



The two images above vividly depict the dynamism and sophistication of Tokugawa Japan. Source: <http://www.indiana.edu/~ealc100/JArt1.html>.

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

Tokugawa Japan

Unit Goals – After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Situate Japan on a map of the East Asian region
- 2) Understand the historical context that created the conditions for the Shogunate's formation.
- 3) Describe the system constructed and the measures taken by the Tokugawa Shoguns to maintain their hegemony over Japan.
- 4) Get a sense of the cultural change that took place under the Tokugawa, in particular the urban culture of consumption that emerged, and how this was connected to social changes.
- 5) Describe the multifaceted encounter between the West and Japan from the 16th Century until the late Tokugawa period. Consider how this was influenced by internal Japanese concerns.
- 6) Identify the following individuals and explain their importance: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the 47 Ronin (esp. the place of the 47 Ronin in Japanese culture).

Introduction

This essay covers the history of Japan from around 1500 to 1850. The first century of this period was a period of incessant internal war, marked by the rise of succeeding warlords who tried to unite all of Japan. This era of increasing warfare came to an end with the establishment of the **Tokugawa Shogunate** (1600-1868) – a military government founded by the warlord **Tokugawa Ieyasu** (from the Tokugawa clan, so last name first). This new government oversaw a long period of peace and stimulated economic development, creating a dynamic, sophisticated and vibrant society with what might have been the highest standard of living anywhere in the early modern world.

The **Shogunate**, or government by military strongmen, was a form of rule practiced in earlier periods of Japanese history, when in periods of crisis ruling elites, or **daimyo**, elected a military commander from their ranks to address and overcome temporary crises. But the Tokugawa Shogunate was unique in guaranteeing such a long period of relative stability. One of the questions student should ask themselves is how they did this. Unlike other military governments in world history, the Tokugawa Shogunate did not guarantee its hegemony over Japan by military means alone, but by constructing a system of relations with other powerful lords that ensured prolonged peace, stability, and economic and cultural development.

The Tokugawa regime is famous for its decision to close Japan to almost all Western visitors in the 1630s; Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese, had appeared in Asian waters in the early 1500s, and reached Japan by 1543. This essay will argue that this policy has to be understood within the context of Japan's internal relations, as a measure designed specifically to protect the system of power set up by the Tokugawa Shogunate.

But the Tokugawa period has not only attracted attention from historians for its high standard of living, interesting system of rule or its dealing with Westerners. Many have looked to the Tokugawa period to explain the unique path followed by Japan in the modern period. In the nineteenth century, Japan was the only non-Western state which managed to join Britain, France, Germany and others as part of the Western international system of imperialist states, relying on the power of industrial technology.¹ Historians have looked to the Tokugawa period, trying to understand the long-term roots that might have made this possible. So this period is also important to our understanding of the place of modern Japan, whose early industrialization in turn influenced the economic growth of Asia in the last half century.

Politics, Society and Culture of Japan before 1500

Modern Japan is principally made up of four major islands: Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu, and Hokkaido. At the beginning of our period the latter, most northern, island, Hokkaido, was not yet part of Japan proper. In fact it was inhabited by another people, the Ainu.

Around 1500, Japan itself was divided into hundreds of small lordships, some of them only controlling a plain or some valleys. There was an Emperor for all of Japan who resided in the old capital city of Kyoto, but he was by now a purely symbolic figure, living in the seclusion of the court, without actual power. During the Middle Ages (from the 12th century) real central power had instead been wielded for a while by military strongmen, **Shoguns**, whose power was hereditary within their family. This form of government is also called *Bakufu*, or government from "the tent of the general," referring to its military origins. One of these families, the Kamakura, had managed to organize the successful defence of Japan against Mongol naval invasions in the 1270s and 80s. But Shogunal power started to wane soon afterward, leaving Japan with no effective central government by the 15th Century.

Regional and local lords – called *Daimyo* – enjoyed *de facto* independence during this period. They relied on armies of military retainers – the Samurai – for their power. It was around the castles of the provincial lords that the development of larger towns and cities took place in the Japanese Middle Ages. But at the same time Japan was linked via

¹ One could say that Russia also managed to do this, breaking in the European International system in the early 18th century, during the reign of Peter the Great. But Russia's position *vis a vis* Europe is more ambivalent than that of Japan. Ironically, it was Japan's defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 that heralded her acceptance as a power by other Western states. For more, see the module essay, "The Russo-Japanese War."

trade to mainland Asia. Innovations in agriculture, imported from the mainland, for instance a new species of rice that produced two harvests a year, created a rise in population. Daimyo also engaged in partnerships with traders, to bring money into their treasuries through overseas commerce as well as through piracy.

This medieval period also saw the origins of many cultural forms, in particular among the military class of the Samurai, that later came to be considered typically Japanese. It was the ethic of this warrior class, with its insistence upon honour, valour and loyalty, which dominated much of the thinking about morality in Japan. Samurai ethics were reflected in literature, with stories of proud courageous leaders and faithful retainers, who rather sacrificed their lives than accept shameful defeat or fail in their obligation to their lord. One example is the *Noh* Drama that came into existence, with plots and themes that could appeal to the military elite that dominated this period. While the actors wore lavish masks, the scene itself was almost bare.

The latter was an example of the influence of Zen Buddhism on the aesthetic taste of the Japanese warrior elite. Zen Buddhism was brought to Japan by Chinese monks. It was a contemplative philosophy promoting inward meditation rather than temple ritual. As a philosophy, Zen believed in the essential oneness of all things: whether good or bad. So man should deal with the vicissitudes of life in a detached way. Instead of holy texts or the veneration of saviour deities practiced in other forms of Buddhism, Zen emphasized the master–student relationship. This was of course appropriate to a world of feudal warriors, where the crucial relationship was between lord and retainer.

(Click on the following link to see Medieval Samurai Armour. This was only worn by the wealthy, elite warriors. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Samurai_armor.jpg)

The Era of the Warring States and the re-unification of Japan

The long period of division was brought to an end in the second half of the 16th Century, with the rise of a number of more powerful regional lords. These warlords employed new administrative techniques to mobilize more fully the economic and military resources of their domains, and piece together larger and more stable territories.

Centuries of warfare in Japan had by now resulted in larger armies, which employed increasingly sophisticated tactics and command structures. Infantry had replaced cavalry as the principal weapon, furthering the expansion of the armies. At the same time more developed command structures made it possible to use combined arms on the battlefield. Gunpowder weapons also made their entrée during this period, thanks to Portuguese merchants, but they were probably of secondary importance to the increased sophistication of military organization. The newer, more powerful, warlords also built brilliant castles to tower over their cities or guard crucial strategic locations. Their purpose was not only military, but also to serve as symbols of power, to impress rivals with their architecture.

(See a map of Japan in the later 16th Century at

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Azuchimomoyama-japan.png>)

(See a contemporary depiction of warfare in this period at the following link. Notice the flags carried for coordination on the battlefield.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sengoku_period_battle.jpg)

(Examine the photograph of the Himeji castle built by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The photo shows only the central keep of a much larger fortified complex.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Himeji_Castle_The_Keep_Towers.jpg)

(Screen paintings, like this one of a Cypress, decorated the castles of the 16th Century, as well as later Tokugawa mansions. The glow from its gold leaf would have generated light even in the darkened rooms.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kano_Eitoku_003.jpg)

The most successful of these new warlords was **Oda Nobunaga**. Originally he had only been a relatively obscure samurai of one of the new warlords. But he turned against his liege lord, killing him(!) and usurping control over his larger network of followers. Further extending his power, Oda would eventually conquer about one third of Japan, including the symbolically important ancient capital of Kyoto, before being betrayed and killed, in turn, by one of his own generals.

Despite his death, Oda Nobunaga's power-base, his network of followers, passed intact to his chief lieutenant, **Toyotomi Hideyoshi**. Thanks to his military talent, Hideyoshi had risen from peasant to general in the service of Oda, whose work of unifying Japan he continued. He was so successful that by the early 1590s, the remaining rival Daimyo's in the outlying areas of Japan were forced to acknowledge his hegemony as military overlord.

Hideyoshi had reunited Japan, but his hold on power was still shaky in a country that had been without central government for centuries. He chose to channel the martial energies outward. He invaded the mainland of Asia with a large army, to which all the lords of Japan had to contribute. Although the attack focused initially on Korea, Hideyoshi's ambition was to conquer the Chinese throne. While this ambition was probably genuine, it also diverted the attention of his opponents among the lords away from the internal struggle in Japan. The Japanese amphibious force which attacked Korea in 1592 was the largest invasion fleet of a century that also saw the Spanish Armada. Still, like the Spanish, Hideyoshi was ultimately unsuccessful in his foreign conquest. The Korean fleet managed to retain mastery of the sea, thanks to one of the most impressive warships of this age. These were the so called **Turtle ships**, armoured with light cannons, and covered by metal plates that made them impervious to boarding. Secondly, Korea received military help from Ming China, which could send very large armies to withstand the Japanese.

(See the replica of a Korean Turtle Ship, a key technological component of the Koreans' successful defense against the Japanese invasion and an impressive piece of military

technology, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Turtle_boat.jpg and <http://english.yi-sunsin.com/03ship/01.jsp>)

Hideyoshi died in 1598, which threatened to pitch Japan into a new round of internal warfare. Only after another of Oda Nobunaga's vassals, Tokugawa Ieyasu, combined some crucial victories with skilful political compromises tranquillity returned, this time for a much longer period.

The Tokugawa Shogunate

While Tokugawa Ieyasu's military victories eliminated some of his most dangerous rivals, it certainly did not remove all potential opponents among the Daimyo. The new Tokugawa regime, established in 1600, relied as much on compromise with local lords and softer, more concealed, forms of coercion to uphold stability. Only one fifth of the land was directly administered by the Shogun, while the rest was divided among approximately 200 domains, administered by lords over whom the Tokugawa Shoguns had varying influence. The largest of these domains, outside direct Tokugawa control, belonged to the outer lords, descendants of those who originally had resisted the hegemony of the new Shogun.

Shogunates, government by a powerful warlord family, had existed earlier in Japan. But the Tokugawa were unique in establishing a system of checks on other lords. A key element to guarantee Tokugawa hegemony was the 'system of **alternate attendance**.' Each local lord was required to be present in the Shogunal capital of Edo, present day Tokyo, for specific periods of time to pay homage. When the lord himself was not present in Edo, other members of his family had to reside there as a symbolic acknowledgement of Tokugawa overlordship, providing in fact hostages to assure the good conduct of the lord. Regular stays in the Shogunal capital also made it easier for the Tokugawa Shoguns to keep an eye on the lords.

But rather than being only a form of coercion, this system became part of a larger court culture in which lords competed for prestige. Regional Lords tried to outshine each other in building opulent mansions in Edo, for themselves and their family. This had the added advantage that it siphoned off some of the economic means of the lords with which they otherwise could challenge Tokugawa rule. The establishment of these mansions and the economic activity they generated transformed Edo from a small settlement into the largest city in the world by 1721 (with a population of 1 million).² The court culture of Edo gave prestige to the Shogunal office, but the Tokugawa also maintained the traditional Shogunal task of protector of the Emperor secluded from the world in Kyoto.

² The total population of Tokugawa Japan numbered 26 million around 1730. This was more than twice as much as Great Britain in this period, around the same number of the most populous 18th Century Western Kingdom, France, but only 1/10th of the number of people living in the Chinese Empire.

(See the skyline of Edo (Tokyo) in 1866, at the end of the Tokugawa period in the following link. Since Edo's mansions and houses were constructed of wood, its cityscape was destroyed in the fire-bombing of Tokyo during World War II.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edo_Panorama_old_Tokyo_color_photochrom.jpg)

World History Compared: *The Tokugawa system of alternate attendance has some interesting parallels with the function of the new court set up by Louis XIV of France at Versailles, later in the 17th Century. In his youth Louis had been confronted with a massive revolt of his nobility, but this would be the last noble revolt against a French King before the French Revolution. Under Louis, the nobles were required to reside at the new palace of Versailles, instead of their local estates, if they wanted to maintain their prestige. This not only prevented them from plotting against the King, but immersed them more completely in a court culture centred on the King. But even an Absolute King like Louis XIV knew that he could not destroy the nobility, needing them as one of the pillars of his regime. In the same manner the Tokugawa Shogunate tamed the Daimyo and collaborated with them to rule Japan.*

The goal of the Tokugawa was to create stability, to preserve their rule. For this they were also willing to intervene in the social order. Hideyoshi, although he himself had climbed up the social ladder from peasant to Daimyo, had already made the Samurai military elite strictly hereditary. This was maintained by the Tokugawa, under whom the Samurai not only became a closed, but also dependent caste. Their independence of action was severely curtailed by removing them from the land they had held as vassals, stationing them instead in the castle towns to live from a stipend they received from their lord.

Notwithstanding this 'domestication' of the Samurai, the old ideals of this warrior class could still conflict with the Tokugawa goal of stability. This happened famously in the 47-Ronin incident, which played itself out from 1701 to 1703. It started when a senior minister provoked a young Daimyo into drawing his sword at the Shogun's court. For this offence, the young lord was sentenced to commit *seppuku*, the ritual suicide of the Samurai. This made the young lord's vassals into *ronin*, masterless Samurai, obliged by the warrior code to avenge their deceased master. They broke into the house of the minister and killed him and his household. After that they withdrew to a temple in Edo, notifying the Shogun what they had done out of loyalty for their master. A legal debate ensued what to do with them. To deny the righteousness of their actions would be to deny traditional values. But to tolerate their action would recreate the chaos of internecine warfare that had dominated Japan in earlier centuries. The Shogun eventually ruled that the samurai had to die, but that they would be allowed to die honourably by committing *seppuku*. The incident showed that even traditional values had to surrender to Tokugawa stability. But the *ronin* won the battle for the soul

of Japan by becoming cultural heroes whose story was sung in plays, and depicted in arts.

(Look at the print of the *Ronin* breaking into the house of the minister who had provoked their deceased master. Made by Hokusai, one of the greatest artists of the late Tokugawa period, this was part of a larger cycle of prints telling their story.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HokusaiChushingura.jpg>)

One privilege the Samurai retained was that only they were allowed to carry weapons. Mostly these were fashionable swords, since gunpowder weapons were restricted by the government. The peasantry, which in earlier times had engaged in part time military activity, was stripped of all weapons. The government conducted “sword hunts” to confiscate weapons from the lower classes, in effect demilitarizing society. Peasants were now legally bound to agrarian pursuits in their home village. Like the Ming in China, the Tokugawa tried to stabilize society, rooting it in agriculture. But as we will see next, stability fostered the growth of markets and urban life.

Tokugawa Urban Culture

The stability of the Tokugawa provided the background for an economic shift towards a more market based economy, with an enormous increase in consumption, which now extended beyond a small elite layer, as well as an increase in standards of living. The new economic environment had a large impact on Japanese culture, transforming (but as we will see not eliminating) the older Samurai values that had come into being during the Medieval period.

Despite the decentralized nature of the Tokugawa system with its many Regional and local lords, a national market emerged. Thanks to the system of alternate attendance, Lords as well as their Samurai retainers who accompanied them were brought together from all over Japan in the city of Edo. Unintentionally it stimulated a national exchange of information and fashions.

Another major element that contributed to the growth of a national market was the increase of literacy. By the end of the Tokugawa period the majority of males received some formal schooling. But it was especially the Samurai who became a highly educated class. Because of the stability of the Tokugawa regime, this warrior elite did not have the opportunity anymore to serve their lords in war. They were also forbidden to serve as mercenaries abroad, which had been common in the Medieval period. Instead, they now started to serve as administrators for their lords, living in the regional capitals (and visiting occasionally the Shogunal capital of Edo). The high rate of literacy was the basis for a thriving publishing industry. Presses tried to meet demands for popular novels as well as what we would now call “self-help” literature. Such books gave advice to farmers on crop selection to improve their economic success. So, even when Japan was still divided into different regional lordships, with many restrictions on travel, information moved freely, creating a greater degree of cultural homogeneity.

However, it was in the cities that a true consumption culture came into existence in the seventeenth century C.E. This was not self-evident, since the Tokugawa regime tried to restrict the interaction between different classes. Tokugawa-era cities consisted of a number of gated communities, destined for specific classes of inhabitants with access restricted to others (incidentally, this gated structure made Edo probably the safest urban metropolis of the seventeenth and eighteenth century world). But each Tokugawa city also had a communal area where different classes mixed. These areas were “floating cities,” and to engage in their pleasures was to pursue *ukiyo*, the “floating life.” *Ukiyo* districts were entertainment districts with teahouses, restaurants, theatres as well as brothels. In these “pleasure districts,” as they were called, the different classes interacted. Since they were open to all, status in this specific urban environment was determined by appearance. Those who were otherwise trapped within their specific class by the traditional order, could fashion themselves however they liked in this urban world. Merchants or artisans who had become rich thanks to the growth of the market could not enter the closed class of Samurai and Lords, but they could outshine poorer Samurai in their conspicuous consumption. The arts of the entertainment districts picked up many of the older cultural forms, dominated by the older Samurai values, and disseminated those to a much wider audience, including non-Samurai. Many of these districts still exist today in Japan’s urban centers.

One of these art forms was *Kabuki* theatre, a fusion of dance and drama derived from the medieval *Noh* theatre. It was performed in elaborate costumes and often with arresting make-up, provided viewers with highly entertaining plays drawn from traditional legends, historical events, or popular stories. Especially popular was the story of the 47 *Ronin*. Its actors became real stars, comparable to twenty-first century Hollywood stars. Images of the most famous *Kabuki* performers, as well as scenes from the pleasure districts were sold to a large audience.

Thanks to advances in woodblock-printing, these images of the pleasure districts could be mass-produced for a relatively cheap price. This new art genre was called *ukiyo-e*. The Buddhist term *ukiyo* had originally expressed the transitory nature of life. Through a play of words, which only works in Japanese, this pessimistic meaning was overturned and it came to mean “to float,” expressing the joys and pleasures of life and in particular of the “pleasure districts.” Everybody with a bit of extra cash could buy captivating images of this “floating lifestyle”: seductive courtesans, exciting kabuki actors, and enticing vistas of famous landscapes. This meant that for the first time, artists were inspired by and responded to the interests and preferences of the general public. Within the closed and restricted Tokugawa society a vibrant consumption culture was born. The prints of the greatest of these woodblock artists, like Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige (1797-1858), would have a strong influence on Western artists of the late 19th Century, who developed a fascination with Japanese art.

(Online Exercise: On your own, or in class with your Instructor, visit and explore the following website on the Art of *ukiyo-e* – the “floating lifestyle,” located at http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm. Examine the following links: Woodblock print of two *Kabuki* actors (1794) by Sharaku, located at

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SharakuTwoActors.jpg>, Woodblock print of a *Bijinga*, a term used for beautiful women in a classic attire, by Utamaru Kitagawa (1798), located at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ase_o_fuku_onna2.jpg, an iconic image by Hokusai, *the Great Wave off Kanagawa* (between 1826 and 1833, located at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Wave_off_Kanagawa2.jpg, and “Red Fuji,” a print by Hokusai in a series *36 Views of Mount Fuji* (around 1830), located at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Red_Fuji_southern_wind_clear_morning.jpg)

Japanese woodblock printing exerted a large influence on Western art in the late nineteenth century. This is a very blatant example: a print by Hiroshige (left) which served as model for Vincent Van Gogh (right). To show the viewer that this was a painting of a print, Van Gogh also painted the frame in which it was displayed. See and compare the images at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hiroshige_Van_Gogh_2.JPG)

(Another print by Hiroshige, of his series *100 famous views of Edo*. It shows a fireworks display above a wooden bridge. Located at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:100_views_edo_098.jpg)

(*Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* (1872-5) by the American artist James Abott McNeill Whistler. While the painting depicts London and the River Thames, it takes many visual cues from Japanese prints. One could say that this American painter looked at London through the lens of Hiroshige.) See Whistler’s painting at the following location:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:James_Abbot_McNeill_Whistler_006.jpg

Relations with the West and the rest of Asia

To maintain internal stability, the Tokugawa also regulated contact between Japan and the outside world. From the 1630s, Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad. This policy of closure was a radical reversion of trends which had been going on in the previous centuries, when Japanese were increasingly involved in the outside world, not only in trade but also as major pirates in East Asian waters and aggressors in war (under Hideyoshi). The closure of the country also restricted the encounter with the West, which had only begun in the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese. Until the closure by the Shogunate, the Japanese had in fact been more receptive to the Westerners than any other people in East Asia.

Hideyoshi had welcomed Portuguese traders, interested in the new weapon-systems they could possibly provide. But the Portuguese also brought Catholic missionaries from the new Jesuit and Dominican Orders. While reaction to Christianity was mixed in Japan, it drew more converts here than in any other place visited by the new wave of missionaries. Large numbers of ordinary Japanese found the new faith

deeply meaningful. By 1580, already more than 100,000 Japanese had become Christian. When some Daimyo also converted to the new faith, they ordered their subjects to follow their example, bringing the number of converts up to 300,000 in the early 17th Century. But the movement was also locally anchored; appealing to converts from many ways of life, with the first Japanese priests being ordained in the 1600s.

(Look at a screen print decorated with a *Nanban* motive. The Western visitors were called *Nanban* ("Southern Barbarians") since they approached Japan from the South over sea. Paintings of the *Nanban*, mainly Portuguese, became a specific motive in Japanese art, comparable in its appeal to the oriental exotica favoured in Europe. See the image at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nanbansen2.jpg>.

Another image similarly illustrates Japanese perceptions of the *Nanban*. This detail of Portuguese traders, depicted by a Japanese artist, gives a sense of the utter strangeness of the visitors, with their curious clothes and large noses. See the image at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NanbanGroup.JPG>)

Before long, the new Tokugawa regime soon developed a strong hostility against Christianity. In 1614, a decree charged the Christians of seeking to overthrow the government; three years later persecutions began, with beheadings, crucifixions and forced recantations. But this opposition to Christianity has to be understood within the political context of the Tokugawa and their ambition to create stability after a century of civil war. Christianity was suspect since it hinted at possible outside alliances that had the potential to disrupt the hegemony over Japan crafted by the Tokugawa. This was no idle speculation. In 1613, Date Masamune, a fiercely independent lord whose clan had been opposed to the Tokugawa, not only converted to Christianity but also sent his own embassy to the Holy See.

(Look at the portrait of Hasekuru Tsunenaga, a samurai of the Daimyo Date Masamune, who was sent by his master on a diplomatic mission to the Pope in the 1610s. See the image at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hasekura_in_Rome.JPG)

Eventually a series of decrees issued by the Shogunate between 1633 and 1639 ordered an end to European trade. Europeans who entered Japan illegally faced the death penalty. This isolated Japanese Christians from their outside allies. A new government office would make sure that Christians would not re-emerge: People were required to get certificates from Buddhist temples attesting to their religious orthodoxy and thus their loyalty to the established order. Still, Christianity did survive as a secret practice among small groups of Japanese during the Tokugawa period.

When it came to foreign trade, Hideyoshi had already restricted Japanese travel abroad in person or as traders in the 1590s. These measures were not intended to end all trade, but rather formed part of an attempt to gain government control over trade.

Japanese merchants had previously been allowed to operate a number of ships with Western crews, who sailed under the seal of the Shogun. Western powers would not harass these ships, since it would damage their standing with the Japanese leaders on whom they depended for access to the Japanese market. Not even the new Tokugawa restrictions of the 1630s, which did forbid the building of larger ships, closed the country altogether. Instead they channelled contact with the outside world through conduits that did not affect the Tokugawa balance of power.

One type of these channels were the small islands of Tshushima and Okinawa, which served as intermediate ground for trade between Japan, Korea and China. Trade did thus not diminish in volume during this period of increased restrictions. The Shogunate also established control over the large northern island of Hokkaido, which served as a conduit with the Northern mainland of Asia. On Hokkaido, the native Ainu people were pushed back by the Japanese, who brought new diseases and created a dependence on trade with the other islands, in a process comparable with the establishment of influence over the Native American populations in North America during the same period.

Secondly, even after the closing of the country in the 1630s, a small number of Dutch merchants were allowed to conduct a limited trade with Japan. As protestants the Dutch were opponents of the Catholic Portuguese (and the Spanish Monarchy which had come to rule Portugal at this point) and thus of the Catholicism of the Japanese Christians. The Shogunate thus exploited the division between different types of Europeans. But the merchants from the Dutch East Asia Company were required to reside on a small artificial island, called Deshima, in the harbour of Nagasaki.

The small island on which the Dutch had to stay contained houses for about twenty Dutchmen, warehouses, and accommodation for Japanese government officials. The Dutch were watched by a number of Japanese officials, gatekeepers, and night watchmen. A few Japanese were licensed to supply their needs (including female companions). The Dutch themselves were forbidden to enter the mainland, except when they were called before the Shogun to perform homage. In this respect, the Dutch governor was treated like a Japanese Daimyo, who had to pay yearly visits to Edo. The Dutch were thus (as it were, literally) integrated, and encapsulated, into the existing power system. Upon arrival in Edo, the Dutch had to wait in their mandatory residence until they were summoned at the court. After their official audience, they were expected to perform folk dances representing the region they came from – it must have been quite an amusing sight to see them perform Dutch folk dances, especially in wooden clogs.

(See an artist's view of Deshima Island, residence of the Dutch East India Company in Nagasaki Bay, located at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nagasaki_bay_siebold.web.jpg)

There were however good reasons for the Dutch to undergo these procedures. For them, even the limited trade with Japan was a key component of their Asian trade. The Dutch had come to Asia to access the sources of spices directly, but they would

make their major profits as intermediaries in an inner-Asian trade. The Dutch would ship Japanese copper to India and South East Asia, returning with silk, textile and tropical woods to the Japanese market, making profit as intermediaries. What made Japan so crucial in this intra-Asian trade was its role as largest source of copper in the world. Together with silver, this metal was used as coinage in Asia during this period. Economic growth in East and South Asia increased the demand for this metal, especially copper that was used for small coins in daily transactions. (Today still, the smallest coins of many currencies, including those of the US, are copper-colored)

When the Tokugawa Shogunate introduced further restriction of trade in 1715, limiting Dutch trade with Japan to two ships a year, the Dutch East Asia Company still send its largest vessels to pack their decks with copper. But these Japanese restrictions also affected other Asian economies, who had not only lost their trade with Japan, but whose economies were also deprived of the vital copper that had become crucial as an exchange medium.

Dutch-Japanese relations were important for the Japanese too. It was through the books delivered by the Dutch that the Japanese kept themselves abreast of Western developments and knowledge. Some Japanese scholars studied Western technologies and medicines. Dutch Studies, as this was called, was considered a school of philosophy comparable to the study of the Chinese classics. Through the Dutch the Japanese had a window on the world, increasing their knowledge of far away places which typified the Early Modern period not only for Europe, but for large parts of Eurasia.

(Look at an eighteenth century Japanese painting symbolizing the intellectual encounter between Japan, China and the West. A Japanese figure at the centre sits with a Chinese *literati*, who has the scroll and pen of the scholar in front of him, and a European figure carrying an anatomy book. Japan had been heavily influenced by Chinese thought in the past, but put itself at the centre in this depiction. See the image at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shiba_Kokan_A_meeting_of_Japan_China_and_the_West_late_18th_century.jpg)

(See an eighteenth century description of a microscope by a Japanese practitioner of Dutch Studies. The Dutch scientist Antoon Van Leeuwenhoek is considered the inventor of the microscope. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:KouMouZatsuWa1.gif>)

(Look at a drawing of a steam engine in a Japanese book titled “Surprising Machines of the West” published a decade before the fall of the Tokugawa. See the image at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:EnseiKiki1.jpg>)

Tokugawa and the roots of Modern Japan

The self-imposed isolation of the Tokugawa came to an end with the arrival of an American fleet of steam-powered warships under Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1853, who wanted to open Japan to free trade just as the British had done with China a few decades earlier. This set off an internal struggle that would lead to the overthrow of the Shogunate and the “restoration” of the power of the Emperor by a new ruling oligarchy – the so called **Meiji Restoration**. A few decades later this new regime had transformed Japan into an industrialized nation. Unlike other non-Western parts of the world that were colonized or at least dominated by Western states during this period, Japan managed to join the system of imperialist states, gaining its own colonies in Korea and Taiwan.

It is interesting to trace some of the roots of this unexpected turnaround of the country to the Tokugawa period. What were possible factors that contributed to this unique pattern? The Tokugawa had probably been wise to prevent Westerners from establish bases on Japan itself, or gaining the alliance of some of the regional lords. After all, the British had been able to gain all of India from bases which had originally been trade outposts, and through alliances with local rulers. At the same time, the Japanese had kept themselves informed about Western advances through Dutch Studies.

Another crucial root for the successful transformation of nineteenth century Japan was the changing character of the Samurai class. Under the Tokugawa this warrior class had been domesticated, and transformed into a closed middle class of highly literate administrators. This evolution had a variety of ‘beneficial’ effects for the Meiji (which means “Enlightened”) era reformers. First of all, it provided a cohort of highly educated men who could lead the industrial transformation. The stability enforced by the Tokugawa had (unintentionally) diverted investment of resources from military to educational pursuits, making Japan a country with a high educational standard. But the domestication of the Samurai also made it possible for the new Meiji regime to remove the monopoly over the military the Samurai still held in theory. The new regime could thus adopt the national conscript army type that had come to dominate the nineteenth century West, instead of a smaller army of individualistic warriors (even though some elements of the Samurai warrior tradition were now disseminated amongst all the conscripts). This new army, relying on industrialized weaponry would be the basis of Japanese power from the 1870s until 1945.

Further Reading

The best general work on this period is Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (1993)

For some beautiful images of Tokugawa art, see R. Eno’s essay, “The Samurai-Merchant Divide in Late Tokugawa, and Tokugawa Popular Art,” located at <http://www.indiana.edu/~ealc100/JArt1.html>.