Political Stability and Social Control in Tokugawa Japan

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ARTICLE SUMMARY

The Tokugawa period, also referred to as the Edo period, is typically dated from 1600, the year of the military victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu at Sekigahara, to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This period saw Japan move from a country divided by civil war to a unified, stable, and mature state. Ieyasu established central authority over the country through the Tokugawa bakufu (shogunate) in Edo (present-day Tokyo). Regional authority was maintained by more than 250 daimyo (regional lords) who governed their han (domains) with considerable autonomy. Because of concerns with the potentially destabilizing effects of Christianity, seventeenth-century shoguns, as the supreme leaders of the bakufu, limited Japan's interactions with the outside world to foreign trade only with China, Korea, the Ryukyu Kingdom, and the Dutch Republic in what became known as its policy of national isolation. Society was divided into four distinct classes (in hierarchical order): warriors, peasants, artisans, and merchants, and the government maintained tight restrictions on all of them. Despite the existence of these legal distinctions, there was some upward and downward movement within it, as merchants became wealthy and bought the status of warriors, and warriors became impoverished and chose to lead lives as peasant farmers. Urbanization spread rapidly in the period, creating profound economic, cultural, and social changes. Edo became one of the largest, if not the largest, cities in the world during the seventeenth century, with a population topping one million people, and the populations of Kyoto and Osaka each surpassed one-quarter million.

The Tokugawa *bakufu* (shogunate) grew out of Tokugawa Ieyasu's (1543–1616) experience with clan government during his time as *daimyo* (regional lord), before his victory at Sekigahara. In 1603, after being appointed shogun by the emperor, Ieyasu began staffing the *bakufu* with his loyal retainers.

Tokugawa Political and Social Control

Ieyasu maintained firm control over the daimyo by redistributing land confiscated because of his victory at Sekigahara. Domains totaling about one-fourth of all land came to be ruled directly by the Tokugawa family and its vassals; the remaining territory was divided among the daimyo. The daimyo were categorized as *fudai* (longtime loyal vassals who were given strategically important lands), *shimpan* (collateral daimyo from lineages related to the Tokugawa), and *tozama* (outside lords who joined Ieyasu either shortly before or after Sekigahara and who remained potential rivals).

A formal portrait of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who in 1603 established a new military regime known as the Tokugawa Shogunate. Private Collection/Bridgeman Images

The *bakuhan* (a combination of the *bakufu* and *han*) system of government begun by Ieyasu was, for all practical purposes, completed by the time of the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651). In the 1630s and 1640s, to provide an increased sense of legitimacy and bureaucratic professionalism among samurai office holders, *bakufu* offices such as the *roju* (senior councilors), *wakadoshiyori* (junior councilors), *hyojosho* (judicial council), *soshaban* (master of shogunal ceremony), *tairo* (great councilor), *ometsuke* (inspector general), *jisha bugyo* (temple and shrine commissioner), *kanjo bugyo* (finance commissioner), and *machi bugyo* (town commissioners) were established.

Bakufu control over the daimyo was also securely in place by Iemitsu's reign. Although in theory the daimyo remained autonomous rulers of their domains, in practice the *bakufu* dictated general rules of conduct and placed restrictions on personal freedom of action. For example, daimyo were not allowed to marry or repair castles in their domains without shogunal permission. They could also be shifted from one domain to another or deprived of their domains entirely. The most important control measure was the *sankin kotai* (alternate attendance) system, which required that the daimyo spend alternate years in attendance at the shogunal court in Edo and leave their wives and children behind whenever they returned to their domains.

Tokugawa control over the peasantry was also strengthened under the first three shoguns. Villages inhabited primarily by *hyakusho* (small tax–paying peasants) served as the basic unit of control in the countryside. Although villagers, led by a *nanushi* or *shoya* (headman), administered their own affairs, they were required to form *gonin-gumi* (neighborhood associations) to foster mutual assistance and responsibility regarding issues such as taxation and law enforcement. Villagers were also prohibited from changing occupations or selling their land, and restrictions were placed on what they could wear and eat.

Using Neo-Confucian principles borrowed from China, Tokugawa leaders saw Japanese society as divided into four classes: warriors or samurai (who were at the top of the hierarchy), peasants, artisans, and merchants. In practice, there was little distinction between the last two groups, who were generally collectively referred to as townspeople. Living outside this hierarchical scheme were outcasts called *hinin* and *eta*.

The samurai lived primarily in Edo and other castle towns and were restricted to military and government service. The peasants, who made up 80 percent of the population, lived in villages at night and cultivated their fields by day. The townspeople usually resided in designated sections of urban areas and served the needs of the samurai. Over time, these social divisions became blurred, as some townspeople and rural landlords became extremely wealthy, and certain lower-level samurai and tenant farmers faced poverty, but the legal boundaries between the classes never disappeared.

Policies on Trade and Christianity

As the Tokugawa political and social structures were becoming formalized, the *bakufu* also developed strict control measures regarding foreign trade and Christianity, culminating in the national-seclusion policies of the 1630s. From the earliest days, Ieyasu had attempted to control the foreign trade of the Portuguese and Spanish at Nagasaki through the *shuinsen* (vermilion seal ship) policy, which officially sanctioned vessels to trade abroad, and the *itowappu* (raw-silk monopoly) system, which granted designated Japanese merchants the exclusive right to purchase, distribute, and negotiate the price of raw silk brought into Japan by Portuguese ships.

The 1600 shipwreck at Kyushu of a Dutch ship with an English pilot aboard afforded Ieyasu another opportunity to wrest control away from the Portuguese and Spanish, who had monopolized trade and tied it to the proselytizing efforts of Catholic missionaries. Ieyasu offered both the Dutch and English an opportunity to trade in Japan. The Dutch accepted his invitation in 1609, and the English followed four years later. Both traded out of the island of Hirado, whereas the Portuguese and Spanish remained at Nagasaki. The nonproselytizing Dutch and English Protestant traders gave Ieyasu exactly what he desired—foreign trade without a Christian missionary presence.

With alternatives to Portuguese and Spanish foreign trade now available, Ieyasu issued a nationwide ban on Christianity in 1614. Soon thereafter, prominent Japanese and Western Christians were deported; those Western missionaries who did stay went underground with their beliefs. The second and third shoguns stepped up efforts to eradicate Christianity in Japan, first through a series of executions and later through torture-induced recantations. In 1622, the Spanish were expelled for continued proselytizing. The following year, the English departed of their own accord after a series of financial losses. This left the Dutch at Hirado and the Portuguese in Nagasaki as the only remaining Western traders in Japan.

In the 1630s, the *bakufu* promulgated a series of edicts that became the basis for what is known as Japan's *sakoku* (national seclusion) policy regarding foreign trade and Christianity. By these edicts, the *bakufu* prohibited all ships and Japanese subjects from leaving Japan for a foreign country; those Japanese already abroad could not return. In addition, the Japanese wives and children of foreigners were deported. Other measures called for payments to Japanese who turned in Christians to the government and strict inspection of foreign ships in search of Christians and Christian materials. In 1639, in the aftermath of the Shimabara Rebellion, another edict was issued banning the Portuguese from Japan.

Over the next few years, the *bakufu* implemented additional Christian control measures, including the establishment of religious census registers, temple registration, oaths of apostasy, *fumi-e* (requiring suspects to trample on Christian images to prove they were not Christians), and the office of religious investigation. Although failing to eradicate Christian beliefs completely among the Japanese populace, the *bakufu* did manage to drive the religion so far underground that it would not reappear publicly until the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1641, the Dutch were transferred from Hirado to the man-made island of Dejima in Nagasaki Harbor. From this time on, Japanese foreign trade was conducted only with the Chinese and Dutch at Nagasaki and with the Chinese and Koreans through the Ryukyus and Tsushima, respectively.

Economic and Cultural Developments

An unexpected development in the transformation of the samurai from rural warriors to civil bureaucrats living in castle towns was the rapid urbanization of Tokugawa Japan. Edo grew to a population of one million people, whereas Kyoto and Osaka had about three hundred thousand, and some domain castle towns recorded more than fifty thousand residents. Trade in silk, cotton, paper, porcelain, and sake made some merchants rich, and they, in turn, came to support a vibrant urban culture of artists and entertainers.

Urban culture flourished in the forms of literature, theater, and painting. Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693) wrote popular prose fiction about love and money among the townspeople, and the traveling poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) adopted haiku as his principal medium of expression. Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) wrote plays about townspeople and their conflicts between duty and human emotion for both the *joruri* (puppet) and Kabuki theaters. Even though a number of painting schools flourished in the Tokugawa period, the one that best represented the new urban culture was *ukiyo-e* (literally, "pictures of the floating world"). This school of woodblock printmaking was begun by Hishikawa Moronobu (1618–c. 1694) in the seventeenth century, and it peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), Katsuhika Hokusai (1760–1849), and Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858).

Although the samurai enjoyed the cultural prosperity of the cities, many were unable to keep pace with the expanding urban economy because their primary source of income was a fixed stipend tied to rural production. The *bakufu* made a number of unsuccessful attempts at Neo-Confucian–inspired fiscal reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the Kyoho, Kansei, and Tempo reforms), but the economic status of the samurai continued to deteriorate.

Urbanization affected the life of people in the countryside as well. The needs of urban markets turned traditionally subsistence peasants into commercial farmers, a few of whom became large landowners, whereas the majority fell to the status of landless laborers. Tax evasion and peasant rebellions became more and more common as the Tokugawa period evolved.

Intellectual Trends

In the Tokugawa period, the orthodox school of thought was Shushigaku (Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism), which stressed loyalty, hierarchy, and stability. The official *bakufu*-sponsored school of Neo-Confucianism was begun by Hayashi Razan (1583–1657), a trusted adviser of Tokugawa Ieyasu. A competing school of Neo-Confucianism was *Oyomeigaku* (Wang Yangming [1472–1529] learning), which was founded by Nakae Toju (1608–1648).

Outside neo-Confucianism were schools such as *Kogaku* (ancient learning), which advocated returning to the original works of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his immediate disciples. Famous members of this school included Yamaga Soko (1622–1685), Ito Jinsai (1627–1705), and Ogyu Sorai (1666–1728). *Kokugaku* (national learning) rejected Confucian ethics and searched for meaning in traditional Shinto texts. Its leading advocates were Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843). *Rangaku* (Western learning) explored Western science and mathematics after the shogun lifted the ban on the importation of Western books in 1720. Honda Toshiaki (1744–1822) was a leading scholar of this school.

The Downfall of the *Bakufu*

By the mid-nineteenth century, rising prices, peasant uprisings, samurai unrest, natural disasters, and famine provided formidable obstacles to effective *bakufu* rule. Exacerbating the situation was poor *bakufu* leadership, which by this time had come to be dominated by senior councilors. Added to these troubling domestic developments was the growing threat of encroachment from the West.

In 1853 and 1854, Commodore Matthew Perry (1794–1858) led US naval expeditions to Japan and demanded that the *bakufu* grant the United States trading and diplomatic rights in the country. The weakened bureaucracy had no choice but to agree, which greatly angered some of the samurai, especially those from southern and western Japan. When *bakufu* leaders signed commercial treaties with the West in 1858—and foreign merchants, missionaries, sailors, and government officials began to pour into designated Japanese ports—the situation worsened. By the 1860s, many in Japan were demanding the dissolution of the *bakufu* and the restoration of imperial rule to unify the country and resolve the crisis. With forces from the powerful *tozama* domains of Satsuma and Choshu leading the way, the last Tokugawa shogun was overthrown in late 1867, and early the following year, in what is known as the Meiji Restoration, a new government was established.

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