What was the secret to Japan's success?

The reality, however, is that during this time Japan also suffered two major defeats. After achieving victory in the Russo-Japanese War during the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan became overly confident of its military capabilities and embarked upon the Greater East Asian War, an effort in which it was ultimately defeated. Later in the Showa period (1926-1989), drunk with

the success of having become a major economic power, Japan was defeated again when its efforts to become a "rich country" ended with the collapse of the bubble economy. Even with these two losses, considering the affluence, freedom and peaceful life the Japanese currently enjoy, however, Japan can still be said to have achieved great overall success in the more than one century that has passed since the Meiji Restoration.

Any discussion of Japan's successful modernization must address these questions. What did Japan do, as a young Asian nation whose modernization was lagging behind, to learn from, pursue and even surpass the advanced Western powers? A look back at history suggests that the origins of these efforts lay with the travels of the Iwakura Mission.

An Unprecedented Study Tour

The Iwakura Mission was a major undertaking in which 50 official members traveled the world for 21 months from December 1871 until September 1873. Its purposes were threefold:

(1) To send greetings to the countries that had established treaties with Edo Japan, and to demonstrate the power of the newly unified imperial state of Japan.

(2) To engage in preliminary negotiations to revise the unequal treaties that the Edo *Bakufu* (shogunate) had been compelled to conclude. Since it was deemed impossible to use force to change the treaties immediately, the mission hoped to get a greater sense of the intentions of their treaty partners.

(3) To seek out the elements of Western civilization. The main goal of the mission was to provide data that would be used in designing a plan for the new Japan.

The Iwakura Mission was unique in several ways. First, it was comprised

of the leading members of the new government. At that time, the helmsmen of Japan numbered just under ten, including court noble Sanjo Sanetomi (Grand Minister of State, or today's Prime Minister). Among them, the most prominent, Iwakura Tomomi (*Udaijin*, or Minister of the Right), Kido Takayoshi (Councillor of State) and Okubo Toshimichi (Minister of Finance), participated in this Mission. It is especially significant that Okubo took part in the mission, as he was the most senior politician at the time, and held the de facto power of a prime minister. It is also of special significance that the mission included Ito Hirobumi (Senior Councillor of Public Works), then a young man who would later become a leader of the next generation. Taking their places during these statesmen's absence were Saigo Takamori, Itagaki Taisuke and Okuma Shigenobu (all of them were Councillors of State), as well as Inoue Kaoru (Vice Minister of Finance) and his colleague Shibusawa Eiichi. The mission departed only four months after a revolutionary reform had been made in the country's administration, with the conversion of the *han* (feudal domain) into prefectures. It was extremely unusual for more than half of the core members of the revolutionary government to be traveling overseas so soon after such a huge transformation. There are probably no other similar occurrences in the history of the east or west, and this could probably be considered more reckless of those leaders, than brave.

Second, the mission visited the United States as well as 11 European countries. These included a wide variety of nations, including both large and small nations, monarchies and republics, new and old nations, and industrial, agricultural and commercial nations. Naturally the mission was able to conduct comparative research using

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what they learned in each country.

On their return voyage from Marseilles, the mission also visited ports in the Middle East and Asia, where they were able to get a brief glimpse of conditions in those places as well. They saw what life was like in colonized countries groaning under the imperialism of the Western powers.

By literally traveling around the world, the mission was able to get a sense of the great variety of countries that existed and of the diversity of their topographical features and historical contexts. By comparing these, the mission's members were able to affirm Japan's place in the world. At the same time, they had the opportunity to objectively consider Japan's strengths and weakness, and to think about where it was lagging and where it was excelling.

Third, the mission was able to see the elements of Western civilization as a whole. Their view wasn't limited only to politics and economics, but included the multifaceted whole of Western civilization – from industry and economy to manufacturing and trade, politics and constitutions, religion and education, culture and entertainment. It is also worth noting that they gained insights about the fundamental principles underlying this civilization, including Christianity, rationalism, individualism, freedom and autonomy, and the pursuit of profit.

The fourth unique element of this mission was its length. It was the exact opposite of the extremely fast-paced and hurried trips that are taken today. Even Okubo and Kido, who had to return to Japan early, were abroad for a year and a half, and Iwakura and Ito stayed for more than a year and nine months. Because of this, they got to see cities as well as the countryside, to stay in the homes of nobility and other prominent people, and to really observe what everyday life was like in the places they visited.

The mission spent 200 days in the United States, traveling the width and breadth of the country by railroad. It also spent 210 days in Europe traveling as far north as St. Petersburg and as far south as Naples. Its European tour



The Iwakura Mission; Kido Takayoshi, Yamaguchi Naoyoshi, Iwakura Tomomi, Ito Hirobumi and Okubo Toshimichi (from left to right) in San Francisco

included 120 days in Britain, with visits to Portsmouth, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and 60 days in Paris.

The slow pace of travel via train and boat gave the mission members time to reflect on what they had seen and heard and to exchange ideas with their colleagues. Thus, in addition to having time to make careful observations of the places they visited, they also had time to consume, digest and absorb all they had encountered. Political scientist Kosaka Masataka calls this “a massive, long-term training trip” that trained Iwakura, Okubo, Kido, Ito and the other members to become the future leaders of Japan.

Fifth, the mission learned about the histories of various countries and cities, and looked at the modern civilizations it encountered from the perspective of their current stages of development. The origins of modern civilization were traced to Britain and France. Following those were the United States and Germany, and then Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Russia modernized much later regardless of its immense size. The mission also saw

Asian countries that had been colonized by Western powers. The trip gave the ambassadors an opportunity to see countries along the whole spectrum of development from the uncivilized to the semi-civilized and civilized nations.

When comparing these with Japan, the mission determined that political unification in Germany and Italy was only about a decade ahead of Japan, and that the United States was only slightly ahead since it had only recently become a truly unified state following the Civil War. The mission thus determined that Japan was at most only 40 or 50 years behind these nations in terms of modern technology, transportation and communications, and industry and trade. It is extremely significant that the mission came to the conclusion that, from a historical perspective, “Japan is not at all that far behind.”

The True Beginnings of Modernization

So what did the Iwakura Mission bring back to Japan? The most extreme

example appears in the report that Okubo and Kido submitted to the Cabinet upon their return, suggesting the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under the Emperor. They knew that a constitutional government was essential for catching up with Western modernity, and that in Japan this would have to mean a constitutional monarchy rather than a republic. In an international society where imperialism was the order of the day, bolstering the nation's power was an urgent priority. This would mean, first, creating a prosperous country by fostering industry and trade, and second, strengthening the country's military capabilities accordingly. They recognized that modern warfare clearly depended on technology and industry, and obtained a clear prescription for what the country had to do to ensure its independence in a world operating under the survival for the fittest rule.

Okubo and the other statesmen that took control of the country after their return aggressively promoted Japanese modernization based on the findings of their study tour. Plans for creating a new Japan, which had been rather vague prior to the mission's departure, began to take on a more concrete shape based on what had been learned overseas. Okubo spent the five years before he was assassinated constructing a framework for top-down modernization.

After his death, Okubo was succeeded by Ito Hirobumi. Ito aggressively promoted the campaign of "increase production and promote industry" while at the same time working toward the enactment of the Meiji constitution. The guiding principle of these efforts can be summed up as "Japanese spirit with Western teaching." Ito wanted to actively adopt Western technologies while maintaining Japanese tradition in the nation's customs and religious culture. The Meiji Emperor and the combined morals of the Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian religions were symbols of that duality, with the Meiji Constitution and the Imperial Rescript on Education giving it a concrete shape as well.

Since it was already lagging behind, Japan didn't have time to promote modernization from the bottom up. The government placed greater priority on the rights of the state than on civil rights, and instead of waiting for spontaneous development efforts from among the citizenry, adopted a system of state-led development in which it developed enterprises and then transferred them to private control once they reached certain levels of performance.

The Samurai Promote Modernization

What was the greatest supporting factor in Japan's modernization? As indicated in the phrase, "a business is only as good as its people," it was the strength of the human resources available in Japan. Leaders raised in the Edo period (1603-1867) and this era of transition could be found throughout Japan. Many of them were samurai, but some were also merchants and farmers. Even from the Edo period, both the Bakufu and the han were passionate about education. It is well known that Japan had a high overall literacy rate in the Edo period, but special attention was paid to educating Japan's elite. The *Bakumatsu* (the end of the Edo period) era, especially, saw the emergence of outstanding leaders like Shimazu Nariakira and Nabeshima Kanso. They promoted the education of human resources in the han and at the same time promoted high-productivity industries and technological development. It is well known that Satsuma (Kagoshima) and Choshu (Yamaguchi) sent students abroad even before the Bakufu's ban on such activities was lifted, and the knowledge those students gained became very useful after the Restoration.

Evidence of their usefulness is the fact that many of the Iwakura Mission members had once been sent by the Bakufu or a han to study abroad. There were young people who welcomed the mission in cities like Washington, London, Paris and Berlin and served as guides in each city. Of course, there were also talented people in the interim

government during the mission's absence. Soejima Taneomi, Eto Shimpei, Oki Takato, Shibusawa Eiichi, Mutsu Munemitsu, Sano Tsunetami, Terajima Munenori, Matsukata Masayoshi and Maejima Hisoka did the actual work during this time, and they were the human heritage of the Edo period.

One of the unique characteristics of the Meiji government is that it was not frugal in its investment in human resources. It employed many foreigners at high salaries, and sent many young people to study abroad. The commissioning of the Iwakura Mission itself was an enormous investment in personnel development. The reason that Japan was able to respond appropriately to the impact from the West was because of the depth of its human resources at all levels, and because it had a pool of capable people with high morals and a classical education. It was this samurai class that ushered in the new era and became the leaders in various fields who would carry the efforts toward modernization forward.

The Continuing Relevance of the Iwakura Mission

Now suffering the after-effects of the collapse of the bubble economy, Japan's second major defeat, the country lacks confidence and is steeped in confusion about what direction it should take next. There are two reasons for this dilemma.

First is the loss of the leading samurai class that sustained Japan after the Meiji Restoration. Even after World War II, there were still many samurai-like people who had been raised under the prewar educational system. Shibusawa Eiichi, for example, urged businessmen to hold the "*Analects of Confucius* in one hand, an abacus in the other."

However, when Japan lost World War II, the Meiji Constitution was abolished along with the Imperial Rescript on Education. Under the new constitution, the Japanese came to promote individualism and pacifism, and have been completely devoted to build-

ing a rich country by aspiring to achieve affluent American lifestyles. In the process, the "Japanese spirit" that had sustained Japanese leaders gradually eroded away, only to be replaced with love of money and devotion to "me"-ism. The principle of holding the "Analects of Confucius in one hand" was, without notice, forgotten.

The second reason for this dilemma is the maturity of the Japanese economy, now that its core players are those of the third generation. Thanks to Japan's status as a great economic power, the Japanese people live surprisingly affluent lifestyles. Having grown up amidst all this affluence, young Japanese people have lost their hungry spirit and have become consumed with the aim of merely amusing themselves, like jellyfish without any backbone. People like this have become the core leadership in various fields, including politics, economics and education, and Japan has lost the steel rod it needs at its core. The samurai mind has deteriorated amidst postwar democracy, economic growth and pacifism, and the Japanese people's sense of responsibility, morals and desire to face a challenge has weakened. The sense of ethics and responsibility incorporated in what Nitobe Inazo, one of Japan's leading figures, called the "*Bushido*" (way of the samurai), has faded.

It is for this reason that Japan today is going through a period of deep reflection. Surely not all Japanese are like this. There must be some stalwart Japanese who do have a backbone and who will stand proud and upright. Looking back in history, we rediscover the "monument of the Iwakura Mission," the gallant samurai who started Japan on the road to modernization.

When You're Lost, Go Back to Where You Started

Last fall the Iwakura Mission Society held a three-day international symposium on the "Re-evaluation of the Mission and Its Meaning for Today's World." This symposium was held in

commemoration of the 130th anniversary of the Iwakura Mission for the first time in Japan. More than 20 researchers from Japan and abroad gathered for the event to focus on the Iwakura Mission and to examine the official record of that trip, *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-1873: A True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary's Journal of Observation Through the United States of America and Europe*. The event featured interesting reports and lively discussions.

The following are some of the ideas presented at that event, reproduced here to convey the enthusiasm of the symposium's participants.

"First, we have to learn from the Iwakura Mission's bravery and ability to take decisive action. We should be surprised by the intellect, observational abilities and sense of mission of Kume Kunitake, the author of *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-1873*. The Japanese at that time had confidence in their own culture. They observed Western civilization and recorded what they saw through impartial eyes tainted neither by prejudice nor pride. Today, we need to learn from their spirit and their observations." (Haga Toru, President, Kyoto University of Art and Design; Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo)

"To contribute to global society today, Japanese citizens need to conduct field research in places all over the world as though they were all members of the Iwakura Mission. All of Meiji Japan directed its efforts toward developing a civilization of power, but 21st century Japanese need to strive for a civilization of beauty." (Kawakatsu Heita, Professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies)

"This is a time when not only Japanese politicians, but other countries' politicians as well, need to take long journeys like that of the Iwakura Mission to carefully consider where their countries, and the world as a whole, are headed. This can't be done by trying to squeeze five to seven countries into a seven to 10 day trip." (Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Former British

Ambassador to Japan)

"The Iwakura Mission departed with a clear sense of their mission. We need to learn from their bold and courageous approach to reform today." (Fujii Hiroaki, President of the Japan Foundation)

The English version of *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-1873* was completed and published this spring. The entire record is quite large, with five volumes containing 2,200 pages. Still, because it is like a kind of encyclopedia, you can start reading it from any point that interests you and still find it fascinating. It provides comparisons of Eastern and Western civilizations, and these comparisons are full of suggestions. It has extremely intriguing comparisons of Western civilizations that pursue profit and aspire to pleasure, and Eastern civilizations that aspire to morality, and full and balanced living.

We are now in a time when we need to be looking at the direction in which Japan is heading, and at the same time to go back to the beginning and think about questions like, "what is civilization?" and "what is modernity?" If we learn from the Iwakura Mission and read *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-1873*, perhaps the way we think about and view Japanese history and the people will change. The Japanese people may regain their confidence, people of other nations may gain a new perspective of the Japanese, and everyone may learn that Japan's own history, traditions and cultural strength laid the groundwork for its modernization.

"When you're lost, go back to where you started." I hope that the Iwakura Mission and *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-1873* will serve as a useful tool in searching for a new direction for Japan and in reconsidering the issues of modernization. JTI

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