

More to a Closed Door than Meets the Eye: Early Modern Japanese Foreign Relations

By Anthony Robbins with Catherine Ishida

Introduction:

In this lesson, students query the common characterization of Tokugawa Japan as a “closed country.” Analyzing written, visual, and quantitative sources, students use critical thinking skills to learn multiple perspectives on Japanese engagements with foreign peoples during the unifying and Tokugawa eras.

This lesson is differentiated for use in middle and high school world history courses. A variety of visual and written primary sources, as well as quantitative data, provide further differentiation for varying student reading levels.

Prior to this lesson, introduce students to and engage them in “dialoging with text” (annotated reading), both visual and written. Also students will benefit from gaining some prior understanding of the East Asian tributary system, unification in Japan, and Tokugawa changes to political and social order such as local to centralized political control and social hierarchy (including terms such as *daimyō*, *han*, *shogun*, *bakufu*, *sankin kōtai*).

Objectives: After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Use a variety of sources to question historical narratives.
- Rethink assumptions about isolation in early modern Japan.
- Understand historical origins of peoples who are notable minorities in Japan today.
- Recognize the benefits and challenges of exploring multiple perspectives.

Guiding Questions:

- Was Tokugawa Japan a “closed country”?
- Why has a narrative of Tokugawa isolation prevailed?

Standards and Guidelines:

[World History Content Standards](#)

Era 6 (1450-1770), Standard 1: How the transoceanic interlinking of all major regions of the world from 1450-1600 led to global transformations.

Standard 1B: The student understands the encounters between Europeans and peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

Standard 5: Transformations in Asian societies in the era of European expansion.

Standard 5B: The student understands the transformations in India, China, and Japan in an era of expanding European commercial power.

5-12 Analyze Japan’s relations with Europeans between the 16th and 18th centuries and the consequences of its policy of limiting contacts with foreigners.

[AP® World History Curriculum Framework](#)

Period 4: Global Interactions, c. 1450 to c. 1750

Key Concept 4.2. New Forms of Social Organization and Modes of Production

II. As new social and political elites changed, they also restructured new ethnic, racial, and gender hierarchies.

Key Concept 4.3. State Consolidation and Imperial Expansion

I. Rulers used a variety of methods to legitimize and consolidate their power.

C. States treated different ethnic and religious groups in ways that utilized their economic contributions while limiting their ability to challenge the authority of the state.

Common Core State Standards: Grades 6-12 Literacy in History/Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources [with additional details for grades 9-12].

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions [with additional details for grades 9-12].

Craft and Structure

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.7: Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Plan for Assessment:

Formative assessment can be conducted through observations of interaction and work conducted in groups. Students will work together to critically examine primary and secondary readings to determine the central ideas of the reading, connect the reading to others, make connections and draw conclusions.

The concluding writing activity is designed to serve as the summative evaluation for the lesson. Student will write:

- *For middle school* - a paragraph answering to what degree they believe Tokugawa Japan was a “closed country” citing at least three pieces of evidence from the sources across the two days.
- *For high school* - an essay analyzing multiple perspectives of the pervasive historical narrative of isolation and providing a conclusion with their opinion, “Was Tokugawa Japan a ‘closed country’?” citing evidence from the sources across the two days.

(See **Assessment** section for rubrics.)

Time Required: Two 50-minute class periods or one 90-minute block period, plus homework.

Materials:

Materials Provided	Online Resources	Other Materials
<p>Handouts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan and the World, 1450-1770: Was Japan a ‘Closed Country’? by Conrad Totman (reading level: 14.7) • Encounters with Dutch (reading level: 16.8) • Encounters with Chinese • Encounters with Koreans (reading level: 9.9) • Encounters with Ryūkyūans (Okinawans) • Encounters with Ezojin (Ainu) • Tokugawa Encounters Summary <p>PowerPoint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Gateways: Rethinking Tokugawa Isolation <p>Assessment Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle School Closed Door Essay Rubric • High School Closed Door Essay Rubric 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school only: <i>The Edicts of Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Excerpts from Limitation on the Propagation of Christianity, 1587, and Expulsion of Missionaries, 1587</i>, Asia for Educators, Columbia University (reading level: 14.5) • <i>The Edicts of the Tokugawa Shogunate: Excerpts from The Edict of 1635 Ordering the Closing of Japan: Addressed to the Joint Bugyō of Nagasaki</i>, Asia for Educators, Columbia University (reading level: 15.7) • <i>Tokugawa Japan: Order in International Relations: Isolation</i>, Asia for Educators video, 3 min 19 sec. Full transcript available on the same webpage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies of your course textbook’s coverage of Japanese foreign relations from 1550-1750 • Four pieces of posting paper, each labeled with one category of encounters: trade, diplomatic, military, cultural (as an alternative, label sections of the board with the categories) • Five to nine different colors of self-adhesive notes • Computer, projector, and Internet connection • Multiple computers for Day 2 • Document projector (recommended)

Implementation:

1. As homework the night before you begin this lesson, assign students to read the course's textbook account on Japanese foreign relations from 1550-1750 (perhaps labeled as Sengoku/Unifying and early Tokugawa Japan, "Europeans in Japan," "Fending off the West: Japan's Reunification and the First Challenge," "Japanese Isolation," "Rejecting Contact with Europeans", etc.). If you teach a high-school course without a textbook, you could assign the "From 1450 to 1770" section of the **Conrad Totman reading**.

Day 1

2. On the board or wall, have the four categories of encounters—trade, diplomatic, military, and cultural (religious/philosophical/scientific ideas)—posted. Begin debriefing the homework reading assignment by asking students to complete an entrance slip on a self-adhesive note describing one Japanese/foreign encounter in the unifying or early Tokugawa era and post it under the corresponding category. Explain that the self-adhesive notes are color-coded for the cultural groups with whom the Japanese had encounters: Chinese, Korean, Ryūkyūan (Okinawan), Ezojin (Ainu), Southeast Asian, European (Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, British). *Note:* Depending on the textbook used, some of these exchanges may not be mentioned and thus the number of necessary colors of self-adhesive notes will vary.
3. Review the information in the reading on Japanese foreign encounters of the time period and add to the students' contributions under the categorized lists. (The **Conrad Totman reading** section, "1450-1600," describes exchanges that may not be mentioned in your course textbook). Discuss the introduction of Christianity by Portuguese and Spanish; the introduction of cotton into Japan; the voluminous Japanese silver, gold, and copper trade (primary world exporter of silver prior to the Spanish Americas); "Japantowns" in Southeast Asia; "vermillion-seal" trade; and the Japanese invasions of Korea.
4. Distribute copies of *The Edicts of Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Excerpts from Limitation on the Propagation of Christianity, 1587, and Expulsion of Missionaries, 1587* (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/tokugawa_edicts_christianity.pdf) and *The Edicts of the Tokugawa Shogunate: Excerpts from The Edict of 1635 Ordering the Closing of Japan: Addressed to the Joint Bugyō of Nagasaki* (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/tokugawa_edicts_foreigners.pdf), the primary source(s) some historians have labeled "sakoku (closed country) edicts." *For middle school:* Prepare only *The Edict of 1635*. *For high school:* Prepare one set of edicts for a pair of students. Each student in the pair reads one.
5. In pairs have students read and annotate the sources. Answer any clarifying questions about the excerpts. *For high school:* Have students summarize and share their edict set with that of the partner.
6. Resume as a whole class and have volunteers read aloud a summary of the main points of the "sakoku edicts." Note the 48-year difference in issuance. The edicts of 1587 were not rigorously enforced. Discuss the following questions, having students provide evidence from the text:

- *What and who did the edict(s) target? And not target? (“Padres,” specifically Portuguese and Spanish; Japanese seafarers; “vassals” Japanese domain leaders and samurai. Vs. Foreign traders, diplomats.)*
 - *Which foreign interactions were most significant to the Tokugawa government? Why? (Trade, tributary diplomatic relations, outlawing Christianity because it create a conflict of loyalty in Japanese subjects)*
 - *What do the edict(s) demonstrate about the Tokugawa government’s approach to international relations? (Active, economically-driven, thought out, hierarchy with East Asian relations given more importance)*
7. Having explored the perspectives of the Hideyoshi and Tokugawa governments, reflect on the perspectives of the course textbook reading. Draw attention to the themes/terms “isolationism,” “seclusion,” “closed,” and/or “*sakoku* (closed country)” in the textbook. Introduce and solicit student opinions on the lesson’s guiding question: *Was Tokugawa Japan a “closed country”?*
- *From the textbook authors’ perspective, which interactions appear most significant? Why? (Western-centric point of view, closure to Christianity not to European trade)*
 - *Do the “Edicts of 1587 and 1635” support or contradict the textbook’s narrative?*
8. For homework, have students view the brief video, *Tokugawa Japan: Order in International Relations: Isolation*, <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/tokugawa/tj08.html>.

Day 2:

9. At the beginning of class, debrief the video, adding new exchanges to the categorized lists and reflecting the professors’ perspectives on the guiding questions. (Neo-Confucian thought; Chinese books and painting; exchange with Korea; knowledge of Western governance and science; Dutch books; regulating trade for self-benefit and legitimacy; operating international relations along the East Asian tributary system model)
10. Present the **Four Gateways: Rethinking Tokugawa Isolation** PowerPoint, which introduces different groups that complicate understandings of Tokugawa Japan as a completely isolated society. Use the notes with the slides to explain what students are seeing.
11. Organize students into five groups and assign each group a visual and a reading that explores one of the groups presented in the PowerPoint—Dutch, Chinese, Korean, Ryūkyūans (Okinawans), and Ezojin (Ainu). To each group distribute the corresponding **handout**, and a copy of the **Tokugawa Encounters Summary handout**. Instruct the groups to:
- View, read, and then analyze their assigned sources.
 - Discuss their sources in their groups, using the questions provided on the handout.
 - Agree upon four sentences that best summarize the sources and record on individual **Tokugawa Encounters Summary** handout. If time and technology permits and teacher wants to choose the whole class option below, groups should create and present short digital presentations that include the name of the assigned group and summary.
 - Consider to what degree they believe this particular group complicates the idea of Tokugawa isolation.
12. Jigsaw the student groups and have students record other group summaries on the **Tokugawa Encounters Summary** handout. Or, as whole class, have each group report out.

On the board or using a copy of the **Tokugawa Encounters Summary** handout under a document projector, transcribe the findings. Students should write findings on their individual copies of the **Tokugawa Encounters Summary** handout to reference for final assignment.

13. Reiterate the guiding questions: *Was Tokugawa Japan a “closed country”? Why has a narrative of Tokugawa isolation prevailed?* Summarize for the whole class or have students read the “Half-truths make the world go round” and “After 1770: The ‘Closed Country’” sections of the **Conrad Totman reading** to understand the origins of “*sakoku* (closed country).”
14. As homework, assign students to write:
 - *For middle school:* A paragraph answering to what degree they believe Tokugawa Japan was a “closed country,” citing at least three pieces of evidence from the sources used in the lesson.
 - *For high school:* An essay analyzing multiple perspectives of the pervasive historical narrative of isolation and providing a conclusion stating their opinion on the question: Was Tokugawa Japan a “closed country”? Students should cite evidence from the sources across the two days.

Rubrics for middle and high school are provided.

Extensions:

1. Encourage students to further explore the history and contemporary status of one of these minority groups in Japan, in a researched, in-depth project and presentation.
2. Connect this lesson to an inquiry of “Was Japan opened?” when addressing the Tokugawa encounters with American, French, British, and Russian ships in the 1800s.

Resources and References:

Asia for Educators. *The Edicts of the Tokugawa Shogunate*: Excerpts from *The Edict of 1635 Ordering the Closing of Japan: Addressed to the Joint Bugyō of Nagasaki*. Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs). New York: Columbia University, 2009.

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<http://slideplayer.com/slide/8469497/>.
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