

Tokugawa Japan: An Introductory Essay

by Marcia Yonemoto, University of Colorado at Boulder

Sir George Sansom's history of Japan was first published in 1932 and used in U.S. college classrooms into the 1980s. In it, he described the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) as an era of oppressive "feudal" rule. In this view, hierarchical divisions between samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant were strictly maintained. Sansom described a system in which swaggering samurai used their swords to cut down commoners. Miserable peasants barely eked out a living, and urban merchants were scorned as unethical profiteers. According to Sansom, change was loathed. The government kept the rest of the world out, denying "themselves all the gifts which the West then had to offer." This move, said Sansom, "arrested the cultural development of Japan" (Sansom 1932, 455, 457).

Scholars today largely dismiss this view. Yet it remains pervasive. Films and *manga* comics glorify samurai bravado. But they ignore much else about the period. Thus, even the well-informed often are surprised when they read more recent histories of the period. Such newer works describe the political system as a rational "integral bureaucracy." This system was "not merely a samurai institution." Rather, it depended on non-elite "commercial agents and activities" (Totman 1981, p. 133). Newer histories call the era "a time of extraordinary social growth and change. In terms of population and production, urbanization and commercialization, and societal sophistication and elaboration, the century was one of unparalleled development."

What should readers make of these discrepancies? What do teachers and students really need to know about the Tokugawa period? This brief essay addresses these questions by (1) sketching the outline of Tokugawa history, touching on politics, economics, society, and culture; (2) introducing some historical debates regarding the Tokugawa period; and (3) giving references for further reading on important topics.

The Tokugawa Political Settlement

The first Tokugawa shogun was Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616). He came of age in an era of violence and conflict. During the Warring States period (c.1467-1590), centralized political authority—the imperial court and the military government (shogunate, or *bakufu*)—had lost its effectiveness. Practical political power had passed into the hands of approximately 200 local warlords, or *daimyō*. The *daimyō* controlled their own territories. These territories were called domains. By the end of the period, some *daimyō* had become extremely powerful. Each commanded large swaths of territory and tens of thousands of warriors.

©2008 Program for Teaching East Asia, University of Colorado. Permission is given to reproduce this essay for classroom use only. Other reproduction is prohibited without written permission from the Program for Teaching East Asia.

One such leader was Oda Nobunaga (1534-82). Nobunaga was a *daimyō* from the province of Owari in central Honshu. Using strategic alliances and brutal military tactics, Nobunaga brought about one-third of the country under his control. When he was assassinated in 1582, his most able general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98), took his place. Hideyoshi was a brilliant military and political tactician. His talent and ambition had allowed him to rise from a humble peasant background. Building on Nobunaga's achievements, Hideyoshi brought all of Japan under his control by about 1590.

Two problems marked Hideyoshi's later years. One was his growing belief that his power was unlimited. This megalomania was reflected in unsuccessful attempts to invade Korea and China. The second problem was his difficulty in producing an heir. At his death in 1597, he had only one infant son. He entrusted his son's fate to five trusted allies. Each swore to protect the heir and help ensure the Toyotomi clan's future. Among these allies was Tokugawa Ieyasu. Ieyasu controlled significant territory in northeastern Honshu. Ieyasu's castle headquarters was located in the city of Edo (now Tokyo). Hideyoshi had been dead scarcely three years when Ieyasu turned on his former lord. In 1600, his forces defeated the Toyotomi. In 1603, Ieyasu established a new shogunate in his family's name. He went to war once again in 1615 to completely wipe out the Toyotomi and their allies. From then on, the Tokugawa maintained political authority for 253 years without resorting to military combat.

The primary political goal of Tokugawa Ieyasu and his heirs—his son, Hidetada (1578-1632) and grandson, Iemitsu (1604-1651)—was to cut off the roots of potential dissent and rebellion. In the late 1630s, Tokugawa Iemitsu expelled Portuguese and Spanish Catholic missionaries and traders. This decision was motivated more by the political threat posed by converts, especially *daimyō* converts, than by dislike of Christian doctrine or the foreign presence in Japan. The early shoguns were wary of other *daimyō*. Many of these *daimyō* were recent allies who were not totally committed to Tokugawa rule.

The Tokugawa shoguns built on the ideas and tactics of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. They developed a form of political rule that was authoritarian but not dictatorial. This can be seen in the way the early shoguns distributed land to their *daimyō* allies. The Tokugawa kept only about a quarter of the land available for redistribution for themselves. Of the remaining lands, the shogunate allocated about 10 percent to blood relations (known as the collateral, or *shinpan daimyō* houses). Another 26 percent went to longtime loyal allies, the *fudai daimyō*. The remaining 38 percent went to the most recent, less stable allies. These allies were the “outside,” or *tozama daimyō*.

The early Tokugawa shoguns' use of land distribution to both win the allegiance and encourage the dependence of *daimyō* illustrates the blend of resourcefulness, pragmatism, and foresight characteristic of Tokugawa political rule. In its policies, the shogunate was careful to balance demands on *daimyō* with privileges granted to them. For example, the shogunate never directly taxed the *daimyō*. Instead, it exercised indirect levies such as requiring *daimyō* to supply labor and raw materials for the construction and maintenance of castles, roads, post stations, and the like. The shogunate also forced all *daimyō* to commute between their home domains and the shogunal capital of Edo, a time- and resource-consuming practice. The shogunate exercised authority by compelling the wives and children of all *daimyō* to reside permanently in Edo.

There, they were under the shogun's watchful eye. *Daimyō* were also required to secure shogunal approval before marrying. At the same time, *daimyō* were for the most part free to govern their domains as they saw fit. They issued their own law codes and administered justice. Some printed and circulated their own currency. The shogunate intervened only if requested to do so. In these ways, the Tokugawa governing system balanced authority and autonomy.

Economic Growth and Social Change

Studying the Tokugawa era reveals many seeming contradictions. Of these, perhaps none is more striking than the contrast between the Tokugawa rulers' vision of the ideal economic system and the reality of economic growth and change. With a few notable exceptions, the shogunate and *daimyō* viewed the economy in simple agronomist terms. In this view, the peasant's role was to produce basic foodstuffs. Peasants were to give a good portion of their products in tax to support the ruling classes. Artisans used their skills to craft necessary non-food items. Finally, goods that could not be acquired through any other means could be purchased from merchants. Merchants were deemed the necessary evil of the economic system.

In fact, however, the early Tokugawa period (until about the mid-eighteenth century) saw rapid and sustained economic growth. This growth occurred first in the agricultural sector. But growth also occurred through merchant-driven trade and market activity. The concentration of population in cities served as a major impetus for growth and change. Yet many Tokugawa authorities clung to their old notions of a static, agrarian-based economy. The samurai class, who were forbidden from engaging in profitable trade or farming, were disadvantaged by Tokugawa policies and attitudes toward the economy. The ruling class was prevented from taking advantage of economic growth. At the same time, substantial benefits went to merchants and even to market-savvy peasants. Economic growth thus contributed to the inversion of the status hierarchy enshrined in the "four class system." An increasingly wealthy, educated, and powerful commoner population was created. Meanwhile, samurai, especially those of low rank, steadily became economically weaker.

Growth in Agricultural Production and Population. During the Warring States period, agricultural production grew. Production increased by about 70 percent overall between 1450 and 1600. Growth continued into the early Tokugawa period. Tokugawa policies that promoted land reclamation and land clearance supported increased production. In addition, the disarming of peasants and local religious communities that came with the "Tokugawa peace" put more people back on the land. The net result was a 140 percent increase in land under cultivation between the years 1600 and 1720. Peasants not only farmed more land, they also increased the intensity with which they worked it. Through careful monitoring and the spread of information about cropping patterns, fertilizers, and the like, Japanese peasants in the Tokugawa period continued to increase their land's productivity.

The overall growth in agricultural productivity caused a rise in the general well-being of the people. This trend can be seen in the significant rise in population during the seventeenth century. Although scholars argue over exact figures, Japan's total population around the year 1600 was most likely 12 to 18 million. The population at the time of the first reliable national census taken by the shogunate in 1720 was around 31 million. These data indicate that *the*

population more than doubled in a little over 100 years. For a number of reasons, including family planning and voluntary limitation of family size among the peasantry, population growth leveled off in the eighteenth century. Japan's population grew at a negligible rate between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. The economy, however, continued to grow, leading to an economic surplus. That surplus was a key factor in Japan's rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Growth in Markets and Trade. Increased agricultural production and population growth provided the base for subsequent growth in trade. Increases in trade were also enabled by such developments as the creation of reliable and effective transportation networks. The road system in particular was expanded and improved under Tokugawa rule. Shipping networks on sea routes were also expanded, especially those linking the major commercial centers in western and eastern Japan. Along with growth in trade came growth in the use of money. Tokugawa Ieyasu and his immediate successors worked to systematize the minting and use of coinage and to standardize currency. In turn, this greatly facilitated domestic trade. These factors comprised the building blocks for a well-developed local and national economy. Regional and domainal capitals were linked by good roads. Smaller market towns and settlements grew along these roads. Local areas developed specialty goods and products. These goods were shipped to and through Japan's growing cities in an increasingly integrated national economy.

Growth of Cities. During the Warring States period, local lords began to gather their warriors around them in headquarters centered on fortified castles. This tendency was formalized by Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, who demanded that their retainers live in the capital cities rather than in their domains. As a result, so-called castle towns (*jōkamachi*) sprung up in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Some 90 new towns appeared between 1572 and 1590 alone. The number continued to grow in subsequent decades. The emergence of castle towns and later of cities had a significant economic impact. Building cities required assembling, equipping, feeding, housing, and supervising huge numbers of laborers and technical specialists. It also required importing vast amounts of resources: soil, stone, lumber, thatch, kilns for baking roof tiles, charcoal, and the like. From the late sixteenth century on, these labor forces came to number in the tens of thousands. As a result, as castle towns grew, laborers and service personnel settled in and around towns. Samurai settled near the castles of their lords. The commoners who served the samurai moved into adjacent areas. Over time castle towns evolved into urban areas.

Development of the city of Edo is a prime example of the urbanization process. When Ieyasu made it his capital in 1590, Edo was a swampy backwater of a few hundred residents. Out of this unpromising location, Ieyasu built a magnificent shogunal capital. Laborers cut down forests, leveled hills to fill in wetlands, rerouted rivers, and dredged creeks and canals. They built bridges and walls, erected shrines and temples, and constructed buildings. Among the buildings erected were opulent *daimyō* mansions and the magnificent castle of the shogun. Warehouses, storefronts, and common dwellings were also built. By 1600, Edo was a town of some 5000 dwellings. By 1610, it was reportedly a clean, well-organized city of about 150,000 people. As samurai retainers of the shogun and of *daimyō* flooded into the city in the early seventeenth century, the population zoomed upward. By 1657, Edo had about 500,000 residents. By 1720, it was the world's largest city outside of China, with a population of about 1.4 million. Half a million of these residents were samurai.

Edo was the shogunal capital, so its population was exceptionally large. But smaller, regional castle towns also grew significantly. Kanazawa, headquarters of an extensive domain on the Japan Sea coast, was a town of 5,000 in 1580. It grew to 120,000 in 1710. Nagoya, a small town in the early seventeenth century, had become a regional center of 64,000 residents by 1692. Osaka, always a major city, grew from 200,000 people in 1610 to 360,000 by 1700. It hit a peak of half a million by the late eighteenth century.

Growth was good for the economy in general. It affected different classes differently, however. In particular, merchants benefited from the increase in trade, markets, and urbanization. Samurai suffered from those same phenomena. Why did the samurai lose out? First, samurai were paid in fixed stipends, disbursed in rice. These stipends were based on an individual's rank and office and did not increase at a pace equal to the rise in prices. Second, with the growth of the market and monetization of the economy, samurai had to trade their rice stipends for cash. This process was controlled by merchants in Edo and Osaka. It put samurai at the mercy of both the unstable market price for rice and the greed of merchant moneychangers. Finally, samurai were forbidden by law from engaging in farming or commerce, which might have afforded them some economic relief. All of these factors made it almost impossible for samurai to benefit from the growth occurring in the economy. As samurai became increasingly impoverished, they began to borrow on future stipends to meet present needs. Thus they put themselves in debt to merchant lenders. Having samurai at their mercy not only earned the merchants a measure of profit, it also gave them significant symbolic leverage over their samurai superiors. For the samurai, being indebted to lowly merchants was extremely galling. Many low-ranking samurai whose stipends gave them barely enough to get by felt they had to scrimp and save while merchants prospered. Matters were made worse by the fact that samurai had to keep up appearances. Protocol deemed that they dress properly, live in good style, and engage in the social activities (which involved expensive gift-giving) that were required of them, but were increasingly beyond their economic means.

Tokugawa authorities were aware of the problems facing samurai. They repeatedly tried to shore up the political and moral order by elaborating on the unique role of samurai as moral exemplars and scholar/administrators. By definition, commoners could not fulfill those roles. Through the Kyōhō Reforms of the early eighteenth century and the Kansei Reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, the shogunate enacted measures aimed at stabilizing and strengthening the economic and political status of the samurai. But the authorities' reassertion of proper political order could not change reality. Neither shogun nor *daimyō* could offer much practical help to financially strapped samurai. More broad-minded thinkers such as the philosopher Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) proposed radical reforms. One such reform was returning the samurai to the land so they could farm. Another was overhauling the office and rank system so that lower-ranking "men of talent" could rise to positions of power. These men often languished in idleness while less deserving sons of high-ranking families inherited their fathers' positions. In the end, economic growth in the Tokugawa period favored commoners over the elite.

The Emergence of Commoner Culture

While they were not shy about commenting wryly on the state of society, urban commoners were not political activists. Peasant protests did break out in the eighteenth century, largely due to authorities' failure to provide relief during times of crop failure and food shortage. But the new urban bourgeoisie did not attempt to overthrow the warrior government. Rather, urban commoners tended to turn away from the troublesome world of politics. They used their newfound wealth to fashion a new style of life and art. While the new style borrowed aspects of elite "high" culture, it was in many ways utterly new to the early modern urban scene. By the Genroku period (1688-1703), one could see in Edo and other cities a flourishing merchant class that was developing a cultural style all its own. Merchants flaunted their wealth, building enormous houses and dressing in finery that exceeded that of samurai. The shogunate was not at all happy about this. It repeatedly issued laws forbidding merchants to wear fine silk clothes and restricting the construction of large and showy homes in merchant quarters.

However, such laws were difficult to enforce. Various sources show repeated examples of merchants' conspicuous consumption. By the mid-eighteenth century, popular representations abounded of the poor samurai pawning the clothes and swords off his back for a little extra cash. Then a merchant redeemed them and paraded around the city in the purchased finery. Such sights enraged samurai. Yet they had to suppress their anger and keep up the façade of reserve and prosperity appropriate to their status. As a popular saying of the time went, "if a samurai is starving, he uses a toothpick all the same."

Despite their economic plight (or perhaps to gain relief from the misery of it), samurai frequented the entertainment areas originally created by and for merchants. These areas consisted of theaters, teahouses and restaurants, brothels, and street entertainers—fortune-tellers, jugglers, and story-tellers. Brothels were a new feature in the cultural life of cities. Prostitution had a long history in Japan. Not until the Tokugawa period did the government seek to control it through licensing and surveillance. Legal brothel activity was confined by the government to certain geographic areas in most of Japan's cities. These areas were referred to as the licensed quarters. Of course, there was also much illegal prostitution in cities. The shogunate could scarcely control it, much less eradicate it.

The high-ranking courtesans (*yūjo*) of the Yoshiwara were not common prostitutes. Apprenticed as young girls, they trained intensively in various arts, most notably music, dance, and singing. They were ranked according to their level of training and experience, much like the geisha that still exist today. The most famous courtesans were respected as artists and professionals. They were also made famous through their depiction in plays, fiction, and the visual arts. Indeed, many became movie-star-like trendsetters. Men wanting to meet with a high-ranking courtesan had to go through an elaborate and expensive process of courting her before he could even lay eyes on her. Technically, the pleasure quarters were enclaves for commoners. Samurai were banned on the grounds that they were supposed to be upright, moral, and frugal characters with no time for crass indulgences. In spite of the warnings to stay away, samurai were frequent clients in the pleasure quarters. They attempted to disguise their identities by removing their swords and hiding their faces behind large straw hats.

The pleasure quarters could be extremely costly. Contemporary sources are filled with tales of wealthy merchants and samurai who drove themselves to financial ruin after falling in

love with a courtesan. Indeed, the dilemmas of love and money were the fodder for many writers and artists of the Genroku period and later. This period saw the development not only of woodblock prints, or *ukiyo-e*, but also the emergence of the first great popular writers and dramatists. Two examples are Ihara Saikaku (1642-93) in prose fiction and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) in drama. Saikaku was an Osaka merchant and amateur poet who late in life turned to writing fiction. Most of his stories are based on the lives of Osaka commoners. Saikaku's stories cover two general topics: love and money. They often have a light-handed, somewhat parodic moral message to them. The first of his works of prose fiction, *Life of a Sensuous Man* (Kōshoku ichidai otoko, 1682), is written in 54 chapters. (That this was a parody of the structure of Murasaki Shikibu's eleventh-century classic *The Tale of Genji* would have been obvious to his audience.) The book was a commercial success, thus inspiring the rest of Saikaku's early stories on similar themes from the perspectives of both men and women. Saikaku's stories dramatized the lives of common city people, their obsession with making and spending money, and their free spirited nature, which led them into various sorts of romantic and financial binds. Saikaku almost single-handedly raised merchant life, previously seen as tedious and mundane, to the level of art.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon wrote mainly for the theater, both kabuki and *bunraku* (puppet theater). Chikamatsu's texts were written to be narrated or sung with musical accompaniment. They featured high drama, with twists and turns of plot. Early in his career, Chikamatsu wrote about contemporary events like the "great political disturbances" (*oie sōdō*) in military households. These works chronicled conflicts between rightful rulers and unlawful usurpers. Later on, Chikamatsu turned to more commoner-centered dramas. These focused on emotional conflicts, often conflicts between social duty or obligation (*giri*) and human feeling (*ninjō*). He is most famous for his plays dealing with "love suicides" (*shinjū*). Love suicides were a real-life phenomenon in which two lovers, committed to other people or occupations (the woman was often a courtesan, the man often a married merchant), resolve to die together rather than live apart. Plays based on this theme, such as Chikamatsu's classic *Love Suicides at Amijima* (*Shinjū ten no Amijima*, 1721), were extremely popular. The essential conflict represented in *shinjū* tales, a conflict that pulls an individual in two irreconcilable directions, was at the core of most Tokugawa drama. Often, the only solution was death. Love suicide was seen to be the ultimate demonstration of love and devotion. It provided a kind of commoner's version of the samurai's *seppuku*, or suicide for honor.

The themes of honor and sacrifice inherent in such highly dramatic stories made commoners feel their culture had something in common with that of the elites. Yet there is a distinct commoner twist to these ideas. This twist both honors and degrades the great samurai tradition of self-sacrifice. Actual incidents of love suicide seem to have proliferated in the late 1600s, perhaps becoming even more common in the 1700s. They became a cultural fad encouraged by the romanticization of the act on stage. In 1722, the shogunate forbade the treatment of *shinjū* on stage, seeing it as an offense against proper family order. The phenomenon of love suicide—both actual and staged—brings to the fore the issue of cultural fads and their spread: How, exactly, did ideas circulate?

Literacy, Education, and the "Library of Public Information"

Assessing popular literacy before the advent of modern universal education is difficult. Historians use many techniques to estimate the nature and level of literacy in pre- and early-modern societies. Still, their findings are often tentative. Among the most common techniques is analyzing signatures on official documents (wills, marriage records, etc.) as a measure of people's ability to write. Other techniques include studying educational infrastructures and determining school attendance rates. Historians also look at data on cultural phenomena such as publishing and circulation of books and other printed matter.

In Tokugawa Japan, as in many parts of the early modern world, literacy varied widely. Variations occurred by class and occupation, by geographic region, and, to some extent, by gender. The ruling elites, Buddhist and Shinto clergy, and commoner intellectuals on the fringes of the elite (Confucian scholars, doctors, and minor officials) tended to be quite learned. They possessed considerable knowledge of Japanese and Sino-Japanese (or *kanbun*, the style of writing derived from classical Chinese, which was used in formal discourse). They also knew the classical works of both the Japanese and Chinese literary and philosophical traditions. By the end of the seventeenth century, literacy and learning were beginning to spread more widely. Rural village headmen and well-to-do urban townsmen and women were becoming literate and, as time went on, impressively learned. These people became the primary consumers of popular literature and of the arts.

The infrastructure for popular education developed considerably in the Tokugawa period. Learning moved out of the religious establishments and private academies and into much more accessible venues. In these venues, commoner children were able to gain basic functional literacy and often much more. The demand for books was thus extremely high. Publishers in the major cities churned out texts of all sorts. While Buddhist and Confucian texts remained the mainstays of highbrow publishing, many more publishers produced for the general reading audience. Illustrated fiction and poetry were popular. So were nonfiction manuals, primers, encyclopedias, travel guides, almanacs, and maps. As printed materials circulated among ever-greater numbers of readers, they conditioned in people certain patterns of thought and ultimately of behavior. As one scholar has put it, there emerged in Tokugawa Japan a broad-based and widely read "library of public information," which produced commonly held forms of social knowledge (Berry 2006, 13, 17).

When faced with the question of precisely what percentages of what sorts of people were literate, historians do not give a precise answer. The data simply is not conclusive. The best we can do is point to figures that may serve as *broad indicators* of the dimensions of literacy. Among samurai, who made up 6 to 7 percent of the population, literacy was almost universal and generally of a very high level. The degree of learning varied, however, according to rank, office, and wealth. There are accounts of illiterate samurai, especially later in the Tokugawa period. These cases occurred among the lowest, most impoverished ranks. Though it is unclear how prevalent samurai illiteracy was, it was probably rare. It was certainly the source of great shame for the unlettered individual and his family.

High literacy is common in an elite ruling class. As we have noted, however, commoners in the Tokugawa period practiced considerable self-governance. The Tokugawa state was very bureaucratic. Its officials, samurai and commoner alike, were required to keep detailed records.

They also had to write a great deal of correspondence. Official duties thus demanded high levels of literacy not only among samurai, but also among the upper strata of urban and rural commoner populations who held such responsible positions as city ward official or village headman. Recent research indicates that, by the end of the seventeenth century, the rural elite—numbering some 200-300,000 out of a total population of around 30 million, or less than 0.1 percent of the population—possessed “extraordinarily high literacy and numeracy” in order to fulfill their many administrative duties (Rubinger 2007, 30).

Below the rural elite were the landowning farmers. Their numbers varied over time and by region. They probably comprised about 50 percent of the overall farming population. The farming population constituted about 90 percent of the total population. Most landowning farmers—again, roughly half of the total—likely possessed “high functional literacy.” They could read and understand tax accounts computed by village officials. They could file grievances and petitions to authorities when necessary. Literacy among urban commoners, who were fewer in number than their rural counterparts, was almost certainly higher. Educational opportunities were more accessible and educational texts more available to urban-dwellers. Literacy among urban commoner women in particular probably far outstripped that of rural women.

Literacy and education were by no means monopolized by the elite in Tokugawa Japan. Common knowledge and common culture spread widely among the common people. This widening of the knowledge base greatly facilitated the subsequent development of the modern industrial nation-state.

The Discontented and the End of an Era

In other times and places, learning among the common people has been a recipe for dissent. Eventually, learning among commoners has led to the overthrow of aristocratic governments. This was not true in Tokugawa Japan. Unrest *did* occur. Peasant protest in particular was widespread and sometimes intense in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ultimately, however, those responsible for overthrow of the Tokugawa regime were members of the ruling class itself: the samurai. This kind of “aristocratic revolution” is unusual in world history.

Why and how did samurai overthrow a government that was ostensibly created in their own interest? To answer this question, one must first look at *which* samurai became involved in the movement to overthrow the shogunate and “restore” the emperor. The major actors were low-ranking samurai from the *tozama* domains. Particularly involved were the powerful and autonomous domains of Satsuma in southernmost Kyushu, Chōshū in far western Honshu, and Tosa on Shikoku. Low-ranking samurai had long observed that the system of rank and office under the Tokugawa had become entirely hereditary. They believed it did not sufficiently take merit into account. One born into a family of low rank could never expect to obtain an official appointment or rise to a position of any power or wealth. Moreover, many low-ranking samurai felt themselves to be abler than those of higher birth. Those of higher birth glided into office by virtue of blood right. Many of the low-ranking samurai were not afraid to speak their minds. In the later Tokugawa period, the phrase *daimyō gei*, or “a *daimyō*’s skill,” came to indicate someone or something entirely lacking in talent or quality.

Samurai grievances were compounded by the events of the early decades of the nineteenth century. Bad crop harvests in the 1830s resulted in widespread famine, disease, and death. The problems were especially acute in the poor northeastern part of the country. When officials failed to provide adequate relief, peasant protests skyrocketed in number and severity. At the same time, Japanese leaders watched nervously as the great Qing empire in China was decimated by the British in the first Opium Wars of 1839-1842. China was thereafter “carved up like a melon” by the other Western powers. The Japanese had already fended off advances by the Russians in the 1790s and early 1800s and by the British in the 1820s. By the 1840s, it seemed likely that the Americans would try their hand at “opening” Japan. In 1853, a U.S. naval delegation led by Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived with demands from U.S. President Millard Fillmore. Fillmore demanded that Japan agree to trade and diplomatic relations with the United States. The shogun was given a half-year to consider Perry’s request. Observers, especially powerful *daimyō*, saw that the shogunate had no new ideas about how to handle the foreign threat, much less the domestic problems wracking the country. In the end, shogunal officials agreed, in spite of the emperor’s disapproval, to sign trade and diplomatic treaties with the United States. As in China, the terms gave great advantages to the Western powers. Japan was relegated to semi-colonial status.

For pro-imperial, anti-shogunal forces, the foreign crises, in particular the signing of the treaty with the United States, were the last straw. Plans to overthrow the Tokugawa regime began in earnest in the 1860s. Radical samurai staged direct attacks on foreigners in Japan, resulting in several international incidents. The most serious of these incidents sparked the bombardment of domains in Satsuma and Chōshū by Western naval forces. Finally, in January 1868, combined military forces of the domains of Satsuma and Chōshū marched into Kyoto, took control of the imperial palace, and proclaimed the restoration of the emperor and the abolition of the Tokugawa shogunate. Court nobles and *daimyō* would form a new government in place of the old. Although its exact structure was unclear in early 1868, the restoration was a clear denunciation of Tokugawa rule. The last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu (or Keiki), retreated to Edo. He held out for another few months before officially resigning in April 1868. Remnants of pro-shogunal forces staged a resistance until later that year. They were ultimately defeated.

Although the Tokugawa regime ended in 1868, it bequeathed a deep and rich political, economic, and cultural legacy to modern Japan. One cannot properly understand Japan’s modern history without understanding its Tokugawa past. Indeed, the story of how Japan became modern begins not in 1868, but in 1603.

Sources Cited

- Berry, Mary Elizabeth, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- Rupinger, Richard, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).
- Sansom, G.B., *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (New York, Century, 1932).
- Totman, Conrad, *Japan Before Perry: A Short History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Notes

The Tokugawa Political Settlement

For a biography of Oda Nobunaga, see Jeroen Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2001).

For a biography of Hideyoshi, see Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

For a useful and visually rich (hundreds of illustrations, graphs and maps) survey of the founding and development of the city of Edo, see Akira Naito, *Edo, the City That Became Tokyo: An Illustrated History* (New York: Kodansha International, 2003).

For more on Christianity in early modern Japan, see Jurgis Elisonas, *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); for a study of international relations and diplomacy in the Tokugawa period that refutes the idea that Tokugawa Japan was a “closed country,” see Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Historians have characterized the type of government practiced in the Tokugawa period in various ways: “an integrated yet decentralized state structure,” the “compound state,” and Edwin O. Reischauer’s celebrated oxymoron “centralized feudalism” are only a few of the often awkward terms devised to describe the essential Tokugawa balance of authority and autonomy. “Integrated yet decentralized state structure” comes from Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 164-176. Ikegami also uses the term “neo-feudal” in a comparative context. “The compound state” is used by Mark Ravina, following Mizubayashi Takeshi, in “State-building and Political Economy in Early-modern Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (November 1995), pp. 997-1022. “Centralized feudalism” appears in Edwin O. Reischauer, “Japanese Feudalism,” in Rushton Coulborn, ed., *Feudalism in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).

Economic Growth and Social Change

When speaking in aggregate demographic or economic terms, it is important to note that growth and decline, whether in terms of population or economy, varied considerably in terms of geographic region. In general, the most economically advanced and prosperous areas of the country were the Kinai Plain, the area of central-western Honshu surrounding the cities of Kyoto and Osaka; northern Kyushu; and, by the mid-Tokugawa period, the Kantō Plain area around the city of Edo. By contrast, the most economically backward and poor areas of Japan tended to be found in the northeast, in what is today called the Tōhoku region and in the Tokugawa period was comprised of the large province of Dewa and Mutsu.

The Emergence of Commoner Culture

For a partial translation of Saikaku's *Life of a Sensuous Man*, see Haruo Shirane, ed., *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 45-57.

A full translation of Chikamatsu's *Love Suicides at Amijima* can be found in Donald Keene, *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Literacy, Education, and the Library of Public Information

In his recent study of popular literacy in early modern Japan, Richard Rubinger argues that "...the Japanese data demonstrate that in certain circumstances geography may be a more influential variable with respect to literacy attainment than gender." See Richard Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 7.

For an absorbing account of a ne'er-do-well samurai in the early 19th century who claimed to have overcome illiteracy in order to write his autobiography of sorts, see Katsu Kōkichi, *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai*, translated by Teruko Craig (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

The definition of 90 percent of Japan's population as farmers is based on the estimate that by 1700, roughly 10 percent of Japan's population lived in cities with populations over 10,000; half of that 10 percent lived in cities with populations over 100,000. By comparison, only 2 percent of Europeans lived in cities of over 100,000. This made Tokugawa Japan one of the most urban countries in the world at the time. Figures on urbanization are from Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 23.

The Discontented and the End of an Era

The term "aristocratic revolution" comes from Thomas C. Smith, "Japan's Aristocratic Revolution," in *Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, 1750-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 133-147.

For more on the debate on merit, see Thomas C. Smith, "'Merit' as Ideology in the Tokugawa Period," in *Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization*, op. cit., p. 169.

Copyright © 2008 Program for Teaching East Asia, University of Colorado. Permission is given to reproduce this essay for classroom use only. Other reproduction is prohibited without written permission from the Program for Teaching East Asia.