

Component 3: Japan in World History

OVERVIEW: EAST ASIA AND JAPAN'S CLASSICAL PERIOD(550-1185CE)

Part 1

Although archeological evidence indicates that humans have lived on the archipelago for approximately 30,000 years, Japan lagged behind China and the Korean Peninsula in developing a writing system, centralized government, and other characteristics of these more advanced East Asian civilizations. However, peoples of the islands developed a spoken language and a collection of spiritual beliefs and practices known today as *Shinto* (way of the gods) even before contact with Korea and China.

Although Chinese records indicate visits from members of the region's most advanced civilization to the archipelago shortly after the beginning of the Common Era, by the middle of the sixth century, Korean kingdoms such as Paekche, and Silla were disseminating Chinese ideas and practices such as Buddhism, Confucian teachings, wet-rice paddy cultivation, and most important, written Chinese characters, to the Japanese islands. By the seventh century, the Yamato clan and members of a few other prominent families, who would constitute the first Japanese emperors and aristocrats, established a small state in central Honshu that was largely, but not entirely, based upon imported Chinese and Korean ideas and technology. In the 8th century, Japan's first permanent capitals were laid out in direct imitation of Chinese cities.

In 794, a new Japanese imperial capital, *Heian-kyo*, was established in what is now Kyoto. It is during the Heian period (794-1185) that a few Japanese aristocrats developed cultural practices that, although including important elements of the other East Asian civilizations, were also distinctively Japanese.

OVERVIEW: MEDIEVAL JAPAN AND FIRST EUROPEAN CONTACTS (1185-1585)

Part 2

Japan experienced wars between great rival families, the emergence of *shoguns* and *samurai*, the institutionalization of Buddhism as a popular religion, and the growth of a variety of cultural practices associated with this belief system during its "medieval" period. After a civil war between two great families that marked the beginning of the period, the reigning emperor appointed Minamoto no Yoritomo as Japan's first shogun. Although the imperial government remained in Kyoto, Yoritomo exercised primary administrative responsibilities such as revenue collection and internal security from the village of Kamakura, which is located near present day Tokyo. The Japanese successfully thwarted Mongol attempts to conquer the archipelago, but the expenses and unrest among samurai, as well as a rivalry for the imperial throne between two claimants, caused further wars between powerful Japanese families. Ashikaga Takauchi and his followers emerged victorious and in 1338 moved the government back to Kyoto. The years between the move and the latter sixteenth century included a curious combination of increasingly ineffectual central government with resultant civil war and disunity, as well as further impressive growth in distinctive Japanese aesthetic and cultural forms. By the end of the period, two powerful war lords, Oda Nobunaga, and later Toyotomi Hideyoshi, virtually completed the task

of restoring political unity and order to the strife-torn country.

Japan also directly interacted with the Europeans for the first time during the period as new foreign ideas and technology were introduced. Japan had intermittently been part of a regional economy for centuries, but Japanese traders also became immersed in world markets as exporters of silver and copper during the last half of the period.

"THE BAMBOO BLIND": EARLY MODERN JAPAN (1585-1868) Part 3

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) assumed the title of shogun, moved Japan's capital to *Edo*, (present-day Tokyo) and completely unified the country in 1615. Members of the Tokugawa family held the office of shogun until 1868 and most of the years encompassed in Part 3 constitute the Tokugawa era of Japanese history.

Primarily in response to European Christian missionary activities and mass conversions, the Tokugawa Government "closed" Japan to foreigners in 1630. However, the late historian Marius Jansen is probably correct in referring to the barrier between Japan and the outside world as a "bamboo" blind rather than an "iron" curtain. This was particularly true throughout the seventeenth century, when Japan's silver exports constituted thirty percent of all silver in world circulation, and Japanese copper exports to the Dutch were a major factor in the economic rise of the Netherlands. Still, although Japanese trade with the Dutch, Chinese, and Koreans would continue throughout the Tokugawa years, other foreigners were not allowed into Japan, and only a few Japanese traveled to other countries during the period.

Neo-Confucianism, with its hierarchal class structure, was the ruling political ideology. Samurai constituted the highest class and merchants were in theory societies' least valued class. Although there were some parallels between Medieval European feudalism and the Tokugawa political/legal order, the differences between Europe and Japan are at least as numerous as the similarities.

In general, many Japanese benefited from economic prosperity, wide-spread literacy, and in the urban centers and even smaller towns, cultural accoutrements, including widespread availability of books, a variety of goods, and flourishing popular arts and entertainment, ranging from *ukiyo-e* (wood-block prints) to *bunraku* and *kabuki* theater. Perhaps most importantly, Japan was at peace during the Tokugawa years.

The quietude of the Tokugawa years abruptly ended on July 8th, 1853, when US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry and his expedition sailed into Edo Bay. Subsequent historical developments would lead to sweeping changes in Japanese society.

OVERVIEW: IMPERIAL JAPAN AND THE WORLD (1868-1945) Part 4

The uninvited presence of the US and, subsequently, other foreign powers in Japan, was a major reason for the Tokugawa Shogunate's end a decade and a half after Perry first entered Edo bay. A small group of mostly young and lower-ranking samurai engineered a relatively bloodless revolution that resulted in the "restoration" of imperial authority in 1868. The young emperor,

who would have political influence but not actually rule Japan, adopted the reign name *Meiji* ("enlightened rule").

Japan during the Meiji Period experienced a transformation, largely based upon cultural borrowing, that was the most significant since the nation's first encounters with the Koreans and Chinese well over a millennium earlier. Japan "modernized" during these years through using Western countries as models, as Meiji leaders re-shaped the economy, political system, military, and other important institutions. Intercultural contacts, particularly during most of the first two decades of the Meiji period, were extensive between Japan and the West as the Japanese government recruited foreign teachers and advisors and sent missions abroad to study Western institutions. By the time of the Meiji emperor's death in 1912, Japan was well on the way to developing an industrial economy. Japan became a world power and acquired an empire that included Korea and Taiwan through victories in the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars.

Japan joined the Allies in World War 1 and seemed to be moving politically from an oligarchy to a more democratic government. However, a number of factors, including rural Japan's reaction to perceived Western decadence, tipped the balance of power in Japan away from democrats and internationalists and toward conservative, military-dominated factions. Japan became increasingly aggressive in the 1930s, annexing Manchuria and going to war with China. Japan's foreign policy resulted in Western boycotts of energy and vital raw materials sales. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, and attacked American, British, and other European powers' holdings in East and Southeast Asia in an attempt to drive the West out of the region. The resulting four-year Pacific war ended in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan's total defeat and occupation by the US in 1945..

OVERVIEW: JAPAN'S PATH TO WORLD LEADERSHIP(1945 TO THE PRESENT)

Part 5

The US occupation (1945-52) brought more changes to Japan than any time since the beginning of the Meiji period. General Douglas MacArthur, who was in charge of the occupation, initiated a broad array of political and economic reforms. At first the Americans concentrated upon transforming Japan from a military-dominated oligarchy to a liberal and peaceful democracy. The 1947 constitution was a major catalyst for change. The new constitution established a democratic government framework, granted universal suffrage, guaranteed the right of labor unions to exist, and transferred sovereignty from the emperor to the people. The new constitution also contained a provision where Japan renounced both war and the right to maintain land, sea, and air forces. American policy makers also initiated associated educational and economic reforms designed to reinforce the political objectives of the occupation. Nationalist and militarist content was removed from public school curricula, land reform creating large numbers of small farmers was implemented, and industrialists, politicians, and some high level bureaucrats with close ties to Japan's previous government were removed from leadership positions. By the late 1940s, faced with a sputtering Japanese economy and a potential communist threat emanating from China, the Americans shifted focus and concentrated on other less idealistic policies designed to bolster economic recovery and utilize Japan as an ally against Communism. However, by the end of the occupation in 1952, the Japan's nascent democratic government was

stable.

By the mid and latter part of the 1950s, Japan's "economic miracle" was beginning and until the early 1970s, Japan would average ten percent annual economic growth rates. Japan's economic rise was dramatic and continued to be impressive throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Japan, with its own form of state-guided capitalism, could boast by the end of the latter decade of having the world's second largest economy. The 1990s and the first part of the new century were different, as some of the same policies that helped Japan become affluent were impediments in a new fiercely competitive global economy. Although Japan remained one of the world's richest countries, unemployment was high relative to earlier decades, and annual economic growth rates were low or non-existent. By the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, government economic deregulation policies were showing signs of success as the Japanese economy began to improve.

During much of the post war period Japan enjoyed political stability as voters in elections continually rewarded the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for economic good times. In international politics Japan was a staunch ally of the United States in the Cold War, and, partially because of American pressure, developed substantial air, sea, and ground defensive military forces. The end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War meant that Japan's role in the world was less certain than in previous decades. Although still a world economic leader and a major American ally, today Japanese leaders and the larger society face new foreign and domestic challenges ranging from regional relations to educational reform.