Early Modern Japan, 1600-1867

Founding of the Tokugawa Shogunate
Japan experienced unprecedented political instability during the last century of the Ashikaga period (1338-1573). Starting with the Onin War (1467-1477), territorial lords (daimyo) waged constant feudal warfare for survival and supremacy. Peasants, now organized in semiautonomous villages, paid taxes for protection to daimyo who maintained large armies composed of warrior retainers (samurai) and foot soldiers armed with pikes. Oda Nobunaga, an obscure but shrewd and ambitious daimyo, began the process of building a national structure of centralized feudalism. He formed secret alliances and then militarily defeated his rivals, finally occupying the ancient capital of Kyoto in 1568. Five years later Nobunaga formally ended the Ashikaga Shogunate. His alliance with Tokugawa Ieyasu, another minor daimyo, protected him to the east as he subdued daimyo and armed Buddhist sects in central Japan during the remainder of the decade. His ablest general was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a commoner whose rise to command symbolized Japan’s new social mobility. In 1582 a disgruntled vassal assassinated Nobunaga, leaving Hideyoshi to complete the task of reunification. Using threats and diplomacy, he effectively assumed authority over Nobunaga’s coalition of daimyo. After gaining political legitimacy in 1585 through appointment as the emperor’s kampaku (regent), Hideyoshi spent the next five years vanquishing all remaining rivals. Pursuing glory, profit, and work for his soldiers, he then sought conquest of China, invading Korea in 1592. Chinese armies and Korean “turtleships” forced Japan to retreat, but after negotiations failed in 1597, Hideyoshi resumed the offensive. After Hideyoshi’s death the following year, the Japanese abruptly withdrew, leaving behind a devastated Korea. Tokugawa Ieyasu dominated as regent for Hideyoshi’s son, but western daimyo opposed his authority. Ieyasu destroyed his opponents in October 1600 at the Battle of Sekigahara, assuming the title of shogun in 1603.

The Daimyo System
Nobunaga and Hideyoshi used techniques that Ieyasu later would employ to establish the political power of the Tokugawa Shogunate. All three confiscated the lands of conquered daimyo, either keeping these holdings or assigning them to their vassals, and then ordered agricultural surveys for tax purposes. Each arranged marriages to consolidate alliances and built huge castles at strategic locations—Hideyoshi’s would develop into the city of Osaka and Ieyasu’s, at Edo, into Tokyo. To control the daimyo, Hideyoshi began the practice of holding their warriors’ wives and heirs as hostages at his headquarters. He moved daimyo to new domains, weakening the loyalty of the local populace. Strictly controlling trade and the minting of currency, Hideyoshi also imposed military burdens and the costs of construction projects onto his vassals. He even banned wheeled vehicles. Ieyasu maintained roadside checkpoints and secret surveillance agents (metsuke).

Ieyasu founded Japan’s final shogunate, which lasted more than two and a half centuries. Tokugawa power rested on the shogun’s own lands, which ultimately comprised roughly a quarter of the nation’s agricultural production and population. About two-dozen collateral Tokugawa families (shimpan) constituted the most important of three categories of daimyo, a total of 270 in all. Forming inner lines of defense, the shimpan held land

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controlling main highways and key towns, while supplying an heir for the shogun if the line ran out.

Next in power and proximity were the fudai daimyo, the descendants of men who were Ieyasu’s vassals before 1600. Finally, the tozama or “outer” daimyo were heirs of lords who were the last to accept Tokugawa overlordship. Although required to sign a loyalty oath, each daimyo continued to be absolute ruler in his own domain, collecting taxes to support himself and pay rice stipends to his retainers.

During the relative peace of the Tokugawa period, samurai became unproductive petty government office holders with overlapping functions who resided at the daimyo headquarters. Anticipating a challenge from the daimyo after his death, Ieyasu resigned as shogun in favor of his ablest son in 1605.

**Foreign Contacts**

Portuguese traders started visiting Japanese ports during the 1540s. Western and southern daimyo became interested in exchanging goods, especially after seeing their first firearms. The Japanese learned how to build castles and use cannons from Europeans, finding their clocks and spectacles fascinating as well. But foreign trade disrupted the social, political, and economic stability of agrarian feudalism in Tokugawa Japan. Worse still, Christian missionaries arrived with European traders. Daimyo leaders, who initially admired the missionaries’ discipline and learning, soon began to view them as a subversive force.

During a particularly aggressive campaign that he began in 1549, Jesuit priest Francis Xavier—in his zeal to make Japan the first Christian country in Asia—led the way in shifting the loyalty of perhaps three hundred thousand Japanese.

Hideyoshi wanted to trade with Europe, but sectarian quarrels added to fears that Christianity would undermine his rule. He banished all missionaries in 1587, but delayed enforcement of this order until 1597, when he crucified nine priests and seventeen Japanese converts. While Ieyasu would allow Spanish Franciscans to attempt to win religious converts in hopes of attracting European trade, he began issuing anti-Christian decrees when Protestant Dutch traders and Will Adams, a stranded English pilot, convinced him that tolerating missionaries was not a prerequisite for commerce. Ieyasu’s successors were more repressive, exiling minor Christian daimyos, expelling countless missionaries, and jailing, torturing, and executing hundreds of European priests and Japanese converts. Persecution climaxed in 1637-1638, when Tokugawa forces slaughtered twenty thousand Christian peasants who were revolting against high taxes in western Kyushu on the Shimabara Peninsula.

**Isolation of Japan**

Rising concern about disruptive foreign influences resulted in the adoption of policies that led Japan into almost total national isolation. In 1616 the Tokugawa Shogunate, perceiving aggressive military intentions, limited European ships to two ports. In 1635 the shogun decreed that the death penalty would apply to anyone caught traveling abroad or returning home from a trip outside of the country. Also, he placed limits on ship building, allowing only the construction of smaller vessels
capable only of coastal transport. When Portuguese envoys returned in 1640, in defiance of an earlier expulsion edict, their execution left only Dutch traders to maintain European contacts with Japan. After forcing the Dutch to relocate to a tiny island at Nagasaki the next year, the shogunate restricted trade with China to that port. Ultimately, one Dutch ship per year brought news to Japan from the outside world.

Japan’s isolation brought technological stagnation, but also two centuries of profound peace and stability that witnessed great cultural creativity. An increasingly literate populace encouraged the proliferation of publishing houses that marketed an avalanche of printed books with contents ranging from inspirational essays to pornography. Tokugawa poets developed the distinctive haiku, with its unique seventeen-syllable, three-line form. While keeping alive the Nō drama of the Ashikaga era, the Japanese embraced Kabuki, a popular new theater form where the actors dressed in colorful costumes, wore heavy makeup, and used exaggerated movements. They also patronized artists who practiced woodblock printing and realistic painting, while admiring the singing, dancing, and conversational skills of "accomplished" women (geisha). By reading rather than fighting, samurai rediscovered Japan’s history, thus reviving interest in Shinto religion and imperial values.

Social and Economic Patterns
Hideyoshi implemented measures to prevent social instability, issuing a permanent employment edict in 1585 that prohibited retainers from changing lords and samurai from becoming farmers or merchants. Another edict in 1586 required all people to remain in the class of their birth. Peasants could not leave their villages, sell land, or even wear silk. A nationwide "swordhunt," begun in 1588, functioned to deny peasants arms and further reinforce class distinctions. Tokugawa laws regulated the lives of the warrior elite while prohibiting daimyo alliances, limiting fortifications, allowing for special financial exactions, requiring periodic service, and making hostage-holding mandatory. Beginning in 1635, daimyo had to spend alternate years in the capital city of Edo (sankin kotai). Travel in elaborate processions and upkeep of multiple residences consumed more than seventy percent of daimyo income, thus reducing samurai stipends while lowering the threat to the shogun. Confiscation of daimyo lands for disloyalty increased the number of unruly and disgruntled "masterless samurai" (ronin).

Dynamic economic growth further weakened the social structure of Tokugawa Japan. Urbanization combined with commercialization of the economy to produce a prosperous entrepreneurial class. Not only did these townsmen finance manufacturing ventures, they loaned money to impoverished daimyo and bought social privileges. As the clan structure collapsed, successful farmers used modern techniques to expand agricultural production, generating increasing wealth and enlarging their holdings. Thus, theoretically lower-class Japanese thrived, while most samurai lived in poverty as petty bureaucrats, many making straw sandals to avoid destitution. Despite the reality of a shifting social structure, the warrior class, which constituted just six percent of the population, remained devoted to an archaic value system that defended its social status and honor, codified years before as Bushido or "way of the warrior." Tokugawa samurai ignored modern techniques of warfare, preferring to perfect skills in sword use, calisthenics, flower arranging, and performance of the Ashikaga tea ceremony. While some samurai gave up their social rank to gain financial security as farmers or merchants, the warrior class soon found themselves deeply in debt.
Opening of Japan
Isolationist Tokugawa policies abruptly ended what had been decades of vigorous overseas trade and piracy. While Europeans would respect Japanese seclusion for many years, the penetration of China in the early nineteenth century established Japan's strategic and economic importance. Russia, and then England, pushed for expanded contacts, but it would be the United States that would finally force the opening of Japan. New England whaling vessels and clipper ships, traveling the great circle route across the Pacific, passed Japan's shores; not only did the Japanese deny the right of such foreign ships to obtain supplies, they captured and mistreated shipwrecked crews. The wish to resolve these grievances—as well as a desire for coaling stations—was the motivation behind several failed American attempts to establish diplomatic contacts with Japan during the 1840s. Finally, in July 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in Edo Bay and demanded that Japan negotiate a commercial treaty with the United States. Exposing its weakness, the shogunate asked the emperor and powerful daimyo for advice. Despite a negative response, news of China's recent defeat in the First Opium War persuaded the shogun to cooperate when Perry returned in February 1854 with three steam frigates and five other ships. In the Treaty of Kanagawa, Japan agreed to open two ports for limited trade, provide good treatment for stranded sailors, and permit consular representation. Townsend Harris, the country's first American consul, then exploited Japan's fear of military action following China's Second Opium War to negotiate a second treaty that completely opened Japan and governed relations with the West until 1894. Meanwhile, internal criticism of all shogunate policies had begun, starting a rapid erosion of Tokugawa authority.

Breakdown of the Shogunate
Tokugawa power depended on a regressive system of agricultural taxation that consumed between forty and sixty percent of all that peasants produced. Gradually, economic growth, social change, and cultural innovation would undermine this system. An expanding population suffered from limited resources, resulting in widespread infanticide (mabiki or "thinning"). Also, foreign ideas penetrated Japan, particularly "Dutch Learning" at Nagasaki. During the 1700s Japanese scholars learned about Western medicine, as well as about botany, cartography, and modern gunnery. Samurai, unable to maintain their traditional lifestyle, demanded sweeping change that would permit them economic advancement. Western and southern daimyo opposed opening Japan to the West, but advocated the adoption of European techniques to restore the values and ethics of Japan's past. Discontented Japanese became openly defiant of the shogunate, looking to a revival of imperial power for salvation.

Tokugawa "elders" fought a losing battle to halt the erosion of the shogunate's authority. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, they passed a series of reform measures to achieve regulation of commerce, financial retrenchment, and restoration of the prestige of the samurai class. The resulting sumptuary edicts, laws fixing interest rates, and summary cancellation of debts only angered prosperous Japanese. By the early 1800s a series of floods, crop failures, city fires, and volcanic eruptions caused widespread famine and disease. High taxes and misgovernment sparked a succession of peasant rebellions and urban riots. The Tokugawa system might have survived without foreign encroachment, but conflict between theory and reality in social, political, and economic affairs fueled an extreme social instability that destined Japan for the rapid and sweeping change that would usher it into the twentieth century.