

## NHD Meiji Restoration Interview Transcript

Interview with Janice P. Nimura, award-winning author of *Daughters of the Samurai: A Journey from East to West*, Yale graduate, M.D. in East Asian studies at Columbia

**Q:** What aspects of government did the Meiji rulers derive from the Tokugawa shogunate and which did they replace?

**Janice Nimura:** Many of my best answers to this are in my book. You could look up “Charter Oath,” “Meiji Constitution,” etc. Those were the foundational documents of the Meiji regime. They were based far more on Western analogs than on anything that had preceded them in the Tokugawa period.

**Q:** Should I read the primary sources themselves or find analysis or historical commentary and would my school library be a good place to search?

**Janice Nimura:** A good textbook will give you both the most relevant excerpts of the primary documents, and secondary analysis. The Meiji leaders started with huge enthusiasm for all things Western, and then by the 1880s began to swing back toward a more conservative attitude, based more on traditional Confucianism. Yes, your school or public library is definitely the place to start. If they don’t have good textbooks, perhaps you can get them via interlibrary loan.

**Q:** Was rule more stable during the Meiji period or Tokugawa and what tactics were employed to maintain this sense of order?

**Janice Nimura:** How do you define stable rule? The Tokugawa period was an extraordinary two and a half centuries without war, but it was also marked by famine and political unrest in its later decades. The Meiji period saw two international wars (Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese), but also huge advances in technology.

**Q:** What led to the more conservative attitude in the 1880s?

**Janice Nimura:** It was a fairly natural pendulum swing—the Meiji leaders had embraced Western ideas with almost too much fervor, raising the question of whether they were undermining what it meant to be “Japanese.” Pages 183-187 in my book, the beginning of Chapter 11, “Getting Along Alone,” is where you want to look for the swing back to conservatism.

**Q:** In their haste to become more modern and advanced, did the Japanese abandon part of their culture and try to regain it once they had achieved their goal and were able to realize what they had done?

**Janice Nimura:** Japan recognized that it had fallen behind the Western powers, and would need to modernize in order not to be victimized or colonized, like the Philippines or China. It needed to end its feudal institutions and replace them with political and economic institutions that the West could recognize. Culturally, in terms of Confucian values and the arts, much remained the same.

**Q:** Was it politically correct to associate being westernized with being technologically advanced during the Meiji era?

**Janice Nimura:** Yes. We are talking about the Industrial Revolution: steam engines, railways, factories. Asian nations had not adopted those technologies yet.

**Q:** Going back to my prior question, does "raising the question of whether they were undermining what it meant to be "Japanese" refer to their cultural identity?

**Janice Nimura:** Yes. Early on, the enthusiastic young Meiji leaders even considered using English as an official language. Western fashions in hair and clothing were all the rage. Some people even recommended that Japanese intermarry with Westerners. This early enthusiasm didn't last.

**Q:** Were the reforms based primarily on Japan wanting to mimic Western society at the time or a result of Japan going in its own direction to bring forth these advancements?

**Janice Nimura:** Japan had watched as Western nations came to dominate China and the Philippines. They did not want to become a colony of a Western power. They systematically studied Western governments, educational systems, legal systems, industry, military technology, and adopted the best examples from various nations to use themselves.

**Q:** Though the Japanese considered speaking English and followed Western trends, did they still have their Confucian values and traditions at the time?

**Janice Nimura:** They were actively copying the most successful systems in order to make themselves strong. Traditional values had not gone anywhere. After the initial fads wore off, Japan kept the advanced technology and political/legal/educational systems it had learned from the West, and turned back toward more conservative social values.

**Q:** So, if there were other more powerful countries, would the Japanese have also tried to replicate their success?

**Janice Nimura:** The most powerful nations in the 19th century were the U.S., France, England, Prussia, and Russia. Those were the nations the Meiji leaders studied. All of those nations were actively involved in seizing colonial territories.

**Q:** When Japan was strong, they entered a period of isolationism to avoid Western influence. But when they were not as advanced, they tried to mimic the west. Did both of these essentially stem from fear (e.g. fear of colonization and of outside influence)?

**Janice Nimura:** That's an interesting question. I think it's not a matter of fear so much as survival instincts. In the 17th century there was nothing to be gained from crossing the ocean and trying to wage war with mighty China. Isolation made sense, as Japan was self-sufficient and secure in its sovereignty. By the mid-19th century this stance was no longer feasible. To protect its sovereignty from Western incursion, it had to make itself equal to the Western nations.

**Q:** After the Meiji Restoration, did Japan have the upper hand in treaties with the United States and how was it viewed as a foreign power?

**Janice Nimura:** Also a good question. Do a little background reading on the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, both of which Japan won. Despite their victories, the treaty process

was difficult and ultimately disappointing to Japan. They had caught up in terms of military strength, but still had to contend with the racist attitudes of the Western treaty powers, who couldn't bear to be beaten by a "heathen" nation.

**Q:** Through the adoption of Western culture and principles, did Japan lose its cultural identity?

**Janice Nimura:** No, I don't think Japan lost its cultural identity. However, the tension between imported Western ideas/trends and Japanese culture continues to this day.

**Q:** When there are negotiations between Japan and the United States today, does this tension remain?

**Janice Nimura:** I'm referring to a tension within Japan, between generations and between liberals and conservatives, as to whether imported styles and attitudes are acceptable or not. U.S.-Japan relations today are strongly influenced by the aftermath of World War II—a different story entirely!

**Q:** Because Japan emerged as a foreign power later in the game, were the Japanese perceived as foreigners and outsiders by the West?

**Janice Nimura:** The U.S. and Europe have a long and unfortunate history of prejudice against non-white nations, whether in Asia or in Africa. That hasn't changed a whole lot, alas. Look up the term "orientalism" for more on this subject.

**Q:** So, this prejudice was not specific towards Japan. Was this then a general bias?

**Janice Nimura:** White, Christian nations saw non-white, non-Christian populations as backward and unenlightened. They believed it was their mission to "bring civilization" to the "uncivilized." There are vestiges of this attitude that persist today.

**Q:** How did they react to this treatment and what stereotypes and misconceptions did the United States have of Japan? Did this view of the Japanese hurt trade negotiations and relationships?

**Janice Nimura:** See pp 74-75 in my book for some information on U.S. stereotypes regarding Japan. In the early Meiji years, the U.S. looked upon Japan with great approval, admiring its ambition. But as mentioned earlier, it would have been very difficult for a 19th-century American or European head of state to treat a Japanese prime minister as a true equal.

**Q:** How did the Meiji Restoration affect the social hierarchy at the time? And at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, was there mutual respect between Japan and the US?

**Janice Nimura:** Abolishing the daimyo/samurai class was one of the first acts of the Meiji government, which shook the social hierarchy to its roots. Many former daimyo and samurai became leaders in the new government, but others struggled, as they had no idea how to earn a living. The establishment of compulsory education for both boys and girls brought women somewhat out of the shadows, but the "good wife wise mother" ideal was as far as women got—education was considered important to help women raise good sons, not so that women could be leaders themselves.

**Q:** Were women given any form of education or more rights in marriage and was it a necessity for those from the lower classes to take jobs? How did they influence the Meiji era?

**Janice Nimura:** Elementary education was compulsory by the end of the 19th century, for both sexes and all classes. Women of the peasant class had always worked. With the advent of industrialization, some migrated to factories. There weren't a whole lot of female leaders, though. That's why the women I wrote about were so unusual. They were able to promote change partly because of their strange half-and-half cultural status.

**Q:** Who were some of the few important female leaders in the restoration and what was their influence?

**Janice Nimura:** There really weren't any female leaders in the Meiji political transformation. There were beginning to be a very few women who were writers, or teachers, or in one or two very rare cases doctors, but there were absolutely no women in government leadership. You might look up Hiratsuka Raicho, if you're interested in the earliest beginning of the issue of women's rights in Japan.

**Q:** As the Meiji Restoration was started by overthrowing the Tokugawa shogunate in a political coup, was it a controversial choice to reform Japanese government?

**Janice Nimura:** Ironically, by 1868 both sides (Satsuma/Choshu and Tokugawa loyalists) were in basic agreement about what needed to happen next. The controversy wasn't in regard to next steps—it had to do with who would lead. And the southern domains had better weapons, so they won.

**Q:** What are some other primary and secondary sources I should use to further my research and develop my thesis?

**Janice Nimura:** I would ask your history teacher for textbook recommendations. There is also an extensive bibliography in the back of my book. If you have questions regarding specific sources I'm happy to try to answer them. MIT Visualizing Cultures is a good website, with lots of fun images from the Meiji era.

**Q:** Were the primary documents from the time mostly factual content or did they contain opinions or biases?

**Janice Nimura:** All documents include biases! That's the fun of doing history—trying to puzzle out how people's contexts influenced what they thought and wrote.

**Q:** Are there any other perspectives I should consider and do you agree or disagree with my stance?

**Janice Nimura:** Your thesis is accurate, though you should be careful not to assign the emperor himself any responsibility. He was largely a figurehead—a symbol the southern domains used to give themselves legitimacy. Historians don't refer to "imperial Japan," but rather to the Tokugawa period and the Meiji period.

**Q:** Would the clans then be the ones who held the true power and made the important decisions?

**Janice Nimura:** You might look up a few of the Meiji leaders and their ideas: Ito Hirobumi, Mori Arinori, etc. Again, a textbook will be a good guide. And yes, the Satsuma and Choshu samurai led the rebellion against the Tokugawa shogunate. By using the emperor as their rallying symbol, they portrayed the Tokugawa as traitors.