

Background Essay Reading Guide: Answer Key

Directions: Read the essay on Meiji and Taishō Japan to answer the questions below.

A. Meiji Japan

1. In one or two sentences, describe the main concerns of the leaders who established the Meiji government in 1868. What did they want to accomplish for their country?

The new leaders wanted to create a unified modern Japan and make it a “modern nation” on par with Western powers—i.e., the leading nations of Europe and the United States. They wanted Japan to be treated as an equal by the West. They wanted to instill a sense of national unity and patriotism among the Japanese people. They wanted Japan to modernize but not lose what was its essential national identity—to become modern without becoming Western.

2. When the Meiji period began in 1868, Japan had several large urban centers and a well-developed commercial economy, but it was still a largely rural country with little industrial or technological development. By the end of the period in 1912, however, Japan was a highly industrialized, modern country that had defeated major Asian (China) and Western (Russia) powers in war and gained the status of a modern country. For each category below, describe the changes that took place in Japan under the Meiji government to create a modern nation.

- a. Armed forces/military: *Modern military, military conscription, Japan had won two wars, gained world power status.*
- b. Social and economic classes: *No more hereditary classes, no special status for samurai, all citizens equal, tax reform.*
- c. Education: *Elementary education required, children taught to revere emperor and be loyal to government.*
- d. Type of government/political system: *Written legal code, constitutional monarchy, state religion—Shinto, two-party parliamentary system.*
- e. Transportation and communication: *Infrastructure developed—highways, bridges, train system, electricity, national telegraph system.*
- f. Industry: *Industrialization, growth of key industries.*
- g. Social changes: *Changes in clothing, fashion, greater roles for women, growth of consumerism.*

3. What were three key areas of the economy that Japan developed and modernized during the Meiji period?

Railways, banking, heavy industry, textiles, communications, war machinery, mining.

4. How did Japan become recognized as a world power?

In 1895, Japan won the Sino-Japanese war, securing its status as the dominant power in East Asia. In 1905, Japan defeated Russia, a major European power in the Russo-Japanese War.

B. Taisho Japan

1. The Meiji period was followed by the Taishō era (1912-1926), named for the ruling emperor. Dramatic changes took place in the Taishō era. Taishō democracy is a term often attached to this period because of political changes. How did politics change from the Meiji period to the Taishō?

Universal manhood suffrage was enacted. Japanese people became more active in the political process, they demonstrated and pressured for a variety of rights and protections. Political parties became active.

2. What social changes took place during the Taishō period?

Increasing urbanization and population migration to cities; creation of a middle class working in white collar jobs; increasing adoption of Western or international fashions and consumer interests; more disposable income leading to consumer culture. In general, increasing prosperity. New roles for women—women were more visible in society, culture, the economy. Increasing social and political awareness and pressure for social, political, and economic rights.

3. What happened to literacy levels during Taishō Japan?

Literacy levels increased as a result of schooling made mandatory during the Meiji. This resulted in an increase in publications—magazines, journals, newspapers, and books circulated.

4. Who were the “moga”?

Moga were “modern girls” who rejected the Meiji era standard of “good wife, wise mother” as a proper woman’s role. They adopted modern hairstyles and clothing that rejected convention, much like “flappers” in 1920s American culture. They also worked in jobs such as waitressing that flaunted conventional feminine social and economic roles.

5. In 1924, a popular novel was published that featured a young woman named Naomi. What was the point of this novel?

The main character spends a great deal of money and time to help Naomi develop grace, refinement, and beauty meeting Western standards. For a while, Naomi is satisfied with this; however, she then sets off on her own in search of freedom and independence. The novel illustrates the changing roles of women during the Taishō period.