

The Opening, Closing, and Re-opening of Japan?

Japanese Foreign Relations Before, During and After the Tokugawa Shogunate

(1600-1868)

An Essay with Lesson Plan Notes

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It is a commonly held belief that for about 250 years (from the 17th to the 19th centuries) Japan was closed to the outside world. This is the period corresponding to the rule of the Tokugawa shoguns, known in English as the Tokugawa shogunate, from 1600 to 1868. What I wish to discuss in this essay is specifically why, and to what degree, Japan was “closed,” and the circumstances behind its “opening” in the nineteenth century.

If we accept for the moment that Japan was a “closed country,” the first thing we need to consider is this: closed to whom? Certainly not closed to China or Korea for example, two cultures that had been exchanging ideas and technologies with the Japanese since the beginning of recorded history. No, when we talk about Japan being closed, we are talking about Japan being closed to *us*, the countries of the West. And if Japan closed itself to the West during the Tokugawa period, it must have been “open” to the West some time before that. So what European country made the first contact with Japan?

[Lesson plan note: instructors can work in discussion of the Age of Exploration here, and students can make intelligent guesses as to which European country reached Japan]

It will come as no surprise that the first European country to contact Japan was Portugal, a major player in the Age of Exploration – though in this case it was by accident. A group of Portuguese traders were blown off course in a storm in 1543 and landed on a small island in southern Japan. The Japanese warlords they met were quite intrigued by the firearms the Portuguese had with them, and welcomed the subsequent arrival of more ships. Reportedly one daimyo [feudal lord] bought two of these large guns and had Japanese craftsmen manufacture them, and for a time these big muskets were important elements of Japanese warfare. The island where the Portuguese had landed, Tanegashima, is also the word that came to be used for these large musket rifles.

[Lesson plan note: excellent coverage, with images, of Japan's 16th century foreign relations may be found in the introductory essay to John Dower's "Black Ships and Samurai" exhibit at MIT's Visualizing Cultures webpage; see

http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/black_ships_and_samurai/bss_essay01.html]

Christianity and Japan

The Portuguese also brought Christianity to Japan. Working with native interpreters, and explaining the foreign religion in terms of Buddhist concepts Japanese people could understand, missionaries converted up to quarter million Japanese by the 1580s, including six daimyo (feudal lords). Daimyo were very eager to cultivate relationships with the Portuguese missionaries, at least in

part because of the very lucrative trade in Chinese silk that was conducted by Portuguese traders. One daimyo even gave the port city of Nagasaki and the surrounding area to the Jesuits.

In addition to the Portuguese, by the 1580s and 1590s, there were, there were people from Spain, Holland, and England living in Japan, providing invaluable information on geography, cartography, ship-building, and so on. During this period foreigners in general were referred to as “Southern Barbarians” (J. *nanban*), presumably since wherever they came from, they arrived from the south. In addition to Christianity and firearms, the southern barbarians brought things like refined sugar, potatoes, bread, deep fried food (tempura), and tobacco, all of which are considered “Japanese” things today.

Tokugawa Shogunate the “Closed Country”

In 1600, as you may know, there was a decisive battle that reunified what had been a fractured Japan, divided into hundreds of ‘warring states,’ into a cohesive whole under the rule of the Tokugawa shoguns. This was the third and final shogunate, or military government, in Japanese history. From this point forward, Japan entered into a period of warrior rule that pretty much lasted until 1868. The foundation of the Tokugawa shogunate would have a monumental impact both on Christianity in Japan, but more broadly speaking on Japan’s whole approach to foreign relations.

A few short years after consolidating their rule, the Tokugawas began a systemic and widespread persecution of Christianity and made it illegal for daimyo domains to conduct foreign relations of any kind. Christianity was outlawed, and all missionaries were ordered out of the country. Some did stay behind, and some Japanese did keep their Christian faith, but since the penalty for being caught or found out was death, the number of Christians in Japan dwindled down to just a few. It is

estimated that about 3,000 people were killed in the early decades of the seventeenth century, plus thousands more were tortured into recanting their faith.

The Japanese government also banned all trade with the Portuguese, who were the original source of the Japanese missions, and severed all contact with the West--save the Protestant Dutch, who were willing to separate commerce from religion. Furthermore, from this point forward, all Japanese were required to periodically step on a religious images, usually of the Virgin Mary. These images were called *fumi-e*, or 'step on' pictures in Japanese. The thinking was that since no Christian would agree to trample on such an image, or would at the very least hesitate, requiring people to step on these *fumi-e* could serve as a test to root out Christians who were secretly holding onto their faith.

[Lesson plan note: it may be useful to have students conjecture on **why** the Tokugawas banned Christianity from the very beginning, before revealing the answer]

So the question naturally arises, why did the Tokugawa Shogunate persecute Christianity so strongly? The Japanese traditionally are quite tolerant of other religions, and foreign belief systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism had been around in Japan for a thousand years with no problem. To answer this question we must consider the situation of the new Tokugawa shogunate, which was trying in the early 17th century to establish a strict system of vertical rule after a century and more of chaos and bloodshed. The Christian idea that there exists an authority higher than the shogun could simply not be tolerated. Furthermore, the prospect of daimyo conducting their own foreign relations was also out of the question if the Tokugawa were to remain in control. To let the domains have anything to do with other countries was too dangerous, and too risky, so rather than let that happen the Tokugawa government virtually isolated itself from the outside world. Along with the ban on

Christianity, there was a corresponding prohibition on Japanese traveling abroad, and on foreigners coming to Japan. The penalty for either was death.

We should emphasize that just because Japan “closed” their country, it does not necessarily follow that the shogunate hated foreigners, or hated foreign things and ideas. In order to consolidate power the shogunate simply needed to monopolize all contact with the outside world. Foreign countries had other ways of thinking, which could be dangerous, and they had money and technology that in the wrong hands could mean real trouble for the shogun’s government -- especially in the hands of the very powerful in the southern part of Japan. So Christianity as well as any foreign contact of any kind was considered an ideological threat to national security.

Dejima

The shogunate allowed one small window where Japanese could interact with foreigners under very strict conditions. As I mentioned earlier, only the Dutch – who were willing to separate religion from commerce – were allowed to remain in Japan. Dutch traders, however, were all confined to a small man-made island off the coast of Nagasaki called Dejima (sometimes rendered as “Deshima”). It was about 400’ by 250’, or very roughly the size of a football field. Dutch merchants were forced to spend their tours of duty, usually one year, under constant surveillance within its limited confines, and open practice of Christianity was, of course, strictly forbidden. Japanese in turn were forbidden from setting foot on Dejima, thus creating a kind of “cultural quarantine” district that existed for 250 years.

[Lesson plan note: there is recent novel by David Mitchell about Dejima, entitled *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob DeZoet* (Random House, 2010). Would be useful to read a few descriptive excerpts]

[Lesson plan note: for an excellent lesson plan on Dejima, see “Paper Trails: Deshima Island: A Stepping Stone between Civilizations,” by Marc Jason Gilbert

<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/3.3/gilbert.html>]

Other than Dejima, though, Japanese society was essentially self-contained, and information about the outside world was greatly restricted. While the arts such as theater, poetry, painting and printmaking flourished in this “hothouse” atmosphere, science and technology did not; and as Europe (and later, the United States of America) was undergoing the bourgeoisie and industrial revolutions that catapulted them to global prominence, Japan was to a great extent excluded from this process. The government sent a few hand-picked scholars to study Western subjects from the Dutch in Dejima, in areas such as medicine and military science, but this never trickled down to the rest of society. As such there were no great developments in technology during the Tokugawa period—electricity, steam power, railroads, telegraphs, all passed them by. In 1850—as it had been in 1650—Japan was an agrarian, preindustrial society.

Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan

[Lesson plan note: introduce idea of imperialism and colonies]

In the 18th and 19th centuries there was a desire on the part of the Western powers to acquire overseas colonies (many of them in Asia), for strategic reasons, or as a source of natural resources, or as a place to dump excess manufactures made possible by the Industrial Revolution. The big prize in Asia was China, and the United States was very interested, but also very understandably sought a new and untapped market, and a place where the British were not so entrenched. By the time the

United States got into the “great game,” Japan was the best option still on the table: a large untapped market, and also potentially a useful way-station for shipping and refueling between the west coast of the United States and all of East Asia.

[Lesson plan note: the best source for text and images for the Perry mission (see below) is John Dower’s Visualizing Cultures website, specifically the unit titled “Black Ships and Samurai, Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853-1854”

http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/black_ships_and_samurai/bss_essay01.html]

President Millard Fillmore authorized a mission to be sent to Japan to try to establish relations with the Japanese government. The expedition was headed by Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy, who sailed into Edo bay in the summer of 1853 with four ships. Some of these were steamships, spewing black smoke, and they made a real impression on Japanese people, who had never seen such a thing before. The Japanese government, forewarned by the Dutch that the Americans meant business, accepted President Fillmore’s letter to the emperor, and Perry sailed off, promising to return the following spring for the response.

[Internet resource: Fillmore’s letter to the Japanese Emperor

http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/black_ships_and_samurai/presletter.html]

So the period between the summer of 1853 and the spring of 1854 was a very anxious time. The shogunate realized that to reverse the seclusion policy at the request of foreigners might perhaps result in a fatal loss of prestige. The title of shogun, after all, is an abbreviation of a longer title,

which translates into something like “barbarian quelling generalissimo,” so a decision not to “quell the barbarian” would mean that the shogun was refusing to do his job. And yet to deny the demands of the United States could possibly result in a disastrous military situation, maybe even the destruction of Edo by Perry’s ships, since the Japanese had very little in the way of coastal defenses in Edo, or anywhere else.

With regard to this crucial question of foreign diplomacy, opinion was divided between two groups: what are called the *kaikoku* (or open the country) group and the *joi* (or ‘expel the barbarians’) group.

[Lesson plan note: students can role-play as daimyo and debate the issue of whether to open the country, based on the positions described below]

Those who advocated the *kaikoku* position were very aware of the West’s advanced military technology, and of Japan’s relative weakness in this regard. They thought that Japan needed Western weapons and techniques to defend itself, and that war must be avoided until these weapons and techniques could be acquired. And the way to avoid war was to open the country. In other words, those who favored opening the country saw the issue primarily as a matter of national defense. Opening the country was not necessarily good in itself, but was a means to create a strong and independent Japan in the long run.

On the other end of the spectrum were those who advocated a position known in Japanese as *joi*, or ‘expel the barbarians.’ Many felt that to open the country to the West would bring about political and cultural disaster. *Joi* advocates were often passionate xenophobes, driven by a commitment to Japan as a sacred country, the Land of the Gods, that would be polluted by the presence

of foreigners. Western trade, it was believed, would make the merchant class even richer, and lead to the further degradation of the morals and manners in Japanese society. Western thought would destroy traditional Japanese culture. So we have two very contrary positions, each with its own persuasive arguments. In the end, the government adopted the position of *kaikoku* and agreed to sign the treaty.

In February of 1854, Perry's squadron, doubled in size to eight ships, returned to Edo. After several weeks of delaying tactics, the Japanese government agreed to sign a treaty on March 31, known commonly as the "Kanagawa Treaty of Friendship." Shortly afterward the shogunate concluded similar treaties with other western countries, and Japan was "open" again, permanently this time. The first American to establish permanent residence in Japan was the American Consul, Townsend Harris. For both internal and external reasons the Tokugawa government finally fell in the 1860s, and the forward thinking young-samurai who came to rule Japan reversed the isolationist trend once and for all.

[Lesson plan note: Treaty of Kanagawa original text available at archive.org:

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/treaty_of_kanagawa/]