



# East Asian History

Wei Peh T'i



# **East Asian History**

## **1870-1952**

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# 1 End of isolation and Tokugawa rule in Japan

From the 17th to the 19th century when Japan adopted its programmes to modernize, Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa *shogun*. After a period of constant warfare, a member of the Tokugawa Clan emerged as the strongest military leader at the beginning of the 17th century. He assumed the title of *shogun* (leading general of Japan), gained control over the other *daimyo* (feudal lords) and maintained the centre of his power at Edo (modern Tokyo); while the *mikado* (emperor) and the court continued to reside in Kyoto. The system of government was a military dictatorship based on feudalism.

## 1 Tokugawa rule in feudal Japan

### The feudal system

In theory the system of feudalism was fairly simple. The society was divided into two classes: nobles and commoners. The nobles were land owning warriors who protected the commoners in times of need. In return, the commoners ploughed the land and gave a part of their produce to the nobles as taxes. Although there was a king or emperor at the centre of the country, he had no real power.

Feudal classes in Tokugawa Japan		
Nobles	<i>mikado</i> <i>shogun</i> <i>daimyo</i>  <i>samurai</i>	Yamato clan, no real power, court at Kyoto. strongest <i>daimyo</i> , real ruler, court at Edo. <i>samurai</i> of high birth, ruler in his domains, system of alternative attendance. <i>samurai</i> of lower birth, trained in hand-carried weapons, some well educated.
Commoners	peasants artisans merchants	primary producers of food and raw materials. secondary producers, made useful products. work considered non-productive but necessary.



*The system of alternate attendance required each daimyo to spend part of his time at Edo. This picture here shows the retinue of a daimyo on the road*

This system was possible as long as the country's economy remained primarily agricultural and fighting was confined to hand combat between trained warriors. With the development of a moneyed economy and the use of firearms that necessitated more complex relationships, feudalism came to an end.

*Feudal society in Tokugawa Japan.* During this period (1603-1867) the *mikado* held court at Kyoto with great ceremony but he had no real power. Real power was in the hands of the Tokugawa *shogun* at Edo. Within their own lands the individual *daimyo* had complete control. He had the right to collect taxes as well as power over life and death of his subjects.

The *shogun* controlled the military power of the *daimyo* by forbidding them to build fortresses and castles. To keep them under closer supervision, the system of alternate attendance (*sankin-kotai*) required each *daimyo* and his family to spend part of their time at Edo and to leave behind the family as hostages when the *daimyo* returned home.

Originally, the *samurai* were trained warriors skilled at hand-carried weapons such as swords and archery. In theory the *samurai* included the *shogun* and all *daimyo*, but generally the term only applied to the lower-ranking nobles who served the various *daimyo*.

The commoners who made up the majority of the population included all Japanese not born to the privileged noble class. They were not permitted to carry weapons, nor defend themselves against the noble in any way. The peasants were producers of food and raw materials. Although the poorest, they were the most honoured commoners under the feudal system. Below the peasants were the artisans who changed products of the land into useful things. The merchants, who were the middlemen between the producers and consumers, were considered non-productive but necessary. They were at the bottom of the social structure.

### **Decline of feudalism**

During the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century



while Tokugawa rule remained basically sound, feudalism in Japan was on the decline because of the collapse of rural economy and *samurai* power.

*Decline of rural economy.* During the second half of the Tokugawa period, despite general economic growth, there was a deterioration of conditions under which the vast majority of the peasants lived. There were a number of famines and peasant uprisings towards the end of the Tokugawa rule. Better jobs paying more money attracted the peasants to the cities. With the decrease in the number of peasants and the decline of rural economy, one major element of Japanese feudalism disappeared.

*Decline of samurai power.* The second element of feudalism, a strong warrior class, was also on the decline at that time. During the long period of peace and with the appearance of foot soldiers using muskets, the *samurai* and their way of fighting became a thing of the past. When their swords were no longer needed and as they were forbidden to engage in trade and commerce, the *samurai* were unable to adjust to the changes. Some of them became government bureaucrats whereas others became discontented and began to work against the shogunate.

### **Economic growth during the Tokugawa period**

There was much economic growth during the Tokugawa period as the *daimyo* were interested in increasing production so that they could collect higher taxes. To achieve this they grew excess rice or specialized local crops which could be sold for cash. As a result, new lands were opened to cultivation, irrigation was expanded, and new methods of farming were invented to produce more crops. Handicrafts associated with the locality's particular cash crops also developed. Standard of living improved and population increased.

*Rise of trade and urban merchant class.* As a result of this system of regionalization and specialization, an increasingly large number of middlemen were needed to handle the goods from the places of production to the markets. These were the merchants. At the same time, whereas there was heavy taxation on agricultural products in feudal Japan, taxes on trade was light. This permitted the accumulation of a large amount of wealth in the hands of the merchants, who, in time, invested in even larger businesses. During the 17th century great merchant houses grew out of such activities as sake-brewing, dry-goods retailing, and money-lending. The House of Mitsui, founded at this time, eventually became one of the largest business enterprises in the modern world.

The merchants became powerful as they were the ones with extra money to lend. The *samurai*, who had been short of money, became so indebted to the merchants that they began to allow the merchants a voice in decision-making for the government. The amount of wealth they had on hand made it possible for the Japanese to pay for their programmes of modernization themselves at a later date.

### Tokugawa policy of isolation

During the 1640s the Tokugawa *shogun* adopted a policy of isolation, closing European trading posts and driving out Christian missionaries who had been in Japan at the beginning of the 17th century. Except for a small amount of trade with the Chinese and the Dutch, for all practical purposes the Japanese had no commercial exchange with the outside world until the middle of the 19th century.

The Japanese themselves were forbidden to go overseas. If they were already overseas, they were not permitted to return home for fear that they might bring back 'dangerous ideas'. A law was passed that allowed only the building of small ships suitable for trading along the Japanese coast to prevent any ship from venturing too far.

*Japanese critics of the Tokugawa policy of isolation.* Within Japan there had been opposition to the Tokugawa policy of forbidding Japanese to go overseas and foreigners to come to Japan. By the end of the 18th century intellectual *samurai*, many of whom were teachers, influential officials or advisers to their *daimyo*, began to question the policy of isolation.

*Outside forces challenging Japanese institutions.* Even with this careful and strict policy, ideas were brought in by Chinese and Dutch traders. These ideas challenged Japanese institutions. Discontented *samurai* began to call for rule by emperor and officials chosen for their merits as in Confucian China, instead of rule by feudal lords with hereditary privileges as in Tokugawa Japan. Dutch traders brought in western ideas and technology. The Japanese especially were interested in introduction of new weapons and western-style ships, and financial reforms.



*Commodore Perry of the American Navy. He forced the Japanese to open their ports to the west*

### British, Russian and American interests in Eastern Pacific

During the middle of the 19th century Russia, Britain and the United States were showing increasing interests in the Eastern Pacific. Whereas British interests were commercial and Russian interests strategic, the Americans were interested in Japan both for commercial and for strategic reasons. The strength of the combination of motives was what eventually led to the opening of Japan by the Americans. With the settlement of the West Coast by 1850 and the proposed transcontinental railroad, the United States had become a Pacific power. Her interest in trading with China and in whaling in the Pacific meant a real need for seaports along the route between San Francisco and Shanghai. Therefore she was interested in establishing seaports in the islands of the Pacific, including Japan.

## 2 The opening of Japan

### The arrival of Perry

In July 1853, Commodore Perry of the American Navy, with steam ships carrying modern cannons that had the capacity to destroy Edo, arrived at the mouth of Edo Bay. He forced the Japanese to accept a letter from the President of the United States to the Emperor of Japan asking for trade and use of Japanese ports. He left immediately after delivering the letter but said that he would return next spring for the Japanese reply.

The Japanese knew that their small and antiquated fleet was not equal to Perry's challenge. Edo lay exposed. Its population of over one million depended on the sea for its daily food supplies. Any blockade would be fatal.

*The Treaty of Kanagawa (1854).* Perry returned in February 1854. This time he sailed up Edo Bay to Kanagawa, today a part of the port city of Yokohama, and negotiated with the Japanese. The agreement, opening two insignificant ports to American trade and offering the 'most favoured nation' clause — whatever privileges Japan would grant to any other nation at a future date would also be given to the United States. Despite the fact that the treaty was useless until it was supplemented later by the Treaty of Edo, similar treaties were concluded with Britain, the Netherlands, and Russia.

*Extra-territoriality in the Russian treaty.* Extra-territoriality was a practice that gave a foreign power the right to try her citizens who had broken the laws of a host country under her own laws instead of being tried by the host authorities under their own laws. This right was given to the Russians by the Japanese.

*The Treaty of Edo (1857).* In July 1857 the Treaty of Edo was concluded between Japan and the United States. By this agreement extra-territoriality was granted to the Americans. The two countries exchanged diplomatic representatives. Americans were allowed to live in Japan. Two more ports in Japan were opened to American trade.

*Consequences of the Treaty of Edo.* As a result of these agreements, Japan was opened to the west. Foreign traders began to demand expensive Japanese silk and tea, driving prices up. Japanese economy was further disturbed by an injection of foreign currency into the Japanese monetary system. The Japanese blamed the bad economic situation on the shogunate. In theory the *shogun* held his high position because he was the protector of Japan. Now it had been shown that he could not fulfill this role. The foreigners had been permitted to disrupt Japanese economy and the Japanese way of life. Forces against the shogunate grew.

*Consequences of the opening of Japan on the shogunate.* Before Perry's arrival the Dutch at Nagasaki had 'advised' that sooner or later Japan would have to give way to western demands to open her doors for trade, citing the Opium War in China as a warning to the shogunate. When Perry made his initial demands in 1853, the shogunate took the unprecedented step of consulting the *daimyo*, but their advice was not followed. Despite a negative response from a vast majority of the *daimyo*, as well as opposition from the *mikado*, Shogun Abe concluded the treaties with the west. With support for the *shogun* disintegrating, the one symbol of unity remaining in Japan was the *mikado*.

### 3 End of feudal Japan

#### Forces against the shogunate

Even after Japan opened her doors, official attitude towards foreign trade was still one of restriction and control. The *shogun* benefited from this trade by taking a share of the customs revenue and by receiving a portion of the profits from monopolies he granted to merchants from Edo.

By that time Yokohama had become a major commercial city. Merchants there objected to these monopolies which limited their own activities. Together with foreign traders they managed to put an end to the practice of granting monopolies.

At the same time, the *samurai*, another discontented group, already short of money, found themselves in even poorer circumstances during the time of inflation while the *shogun* appeared to become richer. They blamed the *shogun* for their greater loss of purchasing power as they blamed the rising prices on foreign trade

that was brought about by the treaties.

*Influence of Shintoism on the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate.* The doctrine of imperial sovereignty was given strong backing during the 18th century by the revival of the native Japanese Shinto religion. Their belief that the *mikado* was descended directly from the Sun-Goddess had important political significance at this time. Whereas the *shogun* was appointed, the *mikado* was born to rule. When the *shogun's* foreign policy of isolation was attacked, his domestic position was questioned.

Eventually the Japanese, unhappy with the treaties the shogunate had made with the western powers, made use of the divinity of the *mikado* as a reason to demand a strong central government by bringing back the *mikado* as the head of it.

### **Emergence of the imperial court as a centre of politics in Japan**

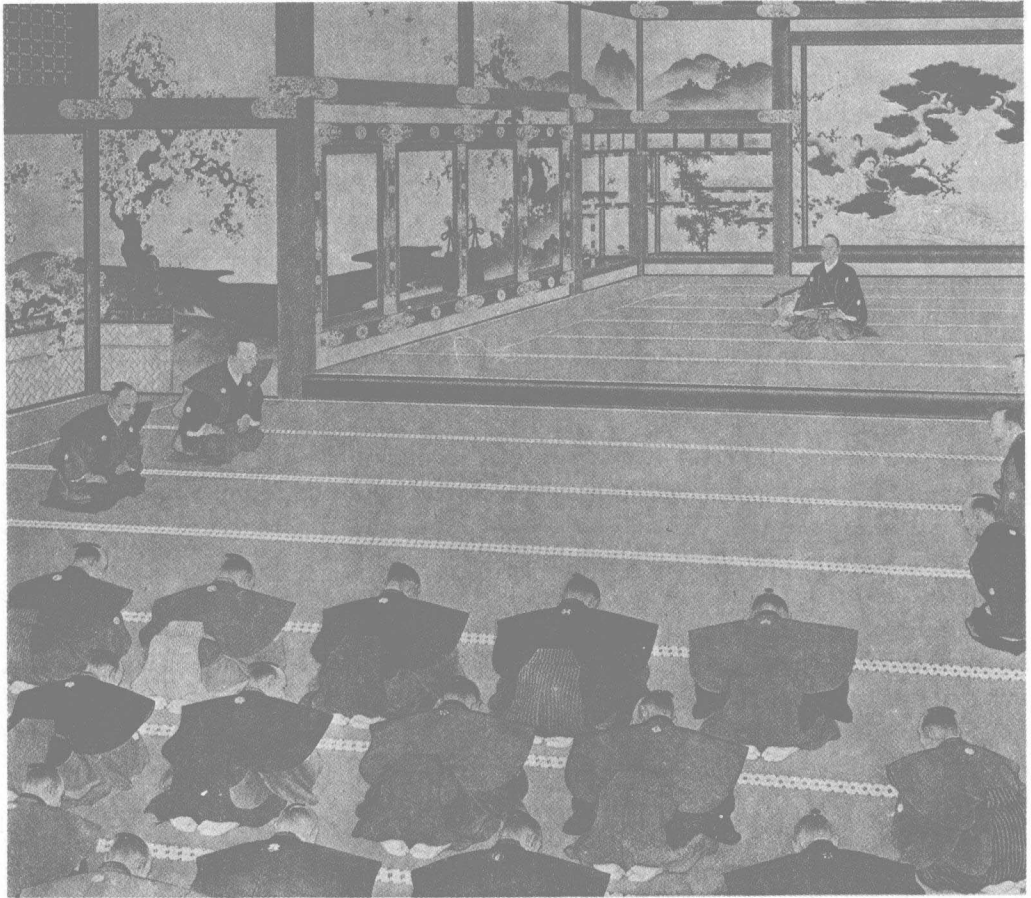
Leadership of anti-foreign and anti-shogun forces could be found among the merchants of Yokohama and the discontented lower-ranking *samurai*. These forces looked to the imperial court at Kyoto for leadership. The twin slogans 'Honour the Emperor' and 'Expel the foreigners' became increasingly popular.

Some of the *daimyo* began to disobey orders from Edo openly. Restless *samurai* roamed the countryside, calling themselves 'masterless samurai' and began to create disturbance all over Japan. The *daimyo* began to take advantage of the political confusion to gain control over the court. The *daimyo* of two states, Satsuma in southern Kyushu and Choshu in western Honshu, both anti-foreign, became leaders of the opposition to the shogunate.

*The resort to military forces.* In 1861 a group in Choshu succeeded in persuading the *mikado* to order the *shogun* to Kyoto. This demanding the *shogun* to appear at the court of the *mikado* in person had never been done before. The fact that the *shogun* obeyed the summons was another indication of the weakness of his position at that time.

The *shogun* was ordered to expel the foreigners by 25 June 1863. This, of course, was an order that could not be carried out easily. When the time came the *shogun* took no action, but the Choshu forces along the Straits of Shimonoseki fired on foreign ships. American ships returned the fire and sank two brand new Choshu gunboats at Nagasaki. French forces subsequently landed and destroyed Choshu forts and ammunition without meeting much resistance. The defeat led the people in Choshu to realize that their traditional forces were ineffective against the westerners.

*The murder of Richardson.* Satsuma forces soon learned the same lesson as the Choshu forces. A Satsuma *samurai* murdered an Englishman, C.L. Richardson, in 1862. The British demanded and received an indemnity of £100,000 from the shogunate. When the *daimyo* of Satsuma refused similar demands that he, too,



*In November 1867, the last Tokugawa Shogun, Yashinobu announced that he had relinquished power in favour of the restoration of imperial rule*

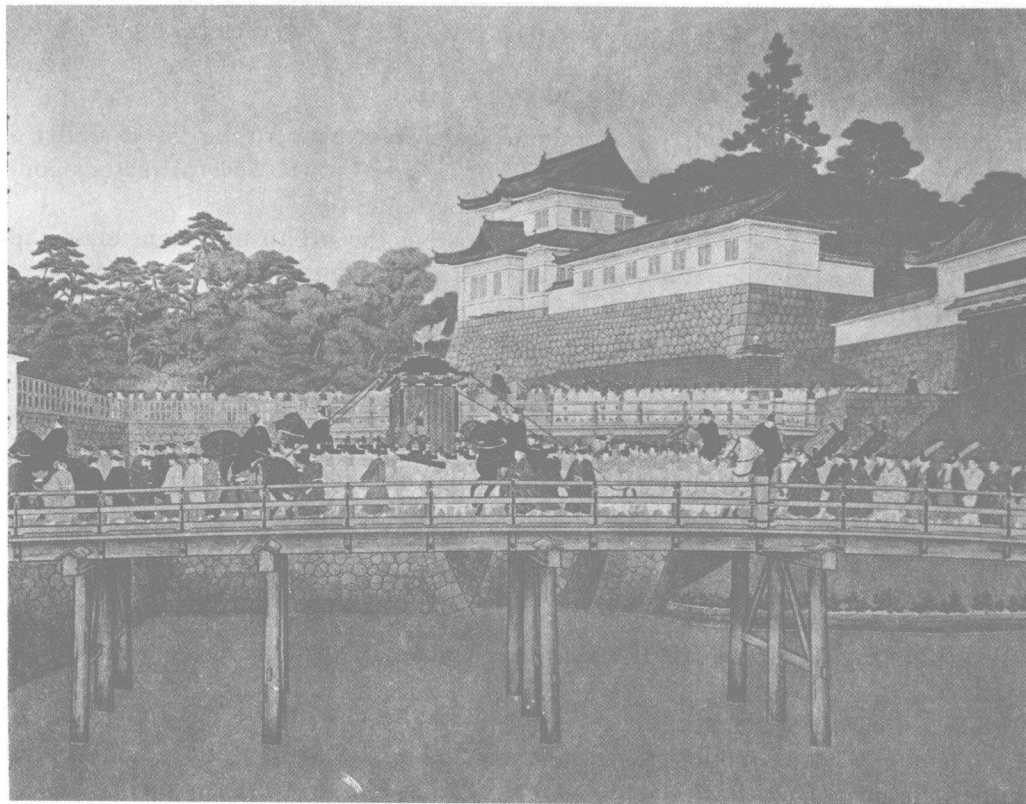
should pay an indemnity of £25,000, the British fleet sacked his capital city of Kagoshima in August 1863. The *daimyo* not only surrendered and paid the indemnity, he was so impressed by the British show of naval strength that he immediately asked for British assistance in purchasing western ships and weapons. Thus, the foundations for what was to become the Imperial Japanese Navy was laid.

### **Final collapse of the shogunate**

Forces from Choshu made periodic attacks on troops loyal to the *shogun*. Although the shogunate troops won, the weakness of the shogunate was once again revealed by the very lenient terms granted to Choshu. It was only a matter of time before the shogunate collapsed.

In November 1867 an agreement was made by the western states to restore power to the new *mikado*, a fifteen year old boy named Mutsuhito (reign 1868-1912). This new reign was to be called Meiji (Enlightened Government). By





*On the restoration of power to the Emperor, the Emperor Meiji crossed a bridge to reach the new imperial residence at Tokyo Castle, 1868*

this agreement a *shogun* was to head a council of the most powerful *daimyo* of Japan. The council was to govern the country in the name of the *mikado*.

There was strong opposition to this agreement. Leaders of this group were the *daimyo* of Satsuma and the *daimyo* of Choshu. They wanted the position of the *shogun* abolished, once and for all. They formed a coalition with the British and French diplomats then in Japan. On 3 January 1868 they stormed the Imperial Palace, announced the shogunate abolished and imperial rule restored in Japan.

## Summary

In January 1868 the Tokugawa shogunate which had been ruling Japan under a system of centralized feudalism since 1603, was overthrown. Several reasons contributed to the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate.

The decline of rural economy and the rise of the urban merchant class had destroyed the economic and social foundations of feudalism. Introduction of modern weapons, such as muskets, removed the dependence of the common people on the warrior class. The trend towards growing cash crops for sale increased the wealth of merchants. The unfair system of taxation put heavy burden on the peasants. As a result, there was increasing poverty and discontent among the peasants as well as lower-ranking warriors.

Even the isolationist policies of the Tokugawa had not managed to keep out all foreign ideas. The Confucian ideal of rule by an emperor and able officials chosen for their merits became increasingly popular as people became more and more unhappy with their feudal lords.

The opening of Japan after 1854 and the display of western military and naval strength brought new ideas of the modern state modelled on the west to the Japanese.

By abolishing the shogunate, Japan hoped to achieve the objectives of establishing a strong modern state in Japan under the Meiji Restoration, rule of emperor with policies formulated by able officials chosen for their merits.

## 2 Transformation of Meiji Japan into a modern nation 1868-90

From the end of the Tokugawa rule in 1867 to 1890 when the new constitution was put into effect, Japan's political, economic and social institutions underwent fundamental changes. By the time the First World War broke out in Europe in 1914, Japan was already a unified nation with a stable government and a sound economy. The modernization of her society was accomplished with a minimum amount of upheaval. Her army and navy had been accredited with victories against two major powers: China and Russia.

It was important for Japan that her modernization was achieved without large scale foreign capital investments. Nor did she suffer outside interference during the period of transformation. Britain was too preoccupied in China to include Japan in her programme for commercial expansion in the Pacific. Shortly after Perry's opening of Japan, the United States was plunged into the turmoil of civil war and later of reconstruction. Of the three major western powers which tried to force the opening of Japan during the early part of the 19th century, only Russia took steps to interfere in Japanese affairs. Russia occupied the island of Tsushima in 1861, but withdrew when Britain protested. At the turn of the 20th century her interests in Manchuria were to conflict with those of the Japanese who had begun to entertain imperial ambitions of her own.

### 1 Creation of a new government

#### The new leaders

At the time Mutsuhito was proclaimed *mikado* of all Japan, he was only fifteen years old. It was Japan's good fortune that she had the services of a group of capable statesmen who made certain that programmes for modernization were adopted rapidly despite personal differences on specific issues and without abandoning altogether traditional Japanese cultural and ethical values.

The new leadership came from the *samurai* class. These men who had played a significant role in the Meiji Restoration Movement were young by Japanese standards of that time. Their comparative youth meant that they were open-minded