**JAPAN: TRADITION vs. WESTERNIZATION**

Europeans knew little about Japan in 1850. From about 1600 Japan had been governed by “shoguns,” lords who ruled in the name of the Emperor, who ruled based on the strength of their samurai armies. In an effort to achieve stability after centuries of chaos and civil war, these shoguns had systematically excluded all external influences on Japan. Only one foreign port was tolerated — the Dutch trading post of Dechima, founded in 1641. Only a maximum of 19 men were allowed at Dechima, and they were held on an island in the port. No women, other than Japanese prostitutes were allowed on the island, which was heavily guarded by the Shogun. Though Christian missionaries had entered Japan in the sixteenth century, they were excluded by 1630, and the persecution of Japanese Christians resulted in a virtual end to Western influence.

However, though Japanese society was highly traditional, some contact with the West did occur. The Japanese learned such skills as smelting and shipbuilding, and in the nineteenth century they built furnaces and steam engines. Urban population grew and medical practices became more advanced. Moreover, there were small groups of Japa- nese who were “Westerners”—that is, people who criticized the policies of the shoguns and wanted Japan to become a significant world power. By 1850 there were two potent forces of change in Japan: first, domestic discontent with policies of the shogunate; second, American and European pressures forcing Japan into diplomatic relations with the rest of the world.

On July 8, 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the United States sailed into Tokyo Bay with four warships, belching smoke from their coal fired steam engines. The Japanese samurai guarding the coast at first thought that these ships were on fire. Perry sent a message to the Shogun that he (Perry) would return next spring, and that he expected Japan to open its boarders to the Americans. This quasi invasion by the United States was one of the first steps in American imperial expansions, which would one day include the Philippines, Hawaii, and others. The government of Japan did not think that it was powerful enough to expel Perry and was forced to negotiate with him. Treaties were soon made with the United States that opened ports for American trade and provided for an exchange of diplomats. The prohibition against foreigners, which had held for over 250 years, disappeared, as ships from seventeen other nations sailed into Tokyo Bay and negotiated similar treaties.

The intrusion of these foreigners had major domestic consequences. Many Japanese lords did not like the treaties, and the Emperor, until now a symbolic figure who took no part in government, refused to sign them, thereby dividing Japanese opinion between himself and the shogun. A show of strength by foreign nations forced the Emperor to approve the treaties in 1865, but in a power struggle between shogun and the emperor came to a climax. The court announced the restoration of powers to the Emperor, and after some fighting, the shogun was forced to give in. Mutsuhito, the new fifteen- year-old Emperor, took the name Meiji (Enlightened One), and the Meiji Era, which lasted until his death in 1912, began.

The policy of the new Emperor was to develop Japan both industrially and militarily. He was determined to build a state that could compete with and stand up to the world pow- ers that had humiliated Japan. Thus Japan consciously began to “Westernize.” In 1868 the Emperor issued the “Charter Oath,” a statement of the new policy;

* Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by public discussion.
* All classes, high and low, shall unite in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state.
* The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall each be allowed to pursue his own calling so that there may be no discontent. (During the shogunate, Japan had a ridged class system, similar to medieval European society)
* Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of Nature.
* Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule.
* Though strong localisms persisted, many feudal privileges were ended, and government became more centralized.

As part of his reforms, the Meiji ruler gave Japan a constitution in 1889. The Emperor retained great powers, his traditional position of divinity was continued and enhanced, and he held control of the army and foreign affairs. A Diet (parliament) of two houses was created: the upper house, the House of Peers, was aristocratic; the lower house, the House of Representatives, was elected by all males over twenty-five who paid a fixed amount of taxes. In effect, this restricted the right to vote to a tiny part of the population. A prime minister, chosen by the Emperor, and a privy council, consisting of twenty-six members selected by the Emperor on the advice of the prime minister, were to assist the Emperor in ruling the country.

The constitution of Japan, which lasted until the end of the Second World War, was ambiguous in certain areas. It did not state clearly whether the Diet had the right to approve the budget; nor did it specify how much control the Diet was to have over the military. In addition, the constitution left so much in the hands of the Emperor that Japan seemed to be a paternalistic state governed by a benign father. The Emperor had no real responsibility to the Diet. Yet this was the first constitution adopted by a state whose roots were non-European.

Economic growth was fostered by a combination of government initiative and private enterprise, a system sometimes called “hothouse capitalism.” The government at- tempted to provide political stability and a sound financial atmosphere, and to encourage industrial development. It also sponsored railways, telegraph lines, and ship building. At this time, family-business enterprises, called zaibatsu, grew up and became very powerful institutions. Between 1883 and 1890 Japan’s railway lines expanded from 393 km to 2332 km; between 1887 and 1892 cotton production increased tenfold; between 1904 and 1914 coal production nearly tripled; between 1902 and 1912 the amount of capital invested in sugar refining increased five times, in ma- chine production nine times, in gas companies eleven times, in electricity fifteen times. In some enterprises Japan began to compete with the major industrial countries

Economic growth at home was accompanied by expansion overseas. In the 1880s Japan established relations with Korea, an area which had long been part of the Chinese sphere of interest. Consequently, a series of minor clashes broke out between China and Japan. When an internal uprising occurred in Korea in 1894, Japan and China both sent in troops to suppress it. Rather than firing on Koreans, Japanese and Chinese ships fired at each other, and war began. The Sino-Japanese War ended after nine months, with Japan the clear victor. In the treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895, Japan received Formosa, the Liaotung Peninsula, and the Pescadores. Korea obtained its independence from China, only to come under the influence of Japan.

Shimonoseki made the West sit up and take notice of Japan; but the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904—05 startled the world. The war was fought over the difficulties that arose between Russian interests in Manchuria and Japanese inter- ests in neighboring Korea. Japan tried to negotiate the issue but Russia refused, and in February 1904 war began. On the sea the Japanese demolished the Russians, though on land neither won a decisive victory. President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States mediated between the warring countries and in 1905 helped to negotiate the Treaty of Portsmouth by which Japan received part of Sakhalin and Russia obtained leases in the Kwantung Peninsula and south Manchuria. Russia also recognized Korean “independence.”

By 1905 Japan was competing successfully with European powers. In only a few decades Japan had undergone an industrial revolution. Moreover, Japan was now a world power, not with the mighty status of England, France, and Germany, but certainly the equal of Italy and definitely above Spain and Portugal. The Japanese humiliation in Tokyo Bay in the 1850s had been turned into a great national triumph by the beginning of the twentieth century.