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| **Viewpoint: China's 'Meiji Restoration'** **Why the world must continue engaging Beijing** [**JANUARY 28, 2000 VOL. 26 NO. 3**](http://www-cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0128/index.html)  By ALEJANDRO REYES  When China joins the World Trade Organization later this year, China will undertake to play by global trade rules. But there is a bigger picture. Over the holidays, I dusted off some fading college texts, surfed the Web and brushed up on the Meiji Restoration, the period from 1868 to 1912 when Emperor Meiji presided over Japan's emergence as a modern nation. It occurred to me that, at this latest turn of the century, China looks poised to enter into its own "restoration." WTO membership is just one step. If you can't shun them or beat them, then join them - but on your own terms.   During the Meiji period, Japan did just that. Rather than keep to themselves, Japan's leaders opened their country to the world. This coincided with rapid industrialization, infrastructure building, and militarization. The transition stirred unrest and uncertainty, but the emperor emerged as a symbol of national unity. By the end of the First World War, Japan had clearly arrived. It took part in peace negotiations for the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. As one of the five big powers, it was allocated a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations.   |  | | --- | |  |   Meiji Japan busily sent missions around the world to observe everything from prisons to mine operations. Officials went abroad to study the political institutions in Europe and America before the government decided to base its parliamentary system on Germany's. A professional diplomatic service was set up. Tokyo (the capital was moved there from Kyoto under Meiji) assured foreign governments that it would continue to abide by previously negotiated treaties even though it regarded them as inequitable. (Think of Beijing's relatively smooth handling of its resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau.) And at least early on in Meiji's rule, Japan used diplomacy to resolve territorial disputes with China and Russia.   Make no mistake: the Meiji Restoration was no golden era of peace and stability. It was an age of immense national and personal turmoil for Japanese high and low. Former samurai had to get used to new roles as bureaucrats, teachers, policemen, bankers and even journalists. Private ownership was legalized and the Meiji oligarchy, led by the elite group of elders or genro, set out to break down the old feudal order. For the first time, there was social and occupational mobility. The government implemented an organized taxation system and military conscription.   Initially, many old warlords resisted the wide-ranging reforms that stripped them of their powers. In 1877, the government practically emptied state coffers to put down a serious uprising known as the Satsuma Rebellion. The government itself first resisted calls for a parliamentary system and representative democracy. But people knew what was going on in the West and kept the pressure on. Political reforms came slowly. When a bicameral legislature was finally set up, only the top male taxpayers, about 1% of the population, were given the vote. But in the latter years of Meiji's rule, pro- and anti-government parties were formed and party politics, even coalition administrations, emerged.   All in all, an encouraging model for China. Don't forget, however, that in Meiji Japan, the gradual adoption of the rule of law over the rule of force was accompanied by the militarization of society and industry. The rise of nationalism seems naturally to accompany such periods of economic and political upheaval, however paced. Many scholars deny any linear progression from the Meiji period to the military-authoritarian regime of the 1930s that set Japan up for war. But others argue that the bombs of Pearl Harbor started dropping decades earlier with Japan's expansionism in Korea and China. Japan declared war on Germany in 1914 and expanded hegemony over northern China. By 1941, a militarily and economically powerful Japan was battling the West.   As China embarks on its own quest for a wider, more visible international role there is no doubt that it will become more democratic, more responsible, and wealthier. But as in Meiji Japan, the forces of nationalism may also grow stronger, particularly if Beijing feels threatened by the U.S.-Japan alliance or by American strategic concerns over Taiwan. Nobody is saying that conflict is inevitable. Yet even as China embraces global rules of the game, its neighbors and the West must also step up engagement. If Japan's experience is any indication, this superpower-in-the-making is only just entering the most testing period in its modern history.  **Since this article was written, American trade with China has increased to the point where they are our greatest trading partner. China’s economy, by some measures, is up to eight times larger than it was in the year 2000! China’s economy is beginning to rival the United States and will surpass our total size soon. The author’s prediction about China becoming more democratic has not become true and has a poor record on protecting human rights. China is increasing the size of its military but still spends a fraction of what America spends on its military. As its military has gotten larger, it has more aggressively claimed islands near mainland China yet prides itself that China never has nor ever will have Chinese troops invade another country.**   1. What similarities is the author drawing between China’s current economic boom and Japan’s during the Meiji Restoration? 2. How is China’s response now different than before the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s? What lessons do you believe China has learned from its history? 3. Using Japan as an example, what predictions can you make about the future of China? In what ways will it be similar or different than Japan after its Meiji Restoration? |