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About Our Partner

Founded in 1846, the Smithsonian Institution is the world’s largest museum and research complex, consisting of 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park, and 9 research facilities. The total number of artifacts, works of art, and specimens in the Smithsonian’s collections is estimated at 137 million. These collections represent America’s rich heritage, art from across the globe, and the immense diversity of the natural and cultural world.

In support of its mission—the increase and diffusion of knowledge—the Smithsonian has embarked on four Grand Challenges that describe its areas of study, collaboration, and exhibition: Unlocking the Mysteries of the Universe, Understanding and Sustaining a Biodiverse Planet, Valuing World Cultures, and Understanding the American Experience. The Smithsonian’s partnership with The Great Courses is an engaging opportunity to encourage continuous exploration by learners of all ages across these diverse areas of study.

This course, *Understanding Japan: A Cultural History*, recounts the extraordinary transformation of Japan from its modest ancient origins to the development of the shogunate and to the Meiji Restoration; from the Russo-Japanese War and the rise of the Pacific empire to the American occupation and the postwar economic miracle. Along the way, the course explains fundamental elements of Japanese culture: the samurai warrior, the *bushidō* code of honor, the kamikaze cult, the influence of Zen Buddhism, and the modern corporate psychology of Sony and Matsushita. In the end, the course explores whether Japan is firmly anchored in the East or is the first truly globalized nation in the world. ■
Understanding Japan: A Cultural History

Scope:

Japanese culture presents us with a paradox. Many aspects of Japan’s culture seem insular and exclusive, and the Japanese people often pride themselves on their distinctiveness. Yet the Japanese people are also voracious consumers of foreign culture, and parts of Japanese culture have gone global. Japanese automobiles, sushi, and animation are known around the world. In this course, we’ll confront this paradox head on, looking at the tension between globalization and isolation over two millennia of Japanese history and culture.

We’ll begin in prehistoric Japan, when the islands were ruled by dozens of warring kingdoms. Next, we’ll see how Japanese rulers confronted the challenge of ancient globalization in the 6th through 8th centuries. When powerful empires on the Asian continent threatened Japan both culturally and militarily, Japanese rulers imported ideas, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, and technologies, ranging from writing to metallurgy, to build a newly powerful state. Then Japan fell into relative isolation, limiting contacts with China and Korea and developing a distinctive culture centered, first, on imperial aristocrats in Kyoto and, later, on a rising warrior class. From the 1300s to the 1600s, Japan experienced a second wave of globalization. Westerners arrived in Japan and introduced new weapons—guns—and new ideas—Christianity. Japanese merchants spread throughout East Asia, establishing trading posts in China, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Japanese warlords sent envoys as far as Rome, and some converted to Christianity.

From the early 1600s, Japan returned to relative isolation, barring most Japanese from leaving the country under penalty of death. Foreigners, both Western and Chinese, were restricted to the port of Nagasaki. Then, in the mid-1800s, Japan confronted a new challenge: powerful, aggressive, and technologically advanced Western states. In response, Japanese leaders again actively embraced foreign ideas and technologies, ranging from democracy to the steam engine. That transformation produced the modern Japanese state, able to challenge the West both economically and militarily.
In the course of this journey over two millennia, we’ll meet some remarkable people, including Hōjō Masako, the “nun shogun” who ruled as shogun from behind her male relatives. We’ll also meet Shinran, the charismatic Buddhist preacher who spread his vision of salvation like a Christian gospel. The 16th-century warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi rose from humble origins to become the most powerful man in Japan, with dreams of a global empire. In the modern period, we’ll meet both warmongers and peacemakers. In the 1920s, for example, Ishiwara Kanji wrote of a coming apocalyptic war with the United States, while Nitobe Inazō was imagining a new era of peace and international cooperation.

In the last section of the course, we’ll consider Japan today. How have the past two millennia of Japanese history shaped contemporary Japan? Do decades of slow economic growth and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster spell the end of an era? What does the future hold for Japan?
In 1871, Itō Hirobumi, a member of Japan’s finance ministry who later became prime minister, gave a speech in Washington, DC, in which he characterized Japan as having been isolated for most of its history. Itō’s speech is just one example of a strangely pervasive view of Japan as disconnected from the rest of the world until the arrival of U.S. ships in 1853. In this course, we will take a more nuanced view than the one offered by Itō. Rather than a clear break between isolation and globalization, we will treat Japanese history in cyclical terms. As we will see, Japan has experienced periods of isolation, but it has also seen eras of extreme international and cosmopolitan engagement.

A Cyclical History

- The modern era, from about the mid-1800s to the present, is Japan’s third phase of globalization. Working backward, this era came out of a period of relative isolation that began in the 1630s. During this roughly 200-year epoch, the shoguns implemented a series of policies that drastically curtailed Japan’s contact with the rest of the world. Japanese subjects were prohibited from traveling overseas, information about the outside world was tightly controlled, books discussing Christianity were banned, and so on.

- But before that, from the 1300s to the early 1600s, Japan had been intensely engaged in world trade and politics.
  - In the 1400s, for example, Japan was a haven for pirates who terrorized the coasts of Korea and China. In the 1500s and 1600s, Japanese traders spread across Asia, Japanese warlords employed foreign advisers, and Japanese samurai served foreign kings.
  - In the 1590s, there were probably more Christians in Japan as a percentage of the population than there were in the 1950s. So important were Catholic missions in the 16th century
that powerful Japanese warlords, known as *daimyo*, sent ambassadors to the Vatican.

- Before this second phase of globalization, however, was an earlier period of relative isolation, running from about 900 to 1300. Japan was not completely isolated during this time; in fact, a few Buddhist monks traveled to China and brought back what became Zen Buddhism. But in general, the Japanese state did not reach out to the rest of the world; instead, it was mainly working to keep invaders, such as the Mongols, away from Japan.

- Moving one more cycle backwards, we reach the first phase of Japan’s globalization, the period from the 500s to about 900. This ancient era of international involvement did not include Europe, but it did encompass vast parts of Asia.
  - For example, in the 740s, the Japanese emperor commissioned one of the largest Buddhist statues in the world. At the consecration ceremony—attended by thousands of guests from across Asia—the eye of the Buddha was symbolically opened by a monk from India.
  - In addition, Japan and the Korean peninsula were deeply connected during this phase of globalization. The official records of the imperial house show extensive intermarriage between Japanese and Korean noble families.

- As we can see, Japan’s history has moved through three cycles of international engagement, punctuated by two cycles of relative isolation. The tension between isolation and global involvement has had a shaping influence on Japanese culture.

**The Jōmon Period**

- The first inhabitants of the islands of Japan migrated down from Siberia along land bridges during the Ice Age. A few scholars argue that a migration also took place up from Southeast Asia. The exact dates of these migrations are the subject of intense debate, but there is a rough consensus that humans arrived in Japan by 35,000 B.C.E.
By about 12,000 B.C.E., these early Japanese peoples had both stone tools and simple pottery. Interestingly, Japan developed a vibrant pottery tradition thousands of years before agriculture. In fact, this pre-agricultural period in Japanese history gets its name from the pottery. It’s called the Jōmon period; jōmon means “rope pattern” because pots were often decorated by pressing a rope into the wet clay.

The Jōmon era is commonly defined as about 12,000 B.C.E. to 300 B.C.E. Jōmon pottery and tools give us some idea of what life and culture were like during this time. Jōmon people formed small communities comprising pit dwellings with tent roofs, and they hunted, fished, and foraged. Rather than thinking of this Jōmon population as a single Japanese people, it’s better to think of prehistoric Japan as a web of tribes that alternately feuded and cooperated.

Around 300 or 400 B.C.E., life on the islands began to change with the introduction of two striking new technologies: wet-rice agriculture and basic metallurgy. These were probably introduced by migrants from the Korean peninsula. Given that there were no longer Ice Age land bridges, we might ask how continental people reached Japan.

○ Japan is actually four large islands: the main island of Honshu, Kyushu in the southwest, the small island of Shikoku, and Hokkaido in the northeast. It also includes many smaller islands, such as the Ryukyu Islands in the south.

○ Many maps are drawn in such a way as to cut Japan off from the rest of the world. It looks like a cluster of islands in the middle of the Pacific. However, if we center a map on the Sea of Japan, we can see that Japan suddenly looks closely connected to the rest of Asia.

○ Off the coast of Nagasaki, one can travel from Japan to Korea without ever losing sight of land; the maximum stretch of open water is about 40 miles. The same is true in the far northeast;
it’s about 30 miles from the tip of Hokkaido to Sakhalin Island, and Sakhalin runs up to the mouth of the Amur River, which stretches thousands of miles across Asia. In the far southwest, the distances are a little longer, with one large gap of about 130 miles, but after that, it’s small hops all the way to Taiwan and, from there, to the Philippines.

○ From this perspective, Japan doesn’t seem geographically isolated. Yes, it’s a cluster of islands, but those islands connect to other islands, and by island hopping or river cruising, one can reach Australia or the Central Asian steppes.

The Yayoi and Tomb Periods

- In the 4th and 5th centuries B.C.E., migrants from the Korean peninsula crossed the narrow stretch of sea by boat and brought with them the technologies of rice farming and metal tool making. These people and technologies arrived first in western Japan, then steadily spread across the islands.

- The development of agriculture in a society means that some people can produce enough to feed others. This, in turn, allows for more social hierarchy, a larger and wealthier ruling elite, and specialization.

- In Japan, with the rise of wet-rice agriculture, we see this exact phenomenon. Kingdoms with powerful elites emerged, and farmers paid tribute or taxes to support those elites. During this time, we find storehouses for grain, elaborate burial mounds for rulers, and evidence of specialized craft workers.

- The era in which this specialization and these new elites began to develop is known as the Yayoi period. It lasted for about 600 years, from around 300 B.C.E. to around 300 C.E.

- As Yayoi chieftains grew more powerful, they were buried in larger and more complex tombs; for this reason, historians and archaeologists refer to the period from about 250/300 C.E. to 587 C.E. as the tomb period. We can also think of the tomb period as
an era of ancient chieftains, much more powerful than earlier Jōmon leaders but much less powerful than the coming generation of Japanese rulers.

- It’s unclear how ethnically distinct this new ruling elite was from the earlier Jōmon people, but artifacts from the elaborate burial sites are useful in helping us understand society in the late Yayoi period and the tomb period. Nobles in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries were buried with terracotta statues called haniwa that depict dancers, shamans, soldiers, animals, and more.

- Japan in this era was still a pre-literature society. The earliest Japanese writing is from the 400s, but we do have continental records, primarily Chinese, of contacts between the Japanese islands and ancient continental kingdoms.
  - One fascinating account comes from the late 3rd century from a document called the Wei zhi, or Records of Wei. This was the official government chronicle of the Chinese Wei dynasty; it contains a detailed account of a Wei Chinese ambassador’s visit to the ancient Japanese kingdom of Yamatai, which was probably located in northern Kyushu.
  
    - According to this Chinese chronicle, the Japanese islands were undergoing consolidation. Earlier, they had been divided into hundreds of kingdoms, but they had consolidated to about 30, one of which was Yamatai.
This kingdom was ruled by a shaman queen named Pimiko, who had a special direct connection to the gods. Pimiko was served by 1,000 female attendants but only one man, her brother, who “helped” her run the country. Given that the most revered Japanese deity is a goddess—the sun goddess Amaterasu—it’s fascinating to find the Chinese envoy describe a shamanistic matriarchy indirectly controlled by the queen’s brother.

An archaeological site on Kyushu in Yoshinogari is actually fairly close to the ambassador’s description of Yamatai, with one major exception: When Pimiko died, she was supposedly buried with thousands of attendants, but no one has found such a large live burial in Japan. Instead, archaeologists have found many *haniwa*; perhaps the ambassador thought that the clay models would later be replaced with living people, or perhaps he invented the story entirely.

For our purposes, the general attitude conveyed in the *Wei zhi* is significant. For the envoy, the kingdom of Yamatai was utterly inferior to China. Yamatai sent slaves to China as tribute, and in return, the emperor of China sent bronze mirrors and other products of advanced civilization. What’s more, Yamatai was ruled by a witch!

This attitude is a good launching point for the rest of our course. Such Chinese condescension was part of the motivation that drove later Japanese kings to build more powerful kingdoms.

By the 500s, Japanese rulers had begun to figure out why continental kingdoms were more powerful: They had writing and could make powerful weapons from bronze and iron.

Japanese rulers decided to import those ideas, launching a period of ancient globalization. As we’ll see, the goal and the eventual outcome of this globalization was a kingdom of Japan that could describe itself as China’s equal.
Suggested Reading

Edwards, “In Pursuit of Himiko.”

Hudson, *Ruins of Identity*.

Kidder, Jr., *Himiko and Japan’s Elusive Chiefdom of Yamatai*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the arrival of hominids to Japan relate to the arrival of people in the New World?

2. If there were multiple waves of migration to Japan and layers of cultural influence, can we speak of a unitary “Japanese people”?

3. Look at a map in a travel guide to Japan. Does it emphasize isolation or connection?
Lecture 2—Understanding Japan through Ancient Myths

We know from archaeology that prehistoric Japanese peoples had rich and varied religious beliefs. These local beliefs and practices included notions of purity and contamination and of sacred and dangerous places, and they were expressed in stories of gods and heroes. Collectively, Japan’s myths are called Shintō, a word meaning “way of the gods.” Shintō is commonly described as the indigenous religion of Japan, but it is intermingled with Buddhism. In this lecture, we’ll explore the two traditions and learn some of the stories of Japanese myth.

Shintōism and Buddhism

- Textbooks and guidebooks sometimes draw a clear distinction between Shintōism, Japan’s native religious tradition, and Buddhism, a religious tradition that originated in north India. For most of Japanese history, however, these two traditions were thoroughly intermingled. An analogy in Western religious practice helps clarify this idea.
  - The conventional celebration of Christian holidays in the United States is full of pagan symbols. The Christmas tree, for example, comes from Celtic solstice celebrations, and Easter eggs reflect an ancient pagan association of eggs and spring.
  - But the fact that modern Christianity has adopted some pagan symbols is not useful in understanding how ordinary people experience religion. In fact, if we make a clear distinction between the four Gospels and pagan traditions, we would come to the conclusion that most American Christians are Celtic pagan heretics.
  - The same is true in Japan, except it’s even more extreme. Japanese historical texts are full of references to “the gods and Buddhas”; for most Japanese, those were two complementary categories of supernatural beings.
When we’re thinking about Japanese religion, we should keep this Christian analogy in mind. Sometimes, a technical distinction is made between Buddhist and Shinto thought that was invisible, irrelevant, or even absurd to actual believers or practitioners.

**The Creator Deities of the *Kojiki***

- Local Japanese religious custom developed by oral tradition and wasn’t written down until 712 in a document called the *Kojiki*, the *Record of Ancient Matters*. The oldest surviving copy of the *Kojiki* is from the 1370s.
  - The *Kojiki* opens with the births of three deities who either disappear or hide after they’re born. They are absent from the scene for seven generations, until the births of the creator deities, the male Izanagi and the female Izanami. These two are ordered by the gods to create the Japanese islands.

  - To populate the islands with gods, Izanagi and Izanami agree to copulate, but first, they perform a courtship dance. During the dance, Izanami speaks first, and because of this, their first offspring is a deformed leech. The gods advise them to try again, but this time, to make sure that Izanagi speaks first. As a result, the pair creates many gods, including a mountain god, a river god, and a god of the plains. But when Izanami gives birth to the fire god, she is burned in the process, falls ill, and dies.

  - Izanagi is so upset that he kills the fire god, then travels to Yomi, the land of the dead, in hopes of retrieving his wife. As the couple waits for the gods of Yomi to decide whether Izanami can return to earth, Izanagi lights his hair ornament to see in the darkness and discovers that Izanami is covered in maggots.

  - Izanagi is horrified, and Izanami is furious. She sends thunder gods after her husband because he has disgraced her by looking at her. Izanagi escapes and seals the entrance to Yomi with a huge boulder. Izanami curses him, saying that she will take 1,000 people from his land to Yomi every day. He responds
that he will have 1,500 birthing huts built every day. In this way, the myth explains why people are born and die.

- Finally, Izanagi bathes to purify himself after visiting Yomi. As the water droplets splash off him, they become gods, including the wind god, Susanoo, and the sun goddess, Amaterasu.

- Notice that the Japanese gods seem to rule by consensus. Interestingly, we also find that many Japanese leaders—emperors, shoguns, daimyo, prime ministers, and CEOs—are less independent than their international counterparts. In Japan, leaders are expected to reflect the will of a broader ruling group.

- Another striking feature of the Kojiki is that gods die and go to the underworld. The concept of Yomi highlights one reason that Buddhism and Shintō have coexisted: They have complementary virtues.
  - The Shintō idea of the afterlife is fairly bleak: You die, then you rot. In contrast, Buddhism offers a richer and more optimistic view of life after death. There is a Buddhist notion of hell, but it’s for wicked people, and even they get another chance because everyone is reborn.
  - Buddhist mourning consists of praying for an auspicious rebirth for the deceased. There is no true Shintō mourning ritual; instead, the emphasis is on avoiding the contamination of death. Izanagi’s final actions focus on his own purification; he bathes to cleanse himself of death, creating more gods in the process, but there’s no funeral for Izanami.
  - It’s something of a cliché to note that Japanese people have Shintō weddings and Buddhist funerals, but that cliché reflects the complementary strengths of the two traditions.

The Rock Cave of Heaven

- As mentioned, two of Izanagi’s children were Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and Susanoo, the wind god. The story of the Rock Cave of
Heaven can be understood as the story of how Susanoo became the second most powerful god, behind his sister Amaterasu.

- One day, Susanoo began destroying Amaterasu’s belongings, tearing up her rice fields, defecating in her palace, and killing her weaving maiden. In response, Amaterasu hid in a cave, depriving the land of light.
  - Notice that Amaterasu becomes the full embodiment of the sun only when she hides, despite the fact that there must have been sunlight before she was born. Further, even though Izanami was burned when she birthed the fire god, no one gets burned by the sun goddess. It seems that the gods are sometimes literally natural forces and sometimes metaphorically related to natural forces.
  - In the 1700s and 1800s, when Shintō scholars tried to push back against Chinese influence and highlight the importance of the *Kojiki* as a fount of uniquely Japanese values, they ran up against the irrationality of the stories.
  - Confucian scholars, who valued logical consistency, pointed out that this story makes no sense except as metaphor. In response, Shintō scholars conceded that the *Kojiki* was irrational but argued that its incomprehensibility was its virtue. The acts of the gods are beyond human understanding, and if humans had invented the stories, they would have fixed such details. The strangeness of the *Kojiki*, they argued, is evidence of its divine origins.

- Plunged into darkness, the gods decide on a plan. One group mines ore and smelts it to make a mirror. Another uproots a tree and hangs the mirror from the tree. The tree is decorated with special cloth and jewels. The descriptions here in the *Kojiki* are extremely elaborate, relating to sacred rituals and places associated with specific deities.

- The gods then assemble in front of the cave where Amaterasu is hiding. One goddess, Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto, becomes
possessed, tears off her clothes, and dances in front of the cave. The other gods laugh, and their laughter draws Amaterasu to the front of the cave. The gods then tell her that an even greater goddess is present. They hold the tree with the mirror in front of the cave door, and of course, Amaterasu’s own light is reflected in the mirror.

- When Amaterasu steps closer to see this other shining goddess, the gods grab her and pull her out of the cave. They put a special rope in front of the cave and tell her not to reenter. The gods then confront Susanoo, expelling him from the High Plain of Heaven.

Analyzing the Rock Cave Legend
- As in the Izanagi and Izanami story, we see in the Rock Cave story that the gods of Japanese mythology have limited powers. Although she is lured out of the cave by deceit, Amaterasu is blocked from returning and bound by the decisions of the other gods.
• Many Shintō rituals are reenactments of the festivities used to lure Amaterasu out of hiding. For example, a woven white rope surrounding a sacred space is a common sight in Japanese shrines today.

• The fact that Amaterasu does not recognize herself in a mirror seems absurd, but it makes more sense if we think of this story as an account of, perhaps, a late Yayoi-era kingdom, when a mirror was a rare and exotic gift from the continent.

• The banishment of Susanoo is also intriguing given the archaeological finds from Izumo, once a thriving and wealthy kingdom on the coast of the Sea of Japan.
  o Hundreds of bronze swords and spears have been unearthed at Izumo, and recent reconstructions show that the platform of the ancient shrine there was hundreds of feet in the air. From such finds, we conclude that Izumo was a powerful kingdom.
  o But at some point—probably in the 500s or 600s—the people of Izumo were defeated by a kingdom associated with the sun goddess. Izumo was too powerful to be eliminated from mythology, but the shrine there was subordinated.

• As we’ve seen, Susanoo is expelled from the High Plain of Heaven, but he is still heroic on Earth. He kills a monstrous serpent and finds in its tail a magic sword. He offers the sword to Amaterasu, a clear sign of his subordination to the sun goddess.
  o We can read this legend as a political metaphor. A coalition of clans centered on the sun goddess and based in the area that is now Kyoto and Nara defeated the rulers of Izumo, the kingdom of the wind god.
  o As part of the peace, however, the Izumo clans retained some local control; thus, in Japanese mythology, Susanoo remains a hero even after he’s expelled from heaven.
Part of the inspiration for compiling the *Kojiki* in the 700s was to use these stories to support Japanese kingship. Ancient Japan’s emperors claimed descent from these gods as part of their mandate to rule. Remarkably, the Japanese monarchy still draws legitimacy from these ancient myths; the reigning emperor in Japan enjoys a special connection to Amaterasu.

What’s distinctive about Japanese mythology is not that it is uniquely strange; it’s that in Japan, the remote and distant past is not all that remote and distant. Instead, particularly in such institutions as the imperial house, ancient rituals are a part of contemporary life.

**Suggested Reading**

Aston, *Nihongi*.

Kōnoshi, “The Land of Yomi.”

Philippi, *Kojiki*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. How does the Shintō idea of myriad gods compare with monotheistic conceptions of the divine?

2. Is the Japanese emphasis on purity unique? What are other traditions’ rituals of purification?

3. In Shintō, oral tradition was transcribed only in the 8th century. How does this compare with other religious traditions?
In the early 500s, Japan was little more than a loose confederation of clans, with an emperor who was the nominal chief of the chieftains who led those clans. Beginning in the late 500s, however, leaders in Japan embarked on an unprecedented project of state building. By the late 700s, Japan was a highly centralized state, with an emperor who claimed direct authority over all of Japanese territory. This was an ambitious state that described itself as equal to the Chinese empire. In this lecture, we’ll see how and why this remarkable change came about. In particular, we will discuss politics in three periods: the Asuka (538–710 C.E.), Nara (710–794 C.E.), and Heian (794–1185 C.E.).

**Snapshots of Ancient Japan**

- In the 500s, each clan leader in Japan governed his own people under his own rules. Commoners paid tribute to local clan leaders. Taxes and ritual offerings were likely fused into one form of tribute because local lords and local gods were connected.
  - By the end of the 8th century, however, Japan had a single monarch in Kyoto whose laws applied throughout Japan. This new state wiped out clan boundaries; it also conducted a census that listed the family status of every person and measured all the land in Japan. The new state tried to fit all the arable land into neat rectangular grids.
  - Moreover, the central government tried to redistribute all the land in Japan every six years so that all adult male commoners had same-size parcels, all adult male servants had same-size parcels, and all adult female commoners had same-size parcels. This was based loosely on Chinese practices, but in Japan, it was an unprecedented new level of national power.
  - Historians call this new centralized monarchy the *Ritsuryō* state. The term *Ritsuryō* refers to a system of imperial law
that, in theory, applied to every village in Japan. The system comprised two main legal components: the criminal laws, or *ritsu*, and the administrative laws, or *ryō*.

- In the 500s, armies consisted of small bands of clan leaders and their followers. In the 700s, by contrast, the centralized government tried to draw conscripts from every village in Japan to create a large national army.

- In the 500s, there were no cities worth mentioning in Japan. The capital cities in the Asuka region were little more than clusters of official buildings. But in the 700s, Japan began building major cities.
  - First, the imperial seat was established in the large capital of Nara; then, it moved to an even larger city in Kyoto, which officially became the capital in 794. Kyoto was based closely on Chang’an, the ancient capital of many Chinese dynasties.
  - Both Nara and Kyoto were carefully planned rectangular cities, with a tidy grid of streets running north-south and east-west. The straight lines reflected the emperor’s ability to impose order and structure on the universe.

- In the 500s, Buddhism was virtually unknown in Japan. But in the 700s, the state actively embraced and promoted Buddhism, which had reached the country via Chinese monks. In fact, the imperial government built a monastery in every provincial capital. And in the 750s, the state completed one of the largest Buddhist temples in the world, Tōdaiji in Nara.

**Understanding the Transformation**

- These before-and-after snapshots of ancient Japan show a dramatic change that occurred in the space of 200 years, from the 500s to the 700s C.E. What prompted Japanese leaders to undertake these massive political, military, and religious projects, most of which were inspired by foreign models?
As noted earlier, Japan experienced a similar period of globalization in the 1800s and 1900s. In both eras, Japan faced a new challenge: an enormous, powerful, and expansive foreign culture. In the ancient period, that foreign culture was China, the Sui dynasty and the Tang dynasty. In the modern period, it was the great Western powers, the United States, Britain, France, and later, Germany.

In both cases, Japanese leaders responded in similar ways. Again, in the ancient period, Japan adopted Chinese ideas and technologies on a massive scale. More than 1,000 years later, it did the same with European and American ideas and technologies.

The Unification of China

The first major Chinese dynasty was the Han, but that collapsed in the 200s C.E., and over the next 300 years, China was ruled by multiple rival kingdoms. There were more than a dozen different kingdoms in the 4th century that consolidated into three in the 500s: the Chen in the south, the Zhou in the northwest, and the Qi in the northeast.

In the late 500s, however, the Sui dynasty again consolidated and ruled much of the area that’s now called China. The Sui lasted only to 618 C.E., but it was followed by the Tang dynasty, which endured for three centuries. Tang emperors were at the helm of a powerful, stable, expansive Chinese Empire.

At a basic level, this Chinese unification inspired Japanese unification. The Tang dynasty in East Asia was like Rome in Europe: unprecedented in its cultural sophistication and in its military prowess. It was both a positive model of what a state could be and a terrifying threat.

The threat to Japan was quite tangible because in the 7th century, Tang China intervened on the Korean peninsula, helping the Silla kingdom defeat its rivals (the kingdoms of Baekje and Goguryeo and the Gaya confederacy) and become the ruling dynasty of the
entire peninsula. That served as a catalyst for centralizing authority in Japan.

The Soga and Nakatomi

- As we’ve seen, Japan was not a unified country in the 500s; rather, it was a loose confederation of clans struggling for control. In this environment, one ambitious house came to the fore, the Soga clan. The Soga claimed descent from the legendary Japanese emperor Kōgen and from Korean nobles.

- Having gained the upper hand among rival clans in Japan, the Soga were committed to building a stronger central state and looked to China for a political model. In addition, the Soga aggressively promoted foreign culture, especially Buddhism. This drew stiff opposition from other Japanese clans, in particular, the Mononobe and Nakatomi.

- The Soga responded to this opposition with force. In 587, they crushed the Mononobe and the Nakatomi in a palace coup, and in 592, they assassinated the emperor. The Soga decided not to make themselves emperors but, instead, to rule through pliant proxies. They married their daughters to emperors and served as high-ranking ministers but did not claim the throne. In this way, they wielded great influence during the Asuka period, driving the creation of a centralized Japanese state based on Chinese models.

- The Soga maintained power for about 60 years, but in 645, they were overthrown in a coup led by the Nakatomi. This clan then accelerated the adoption of continental-style reforms and the process of building a powerful centralized state.
  - Despite their distrust of the Soga clan leaders, the Nakatomi remained in alliance with the Baekje in Korea. In the mid-600s, Japan sent troops and ships to assist the Baekje against China’s favorite, the Silla, but they were crushed. In the Battle of Hakusukinoe in 663, half the Japanese fleet and tens of thousands of men were lost.
○ This development was genuinely terrifying. The Nakatomi must have wondered what would happen if the Tang-Silla alliance decided to attack Japan.

Expansion of Imperial Power

- As it turned out, an invasion from the continent never came, but the army raised by the central government in Japan proved useful nonetheless. The imperial state used it to expand its power in the Japanese archipelago.
- In the early 600s, most of Japan northeast of present-day Tokyo was wild frontier. But over the next 200 years, the imperial court pushed its control almost to the northern edge of Honshu Island. In the southwest, the imperial state extended its control over all of Kyushu.
- With the expansion of the imperial state, by the 800s, the capital in Kyoto was receiving tax revenue from almost everywhere on the three main islands of Japan: Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu.

- Even though the Chinese invasion never came, the emerging Japanese state was still determined to impress its neighbors with displays of power. For this reason, Emperor Shōmu decided to build Tōdaiji temple, one of the largest Buddhist temples in the world. According to ancient records, 50,000 master woodworkers and 2 million ordinary laborers were employed in its construction.
The opening ceremony of the temple was attended by monks and officials from around the known world.

- The Japanese elite was determined to impress its nation’s power and sophistication on Asia, and being sophisticated meant, in many ways, emulating Buddhism and Confucianism, the philosophies of the continent. But mounting such impressive projects can be unsustainable. This remains one of the legacies of the *ristryō* state.
  - On the one hand, *ristryō* law in Japan was like Roman law in Europe: It continued to have influence long after the empire was gone.
  - But many of the achievements of the *ristryō* state began to feel unsustainable rather quickly; they made sense only in terms of furious international competition. And by the late 800s, the imperial elite—the courtiers around the emperor—began to wonder whether this massive central government was worth the effort.

### Suggested Reading

Ooms, *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan*.

Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do modern politics shape research on ancient East Asia?

2. Are there other examples, for different cultures, of massive cultural borrowing, similar to what took place in Nara and Heian Japan?
Aspects of the Japanese Language
Lecture 4

As we’ll see in this lecture, the Japanese language is highly contextual—it’s difficult to know how to say something in Japanese unless you know the details of the social context. This aspect of the language reflects a longstanding concern with order, hierarchy, and consensus. We’ll also see that Japan has one of the most complex writing systems in the world, largely because it adopted ideographic Chinese characters, which have no syntactical relationship to spoken Japanese. This borrowing of the Chinese script system is just one example of China’s deep influence on Japanese culture. We’ll explore some of the linguistic consequences of this influence in this lecture.

A Situational Language

• The Japanese language is highly situational. When translating something in Japanese, you often need to know the time of day; the time of year; the formality of the situation; the age, gender, and social status of the speaker; the social connections among the speaker, listener, and third parties; and so on. In this sense, Japanese is arguably the opposite of American English, which has lost almost all markers of social hierarchy in speech.

• To understand the situational nature of Japanese, think of each speech situation as having a position on two axes: the social hierarchy and the formality of the situation. Almost every Japanese verb is different based on these two axes; in fact, Japanese adjectives and many nouns also vary based on these axes.

• To see this in action, consider the following situation: A group of Japanese friends from college gets together for a beer, and one says, “Hey, I saw our favorite teacher, Professor Tanaka, the other day, and he’s retired but healthy and happy.”
  ○ The situation here is clearly informal, but Professor Tanaka is the social superior to the students. As a result, the speaker’s
language must be honorific but informal. The student says “I saw Professor Tanaka” as Tanaka-sensei ni ome ni kakatta, which literally means, “My eyes respectfully fell upon Professor Tanaka.”

- Ome ni kakaru is a respectful phrase that signals the social superiority of the professor—“my eyes fell upon” instead of just “saw” or “met.” But kakatta is the informal form of kakaru because the speaker is among friends.

- In a more formal situation with the same students talking about the same professor, ome ni kakatta would become ome ni kakarimashita—the same verb but now in a formal form. The longer -mashita ending tells us that the verb is formal.

- Finally, consider the same students and the same formal situation, but this time, the subject of the conversation is an old mutual friend instead of the professor. Because the friend is of the same social position as the students, a neutral verb is used for “to see” or “to meet”—perhaps de’au. The speaker might say, Tanaka-kun ni deaimashita, “I bumped into old Tanaka-kun.”
  - Though the root verb de’au is neutral, it takes the form deaimashita because the situation is formal. In other words, even though Tanaka is a mutual friend, the verb must reflect the contextual mood.
  - As in the previous case, a shorter verb ending is used in an informal situation: de’atta instead of deaimashita. In this situation, the speaker would say Tanaka-kun ni de’atta.

- To English speakers, this two-axis system probably seems rather complicated, but it helps explain how basic phrases work in Japanese.
  - For example, in Japanese, no word truly corresponds to the English please, although many phrase books give kudasai as a translation of please. That translation certainly gives the overall meaning, but kudasai makes more sense in terms of an axis of social hierarchy.
- *Kudasai* comes from the verb *kudasaru*, which actually means “send it down.” Thus, saying *kudasai* marks the speaker as socially below the listener. That humility is balanced by the form of the verb—the *sai* suffix is actually a mild command, which means that *kudasai* is the gentle command form of the verb *kudasaru*. Thus, *please* in Japanese is “Could you send it down?”

**Agglutination**

- Japanese verbs and adjectives add information by adding suffixes; this is characteristic of an agglutinating language. For example, in English, the past passive of the verb *eat* is *was eaten*. In Japanese, the verb for “eat,” *taberu*, becomes *taberareta*, “was eaten.” The past passive voice is indicated by a suffix.

- Agglutination is also seen in Japanese adjectives. In English, as we know, adjectives don’t have tense. For example, in the phrases *is delicious* and *was delicious*, the adjective *delicious* doesn’t change from present to past; the sense of time comes from the verb. But in Japanese, the adjective for “delicious” is *oishii* in the present and *oishikatta* in the past. The past tense of an adjective is marked with a suffix.

- Furthermore, the more complicated the sentence, the more suffixes are added to Japanese words. Consider the sentence: *Although it was delicious, it did not want to be eaten*. In Japanese, that sentence would be: *Oishikatta ga taberaretaku nakatta*. In English, to get this thought across, we use many words, but Japanese uses only the words *delicious*, *but*, and *eat* and a negative past-tense marker, *nakatta*. All the helper words in English become suffixes in Japanese.

- Just as important as how Japanese says things is what it doesn’t say. For example, Japanese routinely drops pronouns, such as *I*, *me*, and *you*. They aren’t needed, largely because those reference points are clear from other parts of the sentence, usually suffixes to verbs.

- Instead of saying *you*, in Japanese, speakers commonly use the person’s name with a suffix; not surprisingly, that suffix marks social status. Further, because the Japanese language reflects
a concern with social position, it commonly relies on markers that are more subtle than a simple pronoun.

- If you’re talking to Mr. Tanaka, rather than saying you, you would say Tanaka-san or Tanaka-sama. Here, san is an honorific suffix, and sama is an extra honorific. If Mr. Tanaka is an old friend, you would say Tanaka-kun.

- Such suffixes can also be attached to words other than names. For example, in the Japanese phrase otsukaresama, sama is attached to the word for “tired.” This is a polite way of saying, “You must be tired,” but literally, it’s “Honorable Mr. or Mrs. Tired.”

- Pronouns exist in Japanese, but they usually come with extra meaning. For example, according to most phrase books, anata means “you.” But this specific word has the connotation of a wife speaking to her husband.

- Similarly, first-person pronouns tend to add information about the speaker. According to many phrase books, I is watakushi, but Japanese also has atashi, an informal I usually used by women; boku, used by males in casual situations; and ore, a very informal male first-person pronoun.

Japanese and Chinese

- Japanese writing is incredibly complex because it uses a Chinese-based script system, even though Chinese is structurally unrelated to Japanese. As a result, the Japanese language is full of workarounds to adapt Chinese orthography to Japanese syntax.

- Japanese was a fully developed spoken language by the 400s, but there was no written language until about that time, and writing did not become widespread for hundreds of years. It must have seemed sensible in ancient Japan to adapt the Chinese writing system rather than reinvent the wheel, but doing so led to two quirks of the Japanese language: double vocabulary and the need for additional orthography.
When the Japanese imported Chinese characters, they also imported Chinese sounds for those characters. Thus, in Japan, almost every Chinese character has two possible readings, the local Japanese reading and a copy of the Chinese pronunciation.

- Consider the word *tonkotsu* in the popular dish tonkotsu ramen. This word is written with the Chinese characters for “pig” and “bone,” but the common Japanese word for “pig” is *buta*, not *ton*, and the common Japanese word for “bone” is *hone*, not *kotsu*.

- *Buta* and *hone* are indigenous words because spoken Japanese had words for “pig” and “bone” long before writing. But with the importation of the Chinese characters—the glyphs—came the Chinese sounds. Thus, the ancient Japanese attempt to say “pig” in Chinese is *ton*, and the ancient Japanese attempt to say “bone” in Chinese is *kotsu*. By convention, when those two characters are put together, the result is *tonkotsu*.

- English, too, sometimes has an older Germanic vocabulary drawn from our Anglo-Saxon roots and a more sophisticated lexicon from Romance languages. Thus, we have both the word *cat*, from the German *katz*, and the more sophisticated *feline*, from the Latin *feles*. In English, these two words are spelled differently, but in Japanese, they would be written with the same character; the distinction between the two would be based on context.

The fact that Chinese is not an agglutinating language led to the second major consequence of adapting the Chinese writing system to Japanese. Because there is no easy way to represent the suffixes in Japanese using Chinese characters, Japanese developed two phonetic systems to fill the gap: *hiragana* and *katakana*. Both are derived from Chinese characters, but they are so highly simplified that they look more like letters than characters, and they are used only for sound.
Onomatopoeia in Japanese

- *Onomatopoeia* refers to words that imitate sounds, such as *moo* or *honk* in English. The Japanese language has a rich vocabulary of onomatopoetic words.

- Interestingly, Japanese uses onomatopoetic words for things that aren’t noisy. For example, to be lively or healthy is *pin pin suru*; to be irritated and angry is *ira ira suru*.

- These sounds can also be combined to create new words. For example, to sparkle is *pika pika*, and in Japanese, mice make the sound *chū chū*. From these words comes the name for the Pokémon character Pikachū, the shining electric mouse.

Generalizations about the Japanese Language

- With its onomatopoetic words, the Japanese language allows for contained playfulness. This observation leads us to some generalizations about Japanese culture based on the language.

Social relationships are wired into the Japanese language, and shifts in these relationships are conveyed by variation in nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
• First and foremost, as we’ve seen, you can’t say anything in Japanese without knowing the social standing of the various people involved in the conversation. The fact that this standing is conveyed in grammar means that you can tell when you have been accepted as a member of a group.

• The Japanese language also reflects the longstanding sense that things go best if everyone knows his or her place and follows the rules. But the Japanese also value consensus, and that means that it’s awkward to explicitly insist on rules. Thus, many aspects of the Japanese language also involve seemingly elliptical ways of saying no without ever using an overt negative. The structure of Japanese means that such linguistic moves are rich and subtle—precious commodities in a society that values consensus.

Suggested Reading

Inoue, “Gender, Language, and Modernity.”

Ono, “The Japanese Language.”

Yi, The Ideology of Kokugo.

Questions to Consider

1. How distinctive is the emphasis on hierarchy in Japanese? Can you think of parallels in other languages?

2. How has the complexity of the Japanese writing system affected education, technology, and other aspects of Japanese culture?
Japanese Buddhism is almost as old as Japan’s civilization, or at least as old as written civilization, primarily because some of the same people who brought writing to Japan—early scribes—were also Buddhist monks. Chinese sources suggest that Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 460s, though the more widely accepted date is 552—when the king of Baekje sent a mission to Japan that included monks, nuns, and Buddhist texts. In any case, whether it was the 460s, the 550s, or somewhere in between, Japanese Buddhism is nearly as old as the earliest written records in Japan. In this lecture, we’ll explore Buddhism and learn why it was appealing in ancient Japan.

Buddhist Doctrine

- Buddhism emerged from Hinduism in north India in roughly the 5th century B.C.E. It spread into China, then into the Korean peninsula. By the time it reached Japan, Buddhism was already a millennium old; it was a mature religion that had split into multiple sects, and those sects disagreed on some key points of doctrine. Still, across all ancient sects, a few core ideas were held in common.

- First, Buddhism assumes reincarnation. The idea of rebirth after death may sound wonderful, but in Buddhism, it’s a bad thing, highlighting the fact that ordinary lives are full of decay and loss. In Buddhist thinking, reincarnation is a trap; even if you are a deeply moral person, you are stuck in an endless cycle of disappointment and loss.

- Thus, from a Buddhist perspective, it’s desirable to transcend the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; that transcendence is called **nirvana**. The goal of Buddhism is to reach this alternate plane of being that is beyond the vicissitudes of human desire. Those who attain nirvana are known as Buddhas, enlightened beings. They exist in a realm that is beyond our comprehension.
• Although the ultimate goal might be to achieve nirvana, in practice, many people have been content with more modest goals. They move along spiritually, first toward a better rebirth, then ultimately, toward nirvana. For a better rebirth, the rules are unremarkable: Don’t lie, steal, cheat, and so on. What’s more intriguing is how Buddhism treats the higher stages of wisdom—the path from being a good ordinary person to a truly enlightened being.

• One of the central tenets of Buddhism is that desire leads us astray and makes us unstable. We all want money, power, and love; we all secretly dread losing those things; and we all know that we will lose them when we die. Thus, on some level, we all know that our lives are spent rushing around in pointless activities. But in Buddhism, inner peace comes from accepting the transience of everything and not trying to hold on.

• Buddhism goes even further. If everything is transient and desire leads us to ignore that fact, then desire blinds us to reality. It’s not just that desire makes us do stupid, futile things; it stops us from perceiving reality. What our senses tell us about the world—what we think is real—is just a mix of our hopes and fears; the real world is actually something completely different. We need Buddhist insight to know what’s truly real.

• In ancient Japan, the path to Buddhist wisdom was overwhelmingly associated with monastic life. Monks and nuns separated themselves from worldly desires, meditated, and studied sutras—transcriptions of lectures by wise monks and by Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha.

**Imperial Promotion of Buddhism**

• As we’ve noted, Buddhism arrived in Japan sometime around the 6\(^{th}\) century, and for the next three centuries, it was actively promoted by Japanese rulers. Why did rulers find this essentially monastic religion appealing?
• First, promoting Buddhism was simply part of what civilized kings in East Asia did; Japanese monarchs followed the example of rulers in Tang China and Korea. As part of the ritsuryō state, the imperial court ordered the construction of monasteries and abbeys and the printing of Buddhist texts.

• In addition to making them seem civilized, ancient Japanese monarchs also hoped that promoting Buddhism would win them divine protection.
  ○ Remember, in Buddhism, what seems obvious to the unenlightened mind is actually an illusion, and what seems impossible is simple to someone approaching Buddhahood. Thus, for ancient Japanese rulers, promoting Buddhism could earn them almost magical protection.
  ○ This idea is explicit in such texts as the Sutra of the Golden Light. Here, the Buddha tells four great kings that propagating Buddhism would afford them protection from heaven and would lead to better government by making their officials moral, honest, and compassionate.

• Japanese rulers in the 600s and 700s were especially impressed by the idea of winning divine protection. For example, one of the oldest temples in Japan, Yakushiji, was founded in Nara around 680 after Empress Jitō had fallen ill. Emperor Tenmu prayed for her recovery, took a Buddhist vow, and founded Yakushiji temple to bring about her recovery.

• Although state-sponsored Buddhism was important in legitimizing the ancient state and spreading Buddhism across Japan, it had weaknesses. For example, because they were dependent on state support, many of the temples constructed by the imperial court in Nara simply disappeared when the court moved to Kyoto. Even more important, early Buddhism in Japan offered little for the laity to do except provide for the monks.
Thus, it’s not surprising that two new forms of Buddhism began to emerge in the 9th and 10th centuries: the esoteric Shingon Buddhism and the more popular Pure Land Buddhism.

These two schools are very different from each other, and even more different from earlier state-sponsored Buddhism, because both were concerned with engaging the laity. Instead of focusing on royalty who could protect Japan by building temples, these new forms focused on what ordinary people could do to have a more auspicious rebirth.

**Shingon Buddhism**

- Shingon Buddhism was founded by the monk Kūkai, who is often considered Japan’s first important Buddhist writer. Kūkai traveled to China in the early 800s as part of a government-sponsored mission. There, he was deeply impressed by esoteric Buddhist sects that emphasized the need to keep advanced teachings secret from everyone except advanced students. Certainly, there were ceremonies and services that anyone could observe, but many deeper truths required extensive training and initiation.

- At the core of Shingon thought is the idea that Buddhist truth is difficult to directly apprehend. Kūkai argued that “words alone” simply cannot capture Buddhist insight. Instead, Shingon Buddhism relies on three tools: mudras, mantras, and mandalas.
  - Mudras, called *ingei* in Japanese, are symbolic hand gestures that are associated with various virtues. For example, a basic mudra is the gesture of hands resting in each other with the thumbs touching; this symbolizes a correct attitude and deep meditation. Some Buddhist truths are said to be so sublime and powerful that they are effectively beyond words; we can apprehend them only through physical sensation—the physical representation of the mudras.
  - A mantra (Japanese: *shingon*, “true word”) is a word or phrase that has a metaphysical connection to Buddhist truth. Conscious language, with its grammar rules and dictionaries, is of only
limited use in attaining enlightenment, but Kūkai taught that one could use this secret, true language—the ultimate language of the cosmos—to move toward truth. It doesn’t matter if you understand a mantra in Shingon Buddhism; part of enlightenment comes from the noninterpretive experience of chanting it.

- Mandalas are extremely detailed paintings (or groups of sculptures) showing the relationship of hundreds of Buddhas and sages. For example, one of the most revered mandalas in Shingon is the so-called womb mandala. This depiction is incredibly rich and detailed, with literally dozens of different manifestations of the Buddha and Buddhist sages. In Shingon meditative practice, the goal is to hold this totality in one’s mind.

- Because Shingon Buddhism was so abstract and demanding, it still assumed that only monks could fully master abstract insights and move to higher levels of enlightenment. But this vision of deep and
profound truths was compelling enough that Shingon was able to survive without state support. Wealthy patrons agreed to support Shingon; in return, they could watch Shingon ceremonies and be buried in Shingon cemeteries, which ensured a more auspicious rebirth.

**Pure Land Buddhism**

- Pure Land Buddhism was popularized in Japan in the late 900s by a monk named Genshin. His message was simple: The wicked go to hell and are brutally tortured in ways that relate to their iniquities on earth. For example, if you killed something in your human life, then in hell, you would be ripped apart by swords—for eternity. Genshin’s account of these horrific torments was extremely popular in the Heian period; illustrated versions, called Hell Scrolls, graphically illustrated the torments he described.

- But Genshin’s vision of hell was balanced by his understanding of salvation. According to Genshin, Amida, the Buddha of the Past, was ready to save people from hell. In the ancient past, when he was only a monk, Amida had once taken a vow that as part of his own path to Buddhist enlightenment, he would ease the suffering of any human who called out to him for help. And he promised to take those people to a special paradise, the Pure Land. Of course, when he achieved enlightenment, he kept his vow, and anyone can avoid going to hell by calling out to Amida.

- This emphasis on salvation made Amida Buddhism, or Pure Land Buddhism, a great complement for other forms of Buddhism, such as Shingon. Pure Land Buddhism became a powerful force in Japanese history; in fact, today, the Pure Land sects are the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan.
Suggested Reading


Saunders, Mudrā.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the core similarities across different branches of Buddhism?

2. How do differences in Buddhist schools relate to broader social and political issues?
One of the framing ideas of this course is the notion of cycles in Japanese history: periods of great cosmopolitanism and globalization and periods of relative isolation and seclusion. In this lecture, we’ll discuss Japan’s first period of relative isolation, beginning in the 800s and lasting into the 1300s. By standard chronology, this 500-year stretch spans two historical epochs: the Heian period (794–1185) and the Kamakura period (1185–1333). This lecture highlights two key issues in the Heian period: the relative decline of the powerful centralized state that was constructed in the 700s and the rise of a new political and cultural system to replace it, the Heian court.

Transformation of the Ritsuryō State

- As we’ve seen, the incentive to build a powerful Japanese state was connected to broader international trends, particularly the rise of powerful centralized states on the continent.
  - But in the 800s, the Tang dynasty in China was suffering serious decline. After a major rebellion around 860, China was ruled by local strongmen, with no single dynasty. The next large dynasty, the Song, ruled from the 900s to the 1200s, but it controlled much less territory than the Tang had and struggled against other empires.
    - Thus, after about 800, China was not a threat to Japan, and contemporary Chinese civilization lost some of its appeal to the Japanese. After 894, official contacts between the Japanese and Chinese imperial courts came to an end.

- One important result of this period of disengagement was the gradual transformation of the ritsuryō state, that highly structured, highly centralized administrative system introduced in the 700s.
  - The ritsuryō system had always been difficult to run. The tax burden was so onerous that it caused farmers to desert their
fields. Another major burden on the people was conscription, compulsory military service and forced labor. And the value of that forced labor began to drop for the imperial government. A large infantry was useful for seizing and holding territory, but the imperial state had stopped expanding after the 800s.

• Thus, the incentive to maintain the hallmarks of the *ritsuryō* system—the centralized army, system of taxation, and complex land redistribution policy—decreased markedly in the 9th century.

• In this context, the imperial court gradually ceded control of those functions to powerful regional figures. Provincial governors were turned into tax farmers. At the same time, tax exemptions steadily expanded, and court politics became focused on cutting deals to get tax immunities. Over the course of a few centuries, a small number of tax exemptions swelled to include more than half the land in Japan. Tax-exempt estates were called *shō* or *shōen*. During the Heian period, the growth of the *shōen* undermined the power of the central government to tax and redistribute land.

• Beginning as early as the 700s, the government also began authorizing local commanders to raise their own forces, and in 792, Emperor Kammu scrapped the large conscript army entirely. The Heian period, national politics centered on intrigue among 20 elite families; refinement and insider knowledge of extramarital affairs were essential.
government maintained a police force for the capital, but beyond that, it allowed and even encouraged the growth of private armies. Provincial governors began to form their own armies to maintain order and collect taxes, and the tax-exempt estates established their own security forces.

- Despite these developments and because Japan was at peace internationally, the Heian court felt secure, even as it was losing control of the countryside. Ironically, this era represents the high point of Japanese classical culture.

The Court in Kyoto

- The most important figures in the Kyoto court were members of the Fujiwara family. Originally known as the Nakatomi, they were a powerful ancient clan that began enjoying special imperial favor after 645, when they helped overthrow the Soga.

- The Fujiwara rose to power by marrying into the imperial line rather than directly challenging it. In fact, they honored the tradition that emperors should be sons or grandsons of emperors, but through marriage politics, they ensured that emperors married Fujiwara women. That meant that emperors were routinely surrounded by Fujiwara men.
  - For centuries, emperors were raised with Fujiwara uncles and Fujiwara grandfathers, who routinely served as the emperor’s regents. Gradually, the position of regent became as important as the position of emperor.
  - The best single example of this process is the case of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1028). Through his marriage connections, he was the uncle of two emperors, the grandfather of three emperors, the father of four empresses, and regent for his grandson, Emperor Go-Ichijō.
  - Fujiwara no Michinaga had titles in the official civil bureaucracy, but it was his position as head of the Fujiwara house and his roles as grandfather and uncle to five emperors
that gave him real power. His position as daijō daijin—prime minister or grand minister of state—was almost an afterthought.

- During the Heian period, the aristocracy that made up the court in Kyoto was very small and tightly knit.
  - At the apex, there were about 20 noble houses, and the extended nobility might have numbered 20,000 people, a tiny fraction of Japan’s population of about 5 million. In such a political environment, courtly behavior became extremely important; refinement was essential.
  - Classical or Heian era standards of elegance included a striking level of cultivation, such as composing impromptu poetry that reflected the season, the weather, and the occasion, and writing poems in response to other poems—basically, flirting and bantering through poetry.

- This emphasis on family politics and court culture had an important gender component. Because the Fujiwara didn’t displace the imperial line but married into it, men acquired power through their daughters’ husbands and children. This didn’t produce anything resembling gender equality, but it made for very different marriage patterns compared to later samurai families.
  - It was common in the Heian period for a nobleman to get married, keep his own residence, and visit his wife in his father-in-law’s residence, or the couple might get an independent residence.
  - Contrast this with the living pattern that became common under the samurai: A married woman left her father and mother and went to live with her husband’s family. This pattern was incredibly rare in the Heian period.
  - In fact, if a Heian patriarch sought to rule through his grandchildren and nephews, then he wanted to bring his son-in-law into his house as much as possible, both physically and politically.
Heian Culture

- The Heian period also produced a surge in women’s fiction; in fact, many of the classics of Japanese literature were produced in this period by women.
  - Classical Chinese remained the language of serious philosophy and political arguments and, into the modern era, was considered the realm of men and inappropriate for women. But Heian court poetry was composed in Japanese, and poetry was considered appropriate for women; in fact, composing poetry was considered part of courtly elegance.
  - In the 900s, the imperial court began to emphasize the importance of Japanese poetry by compiling anthologies of the great poems. Vernacular poetry was celebrated at the highest levels of society.
  - Many poems in these imperial anthologies are about the beauty of the seasons, love and longing, and parted lovers waiting for each other. Although men maintained a monopoly on some topics, such as writing about valor in classical Chinese, we see an entire area of literature in which women’s voices were welcomed.

- One of the greatest works penned by a woman of this era is *Genji monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji*, composed in the early years of the 11th century. It was written by a woman under the pen name Murasaki Shikibu (c. 978–1014/1025). She was probably the daughter of a mid-ranking Fujiwara noble and rose to be a lady-in-waiting to an empress.
  - Although *The Tale of Genji* is sometimes called Japan’s first novel, the plot and character development don’t resemble a modern novel. There is a narrative arc to the story, but the vignettes are often better enjoyed on their own than as part of this massive work.
  - The hero in the story is a character known as Hikaru Genji, who was inspired by, but not directly modeled on, Fujiwara no
Michinaga. Genji is the son of an emperor, Kiritsubo, by the emperor’s favorite mistress, known as Lady Kiritsubo. The text tells us that it is impossible to look at Genji without pleasure and that he can have almost any woman he wants. Of course, he primarily wants women he can’t have.

- For centuries, Genji’s story was taken as a sort of morality play or even a Buddhist parable because his troubles reflect a Buddhist understanding of desire: He can have almost anything, but he wants what he can’t have, and if he gets it, he no longer wants it. In Buddhism, you can’t quench desire; you must transcend desire.

- Many of Genji’s exploits are scandalous, but the true pleasure in reading his story is in the small details. The romantic banter, for example, is an aspect of the story that remains compelling even today. And *The Tale of Genji* as a whole is a wonderful window on the attitudes and practices of Heian court culture.

**Summing Up the Heian Period**
- The Heian elite dismantled the *ritsuryō* system, turning basic government functions, such as tax collection and military readiness, into private family ventures. Eventually, that opened the way for military families to challenge the Fujiwara.

- But one reason that the Fujiwara and the rest of the imperial court did not quite see the danger of their actions was that those rising military families were actually petty nobles at the margins of the Heian court.

- The Fujiwara didn’t think that these nobles were considered important by outsiders; they thought they were entrusting the unsavory business of tax collection to their country cousins—minor nobles who might come to Kyoto on occasion but who mainly stayed out in the provinces. Starting in the 1100s, that worldview collapsed.
Suggested Reading

Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*.


Questions to Consider

1. How does the culture of the Heian aristocracy compare to that of other exclusive nobilities?

2. How does *Genji* work as a Buddhist parable of desire leading to despair?

3. How do the poems of the Heian court relate to other forms of Japanese poetry?
The Rise of the Samurai
Lecture 7

During the 600s and 700s, the Japanese imperial court built a powerful centralized government—the *ritsuryō* state. It then spent the following centuries dismantling that state, replacing the conscript army with militias, replacing a centralized tax system with tax farming, and moving a great deal of land off the tax rolls. The overall effect of this process was that it gradually moved power from the capital to the countryside. In this lecture, then, we will turn our attention to the countryside—the events taking place in the rest of Japan while the court in Kyoto focused on itself.

The Rural Elite

- At the lowest level of control, we don’t know who was in charge in the provinces during the Heian period; the records are too fragmentary. We have a much better understanding of the upper levels of local control—the rural elite who linked the countryside with the capital. That elite was made up of the lesser nobility who still had distant ties to the imperial line. The two main families during the late Heian period were the Genji, also known as the Minamoto, and the Heike, also known as the Taira.

- These two powerful clans had a foot in both the imperial court and the countryside. In court, they were part of the Kyoto nobility, but they were at the very bottom. Their influence did not approach that of the powerful Fujiwara house; instead, they were considered unsophisticated country cousins. But out in the provinces, the Minamoto and Heike clans were quite powerful; they held together bands of warriors who squeezed taxes out of farmers.

- By and large, these country cousins of the Kyoto nobility respected the authority of the capital, although there were signs of trouble relatively early in the Heian period.
  - For example, in the 10th century, Taira no Masakado, a minor provincial official in what is today the Tokyo area, became
embroiled in a fierce feud within his own clan. In 939, he brought his army to the provincial government headquarters, supposedly to plead his case against his relatives, but he wound up fighting and defeating the local governor and claiming control of the province.

- According to one account, an oracle told Masakado that he was now emperor and should, therefore, take over the rest of Japan. Whether we believe that or not, Masakado quickly gained control over eight eastern provinces.

- The government in Kyoto was alarmed but didn’t have an army with which to fight Masakado. It had to rely on nobles who could raise their own armies; thus, Masakado was finally defeated by his cousin, Taira no Sadamori.

- Even though the imperial state suppressed the rebellion, the incident actually accelerated the deterioration of central authority. The government rewarded Taira no Sadamori with court rank and official positions; thus, even in victory, Kyoto was merely choosing sides in a family feud.

**Decline of the Heian Court**

- As problems in the countryside grew worse, trouble was also brewing in the capital. The Fujiwara’s control through pliant young emperors began to break down in the 1060s with Emperor Go-Sanjō, who took the throne in 1068. Because he did not have a Fujiwara mother, he was not beholden to a Fujiwara patron.

  - Go-Sanjō moved against the tax-exempt estates used by the Fujiwara and other powerful families, declaring that that all *shōen* created after 1045 were illegal.

  - Go-Sanjō’s son, Emperor Shirakawa, was even more independent. Not only did Shirakawa continue Go-Sanjō’s campaign, but he aggressively confiscated *shōen* that he considered illegal.
• It seemed as if the emperors might be restoring the ritsuryō state, but in fact, the opposite was true. By the 11th century, even the imperial house was no longer interested in restoring the power of the ancient state. Instead, Emperor Shirakawa created new shōen for himself and his allies. In other words, he dissolved the shōen of his enemies while promoting new exemptions from the imperial tax rolls.

• By the 11th century, the imperial house was trying to beat the Fujiwara at their own game. Indeed, Shirakawa imitated the Fujiwara in another way. In 1087, at the peak of his power, he abdicated, then went on to rule for decades as “retired emperor.” In this way, Shirakawa started his own version of indirect rule.

• This move must have made sense to Shirakawa, but it led to a succession crisis and a major setback for imperial rule. The crisis occurred under Shirakawa’s grandson, Emperor Toba.
  ○ Toba also chose to rule as a retired emperor. First, he put his son Sutoku on the throne, but he then changed his mind and put another son, Go-Shirakawa (essentially, Shirakawa II), on the throne. Toba may have suspected that Sutoku was not actually his son.

  ○ When Toba died in 1156, each son thought that he should be emperor. They each called in their supporters—mostly warriors from the Taira and Heike clans—and Go-Shirakawa’s side won. Sutoku was sent into internal exile, and Go-Shirakawa named one of his sons as emperor.

• Unfortunately, one of Go-Shirakawa’s major supporters, Taira no Kiyomori, had ambitions of his own. First, he moved against some of his military rivals; then, he began to encroach on the powers of the imperial court. He took several important titles and made one of his daughters an imperial consort. In 1180, he had his grandson named emperor.

• At this point, although he was confined to his villa in Kyoto, Go-Shirakawa sent out word that he wanted to get rid of the Taira. That
call to arms galvanized Taira no Kiyomori’s enemies, especially members of the Minamoto clan. The fighting against the Taira lasted from 1180 to 1185, and when the dust settled, Minamoto no Yoritomo was in control.

- Yoritomo took a different strategy from Taira no Kiyomori. Rather than trying to emulate the Fujiwara and have his grandson named emperor, in 1185, he cut a deal with Go-Shirakawa. Yoritomo announced that he intended to settle the land claims of his men, primarily with land taken from the Taira. But he would also set up his own capital in Kamakura and allow the imperial court to remain in operation from Kyoto. Historically, this is referred to as the founding of the first shogunate because one of the titles Yoritomo received as a reward for his service was shogun (“generalissimo”).

- For historians, Minamoto no Yoritomo’s legacy lies not his battlefield victories but in the paper trail he created for the warrior culture. After 1185, the new government in Kamakura began keeping records of its warriors. At the time, they were called jitō (“land stewards”) because their main function in peacetime was collecting income from shōen; however, we know them as samurai.

**The Heian Cultural Legacy**

- The battles of the 1100s also produced some enduring works of literature. One incredibly influential work that hearkens back to this era is *Heike monogatari*, or *The Tale of the Heike*. This is a long ballad that was spread across Japan by wandering minstrels. It turns the story of the Taira into a Buddhist parable.

- In *The Tale of the Heike*, Taira no Kiyomori rises from relatively humble origins to reach the apex of power, but his excessive ambition leads to his downfall; his legacy falls to ashes, and his family is scattered and destroyed. This ending is foreshadowed from the first lines:

  The sound of the Gion temple bells echoes the impermanence of all things;
The color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline.
The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night;
In the end, the mighty fall; they are like dust before the wind.

- One famous section of *Heike monogatari* tells the story of Atsumori. In the story, a Minamoto warrior named Kumagai sees a Taira noble, Atsumori, fleeing from battle.
  - Kumagai throws Atsumori down from his horse and yanks off his helmet to take his head as a trophy. But he finds that the enemy soldier is a beautiful teenage boy, so beautiful and refined that Kumagai’s eyes fill with tears, and he cannot kill Atsumori.
  - Kumagai realizes, however, that if he leaves the boy, Atsumori will be killed by another Minamoto soldier. The warrior decides that it is better for Atsumori to die by his hand because he will offer prayers for the boy’s auspicious rebirth. After he kills Atsumori, Kumagai laments his own cruelty.
  - Beyond the pathos of the warrior life, the story of Atsumori also captures the sense of cultural inferiority of the early samurai. Atsumori is clearly a courtier, and Kumagai admires his refinement. This seems to reflect an important historical duality—a tension—felt by both the Taira and the Minamoto. They were at the bottom of the Kyoto aristocracy but at the top of a rural hierarchy of warriors.

- That duality is also captured in another famous story from the 1100s, that of Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Benkei, probably the most famous warrior team in Japanese fiction.
  - Yoshitsune was a historical figure, a competent general of the Minamoto clan who helped his half-brother Yoritomo defeat the Taira. Then, Yoritomo became suspicious of Yoshitsune, declared Yoshitsune a traitor, and had him hunted down and killed.
To this historical outline, the Japanese ballad tradition added a great deal of intrigue and many fictional details, including a beautiful and loyal wife, Shizuka, and Yoshitsune’s loyal sidekick, Benkei.

The combination of Yoshitsune and Benkei wonderfully captures the duality of warrior rule in the 1100s. Yoshitsune is depicted in fiction as refined, cultured, and almost androgynously beautiful—a part of Kyoto elite culture. But Benkei is tough, rugged, hairy, and crude; he reflects the unrefined but effective face of provincial samurai culture.

The lore of Yoshitsune and Benkei is rich and broad, ranging from plays to woodblock prints to comic books. For historians, the contrasts between the two characters seem to capture a moment of transition from a courtier culture to a warrior one.

More broadly, the popularity of Yoshitsune also points to a certain acceptance of the fluidity of gender roles in traditional Japanese culture. Yoshitsune is one of the deadliest warriors in Japan, but if he cross-dresses, he can almost pass for a woman, and that androgynous beauty does not make him any less male.
Another key feature of the story is the power of the warrior bond. In the legend, both men die, but their complete loyalty to each other makes them heroic. This is a powerful theme in Japanese culture: the idea that loyalty can turn defeat into victory.

Suggested Reading

Friday, Hired Swords.


Questions to Consider

1. What led Minamoto no Yoritomo to limit his power? Why did he establish a parallel government rather than displace the imperial court?

2. How does the Japanese tradition of imperial regents compare to other forms of indirect rule?

3. Historians debate whether samurai rule should be called feudalism. Is that term useful or confusing?
Religious thought does not exist in a vacuum; it both shapes politics and is shaped by politics. In this lecture, we will explore how the decline of the imperial court and the rise of the warrior class changed Japanese culture, with a specific focus on Japanese Buddhism. What were the consequences of decades of fighting in Kyoto and across Japan; the rise of powerful warrior families—first, the Taira house, then the Minamoto house—and the establishment of a warrior government in Kamakura? We will look to 13th-century Buddhism in Japan to see how aesthetic, religious, and philosophical concepts both reflected and shaped this cultural transformation.

An Account of My Hut

- Amidst the fighting of the 1150s and the 1180s, the imperial palace was burned several times, and Kyoto was struck by natural disasters; the aristocracy emerged from this turmoil with less power and less money. These changes did not obliterate the appeal of court culture, but after the tumultuous events of the 12th century, the aristocracy in Japan would never again be at the apex of wealth and power.

- Perhaps the most evocative and influential response of aristocrats to this loss can be found in an early-13th-century work entitled Hōjōki, or An Account of My Hut.
  - *Hojoki* was written by a petty aristocrat named Kamo no Chōmei (1155–1216). Although he was well-respected as a poet, Kamo was never adept at Kyoto politics. He was unable to inherit his father’s position as superintendent of a Shintō shrine and lived largely as a recluse.
  - This personal failure on the part of Kamo led to his masterpiece—a brilliant evocation of the Buddhist concept of impermanence.
Almost any well-educated Japanese person can recite the opening lines of Hōjōki: “The flow of a rushing river is ceaseless, and yet the water is never the same. The froth that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never lasts for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world.”

Kamo relates this Buddhist sense of impermanence to his own life. He describes in vivid detail a great fire in 1177, a whirlwind in 1180, and an earthquake in 1185, and he asks: What’s the point of building a beautiful mansion? It’s just another thing to lose.

Instead, Kamo advises aristocrats to give up—to live in the mountains, away from the frenzy of city life, in a simple hut. He gives us a series of beautiful evocations of the allure of simplicity, along with the pain of loneliness:

If the evening is quiet, I long for old friends. ... When the wild deer of the mountain approach me without fear, I realize how far I am from the world. And when sometimes, as happens in old age, I awake in the middle of the night, I stir up the embers of the fire and make them companions in solitude.

Kamo concludes that our ability to enjoy things is not determined by the splendor of the things we possess but by our wisdom. In describing his view of a mountain, he writes: “It is not an awesome mountain, but its scenery gives me endless pleasure as it changes through the seasons, and I listen transfixed to the lonely hooting of the owls. How much more would this all mean to someone of deeper knowledge.”

Kamo is emblematic of an aristocratic culture that was trying to find meaning in loss, trying to discover how less could be more. He is associated with an aesthetic term, yūgen, that means “mysterious or deeply evocative.” The idea is to summon a mood through small, subtle hints rather than explicit gestures. That aesthetic goal would
The turmoil of the 12th century also brought a drop in income and status to the Buddhist temples of Kyoto, which had been dependent on noble patrons. On a more philosophical level, the entire conceptual framework of institutional Buddhism was changed.

Recall that ancient Japanese kings believed that if they promoted Buddhism, they would enjoy peace and prosperity. But after the warfare of the 1100s, some medieval Japanese clergy wondered what good massive temple complexes were if the country was beset by civil war and turmoil. Perhaps the established temples have gotten key aspects of Buddhism wrong.

Kamo's aesthetic reflects the refinement and restraint we often associate with Japanese art forms and culture, such as the tea ceremony.
As a result of such questioning, in the century after the founding of the first shogunate, Buddhism underwent two major changes. The first was the start of a school new to Japan, Zen Buddhism. The second was the significant growth of Pure Land Buddhism, along with some remarkable changes in that school.

**Pure Land Buddhism**

- Pure Land Buddhism focuses on a monk named Amida who attained Buddhahood and promised that he would transport anyone who called out to him to a wondrous Pure Land. That supplication to Amida is called the *nenbutsu*; the full phrase is: *Namu Amida Butsu*, “Save me, Amida Buddha.” The salvation promised can be seen as a physical place or as the bliss one experiences when released from worldly turmoil.

- The saving power of Amida was not new to the 1200s; what was new was the sense that other approaches to Buddhism might be mistaken and that Pure Land Buddhism might be the only true teaching.

- This idea was first put forth by a monk named Hōnen (1133–1212). Hōnen spent decades as a student of the Tendai school at Enryakuji, a prominent temple complex near Kyoto, but became profoundly dissatisfied with life there. Enryakuji was quite wealthy, partly because it engaged in money lending and used its religious power to force loan collection. Enryakuji also had armed monks who often got into skirmishes with monks from other temples.

- The Buddhist conception of time is cyclical: Buddhist truth is discovered, then diluted, then lost, then rediscovered by another Buddha. Hōnen concluded that 12th-century Japan was in a late cycle of Buddhist law. Buddhist truth had become garbled, and the future Buddha hadn’t arrived yet to re-clarify it. The Japanese term for this situation is *mappō*, roughly meaning “end times.” The sutras were garbled, the world was in turmoil, and the only true Buddhist insight left was Amida’s vow.
- According to Hōnen, all the achievements of the great temples—all their learning and scholarship—were worthless; they were unable to attain Buddhist insight. The only way to achieve an auspicious rebirth for all of Buddhism was by calling out to Amida. Not surprisingly, major temples lobbied to have Hōnen’s teachings banned. He agreed to respect other Buddhist sects in his teachings but was still banished from Kyoto.

- In his final testament, Hōnen insisted that the power of the nenbutsu does not come from study or understanding but from thinking of Amida. This revolutionary doctrine was taken further by Hōnen’s student Shinran, whose sect became known as True Pure Land Buddhism.

- Hōnen had made salvation available to ordinary people through prayer. People didn’t need to be learned or wise or make large donations to a temple; they just needed to say the nenbutsu. Because of this, Shinran concluded that those who are more wicked, stupid, and vile are blessed. In another epoch, a wealthy and wise person might have achieved an auspicious rebirth through virtuous actions, but scoundrels would be doomed if not for Amida. In fact, according to Shinran, a combination of two things makes a person uniquely blessed: being born after Amida’s vow and being a bad person whose worldly actions should consign him or her to hell.

- Shinran was a follower of Hōnen and adopted his ideas, pushing them to their radical conclusion. Hōnen had allowed for salvation through good deeds, although he minimized this teaching. In contrast, Shinran insisted that even the thought that you could reach the Pure Land on your own would undermine your faith in Amida, confusing you with the lingering sense that you could be redeemed through acts, which is impossible.

- We can look at Shinran’s radicalism not just from a religious perspective but also from a broader social and political perspective. Shinran himself was from a low-level Fujiwara family; thus, his renunciation of institutional Buddhism serves to mark a broader
shift in power that occurred at the end of the Heian period—a shift away from the imperial court at Kyoto, where a few noble families had held sway.

**Zen Buddhism**

- There are two main schools of Zen Buddhism, the Rinzai school and the Sōtō school. These sects capture two approaches to sponsorship that emerged in medieval Japan. The Rinzai sect had a powerful patron in the new shogunate in Kamakura. Sōtō Zen, by contrast, tried to be more independent.

- Both schools were opposed by the major temples in Kyoto. The two founders of Zen Buddhism in Japan, Eisai and Dōgen, were both Tendai school monks at Enryakuji, but both left Enryakuji in disappointment and went to study in China. Thus, Zen, like Pure Land Buddhism, was emblematic of medieval challenges to the older Kyoto-based schools.

- The core concept of Zen is that we are all Buddhas. We attain enlightenment by revealing the Buddha nature within us. Central to that attainment is meditation, particularly, meditation on nothing.

- A number of Zen parables capture this focus on emptiness. For example, a metaphor from Dōgen holds that a quiet mind is like a teacup full of pure, still water: It can reflect the moon—in fact, a single drop of water can seem to contain something enormous—so long as it is clear and still. Further, because we already contain the Buddha nature, enlightenment can come in a flash.

- The emphasis on meditation is common to both major schools of Zen. The difference between the two is primarily that Dōgen’s Sōtō school focuses on seated meditation, whereas Eisai’s Rinzai school focuses on the use of the *kōan*, a type of riddle. You may be familiar with two of these: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” and “If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?” The primary insight of these *kōan* is that the rational mind is a source of confusion rather than enlightenment.
Zen and Pure Land are, in many ways, extremely different Buddhist traditions—Zen with its focus on nirvana through a quiet mind and Pure Land with its focus on salvation through faith. But both are actually similar in terms of broader social change because they reflect the shift in power away from the aristocracy in Kyoto; both schools sought to bring Buddhism to a new audience.

### Suggested Reading


Heine and Wright, *Zen Ritual*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the understanding of faith in True Pure Land Buddhism resemble other religious traditions?

2. Zen Buddhism was brought to Japan from China, where it was known as Chan Buddhism, but it is best known in the West by its Japanese name. Why?
between 1185 and 1868, three dynasties used the title shogun. The first was the Minamoto (1185–1333), with its capital in Kamakura. The second was the Ashikaga (1336–1573), with its capital in the Muromachi neighborhood of Kyoto. Then came the Tokugawa (1603–1868), with its capital in Edo, which today is Tokyo. All shoguns were supposedly descendants of Minamoto no Yoritomo, although some of those connections were extremely tenuous. Despite this emphasis on political continuity, as we’ll see, warrior culture changed a great deal over the seven centuries from the 1100s to the 1800s.

The Kamakura Regime

- As you recall, the shō were landed estates that were exempt from ritsuryō taxes and inspections, but those very exemptions made them part of the ritsuryō system. Thus, Kamakura warrior culture was still part of the ancient imperial state. Later shoguns would be much less interested in trying to work around the edges of the old imperial state; they deferred to the emperor as needed but began setting up their own forms of taxation and control.

- The Kamakura regime was run largely by descendants of Yoritomo’s wife, Hōjō Masako. They were the power behind the throne, just as the Fujiwara had been the behind-the-scenes rulers during the Heian period. But in the late 1200s, the Hōjō ran into a series of difficulties; there were internal divisions within the Hōjō family and incompetent leadership, as well as an even greater challenge: two attempted invasions by the Mongols, in 1274 and 1281.
  - At its peak, the Mongol Empire stretched from Eastern Europe through the Middle East, Russia, and Central Asia to Korea and China, but the Mongols did not conquer Japan.
  - The Mongol invasion in 1274 was repelled by Japanese samurai with great difficulty. In its wake, Japanese defenders
built stone walls around Hakata Bay, where the Mongols had landed in 1274 and where they tried to land again in 1281.

- Although they were unable to land in 1281, the Mongols managed to regroup and land on the small island of Takashima, near the modern city of Karatsu. But before the Mongols could mount an invasion of the main islands, their fleet was destroyed by a typhoon.

- We might assume that victory over the Mongols would have enhanced the power of the Hōjō, but in fact, it created a problem. Because the fighting against the Mongols was in southwestern Japan, far from the Hōjō center of power, the Hōjō relied heavily on warriors from the southwest region. That strengthened the bond between local commanders, called shugo, and the local samurai. Even worse, the Hōjō couldn’t offer land to the samurai as rewards for their service. Thus, the Hōjō emerged from the Mongol invasions seeming both remote and stingy.

**Demise of the Kamakura**

- The immediate cause of the fall of the Kamakura shogunate was an ambitious emperor and a succession dispute in the 1330s. The emperor was Go-Daigo (“Daigo II”), and his goal was to reestablish direct imperial rule; in a reversal of custom, he insisted that the Hōjō allow him to choose his own successor.
  - At the time, an ongoing power struggle was taking place between two factions in the imperial house. The Hōjō had been containing the problem by having the two sides take turns, with each faction naming every other emperor. Go-Daigo was supposed to bequeath the throne to a member of the opposing line.

  - But Go-Daigo was determined to put his own son on the throne, and when the Hōjō insisted otherwise, he called for their overthrow.

- The Hōjō sent Go-Daigo into internal exile, but he escaped and managed to gather enough support to challenge the Hōjō. With
Go-Daigo’s call to arms, the samurai who had become disgruntled with the Hōjō could attack in the name of a higher purpose. In other words, what would have been treason against the Hōjō could now be described as loyalty to Emperor Go-Daigo.

- In 1333, Go-Daigo’s supporters crushed the Hōjō. In the aftermath, everything should have gone well for Go-Daigo, but he made the mistake of taking his own rhetoric too seriously. He seems to have envisioned a true restoration of imperial power; to that end, he refused to appoint any of his warrior allies as shogun. He imagined that the imperial court could return to its former glory—before the first shogunate.

- This move did not endear him to his allies, particularly the shugo Ashikaga Takauji. When Go-Daigo failed to reward Takauji by making him a shogun, Takauji expelled Go-Daigo from Kyoto and replaced his heir with a prince from the rival line of the imperial house. This new emperor, not surprisingly, named Takauji a shogun.

- In exile, Go-Daigo’s faction established its own imperial court, called the Southern Court, which held out until 1392 but without any real power. Today’s emperors are descendants of what was called the Northern Court.

The Ashikaga Shogunate

- Ashikaga Takauji based his shogunate in the Muromachi district of Kyoto, and on paper, it lasted until 1573. But this shogunate never lost its initial taint of treason.
  - There was a brief flowering of Ashikaga power under the third shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, in the late 1300s and early 1400s, but by and large, the 1400s were characterized by weak shoguns and a weak imperial court.
  - A good example of the limits of Ashikaga power can be seen in the murder of the sixth Ashikaga shogun, Yoshinori, by a shugo in 1441. The Ashikaga were so weak that they didn’t even retaliate.
In terms of central political control, the Ashikaga period was a low point in Japanese history, but many Japanese cultural forms that we now consider traditional, including the tea ceremony, Zen rock gardens, haiku poetry, and Noh theater, are products of this era.

This cultural flowering in a period of weak political control might seem like a paradox, but we see a similar situation in Italy around the same time. Like the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de’ Medici, the third Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimitsu, was savvy in backroom political intrigue but was also a great patron of the arts. Also like Lorenzo, Yoshimitsu was a tough act to follow; his successors, such as Yoshinori, tended to get ignored, manipulated, or assassinated.

Given that Yoshimitsu was the ruler of a weak shogunate, he knew better than to base his rule solely on shogunal authority. Instead, he flattered imperial courtiers and ingratiated himself with the imperial house. In other words, he was able to hold the shogunate together by playing courtier on the one hand and warrior on the other.

**An Account of Great Peace**

Another paradox of the 1300s and 1400s is that the treason that characterized court politics produced its own antidote in the countryside. Outside the court, the samurai began to define themselves with a cult of extreme loyalty and to develop a new sense of samurai valor that was independent of courtier culture. One of the most famous examples of warrior loyalty comes from an epic of the 1300s called the *Taiheiki*, meaning *An Account of Great Peace*.

The title is ironic, because the story the *Taiheiki* tells is anything but peaceful. It’s the story of the overthrow of the Hōjō and Ashikaga Takauji’s rise to power. One of the main characters is Kusunoki Masashige, who fought with Emperor Go-Daigo and against Ashikaga Takauji.

Much of the basic chronology in the *Taiheiki* is accurate, but it’s embellished with imagined dialogue between warriors. Although
Lecture 9—Samurai Culture in the Ashikaga Period

the Taiheiki was written only about 200 years after The Tale of the Heike, it offers a completely different vision of warrior culture.

- Unlike The Tale of the Heike, warriors in the Taiheiki don’t defer to courtier sensibilities; instead, they act based on what’s right for warriors, that is, above all, loyalty.
  - In The Tale of the Heike, when Atsumori flees, Kumagai calls him out, saying that it’s cowardly to turn your back on the enemy. Of course, when Atsumori returns, Kumagai kills him.
  - In the Taiheiki, however, we get a completely different sense of honor. Kusunoki Masashige, the hero of epic, uses retreat as one of his signature strategies. Indeed, Masashige explicitly declares that if he fights when he’s outnumbered and loses, he won’t be able to protect his lord. He rejects the idea that he’s supposed to indulge in some melodramatic show of honor and instead focuses on the central issue: victory for his lord.

Like Benkei in the legends of Yoshitsune, Masashige is tough and rugged, but he is not a sidekick to a more refined warrior; instead, Masashige is a direct servant of the emperor.
In the story, we also see multiple instances of Masashige’s deception and intrigue, but they are legitimized by his loyalty to Emperor Go-Daigo.

Another aspect of this striking shift away from courtier sensibilities is Kusunoki Masashige’s attitude toward Buddhism. His death scene in the Taiheiki is almost anti-Buddhist.

Masashige, a dozen officers, and their 60 retainers are surrounded by thousands of enemy soldiers. Masashige understands that this is his last stand. He turns to his brother and says, “Brother, they say your thought at your last moment of life determines whether your next life is going to be good or bad. Tell me, brother, what is your wish for rebirth?”

The correct answer here is that one would like to be reborn at a higher level of enlightenment, closer to Buddhahood. The goal is to die with a calm mind, free from worldly desires. But instead, Masashige’s brother answers that he’d like to be reborn in the human realm seven times so that he may destroy the imperial enemy.

Masashige responds, “That’s a truly sinful, evil thought, but I think exactly as you do. Well then, let us be reborn in the same way and realize our wish.” The two then commit ritual suicide.

This is an explicit embrace of Buddhist sin and a striking contrast with Kumagai’s response in The Tale of the Heike. Where Kumagai was so overcome with grief at killing Atsumori that he lamented being a warrior at all, Masashige shows an opposite impulse.

This new sense of warrior valor had a lasting impact on broader Japanese culture. Loyalty was always an important value for warriors, but in such stories as the Taiheiki, it became the most important value, and it became more abstract—warriors died for a noble cause.
Thus, in future generations, Masashige would be celebrated as a model of loyalty for its own sake. In fact, in World War II–era propaganda, when the Japanese government wanted soldiers to die for an emperor they’d never met, they invoked Kusunoki Masashige, exhorting kamikaze pilots to follow Masashige’s example.

Suggested Reading

Hall and Toyoda, *Japan in the Muromachi Age*.
Imatani and Yamamura, “Not for Lack of Will or Wile.”

Questions to Consider

1. Medieval Japan was long known as a “dark age” because of its civil war, but it is now seen as a period of cultural vibrancy. Does political turmoil promote or inhibit cultural creativity?

2. How does Kusunoki Masashige’s sense of honor differ from that of previous samurai heroes?
In this course, we’ve looked at the sweep of Japanese history in terms of waves of globalization and isolation. As we’ve seen, the first wave of globalization took place from the 500s to the 800s. That was followed by a period of relative isolation, running from around 900 to around 1300. In this lecture, we arrive at Japan’s second great wave of globalization, which stretched from the 1300s to the early 1600s. As we’ll see, there are some strong parallels between Japan’s first and second waves of globalization. In both, Japan moved from fragmentation to centralization, a process driven by broader trends in East Asia.

**Relations with China**

- As you recall, the Ashikaga shogunate had been established in the 1330s after Ashikaga Takauji turned against Emperor Go-Daigo. Thus, there were two rival imperial courts—a Northern Court in Kyoto and a Southern Court in Yoshino. Moreover, the Ashikaga shoguns were relatively weak.

- In the 1300s and 1400s, Japan was wracked by civil strife, but in China, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was consolidating its power. As part of that consolidation, China reached a new level of prosperity, and East Asia underwent an unprecedented surge in the movement of people, goods, and ideas.

- That surge gave Japanese merchants new opportunities for both trade and plunder. In the absence of any strong central government, large parts of western Japan, especially Kyushu, became a haven for pirates, called *wakō*.

- Both China and Korea were alarmed by this piracy and sent envoys to Japan to urge the Japanese government to suppress the *wakō*, but there was no government in Japan powerful enough to do so. In fact, the foreign envoys were not even sure who was in charge in Japan.
When the Ming sent envoys in 1369 and 1370, they landed in Kyushu and were received in Dazaifu, near present-day Fukuoka. Dazaifu was in the hands of the Southern Court—Emperor Go-Daigo’s side—and the Ming envoys assumed that this was the ruler of Japan.

The Chinese imperial court believed that Chinese emperors were supreme and all other rulers in the world were lesser monarchs. Trade was a reward bestowed on regional monarchs in exchange for subservience to the Chinese throne. In dealing with the Ming envoys, the Southern Court tried to finesse this issue, establishing relations with the Ming without being overtly subordinate.

Then, in 1372, Dazaifu fell to the Ashikaga shogunate. Thus, when Ming envoys arrived later that year, they discovered that they might have been working with the wrong government. The Ming emperor became angry because his envoys couldn’t tell him who was in charge in Japan or who could suppress the pirates.

This situation was not sorted out until around 1401, when the third Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimitsu, began sending respectful letters to the Ming court. Yoshimitsu did not want to publicly declare that he was subordinating himself to a foreign king, but subordination was lucrative. Yoshimitsu received lavish gifts from China and trading rights that he could sell to merchants.

Eventually, the question of how Ashikaga shoguns should deal with the Ming became irrelevant because the Ashikaga were too weak to matter. Yoshimitsu was arguably the most powerful shogun of the Ashikaga dynasty, and he was able to capture some pirates and send them to China as prisoners. But later Ashikaga shoguns could not control either the pirates or their own lords.

In 1441, the sixth Ashikaga shogun was assassinated by an angry vassal, and in the 1460s, under the eighth shogun, Japan slid into
open civil war. Local warlords, or daimyo, simply ignored the shogunate.
- This fighting within Japan affected relations with China. The most spectacular incident occurred in 1523, when ships from two rival Japanese daimyo arrived in the Chinese port of Ningbo at the same time and started arguing over who would be first to unload and sell their cargo.
- The argument turned into a melee in the streets of Ningbo, with Japanese samurai killing each other, burning ships, raiding storehouses, and killing Chinese port officials before leaving and returning to Japan.
- The Ming insisted that the perpetrators be extradited to China for punishment, but again, no one could enforce an extradition order in Japan. In the end, the Ming simply cut off trade and diplomatic relations with Japan.

Relations with Korea
- The Korean royal court also struggled with the problems of civil war and the wakō in Japan. Many of the pirates attacking Korea were based on a single island, Tsushima, which lies between Japan and Korea. The Koreans asked the daimyo of Tsushima, the Sō family, to suppress the wakō, but the Sō were either unable or unwilling to do so.
- The Korean king sent his navy to attack Tsushima, and in 1419, Korea defeated the Sō. The Sō then agreed that they would take the necessary steps to suppress the pirates and, in return, were granted special trading rights in the Korean port of Busan.
- Note that this situation reflects both globalization and decentralization in Japan. The local lord of Tsushima arranged an international trade deal with the king of Korea without consulting the shogun or the emperor. In fact, the 1420 treaty between the Sō and Korea established something of a precedent; Tsushima maintained a special role in Japanese-Korean relations until the 1860s.
New Institutions in Japan

- The independence of the daimyo was one of the defining features of the 1400s. Local lords had been growing more powerful since the 1200s, but in the 1400s, their power eclipsed that of both the shogunate and the emperor, and the daimyo began to act as though they were independent governments. They recruited their own samurai as vassals, wrote their own laws, and set up toll barriers and checkpoints at their borders.

- The *jizamurai*, or “samurai of the land,” also emerged in this period. These local samurai led the defense of villages. Because their welfare was bound up with the local farms they controlled, their loyalty ties were primarily to a village rather than a higher lord.

- One of the most daunting new political forms to come out of this period of civil conflict was the *Ikkō ikki*. These were networks or alliances of farm villages with their own *jizamurai*, bound together by belief in True Pure Land Buddhism.
  - The *Ikkō ikki* recognized only the authority of Ishiyama Honganji, a massive temple complex in Osaka, and many of their samurai were also monks. In fact, in the turmoil of the 1400s and 1500s, the distinction among farmer, warrior, and monk disappeared.
  - The *Ikkō ikki* couldn’t be intimidated. Whether their fighters were samurai, monks, or commoners, they wouldn’t surrender and join an enemy vassal band because they were convinced that they would be reborn in the Pure Land.

Reunification in Japan

- In the mid-1500s, we begin to see steady progress toward political consolidation in Japanese affairs. This progress was shaped by the deeds of three daimyo: Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616).
At about the same time as unification began under Oda Nobunaga, Europeans began to arrive in Japan, bringing with them Christianity and guns.

- These new weapons were devastating, but only if deployed correctly, with gunners organized in teams to concentrate their fire.

- A famous instance of this deployment is the Battle of Nagashino, in which Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu destroyed one of the most powerful warlord houses in Japan, the Takeda. The Takeda were certain that their cavalry charge would drive the enemy’s infantry to break ranks and scatter, but instead, the cavalry was destroyed by volleys of fire from gunners.

- This battle effectively turned the calculus of war upside down. It was much easier and less expensive to train gunners to simply hold their positions and fire than it was to maintain mounted warriors.

Oda Nobunaga died in 1582 and was succeeded by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. By 1590, Hideyoshi had forced all the daimyo in Japan to swear loyalty to him and was the supreme warlord from the far northeast to the far southwest. But Hideyoshi had even greater ambition; he wanted to be emperor of China and to conquer the world.

Because Hideyoshi wanted to ensure that he would not face domestic trouble while fighting abroad, he organized the most powerful and centralized state in Japan since the 800s. He demanded systematic land surveys of Japan and aggressively moved daimyo around, rewarding them with larger holdings or punishing them with smaller ones. He claimed control over all gold mines in Japan and minted coins for the first time since the 900s.

- Hideyoshi also issued bans on the change of social status. Peasants were not to leave their villages or join warrior bands, and warriors were not to leave their vassal bands to become cultivators.
○ When it came to religion, Hideyoshi was extremely pragmatic. Oda Nobunaga had destroyed Ishiyama Honganji, the temple of the Ikkō ikki. But Hideyoshi allowed the remaining followers of True Pure Land Buddhism to rebuild Honganji temple, provided that they recognized his authority and constructed a simple temple complex, not a massive fortress.

○ Having built a powerful state to support his international ambition, Hideyoshi invaded Korea in May 1592. His forces overran much of Korea in a matter of months, but the tide turned when the Ming dynasty intervened. The Ming forces pushed Hideyoshi’s men back to around the 39th parallel, where the two sides became deadlocked and tried to conclude a peace treaty.

○ The peace talks did not go well. Hideyoshi expected to be named emperor of China. Failing that, he sought to be recognized by the Ming as an equal, with sovereignty over most of Korea. Even this minimum was ridiculous to the Ming.

○ Hideyoshi’s diplomats did their best, but when Hideyoshi realized the gap between what he wanted and what the Ming would offer, he exploded in rage. Despite the best efforts of his diplomats, in 1597, Hideyoshi ordered his men to attack again.

○ This time, the war was a disaster. The Japanese faced a massive Ming army, new Korean militias, and a revitalized Korean navy, which inflicted significant damage on Japanese ships. Then, in 1598, Hideyoshi died and left a five-year-old as his heir.

○ Hideyoshi’s debacle in Korea shaped the next era of Japan’s history—the coming cycle of isolation. Hideyoshi had been the most powerful warlord in Japan, but he financially and militarily exhausted his own supporters. From the point of view of the Tokugawa, the next dynasty, it seemed wise to avoid becoming entangled in international struggles. Over the next few decades, the era of globalization came to an end, and a new period of isolation began.
Suggested Reading


Sasaki and Toby, “The Changing Rationale of Daimyo Control in the Emergence of the Bakuhan State.”

Questions to Consider

1. How did Japan’s second phase of globalization differ from its first?

2. How did domestic political consolidation relate to globalization?
In this lecture, we’ll discuss Japan’s relative isolation from the 1600s to the 1800s. The shift from the earlier period of globalization was triggered by multiple interconnected causes; overall, however, we can point to two main forces: Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s disastrous invasion of Korea, a mistake that the Tokugawa did not intend to commit, and Christianity, which had come to Japan in the 1540s but began to seem destabilizing in the early 1600s. The Tokugawa dynasty lasted for more than 250 years, from 1603 to the 1860s. In this lecture, we’ll explore how the Tokugawa came to power and stayed in power and how their policies tended to isolate Japan from the broader currents of international affairs.

**The Tokugawa Rise to Power**

- As mentioned in the last lecture, the three unifiers of 16th-century Japan were Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Ieyasu served as a vassal first to Nobunaga, then to Hideyoshi, but when Hideyoshi died in 1598, he left a five-year-old as his heir, Hideyori. Hideyoshi had hoped that a council of five lords would work together to support Hideyori, but the council quickly split into two factions, each vying for control of Japan.

- The great battle that determined the political future of Japan was the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. It was a massive engagement, with about 80,000 men on each side. Ieyasu’s side, known as the eastern army, was actually smaller than the so-called western army, but during the first day of fighting, three generals defected to Ieyasu’s side. That surprise tipped the balance of power, and the eastern faction was able to rout the foe.

- After the battle, Ieyasu immediately began consolidating his power. He seized the land of enemy daimyo, keeping some for the Tokugawa house and reapportioning the remainder to his allies. As
a result, within just a few years, the Tokugawa controlled about 15 percent of Japan directly; about half the land was controlled by close vassals or Tokugawa relatives; and a little more than a third was controlled by what the Tokugawa called “outsiders,” either allies of questionable loyalty or subjugated enemies.

○ In other words, Ieyasu did not eliminate all the daimyo who opposed him in 1600; rather, he allowed several powerful enemy daimyo to survive but on reduced holdings and mostly in the far southwest.

○ The Shimazu house, for example, opposed the Tokugawa in 1600, but they were allowed to keep their holdings in the far southwestern corner of Kyushu. The Mori also opposed Ieyasu and were allowed to keep a reduced holding in the far western edge of Honshu.

○ Ironically, 268 years later, those two domains would lead the revolution that toppled the Tokugawa shoguns and restored the emperor.

- The Tokugawa had several strategies for retaining power. As we said, they allowed powerful enemy domains to survive but primarily on reduced holdings and far away from the Tokugawa capital of Edo and the major cities of Osaka and Kyoto.

○ They also tightly monitored the daimyo. The Tokugawa issued strict orders that the daimyo were not allowed to enter alliances, arrange marriages, or do “new things” (shinki) without Tokugawa approval. If the Tokugawa could prevent daimyo alliances, then they didn’t need to directly control all of Japan; the idea was to keep their allies loyal and their enemies confused and fragmented.

○ The Tokugawa were able to serve as shoguns for 15 generations because they kept the daimyo under tight surveillance. But making that system of surveillance work required curtailing both globalization and Christianity.
Christianity in Japan

- Christianity arrived in Japan with Portuguese and Spanish explorers in the mid-16th century. For the remainder of the century, the Christian missionaries were rather successful. They converted several major daimyo, along with hundreds of thousands of samurai and commoners. Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu were willing to tolerate Christianity as long as it did not threaten their rule as warlords.

- Thus, in the 1570s and 1580s, Nobunaga allowed the construction of Christian churches while destroying temples associated with True Pure Land Buddhism. In fact, as a percentage of the population, there were probably more Christians in Japan in the 1590s than there were in the 1950s.

- At one point, Hideyoshi, Nobunaga’s successor, became suspicious of Christians and issued an order banning Christianity, but he changed his mind when missionaries offered to say prayers for his invasion of Korea. Moreover, some of Hideyoshi’s best generals in Korea were Christians.

- But as the Tokugawa began to implement tight surveillance of the daimyo after 1600, the attitude toward Christianity changed significantly. From the point of view of the leaders in Edo, daimyo who were co-religionists might find many occasions to meet outside of Tokugawa surveillance, and fellow Christians might be natural allies. An affair in which a Christian samurai forged a document for a Christian daimyo raised the specter that Japanese Christians could form a network of subversive men with dual loyalties.

- This turned Ieyasu against Christianity, and in 1614, he issued a decisive edict banning it. Japanese Christians were ordered to renounce their faith, and missionaries were forced to leave under penalty of death.

- With Japan’s porous borders, there was no guarantee that Japanese Christians wouldn’t simply move to an expatriate community.
in China, Manila, or Thailand and conspire there. One obvious solution was to isolate Japan from the rest of the world. And, in fact, the cornerstone of Tokugawa foreign policy was a strict limitation on the presence of foreigners in Japan and on the ability of Japanese to travel overseas.

- In 1638, the Tokugawa regime faced the exact peril it had been dreading, a massive uprising of Christians known as the Shimabara Rebellion. Staged largely by Catholic peasants, the rebellion came to a head when the rebels took over Hara Castle in the Hizen province in southwestern Japan. To quell the uprising, the shogunate sent 125,000 troops to defeat about 30,000 rebels. After a siege of several months, the shogun’s forces retook the castle and beheaded virtually all the defenders. In the aftermath, the Tokugawa intensified their suppression of Christianity.

- Despite bans on some European Christians, the Dutch and English were allowed to remain in Japan because they separated commerce and missionary work. But the English stopped sending ships in the 1620s for financial reasons, and the Dutch were restricted to Nagasaki. Chinese merchants were still allowed to come to Japan for trade, but they, too, were restricted to Nagasaki. This treatment of foreigners in Japan eliminated a transnational community of adventurers, traders, and advisers.

**Conquest of the Ryukyu Kingdom**

- It’s important to note that the Tokugawa didn’t cut all ties with the outside world, only ties that might be dangerous. It’s true that they avoided major wars on the continent, but they didn’t object to wars that they were fairly certain they would win. The best example of this is the conquest of the Ryukyu kingdom in 1609.

- In the 15th century, the Ryukyu kingdom, which is today the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa, was an independent kingdom with close ties to China. In 1609, the Shimazu clan of Satsuma asked the Tokugawa for permission to attack the island kingdom, and the shogun agreed. The Shimazu quickly captured the capital
city of Naha and brought the king of Ryukyu to Satsuma as a hostage.

- But then the Shimazu did something remarkable: They sent the king back to Naha with instructions to conceal the Japanese conquest of Ryukyu from China. Rather than trumpet their conquest, Japanese leaders decided to hide it.
  - The main value of Ryukyu was as a trading center; the kingdom had tributary status with the Ming and traded with Korea, China, and much of Southeast Asia. But if the Ming heard that Japan had conquered Ryukyu, they would, at the very least, cut off ties with Ryukyu and stop trading, which would destroy much of the value of the conquest. If the Ming didn’t know, then Satsuma would have access to international trade through Ryukyu.
  - The Shimazu stationed troops in Naha, but when Chinese diplomats came to the capital, the Japanese troops left the city and hid. The Shimazu also gave the kings of Ryukyu—the Shō dynasty—increasingly strict instructions on how to conceal Japanese influence.

- Contrast the conquest of Ryukyu with Hideyoshi’s 1592 invasion of Korea. Instead of a massive and exhaustive campaign on the continent, intended to impress the Ming with Japanese power, the Tokugawa chose a small, quick battle, then carefully avoided annoying the Ming.

- We see similar patterns in the Tokugawa’s relations with Korea. First, Ieyasu disavowed any connection to Hideyoshi’s invasion, although the Korean court probably knew that he was lying. Second, in the peace talks, the Tokugawa adopted the title taikun (“great lord”) to avoid a title that would imply they were vassals of the Ming.

Relations with China

- The Tokugawa also chose to dodge the question of how the Japanese sovereign would relate to the Chinese emperor. Calling the
sovereign “king” would be seen as a challenge to the Chinese, as would shogunal regulation of Chinese merchants in Nagasaki.

- The solution was to regulate Chinese merchants through the Nagasaki Chinese Translation Office, which took orders from the shogun but carefully avoided mentioning that title.

- Of course, Beijing knew that regulations coming out of this office were shogunal orders, but the Chinese really didn’t want a war either. Thus, if a Chinese merchant complained that he wasn’t being allowed to bring as many ships into Nagasaki as he wanted, the emperor of China could answer that it was beneath him to intervene in a petty dispute with a city translation office.

- Thus, for more than 250 years, Japan had no direct relations with China, but the two countries managed to regulate bilateral trade through what one scholar has described as “silent diplomacy.”

- Although it’s accurate to view Japan as isolated during the Tokugawa shogunate, the nation also managed to maintain a certain level of international trade. Still, for centuries, almost no foreigners came to Japan and virtually no Japanese left the country. In the 1850s, however, Japan would be forced to engage with the rising Western powers.
Lecture 11—Japan’s Isolation in the Tokugawa Period

Suggested Reading

Endo, *Samurai*.


Ravina, “Japan in the Chinese Tribute System.”

Questions to Consider

1. What prompted the Tokugawa to restrict Japanese ties to the outside world in the 1600s?

2. How does this phase of isolationism differ from previous epochs? How did it affect Japanese culture?
Japan has three main traditional forms of theater: Noh, the high classical form; Bunraku, theater with highly articulated puppets; and Kabuki, the popular theater of the early modern period. In this lecture, we’ll discuss Noh and Kabuki. These two forms share some important commonalities: They both have a chorus and musicians who are essential to the narrative, and in both forms, the performers were exclusively male. But beyond that, the two traditions are rather different. In this lecture, we’ll look at plays from both traditions to explore those differences.

**Contrasting Noh and Kabuki**

- In Noh theater, key actors wear masks, which means that acting involves conveying emotion through body movements rather than facial expressions. In addition, Noh sets are extremely simple, with perhaps a single branch representing a tree or a wooden frame representing a house. Noh dramas also have a limited number of characters. One character, known as the *waki*, asks questions, and another, known as the *shite*, answers them. The *shite* is the main character.

- In contrast, Kabuki theater can have elaborate sets, complete with trapdoors and rotating platforms. Kabuki costumes are elaborate, and the actors wear dense and sometimes outrageous makeup. Kabuki also has a greater range of subject matter than Noh does and, therefore, a greater range of characters, including great lords and ladies, wise and lecherous monks, depraved and noble bandits, and so on.

- Another important difference is that Noh theater was shaped by the sponsorship of wealthy and powerful patrons. In fact, many plays in the Noh canon were written by the 15th-century actor-playwright Zeami Motokiyo, who was patronized by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third Ashikaga shogun.
Kabuki, however, emerged from base origins. It builds on a medieval popular ballad tradition called *jōruri*. In the early 1600s, *jōruri* ballads were adapted by prostitutes in Edo to draw customers; gradually, the performances became successful in their own right. Today, Kabuki is treated as a national treasure, but until the 1900s, it was at the edge of respectability.

**Atsumori**

- As part of the high culture of the 1400s, many Noh plays focus on the Buddhist theme of illusion, particularly the torments of illusion. One example is *Atsumori*, written by Zeami Motokiyo.

- In the play, Kumagai has the role of the *waki*, the character whose questions drive the plot forward, and Atsumori is the *shite*, the character who answers the questions. The play picks up the story of these two characters from *The Tale of the Heike*.

- As you recall, there’s a brief passage in the ballad in which a Minamoto warrior, Kumagai, kills a Heike warrior, Atsumori. Atsumori reminds Kumagai of his own son, and he is so distraught that he has killed a beautiful young man that he thinks of becoming a monk.

- The Zeami play creates a sequel to this story that begins years later. Kumagai has become a monk and is still distraught over having killed Atsumori. The drama opens with Kumagai preparing to travel.

In Kabuki theater, the costumes and makeup are elaborate, and actors intensify the effect of their makeup with highly stylized facial expressions.
to Ichinotani, the scene of the battle, to pray for the repose of Atsumori’s soul.

- Kumagai’s opening line is: “Awake to awareness; the world is but a dream!” The Buddhist message here is clear. We live in a world of illusion and are blind to ultimate truth; our salvation lies in realizing the limits of our understanding.

- What’s interesting about the Noh tradition, and this work in particular, is how the practice of Noh drama itself—the philosophy of performance—connects with the Buddhist sentiment.
  - For example, Kumagai states that he is leaving Kyoto to go to Ichinotani, then does a slow, graceful dance. He describes the changing scenery before announcing that he has arrived at Ichinotani, but the sets don’t change.
  - Given that we live in a world of illusion, why should the sets change? Recall the Buddhist notion that believing everything you see actually keeps you from a higher level of understanding.

- In Ichinotani, Kumagai sees a grass cutter, which in Japanese poetry is a metaphor for isolation and humiliation. Although neither character realizes it, the grass cutter is the ghost of Atsumori, bound to this world by his negative emotions. The arc of the play is focused on Kumagai and Atsumori realizing who Atsumori is, then releasing him from his torment.

- When they first meet, Atsumori tells Kumagai that he is related to someone named Atsumori. Later, when he realizes who he is and appears on stage as Atsumori, the two reenact their initial meeting. Atsumori recalls playing the flute on the eve of the battle, and in Zeami’s version, the Heike ships leave without him. Atsumori turns to confront Kumagai and they fight. This action is all conveyed in a stylized dance, with explanation from the chorus.

- At the very moment that Atsumori is reliving his own death, he snaps. He draws his sword and rushes over to kill Kumagai, but
then he stops. Kumagai is praying for Atsumori’s salvation and that the two will be reborn together as friends, not enemies. Atsumori is finally released from his torment, makes a gesture of prayer toward Kumagai, and gracefully moves offstage.

- The appeal of this play to warrior patrons is clear: It allows them to feel cleansed of any remorse they might feel for killing in battle. But more broadly, the play expounds several key Buddhist ideas. Atsumori is locked in torment because he can’t accept his own death. He’s a distinctly Buddhist ghost, trapped by his own negative emotions. Therefore, Kumagai, his enemy, can actually become his savior—by releasing him from his own anger.

**The Scarlet Princess of Edo**

- *The Scarlet Princess of Edo* (*Sakurahime azuma bunshō*) is a wonderful but utterly vulgar Kabuki drama. It was a hit in the early 1800s and was revived many times in the 20th century. The play is an excellent example of Kabuki’s celebration of mayhem and decadence.

- The story opens with a monk, Seigen, and his male lover, Shiragiku, an acolyte. Because they have violated their Buddhist vows of celibacy, the two decide to end their illicit love affair in a double suicide.
  - They break apart an incense case—one part has Seigen’s name and the other part has Shiragiku’s—and they each take the part with the other’s name. With Seigen’s name clenched in his fist, Shiragiku jumps off a cliff, praying that he will be reborn as a woman so that he can become Seigen’s lawful wife.

  - But Seigen does not jump. He says, “The ties that bind me to you, Shiragiku, are powerful, but the ties that bind me to life are more powerful.” Then, an eerie green glow and a mysterious bird emerge from the sea where Shiragiku plunged into the waves.

- Seventeen years later, Seigen is approached by a noble family, the Yoshida, to say prayers for their daughter, Princess Sakura. She was
born with a deformity—a tightly clenched fist—and because of this deformity, she was rejected by her betrothed, a man named Akugorō.

- Seigen nonchalantly says a prayer for the princess, her hand unclenches, and out pops the incense box with Seigen’s name. Of course, Seigen is instantly obsessed with Princess Sakura because she is Shiragiku. Now that she’s no longer deformed, Akugorō decides that he wants her, too.

- In addition to being deformed, Princess Sakura has also been abducted and deflowered by an unknown assailant, and she has borne his child. That unknown assailant turns out to be the gangster Gonsuke, who is the brother of Seigen. Gonsuke is also working for Akugorō, who has a scheme to take over the headship of Princess Sakura’s family. When Gonsuke realizes that Princess Sakura is the woman he raped, he also becomes obsessed with her.

- All this occurs in only the first act. The play has four acts, showcasing every possible form of lurid mayhem. Seigen is, by turns, drowned, poisoned, and stabbed, all by different people in different scenes. Princess Sakura is sold into prostitution, then dismissed because she’s too regal. In a drunken stupor, Gonsuke admits to the princess that he may have killed her father; she stabs him to death, then kills their baby. Then, somehow, in the final scene, she lives happily ever after.

**Kanjinchō**

- The Kabuki play *Kanjinchō* is based on a Noh drama. The title is commonly translated as “subscription list,” although a better translation might be “donor list” or “contribution list.” It is an account of Benkei’s incredible loyalty to Yoshitsune. As you recall, Yoshitsune is a historical figure, the half-brother of the first shogun, and Benkei is his largely fictional loyal retainer.

- The backstory to *Kanjinchō* is that Yoshitsune is fleeing north to escape from his half-brother, Yoritomo. Benkei has conspired to get them past a checkpoint by disguising himself as a priest,
traveling the countryside to collect funds for the restoration of the Tōdaiji temple in Nara. Yoshitsune is disguised as one of Benkei’s porters.

- They reach a checkpoint commanded by a character named Togashi, who begins to ask Benkei about his “mission” to raise money for Tōdaiji and to grill him about points of Buddhist doctrine and practice. In response, Benkei bluffs; Togashi is not fooled but admires Benkei’s determination to save his lord.

- Togashi is about to let them pass when one of his men comments that Benkei’s porter resembles Yoshitsune. Benkei begins to beat Yoshitsune, berating his supposed porter for making them late because everyone mistakes him for Yoshitsune.

- Togashi is convinced that the porter is Yoshitsune, but he is even more impressed by Benkei’s devotion and allows them to pass. Once they are safe, Benkei apologizes to Yoshitsune for the great sin of striking his own lord, but Yoshitsune replies that he is lucky to have a companion as loyal and clever as Benkei. The loyal retainer collapses in tears.

- *Kanjinchō* was a hit when it was first performed in 1840. It was adapted from a Noh play of the 1400s called *Ataka* (“safe haven”), and the broad outlines of the story are almost identical. But because *Ataka* is Noh drama, the intense emotional connection between Benkei and Yoshitsune is raised to high abstraction.

  - Yoshitsune says to Benkei, “Your intelligence at the barrier was beyond human,” and he interprets this as a sign that they were favored by a bodhisattva, an enlightened Buddhist being.

  - He then explains their struggles in terms of Buddhist philosophy, and the chorus observes, “The master and the followers all remain dazed—just as if awakening from a dream, looking at each other, and shedding tears.”
Instead of having Benkei break down onstage, the original Noh version of the story shows both Benkei and Yoshitsune weeping as they contemplate the evanescence of life and the tragedy of karma.

**Suggested Reading**

Brazell and Araki, *Traditional Japanese Theater*.

Gunji, “Kabuki and Its Social Background.”

Masakazu and Matisoff, “The Aesthetics of Transformation.”

Wetmore, *Revenge Drama in European Renaissance and Japanese Theater*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. In both Noh and Kabuki, the chorus serves a range of roles: explaining the backstory, clarifying motivation, and describing the characters’ thoughts. How does this compare to other theater traditions?

2. Noh has proved especially attractive to European authors, including Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats. What might explain this appeal?
The Importance of Japanese Gardens
Lecture 13

In Japan, gardens are treated as cultural treasures. They are listed UNESCO heritage sites, and foreign dignitaries are taken to gardens as a means of showing them Japanese culture. Famous gardens draw large crowds and long lines during tourist season. Of course, England and France also have rich garden cultures, but Japanese gardens have unusual cultural significance. In this lecture, we will consider Japanese gardens in two ways: as part of a history of aesthetics and as expressions of broader political and social concerns.

Gardens of the High Classical Period

- A famous example of a garden of Japan’s high classical period is the Byōdōin in Uji. Both the buildings and the garden are classic evocations of Heian aesthetics.
  - The Byōdōin was originally a rural villa on the Uji River near Kyoto. Fujiwara no Michinaga, the master of Heian court politics, used it as his meditation retreat. It was converted into a temple in 1052.
  - The goal of the designers of Byōdōin was to create a tiny scale model of the Pure Land. The largest surviving structure in the Byōdōin complex is a hall dedicated to Amida, alternatively known as Amida Hall or Phoenix Hall. The large statue of Amida inside is considered a national treasure. The walls of Amida Hall are covered with angels, all rejoicing in Amida’s vow to save every sinner who repents.
  - Amida Hall is set in a lotus pond, a placement that makes it an island of salvation. Visitors can cross a bridge from Amida Hall to a second tiny island, then to the shore, a progression that symbolizes Amida’s bridge to the Pure Land.
Another superb example of a classical garden can be found in Hiraizumi at a temple called Mōtsuji.

- Mōtsuji was originally a large temple complex built by the northern branch of the Fujiwara house. All the original temple buildings were lost in a fire in the 1200s, but the overall landscape architecture of the ponds is largely unchanged. In its original layout, Mōtsuji had the same major buildings as the Byōdōin: a main prayer hall set on a quiet lake, a bridge to a small island, and a bridge to the shore.

- The garden at Mōtsuji is famous for two groups of rock formations and a tiny beach. Those features are miniature replicas of real landscapes, such as the craggy seacoast of northeastern Japan. Thus, the lakeshore represents the entire world in miniature.

The Byōdōin garden was designed with a clear religious message; it was meant to be a scale model of the Pure Land.
○ Like Byōdōin, Mōtsuji had something of a dual role, as a religious site and as an aristocratic villa. Each year in May, a reenactment of a Heian-era garden party is held there. Reenactors in Heian court dress sit on mats by a gentle stream and indulge in a favored Heian pastime: Sake is floated down the stream, and the revelers must compose a poem appropriate to the occasion before it’s their turn to drink.

**Medieval Gardens**

- One of the most imitated gardens in Japan is the one at Saihōji in Kyoto; to see it, visitors must apply in advance. Saihōji is also known colloquially as *kokedera*, or “moss temple,” because the gardens are famous for rich, verdant moss. Ironically, where there is now moss, there was once raked sand.
- The exact origins of the Saihōji garden are unclear, but the current layout reflects the influence of the monk Musō Soseki. Soseki converted the site from a Pure Land temple to a Zen temple in the 1300s. Originally, the garden was probably a paradise garden, but in its redesign, it no longer directly represents a paradise theme. Instead, the garden offers ever-changing perspectives.
- Saihōji also has the prototype of Japanese rock gardens—a clump of rocks, commonly thought to suggest a waterfall.

- A famous garden influenced by Saihōji is at Kinkakuji, or the temple of the Golden Pavilion, in Kyoto. The Golden Pavilion was built at the end of the 14th century by the third Ashikaga shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. He used it as a villa, but after his death, it became a Zen temple known as Rokuonji.
- The garden at Kinkakuji uses large stones to create the illusion of a much larger landscape seen from a distance. The small lake seems like a vast sea with a rocky shore.
- Instead of the emphasis on a journey to the Pure Land, the changing perspectives of Kinkakuji point to the Zen notion of extreme subjectivity: How we see the world can change
radically based on our state of mind. This idea is reflected in the fact that at some points, the Golden Pavilion dominates the landscape, and elsewhere, it almost disappears in favor of small, rocky islands or a wooded grove.

- The Golden Pavilion itself was completed around 1397 and incorporates three distinct styles: The first floor is laid out like a Heian-era aristocratic villa; the second floor is in the style of a warrior residence; and the tiny third floor is in the style of a Chinese Zen temple. This blending of styles reflects Yoshimitsu’s syncretic approach to politics.

- In contrast to the gaudiness of Kinkakuji, there was also a countervailing force in medieval aesthetics toward the austere and simple. This is reflected in landscape architecture in the emergence of temple rock gardens. The term in Japanese is kare sansui, or “dry landscaping.”
  - Two iconic rock gardens are the abbot’s gardens at Daisenin and Ryōanji, both dating from the late 1400s or 1500s in their original layouts and both attributed to the famous painter Sōami.
  - These gardens showcase two innovations, the first of which is the concept of dry landscaping itself, that is, using raked gravel or moss to represent water and stone to represent such features as mountains and bridges. In the extreme case of the rock garden at Ryōanji, the only plants are moss.
  - Second, these gardens are incredibly compact in size. The rock garden at Daisenin bends around the corner of the abbot’s residence in an L shape and measures 30 feet by 40 feet, with the most important features squeezed into an area about 10 feet square.
  - This tiny garden has generated an outsized volume of interpretation. The most basic is that the tall, upright stones represent mountains; the raked sand is a rushing stream; the horizontal stone is a bridge over the stream; and another stone
in the adjacent garden is a boat floating in the stream. In this interpretation, the genius of the garden is that it converts a scene from classic monochrome Chinese landscape painting into a garden.

- Many have noticed that it is impossible to see all 15 stones in the Ryōanji garden from any one angle, which reinforces the Zen belief in the limits of the senses. Looking at the garden reminds visitors that they are seeing only a fragment of what is truly present.

The Tea Ceremony and Tea Gardens

- Another important innovation of the 1500s was the tea garden, a special style of garden leading to a small tea house. To understand the tea garden, we need to know a bit about the Japanese tea ceremony.
  - Tea drinking in Japan seems to have begun with monks who brought tea back from China. By the 1300s, tea drinking had become an important social occasion, with warriors hosting lavish tea parties. In the 1500s, tea drinking became more structured and formal, and lords began to entrust the details of these parties to tea masters.
  - The tea ceremony is an important reflection of Japanese aesthetics. It involves graceful and stylized movements; the tea master serves the tea without a single wasted motion. The tea implements are without ornamentation; an ideal tea implement is a simple bamboo tea whisk or a water ladle. The tea house itself is somewhat cramped, which creates a feeling of intimacy, and the interior might be decorated with a single flower and a hanging scroll.
  - These aspects of Japanese aesthetics—simplicity, natural materials, clean lines, perfectly functional elements—have dovetailed with certain Western artistic movements, such as the English Arts and Crafts movement, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and even some product design.
The function of a tea garden is to lead one into the almost meditative space of the tea ceremony. Thus, an ideal tea garden has carefully placed stepping stones. The palette of the plantings should be muted, with no bold flowers or colors.

Many famous gardens are actually fusions of multiple styles. This is the case, for example, with the gardens of Jishōji, more commonly known as Ginkakuji, the temple of the Silver Pavilion.

- The Silver Pavilion was built for shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, the grandson of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. The somber and muted tones of the Silver Pavilion represent a wonderful contrast with the bold and brilliant assertiveness of the Golden Pavilion. The difference is fitting because Yoshimitsu was the most powerful shogun in the Ashikaga dynasty, while Yoshimasa presided over the collapse of the shogunate into civil war.

- Ginkakuji is most famous for a gravel garden—a smooth mountain of gravel—and a long, raised sand plane. The combination is said to look like a mountain by the sea. Ginkakuji was built in the 1400s, and this garden is almost certainly not part of the original design. However, the net effect of layers of design and redesign is that Ginkakuji is like three gardens in one: a garden inspired by Saihōji, a quasi-tea garden, and a rock garden.

Some of the most famous gardens in Japan are called strolling gardens or tour gardens; these often combine multiple elements and may have more than one tea house. Strolling gardens are often grand in scale, but they use elements from small-scale gardens to pack multiple perspectives into the space. A fine example of a strolling garden is Katsura Rikyū in Kyoto, known in English as Katsura Imperial Villa or Katsura Detached Palace.

**Japanese versus Western Gardens**

- The gardens at Versailles exhibit straight lines and right angles, with broad, clear vistas. The human effort required to build and maintain Versailles is obvious in the fountains, the shape of the
shrubs, and so on. This garden is nature bent to man’s design—the natural world conforming to the power of the king or the state.

- At Katsura Rikyū, instead of broad vistas, we get an ever-changing perspective. In a way, as many have observed, Japanese gardens look more natural than nature itself.

- Often, the goal in Japanese aesthetics is to hide human effort rather than to extol it. In gardens, that means invoking nature rather than coercing it. Japanese gardens avoid hard, right angles or unnatural forms; the natural elements are meant to suggest or invoke still grander natural elements, as when a rock suggests an island.

### Suggested Reading

Itō and Iwamiya, *The Japanese Garden*.

Okakura, *The Book of Tea*.

Thacker, *The History of Gardens*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What are the key elements of Japanese garden design?

2. How does Japanese garden design relate to broader movements in Japanese aesthetics?

3. How does Japanese garden design differ from other garden traditions?
The Meaning of *Bushidō* in a Time of Peace  
Lecture 14

As you may know, *bushidō* means “the way of the warrior.” The term was first used in the 1890s, about 20 years after the samurai class had been dissolved. In other words, samurai began writing about “the way of the samurai” primarily during peacetime. The Tokugawa shogunate had suppressed the insurrection at Shimabara in 1638, and after that, there was no fighting for more than 200 years. Thus, almost all our descriptions of warrior conduct were written after warfare had stopped. That’s one of the striking tensions in virtually all works on *bushidō*: Either they are nostalgic, looking back to the past, or they confront the paradox of warriors at peace, seeking a new role for the samurai.

*The Book of Five Rings*

- *The Book of Five Rings* is a guide to strategy, specifically swordsmanship, written by Miyamoto Musashi, a great swordsman and tactician. Interestingly, the book was written around 1645, when Miyamoto Musashi was about 60. He had fought on the losing side in the war between the Toyotomi and Tokugawa clans and, thereafter, had wandered Japan as a *ronin*—a masterless samurai.

- After 60 duels, Musashi became known as a master swordsman and was politically rehabilitated. He fought on the Tokugawa side at Shimabara and became a swordsmanship instructor for the Kumamoto domain. By the 1640s, he suffered from a variety of ailments and, according to some accounts, retreated to a mountain cave to practice Buddhist meditation and write *The Book of Five Rings*.

- The text is a combination memoir and manual. It’s full of practical advice on how to duel mixed with somewhat mystical aphorisms, such as “Compose your body and mind in a straightforward way so that you can bend and warp the mind of your opponent, achieving the victory by twisting and distorting his mind.”
• What’s intriguing about this text is that even the practical advice on dueling is largely impractical because neither the shogunate nor the daimyo were willing to tolerate the sort of lawlessness that comes with vendettas or feuding. In fact, in the early modern period, both the shogunate and the domains relied on a principle called *kenkairyōseibai*, which dictated that in case of a fight, both parties could be punished for disturbing the peace.

• Thus, practically speaking, virtually no one applied Miyamoto’s lessons outside of a martial arts *dōjō* because by the time he wrote *The Book of Five Rings*, there was no officially sanctioned violence.

**Hidden in the Leaves**

• Another book that’s sometimes described as a handbook for samurai is Yamamoto Tsunetomo’s work *Hagakure*, sometimes translated as *Hidden in the Leaves*. Despite modern descriptions, *Hagakure* is not a guide to samurai practice but a sort of grouchy and petulant memoir.

• The most famous line in *Hagakure* is found in the opening chapter: “The way of the warrior is found in death.” Although this line is widely quoted as central to samurai thought, it’s important to note that unlike Miyamoto Musashi, Yamamoto Tsunetomo had no practical combat experience of any kind. He was born in 1659, after warfare had ended, and he worked as a scribe, although he was mostly unemployed.

• Thus, *Hagakure* is the morose late-life reflections of an armchair general. In fact, what’s most interesting about *Hagakure* is Yamamoto’s deep nostalgia for a world that had ended before his birth.

• This eccentric book was largely forgotten for two centuries. The first modern edition of *Hagakure* was published in 1900, and in the first decade of the 20th century, only three Japanese-language books even mentioned *Hagakure*. 
But in the 1940s, the number of books discussing *Hagakure* soared to 35. In other words, *Hagakure* became the definitive book of the samurai only during the Pacific war.

Rather than an account of samurai tradition, this work serves as an example of what the Japanese army thought Japanese soldiers should believe about samurai practice.

**Samurai as the Ruling Elite**

- By the late 1600s and early 1700s, samurai faced a truly significant question: How do you maintain a warrior class in the absence of war? One answer to this question came from a scholar named Yamaga Sokō. Yamaga was an influential Tokugawa thinker, but unlike Yamamoto Tsunetomo, he was taken seriously in his own lifetime.

- Yamaga was born in 1622 and studied with one of the leading Confucian scholars of his day. He turned to Confucianism to explain why the samurai should stay in power as a warrior elite even in the absence of war.

- In an ideal Confucian society, the country is ruled by the emperor and administered by an impartial landed gentry. Because they are landed, they have time to study, and because they study the Confucian classics, they are moral; thus, they administer the land and advise the emperor with wisdom and impartiality.

- For Yamaga, the Japanese counterparts to the noble gentry were the samurai. According to Yamaga, samurai spend their time reflecting on great Confucian moral problems, such as how to maintain loyalty to their lords. For this reason, they become intensely moral, and it’s only natural that they should be the ruling class in Japan.

**The Vendetta of the 47 Rōnin**

- Yamaga’s thought was deeply influential, although in practice, being moral exemplars could be quite challenging for the samurai. For example, samurai of the early modern period wrestled with the question: How does one show great loyalty in peacetime? Nowhere
The story of the 47 rōnin has never left popular culture in Japan; it has been turned into a Kabuki play, multiple film and television depictions, an opera, and a ballet.

was the thorniness of this question more apparent than in the famous vendetta of the 47 rōnin.

- In 1701, the Tokugawa shogun in Edo was preparing to receive an envoy from the emperor in Kyoto bearing New Year’s greetings. This event was entirely ceremonial, but because it involved the emperor and the shogun, correct protocol was essential. A shogunal officer named Kira Yoshinaka was in charge of protocol, and daimyo Asano Naganori was in the receiving party.

- These two men did not get along, and toward the end of the multiday reception of the imperial envoys at the shogun’s castle, Asano flew into a rage and tried to kill Kira. Kira recovered, but Asano’s conduct was outrageous. He was ordered to commit seppuku (ritual suicide), and his entire territory was seized by the shogunate as punishment. His lineage lost their land, and all his samurai were now rōnin.
Kira suspected that Asano’s samurai would try to avenge him, but Asano’s men were patient. They waited almost two years, then in the last days of 1702, the soon-to-be famous 47 rōnin attacked Kira’s compound in Edo, killed him, presented his head to their lord’s grave, and surrendered to the police.

The vendetta posed a problem for Tokugawa law because the samurai were both heroes and criminals. As criminals, they had committed murder; worse, they had killed a shogunal officer. But as heroes, they had upheld the highest principle of samurai morality: They had remained loyal to their lord, even when there was no chance of worldly gain. After deliberating for two months, the shogunate ruled that the rōnin should commit seppuku, the most honorable form of execution.

The general consensus was that the 47 rōnin had struck an exact balance between their duty to avenge their lord and their obligation to respect the laws of their lord’s lord—the shogun. Thus, the incident became a famous example of Tokugawa-era samurai loyalty.

- There were, however, dissents on both sides. Yamamoto Tsunetomo, the author of Hagakure, insisted that the rōnin had been too cautious. What if Lord Kira had died while the rōnin were delaying? It would have been better to attack immediately even if such an attack would have been futile.

- Another account critical of the rōnin accused them of ambition. The fact that they surrendered to the police instead of immediately committing seppuku once their vendetta was accomplished showed that they were clearly hoping for a pardon and, perhaps, a good job.

- A completely opposite opinion was that the rōnin were exemplary because of how carefully they separated their personal grievance from respect for public order. They reportedly had men at the ready to put out fires in case Lord Kira’s mansion was set ablaze during the attack.
Some even grumbled that the entire incident was set in motion by the shogunate itself. As noted earlier, one of the key principles of Tokugawa law was *kenka ryōseibai*—both parties to an altercation are guilty of disturbing the peace. If Kira had provoked Asano’s fury, then he was a party to the dispute and should have been punished in some way, even though he didn’t draw his weapon.

- The story of the 47 rōnin set up the iconic standard for samurai behavior: brave, stoic, and self-sacrificing, even violent when needed but only as violent as absolutely required out of respect for the broader social order.

**A New Reality for the Samurai**

- By the 1700s, most daimyo were not especially interested in spectacular shows of loyalty. After several generations of peace, they were primarily interested in maintaining high levels of conspicuous consumption; the former rivalries of the battlefield had become rivalries of wealth.
  - Daimyo wanted samurai who could arrange a steady or increasing stream of income but without oppressive taxation that might provoke peasants to revolt. For this reason, samurai sought to serve their daimyo by introducing alternative crops that could be sold in Osaka and Edo.

- Thus, for the samurai, the early modern period was a time of change and even social ambiguity.

- One remarkable example of the way the samurai class adapted to new realities took place in the domain of Yonezawa in northern Japan, where for almost three generations in the 1600s, everything went wrong for the Uesugi house.
  - In the 1590s, the Uesugi were at the peak of their power, but in the 1660s, they lost most of their land and, thus, their means of supporting their samurai. The Uesugi struggled until the late 1700s, when they revealed that their samurai were engaged in weaving in their homes.
As shocking as this revelation was, the Yonezawa government decided to formally embrace this new reality. It set up an official system allowing samurai households to get looms and told merchants to allow samurai to sell their cloth discreetly. The government also issued an edict declaring that it was not shameful but noble and essential for samurai families to have another source of employment. These reforms led to fame for Yonezawa as the origin of a distinctive type of cloth.

The extent of this transformation in Yonezawa was unique, but it points to the great flexibility of the notion of samurai. The term samurai originally meant “warrior,” but that began to change in the 1600s, with the Tokugawa peace; as we’ve seen, warriors began to define themselves in terms of loyalty and self-sacrifice rather than combat.

Suggested Reading

Friday, “Bushidō or Bull?”
Takeda, Shōraku, and Namiki, Chūshingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers).

Questions to Consider

1. Why is it misleading to call Hagakure a “handbook” for samurai conduct?

2. In what ways does the vendetta of the 47 rōnin illustrate the challenges faced by the samurai during the Tokugawa period?
In this lecture, we will do some historical traveling to get a sense of the range of voices and styles in Japanese poetry. We’ll begin with the oldest surviving Japanese poems, which appear in mythology. We then move on to poetry found in Japanese anthologies, compiled from the 700s. Here, we find the *tanka* (“short poem”); these five-line poems would become the cornerstone of Japanese poetry. In the imperial anthologies, we also find two devices that are distinct to Japanese poetry: pillow words and pivot words. Next, we move on to *renga*, linked verse, which ultimately led to the development of haiku, the best known form of Japanese verse.

**Poetry in Japanese Myth**

- There are two ancient editions of Japanese mythology: The *Kojiki*, compiled in 712, is the bawdier, rowdier version; the *Nihon shoki* or *Nihongi*, compiled in 720, is more like a Chinese-style imperial history. Instead of lurid details of rape and murder, we get classical references to Confucian virtue. The *Kojiki* has the better poetry of the two. In it, the gods simply compose poetry as they go about their lives.

- A favorite example is the tale of Yamato Takeru, a legendary emperor who was inserted into the official genealogy of the imperial house. Yamato Takeru supposedly lived from 72 C.E. to 114 C.E. He was simultaneously a great warrior prince and something of a dangerous lunatic. For example, in the *Kojiki*, Takeru murders his brother on a whim. His father, Emperor Keiko, is understandably alarmed and sends Takeru to the frontier.

- Because the Takeru story is pieced together from multiple oral traditions, he comes across as both a romantic hero and a violent conqueror who subjugates the wild frontier, and his story includes poems about both courtship and murder.
Takeru is betrothed to a princess named Miyazu. On one occasion, when he returns from a mission, he notices that the princess has a menstrual blood stain on the edge of her robes. He writes:

Across boundless heavenly Mount Kagu
Curved-necked swans fly.
Your arm as slim, as pliant,
I wanted to use as a pillow.
I had thought of sleeping with you
But on the hem of the outer garment you wear
The moon has risen.

The princess responds, “My great lord, I have waited for you for years, but I could not wait any longer.” Then she quotes his couplet: “…on the hem of the outer garment I wear / The moon has risen.”

This episode seems strange. The implication is that Princess Miyazu was going to wait to begin menstruating until Yamato Takeru returned, but what’s even more striking is that the incident appears in courtship poetry. The subject of menstrual bleeding would never occur, for example, in the poetic banter of the Heian court. In fact, this shift in poetry—from the crude but vibrant verse of the .RMLNL to the refined but studied poems of the Heian period—matches a similar transformation in society.

The Collection of Countless Words

- The oldest Japanese poetry anthology is the Man’yōshū, compiled in the 700s, probably with some later editing. Manyō means “ten thousand leaves” or, possibly, “ten thousand words,” but ten thousand in East Asian languages can mean “many” or “countless.” Thus, it’s possible to interpret Man’yōshū to mean Collection of Countless Words.

- The Man’yōshū is strikingly different from later anthologies. First, it uses an earlier writing system, and its poems demonstrate an earthy simplicity. They are not quite as rowdy as the poems in the
Kojiki, but they are certainly rougher than the refined aesthetics of later court poetry. The Man’yōshū includes poems about seeing dead bodies washed up on the shore and about hunger and famine—themes that were considered unseemly in later centuries.

- A third distinctive characteristic of the Man’yōshū is that it contains poetry forms that disappeared in later anthologies.
  - Most important of these are the chōka, which means “long poem.” A chōka features alternating lines of 5 syllables and 7 syllables, just like later Japanese poetry, but a chōka alternates 5 and 7 many times before ending with 5-7-7. The hundreds of chōka in the Man’yōshū represent the last stand of what was probably once a dominant poetry form.
  - Even in the Man’yōshū, short poems outnumber long poems by about 20 to 1. Above all, there are the five-line poems, usually with a 5-7-5-7-7 meter. These are called tanka, which means “short poem.” This shorter form would become the cornerstone of Japanese poetry; in fact, tanka are often called waka, which simply means “Japanese poem.”

**Imperial Anthologies**

- The canon of classical Japanese verse was shaped largely by imperial anthologies—collections that were commissioned and authorized by the imperial court. Technically, there are 21 imperial anthologies, starting in the 900s and ending in the 1400s, but the first eight are considered the true classics. The first and last of these eight, the Kokinshū and the Shinkokinshū, are considered the most influential. Poems from those collections became the basis for other artworks, such as paintings and screens.

- The dominant form in these anthologies was the waka or tanka with a 5-7-5-7-7 meter. But classical tanka also feature two devices that are distinct to Japanese poetry: pillow words and pivot words.
  - Pillow words are set phrases that refer to other poems. One or two words evoke an earlier poem, enabling those who are poetically literate to enjoy a chain of references.
The pivot word, or *kakekotoba*, is a homophone that changes meaning midway through the poem. Consider this example in English:

It is so noisy
In this crowded bustling room
That I cannot *hear*
I can at last find some peace
Away from the madding crowd

The poem pivots with the word *hear*, first meaning “to hear a sound,” then meaning a location. A famous example from the *Kokinshū* uses *matsu* as a pivot word, which can mean either “pine tree” or “to pine for.”

There are many pivot words that can’t be represented in English, such as *urami*, meaning “to gaze at the shore” and “to resent,” or *oto*, meaning “a sound” and being the start of the word *otozuru*, “to visit.”

A famous poem in the *Kokinshū* uses a brilliant double homophone. The poem opens with a lonely woman. In Japanese, it reads:

*Hana no iro wa*
*Utsuri ni keri na*
*Itazura ni*
*Waga mi yo ni furu*
*Nagame seshi ma ni*

The poem can be rendered in English as:

Behold my flower
Its colors faded away
As to no avail
I spent my days gazing at
Long rains and the passing time
○ This translation attempts to capture two pivot words: *furu*, which means either “rainfall” or “the passing of time,” and *nagame*, which means either “to gaze” or “a long rain.”

**Linked Verse**

- Late in the classical era, a new poetic form rose to prominence: linked verse, or *renga*. This form breaks the standard 5-7-5-7-7 format into parts. It also involves multiple poets. The first poet writes a 5-7-5 poem that becomes the starter poetic fragment; the next poet finishes the poem with a 7-7 couplet; a third poet writes the next 5-7-5; and so on.

- The official rules for a high art *renga* were set in the 1300s. In their classical form, *renga* were 100 stanzas. There were also fairly strict regulations on the topics. For example, the moon must be mentioned in certain stanzas and flowers in other stanzas. Classic *renga* also focused on two themes: elegance (*ushin*) and mysterious beauty (*yūgen*).

- Despite these rules, *renga* allowed for remarkable creativity because of the ability to play with and explore other aspects of poetry. An excellent example is a *renga* called “Three Poets at Minase,” or *Minase sangin hyakuin*, composed in 1488 by the great poet Sōgi and two of his disciples.
  ○ This linked poem follows all the classic rules, but within those constraints, it creates a beautifully flowing dialogue, as if three screen writers were sketching out a storyline in real time.

  ○ At one point, the subject seems to be a woman waiting for her lover, but she grows angry. Then, the next lines suggest an affair that ended badly, hurting both the man and the woman. As the poem flows on, the speaker becomes a hermit—a man—perhaps in hiding because a woman broke his heart. Each transition in the poem is graceful and thematically coherent.
Beginning in the 1400s, poets began to play with *renga* conventions, loosening the rules. Here’s a translation that captures the surprise ending of one example:

At a gap in the fence
Did someone say “hush”?
A little mouse
The cat next door
About to pounce

**Development of Haiku**

- The boom in comic *renga* and *renga* on vernacular subjects, with fewer rules and a broader vocabulary, was the first step in legitimizing haiku as “real poetry.” Simpler *renga* were all the rage in the 1600s and 1700s. In addition to loosening the *renga* rules, poets also began to compose one-person *renga* so that it was no longer necessary to have a poetry circle. Finally, the Japanese began to appreciate the first three lines of a *renga*, the 5-7-5 couplet, as an independent form of short poem.

- The 17th-century poet Bashō is known today as a haiku poet, but in his day, he was known as a *renga* poet. He was fortunate enough to be acclaimed in his own lifetime and supported himself as a poetry teacher. That’s remarkable in terms of social history: Amidst the increased literacy and prosperity of the Tokugawa...
period, poetry went from being associated with aristocratic or monastic leisure to being part of daily life for wealthier and more educated commoners.

- Interestingly, poetry has remained an important part of daily life in Japan. One indicator of this importance is the card game *Hyakunin isshū*, meaning “100 Poems by 100 Poets.” In essence, the game requires matching the first three lines of a poem on one card with the last two lines on another card. There are dozens of variations of *Hyakunin isshū*, including ones as recent as 2012; the popularity of the game reflects Japan’s longstanding and widespread interest in poetry.

### Suggested Reading


Keene, *Seeds in the Heart*.

Sato and Watson, *From the Country of Eight Islands*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do changes in Japanese poetry correspond to broader changes in literature and other arts?

2. What accounts for the unique popularity of haiku around the world? What other Japanese poetry forms have been successful in other languages?

3. Should translators feel constrained by the exact meter of Japanese verse, or is it more important to capture the flow of an individual poem?
In this lecture, we’ll discuss Japanese wood-block prints, a central form of visual art in early modern and modern Japan. In particular, we’ll focus on one of the most famous masters of the form, Katsushika Hokusai, who is best known for his wood-block print of a huge wave with Mount Fuji in the background. This image, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, is probably the single most famous Japanese work of art in the world; it is one image in a series of prints called *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. In this lecture, we’ll explore how *The Great Wave* fits in the history of Japanese wood-block prints, and we’ll use Hokusai’s life as a window into late Tokugawa history.

**Edo in Hokusai’s Youth**

- Hokusai was born in 1760, when the Tokugawa shogunate was just beginning to decline from the peak of its power. The eighth Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, had restored the regime’s finances and instituted a series of wide-ranging reforms. When he died in 1751, he left the regime stable and solvent.

- Edo, the city of Hokusai’s birth, was a bustling place, with more than 1 million people; Edo was full of poetry societies and theaters, restaurants, bookstores, brothels, and gambling dens, offering many legal, semi-legal, and illegal ways for a rising bourgeoisie to spend its time and money.

- That rising urban class was Hokusai’s clientele. These consumers had some disposable income, although not enough to enjoy the more conventional forms of art cherished by the samurai elite. Their desire for affordable art led to an explosion in wood-block prints, which could be produced in enormous volume.

- Probably the most popular Tokugawa-era prints are known as *ukiyo-e*, or “pictures from the *ukiyo,*” which means “floating world.” This term refers to the demimonde of the geisha and theater actors.
The steady sellers in the wood-block print industry were scenes from the theater and portraits of famous actors and courtesans.
- An artist named Suzuki Harunobu produced delicate portraits of famous geisha that were extremely popular and widely imitated.
- Another artist, Kitagawa Utamaro, had great commercial and critical success with prints that resemble modern head shots, focusing solely on courtesans from the neck up.

The Career of Hokusai
- Hokusai began his career working in the *ukiyo-e* tradition. He was apprenticed to a leading *ukiyo-e* artist named Katsukawa Shunshō. Following the custom of the day, Hokusai received a new name from his master, Katsukawa Shunrō. Under this name, Hokusai was quite successful, producing well-executed if unremarkable prints of actors, for 15 years.

- In addition to learning the basics of *ukiyo-e*, Hokusai also learned from Katsukawa the basics of perspective drawing. Japanese artists had learned this from Dutch prints, and the Katsukawa school was known for its use of perspective. These prints were called *uki-e*, or “floating pictures.”
- After Katsukawa died in 1793, and especially beginning in the 1800s, Hokusai began to engage in bold experimentation.
- He continued to do theater prints, including a series on the famous play *Chūshingura*, but for this series, he set the scenes outside in order to combine the figures with a dramatic landscape. These prints showcase Hokusai’s complete mastery of vanishing-point perspective.
- Hokusai’s mastery of Western-style perspective is a reminder that although Japan was closed to Westerners during the Tokugawa shogunate, it was not closed to Western influence. On the contrary, Hokusai, like other Japanese artists of his day, saw examples of Western art and experimented with perspective and Western-style painting.
While Hokusai embraced Western aesthetics, he also tried other forms of Japanese art. For example, he experimented with the style of the *rinpa* school, which specialized in elegant and refined landscapes and beautiful flowers. *Rinpa* design was largely two-dimensional—almost the opposite of Hokusai’s Western-style landscapes—and *rinpa* artists often used gold leaf and worked on large screens.

Studying these different styles gave Hokusai the ability to transform conventions and infuse his work with a distinct sensibility.

- For example, he did a series of bird-and-flower prints that look strikingly modern, almost like Art Nouveau, and in fact, influenced the Western European Art Nouveau movement years later.

- In his 1834 print *Wagtail and Wisteria*, Hokusai used just a few colors but with strong contrasts. The flowers are precisely rendered and draped, almost as architectural elements. The work is highly stylized yet also flowing and organic; that combination would enchant Western connoisseurs, such as William Morris.

At the peak of his career, Hokusai kept busy working on an amazing range of projects. He was in demand as an illustrator for some of the bestselling authors of the day and continued to publish cheap popular works. These popular works addressed his chronic need for money.

- In 1814, Hokusai decided to make some quick cash by publishing some of his simple sketches with explanations of how to draw; the result was a sort of manual called *Hokusai manga*, or *Hokusai’s Sketches*.

- As it turned out, people loved the sketches but didn’t care about the explanations. Hokusai began publishing multiple volumes of manga; he was essentially the inventor of the comic book.
○ His sketches show plants, animals, buildings, and most important, ordinary people engaged in everyday activities—doing household chores, eating, drinking, arguing, sleeping, wrestling, dancing, and more.

Japan in the 1830s

• Hokusai’s most famous work, *The Great Wave*, was published around 1830, when the artist was 70 years old. By that time, the shogunate no longer looked like a stable regime at the peak of its power; in fact, it was beginning to seem battered. Although major urban centers were still prosperous, there was a pervasive sense that something was not quite right in the socioeconomic order.

○ For example, in the countryside, the samurai class had long relied on village headmen—wealthier commoners—to keep control of their villages; until the late 1700s, these headmen commonly represented their villages in disputes with samurai authority.

○ But by the 1830s, the economy had changed so much that village headmen had become targets of protest. Poor farmers no longer saw their village headmen as sharing their interests; increasingly, they saw them as the enemy—exploitative landlords who always demanded more of the crop or unscrupulous merchants or loan sharks.

○ As a result of these growing tensions, when the 1830s saw a series of bad harvests, the countryside exploded in new levels of violence. Instead of farmers asking their village headmen to request tax relief from samurai authorities, they attacked their headmen’s property and destroyed their debt records.

• Because samurai relied on headmen to control the countryside, this breakdown in control was alarming, but even worse was the appearance of samurai discontent. In 1837, a major protest took place in Osaka, led by a samurai named Ōshio Heihachirō.
The police in Osaka kept order partly by tolerating *yakuza* (organized crime) activity. But Ōshio, who worked as the equivalent of a police lieutenant in Osaka, was appalled by this situation. He repeatedly exposed illegal activity before finally quitting the force. He then founded an independent academy, where he taught that Japan needed a wholesale moral renovation.

Amid the harvest failures of the 1830s, Ōshio petitioned the government to take immediate action and seize private stores of grain for emergency relief. After all, it was the paramount responsibility of the shogunate to protect the people against natural disaster. When his petition received no response, Ōshio took matters into his own hands, leading his students into Osaka to overthrow the government and help the poor.

The protest was a disaster. Instead of overthrowing the government, the protesters fled in disarray once their plan was discovered. In the commotion, large sections of Osaka were burned. The affair was humiliating for the shogunate, which had been rebuked in a highly visible fashion by one of its own, a former samurai police officer.

The situation was equally bleak on the foreign front. After decades of international peace, in the early 1800s, the Russians began attacking Japanese settlements in Ezo and the Kuril Islands. Then, during the Napoleonic Wars, a British ship entered Nagasaki and threatened to burn down the city. U.S. whalers searching for fresh water and supplies started coming ashore in Nagasaki, engaging in theft and scaring the locals.

In 1825, the shogunate ordered that all foreign ships trying to come ashore in Japan should be driven away. After 1841 and the defeat of China in the Opium War, however, the shogunate had to back down from this policy.
The Great Wave

- The first run of Hokusai’s Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji came out in the midst of the foreign crisis; the series was reprinted repeatedly throughout the tumultuous 1830s and 1840s.

- Unlike conventional views of Fuji, The Great Wave is not a view from Japan. The perspective is of someone looking at Japan from outside. In this way, the work anticipates an end to Japanese isolation. This perspective was deeply appealing both inside and outside Japan.

- Another important feature of The Great Wave is Hokusai’s treatment of the human figures. The men in the boats are hard at work, probably bringing the day’s catch back to Edo. Notice that they are larger than Fuji. Instead of Fuji dominating the landscape, the mountain is a backdrop to the hard-working men of Japan. By putting these figures in the foreground, Hokusai may be addressing
the looming question of the 1830s in Japan: What should be done about the discontented commoners? His answer is that the common people must not be forgotten.

- Hokusai’s interest in ordinary people helps explain why European impressionist painters were so taken with him, as well as a range of other Japanese artists who also depicted scenes of ordinary life. All these artists insisted that ordinary people and daily life could be subjects for works of art.

- Hokusai lived a remarkable life, producing acclaimed work almost to the time of this death at age 90. Although he lived during an era of isolation, he knew about Western painting techniques and even used Western inks in some of his prints. That points to a fascination with the rest of the world and a hunger for knowledge about the world outside Japan that would drive the next cycle of Japanese history: modern globalization.

**Suggested Reading**

Carpenter, *Hokusai and His Age*.


Yonemura, *Hokusai*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. How does the impact of Hokusai and other Japanese artists on European and American artists compare to the impact of other Asian art traditions?

2. How did Hokusai adapt European art traditions? How did Western artists adapt Japanese traditions to produce new art forms?
In 1904, the scholar and translator Basil Hall Chamberlain, referring to his recent experiences in Japan, wrote that he felt as if he had arrived in Japan during the Middle Ages but found himself just 30 years later in modern times. Chamberlain had come to Japan in 1873, five years after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate; over the following decades, he had witnessed a breakneck pace of change. His description was a bit of an exaggeration, but it captured something real. We’ll begin this lecture by playing with Chamberlain’s approach, although we’ll stretch his dates: We’ll explore the period from the fall of the shogunate in 1868 and the ensuing Meiji Restoration up to about 1905.

**Japan in 1868 and 1905**

- In 1868, Japan had virtually no railroads or steam engines and no significant telegraph capacity. By 1905, Japan had used its navy to defeat one of the world’s great military powers in the Russo-Japanese War, and railroads and telegraph lines crisscrossed the country.

- In 1868, the samurai were still a hereditary warrior class, and commoners were banned from possessing serious weapons. But in 1905, Japan’s army was full of conscripted farm boys, and some of the heroes of the Russo-Japanese War were local youths.

- In 1868, public discussion of politics was effectively illegal. Government affairs were the business of samurai, and commoners were not supposed to question their decisions. Even directly reporting the news could be punished as a crime. But by 1905, dozens of daily newspapers reported on local and world affairs and even criticized the government. In addition, there was an elected national assembly called the *diet* that was full of elected commoners who enjoyed freedom of speech.
• In large measure, these changes were driven by Japan’s most recent cycle of globalization. Just as it did in its two earlier stages of globalization, Japan changed radically to adjust to a new global environment, new opportunities, and new challenges.

**Late-1800s Japan**

• In the late 1800s, the Japanese saw that the wider world was quickly being divided into two camps: the colonizers and the colonized. Virtually all the European powers had colonial empires, and much of the Asian world, including India, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia, was either already colonized or in the process of being colonized. After the 1840s, the Western powers even began peeling off parts of China, such as Hong Kong, as colonial outposts.

• The Tokugawa shogunate was unprepared to meet this challenge. It had no army or navy capable of pushing back against aggressive Western powers. As you recall, the Tokugawa had worked carefully for hundreds of years to create an international environment in which the regime could be safe without an army. Japan, Korea, and China had all agreed to stay out of one another’s way. The Tokugawa’s “weakness” wasn’t an accident; it was part of a plan not to need an army.

• But the Western powers broke that system, and from at least the 1840s, with the defeat of China in the Opium Wars, it was clear that the shogunate needed to take action. It needed new weapons and a new military organization, but the institution was internally paralyzed. Even after Commodore Perry humiliated the shogunate in 1853, the vested interests against reform, including the hundreds of daimyo armies and the samurai, were just too strong.

• In this environment, certain reform-minded politicians, intellectuals, and activists began looking for a way to break with the unsustainable status quo. To move forward, they looked backward to imperial rule. Historians refer to this period as the Meiji Restoration.
The Meiji Restoration

- The Meiji Restoration began with the overthrow of the Tokugawa house in early 1868. The major reforms included the abolition of hereditary status distinctions, the abolition of the samurai class, the creation of a conscript army and navy, the restructuring of land ownership and taxation, and the creation of a new education system.

- The end date of the restoration is a bit more difficult to pinpoint. Some scholars use the year 1873 because all the reforms were announced by then; others use 1878 because many of the reforms did not take effect nationwide until about that time. Some also argue that the restoration ended with some later accomplishment, such as a new constitution in 1889, nationwide elections to the diet in 1890, or even the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, when Japan completed the shift from a potentially colonized country to a colonizing power.

- However we define the endpoint of the Meiji Restoration, a central idea of it was the restoration of imperial power, a remarkable development considering that the imperial house had done little for a millennium. The last time the emperor had commanded an army was in the 700s; the imperial tax collection system was defunct by the 800s; and since the early 1600s, the emperor’s duties had been reduced to ceremonial functions.

- This complete disconnect from practical affairs was actually part of the emperor’s appeal to the Meiji reformers: Whatever had gone wrong in the Tokugawa period wasn’t the emperor’s fault. Imperial authority was unsullied by the inability of samurai to respond to Western imperialism.

- Scholars remain amazed by the astonishing smoothness of the Meiji Restoration. It wasn’t entirely peaceful, but it was much less violent than the French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions. Bitter power struggles took place, but Japan didn’t witness the sort of clash of ideologies that could tear a country apart.
  - The last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, was vilified by his enemies, who described him as a traitor to the emperor and to
Japan. But Yoshinobu was not executed or forced to commit *seppuku*.

- He died in 1913 at the age of 75, rather wealthy and fully restored to respectability. Essentially, there wasn’t any point in killing Yoshinobu because by the time he resigned, he was basically dissolving the old order on his own.

- Thus, a key insight into the Meiji Restoration is the relative absence of a clash between old and new.

- One of the many things the new Japanese government developed was a national currency. Prior to the Meiji Restoration, Japan had hundreds of kinds of money, issued by different daimyo, shrines, and temples. The Meiji government found that situation intolerable and commissioned modern national money from the Continental Bank Note Company in the United States. The result was that Japan’s 1873 paper money looks remarkably like U.S. money from the 1860s, even sharing a theme of Manifest Destiny in its imagery.

The image of the empress Jingū conquering a Korean kingdom on Japanese banknotes suggests that the Meiji government believed their gods had given the Korean peninsula to them.
Japan as a Colonizer

- The Meiji government abandoned the old Tokugawa model, in which Japanese-Korean relations were deliberately kept both distant and vague; instead, the Meiji insisted on the Western model of colonizers and colonized.

- From the 1870s, the Japanese government employed Western advisers to ensure that its colonial claims on Korea made sense in London, Paris, and Washington, DC. Instead of arguing that it was time to finish the job that Toyotomi Hideyoshi had started with his invasion of Korea in 1592, the Japanese used modern terms, such as protectorate and sphere of influence.

- Japan also drew explicit parallels between U.S. “interests” in the Philippines and French “interests” in Indochina with Japanese “interests” in Korea. Japan’s position was carefully justified in diplomatic memos that framed the first stage of Japanese imperialism as a counterpart to Western imperialism. By 1905, the great powers accepted Japan as the new junior member of the imperialist club.

The Modern Japanese Army

- The abolition of the samurai class and the creation of the modern Japanese army was one of the most momentous reforms of the Meiji era and serves as another example of how new Western ideas were combined with ancient Japanese practice.

- The samurai class was dismantled by a series of edicts in the 1870s. The government also abolished all hereditary restrictions on employment, enabling Japanese commoners to join the military; in fact, the new government instituted a draft.

- However, the government insisted that conscription was a restoration of Japan’s true tradition rather than a break with tradition. The government claimed that in the 700s, the emperor had been the commander of a national conscript army. This was a rather romantic view of ancient conscription; being drafted probably
felt more like slave labor than noble service to most 8th-century Japanese farmers. But the government was correct that, at least on paper, the ancient imperial state had a conscript army.

- That ancient precedent allowed the Meiji government to attack the tradition of samurai rule as not traditional at all. The samurai were interlopers whose rise to power had been a symptom of the decline of the imperial house.

- The Japanese government declared that it had abolished the samurai class in the name of equal rights and equal duties for all Japanese. These distinctly modern Western concepts dovetailed perfectly with the aims of Japanese reformers in the 1870s.

Public Ceremonies under the Meiji

- The Japanese emperor was thought to be uniquely descended from the ancient gods by an unbroken line going back to the 7th century B.C.E. By longstanding practice, only a handful of people ever even met the emperor. The leaders of the Meiji Restoration thought that such remoteness made the emperor a poor symbol of national unity.

- In the West, European kings and queens participated in all sorts of public ceremonies. For this reason, the Meiji reformers decided that it was time to show off the Japanese emperor. They sent the emperor and empress around the country to visit textile mills and schools, attend the opening of railroad lines, and meet ordinary people.

- By the 1880s, the government eased up on these visits, wishing to avoid overexposure. But it was still considered important for the emperor to be in the public eye and for European royals to think of the Meiji emperor as part of their club. Thus, in 1894, the government promoted a nationwide celebration of the silver wedding anniversary of the emperor and empress.

- In planning this event, the imperial house had trouble with one key question: When exactly was the emperor’s anniversary? No one knew because commemorating an exact wedding day was
unknown in Japan before the Meiji period. The idea had arisen only because European heads of state held public celebrations for their anniversaries; as a civilized country, Japan needed such a celebration, as well.

- If we think of the imperial institution as uniquely Japanese and ancient in contrast to modern and Western, such large nationwide celebrations make no sense. But that’s the ongoing legacy of the Meiji Restoration: the synthesis of the ancient and modern, the new and the traditional, the local and the global. That synthesis was deliberately crafted by the Meiji government, and it remains a distinctive characteristic of Japan today.

Suggested Reading


Smith, “Japan’s Aristocratic Revolution.”

Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Japanese samurai elite reform itself out of existence?

2. How does the Meiji Restoration compare to other forms of revolutionary change?
In this lecture, we’ll discuss Japan’s road to World War II, but we will not look at that road purely in terms of battles, treaties, and major events. Instead, we’ll look at the lives of three important individuals, each of whom offered a distinct perspective on Japan’s place in the world in the early 20th century. These individuals are Nitobe Inazō, Shidehara Kijūrō, and Ishiwara Kanji. Nitobe and Shidehara were both proponents of Japanese democracy and international cooperation, although from somewhat different perspectives. Ishiwara, by contrast, was a diehard militarist. We can understand the fate of Japanese democracy and Japan’s road to war by examining what made each of these men influential.

**Nitobe Inazō**

- Nitobe Inazō was born in 1862, just a few years before the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. He was educated largely in the United States and converted to Christianity. Nitobe’s great accomplishment was representing Japan to the world through his writings and through international organizations, such as the League of Nations. Nitobe’s approach to the world might be summarized as “peace through mutual understanding.”

- Nitobe studied at Tokyo University, Johns Hopkins, and Halle University in Germany. After completing...
his academic work, he returned to Japan and became a professor at Sapporo Agricultural College.

- Nitobe’s connections to the West were part of what drove him to write *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Nitobe was interested in establishing *bushidō* (the “way of the warrior”) as a coherent ethical and moral tradition, leading people to be stalwart, brave, honest, dutiful, generous, and so on. His book was eccentric, but it was quite popular in the West.

- In part because of Nitobe, Japan was seen as progressive and civilized in the West, and this favorable view was one reason that the United States and Britain were supportive of early Japanese colonial efforts in Taiwan and Korea. In essence, Japan was seen as bringing progress to backward places. Moreover, in staking a claim to Korea, Japan was fighting against Russia, which meshed with British and American interests.

- But then, in 1905, the West’s perspective began to change. The British and Americans were delighted so long as Japan was building a colonial empire at the expense of Russia, but after 1905, it looked as though the Japanese Empire might clash with European and American ambitions. The period between 1905 and 1918 was tense because Japan was now an imperial power, but it was unclear where it sat in the pecking order of great powers.

- In the wake of World War I, Nitobe saw an opportunity for Japan to participate in a multinational effort to shape a peaceful and democratic world order. This vision of Japan’s role was bolstered by a surge in idealism and antiwar sentiment.

- We’re all familiar with the institutions and agreements that emerged from the generation of postwar idealists: the Paris Peace Conference, the Permanent Court of International Justice, the League of Nations, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, in which the signatories pledged not to use war to resolve disputes; both the United States and Japan signed the treaty.
In East Asia, postwar optimism produced one of the world’s first major arms control agreements, which emerged from the 1921–1922 Washington Naval Conference. The great naval powers in East Asia—Japan, Great Britain, and the United States—pledged to limit the size of their fleets.

They also agreed not to establish colonies or special “spheres of influence” in China; instead, they would each recognize one another’s rights to trade in China and would support the establishment of a stable, unified government there. In essence, the great powers agreed that they would compete economically but not militarily.

Nitobe was fully supportive of these military and economic agreements, but unfortunately, by 1929, his idealism faced a serious challenge in Japan. Such men as Ishiwara Kanji were trying to carve out a Japanese sphere of influence in Manchuria, despite the agreements of the Washington Naval Conference.

**Shidehara Kijūrō**

In many ways, Shidehara Kijūrō, the diplomat who represented Japan at the Washington Naval Conference, was similar in orientation to Nitobe, but Shidehara was far more pragmatic. If Nitobe’s slogan was “peace through understanding,” Shidehara’s was “let’s make peace more profitable than war.”

Shidehara had married into one of the most powerful business interests in Japan. His father-in-law was Iwasaki Yatarō, the founder of Mitsubishi. Thus, Shidehara, whether he was serving as foreign minister or even briefly as prime minister, never had a gauzy vision of peace through mutual respect; instead, he argued for peace in terms of a business plan.

For example, Shidehara believed that Japan might be able to conquer and hold part of China, but whatever parts Japan did not control would probably boycott Japanese exports. If, instead, Japan helped China establish a stable and independent government, then
Japanese businesses, including Mitsubishi, would have access to the entire Chinese market.

- This attitude also explains why Shidehara pressed for arms control: A naval arms race with the United States and the United Kingdom would be expensive. Shidehara believed that Japan shouldn’t undermine a chance to dominate a huge emerging market by starting an arms race it couldn’t afford.

- Shidehara was remarkably committed to a strong China, more so than either the United States or the United Kingdom. We see an example of this in the so-called Nanjing Incident.
  - In March of 1927, the armies of the Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists together retook the city of Nanjing from a local warlord, Zhang Zongchang. In the process, the soldiers attacked foreigners in Nanjing, including businessmen, diplomats, and teachers.
  - In response, the United States and United Kingdom sent warships and began attacking Chinese troops with machine guns and high explosives. Japan was asked to join an expedition to reestablish order, but Shidehara, who was then foreign minister, refused. He argued that while foreign troops should protect their own residents, they needed to let Chiang Kai-shek get control of his own army. Foreign intervention would likely make matters worse.

- Clearly, Shidehara’s policies were based on peaceful competition for Chinese consumers, rather than military competition for Chinese territory. But even when Shidehara was at the peak of his power as foreign minister, such militarists as Ishiwara Kanji regarded him as weak and dangerous. Starting in 1929, Shidehara’s world gradually unraveled.
  - Beginning in October 1929, stock markets from New York to London to Tokyo fell and, with them, all optimistic talk of international cooperation and trade.
In the face of economic crisis, the United States implemented strict import restrictions. U.S. trading partners retaliated with tariffs of their own, and world trade collapsed. Shidehara’s vision of relying on free access to large markets in China, rather than establishing a “sphere of influence,” died.

**Ishiwara Kanji**

- Ishiwara Kanji was a graduate of the Japanese Army War College, where he lectured in military history from 1925 to 1928. During that period, he developed an apocalyptic doctrine that featured a coming World War III between Eastern and Western civilizations, with the goal of complete world unification. In Ishiwara’s mind, this war would be between Japan and the United States.

- Ishiwara observed that military mobilization was growing increasingly extensive over time and that this expansion was erasing the line between civilian and soldier. He predicted that armies would soon be targeting their enemies’ civilian populations using amazing new weapons, including bomber aircraft.

- Ishiwara was transferred to Manchuria as an operations officer in 1929. With the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had won control of key railroad lines in Manchuria. The Japanese army there (the Kwantung Army) was supposed to protect those rail lines, but Kwantung officers were intent on using their power to carve out a Japanese sphere of influence in Manchuria.

- The Japanese army in Manchuria also had a long tradition of insubordination, even ignoring direct orders from Tokyo, and Ishiwara raised that insubordination to a new level. In 1931, with the collusion of mid-ranking officers throughout the military, Ishiwara helped organize the invasion of Manchuria and the creation of a new puppet state, Manchukuo.

- The army’s actions had not been approved by the Japanese government or even discussed in a cabinet meeting; in fact, when it seemed that civilian officials were becoming suspicious, the
Kwantung Army had accelerated its plan. The creation of Manchukuo sealed the coffin of the internationalist dreams of the 1920s.

- Such men as Shidehara knew that the army could not be forced to give up territory, and it did not help that back in Tokyo, rightwing extremists were beginning to eliminate their opponents. These groups were a mix of military men and civilians, and they were commonly both anti-communist and anti-capitalist.

- Amidst the despair of the Great Depression, these extremist groups became increasingly brazen. They shot one prime minister in 1931 and killed another in 1932; a remarkable number of elected civilian politicians died because they were deemed either too complicit in capitalism or insufficiently aggressive in China. Japan continued to hold elections into the 1940s, but fear of assassination stifled opposition.

- Ishiwara’s creation of Manchukuo ended Nitobe’s and Shidehara’s vision of international cooperation. China insisted that Manchukuo was a puppet state and demanded a League of Nations investigation. When the league commission reported that Manchukuo was an illegitimate state, Japan quit the league.

- The invasion of Manchuria closed off the alternative paths proposed by Nitobe and Shidehara, ended Japanese reliance on multinational agreements, and made clear that the U.S.-Japanese rivalry in the Pacific would become military—perhaps just an arms race or perhaps open war. It was certain that for the moment, at least, Ishiwara’s militaristic vision had won the day.

**Aftermath of the Invasion**

- In the aftermath of the invasion, Nitobe was devastated. At a meeting of the Institute of Pacific Relations in 1933, he and other Japanese delegates struggled painfully to explain their nation’s actions in Manchuria. Soon after the meeting, Nitobe collapsed from pneumonia and died shortly thereafter.
The Japanese army did not know what to do with Ishiwara. He was intelligent and charismatic, but he was also consistently insubordinate and so thoroughly enthralled by his own vision of Japan’s future that he was unable to compromise. He was moved around in the army and forced into early retirement in 1941. He died in 1949 at age 60.

Shidehara survived World War II, and his views were vindicated. One of his last public acts would shape Japan to this day: the inclusion of an antiwar clause in the nation’s postwar constitution. With this clause, Shidehara’s prewar vision of Japan was written into law: Japan would be an economic superpower, not a military superpower.

Suggested Reading

Crowley, “An Empire Won and Lost.”

Howes, ed., Nitobe Inazō.

Nitobe, Bushido.

Questions to Consider

1. What factors explain the collapse of Japanese internationalism in the 1930s? How are these connected to global trends?

2. How did domestic and international forces combine to promote Japanese militarism?
In 1946, a political science professor, Maruyama Masao, tried to explain what had gone wrong over the past 15 years of Japanese history. How had Japanese leadership led the country into World War II, and why did none of the leaders feel personally responsible for the war? Maruyama concluded that Japan had created something as dangerous as German fascism but with a difference. Japan had fostered despotism without a dictator, a country run by a cult of ultranationalism but without a leader, and a country run by slogans instead of reason. In this lecture, we’ll look at this theory in light of Japan’s decisions to wage war in China in 1937 and to attack the United States in 1941.

Takeover of Manchuria

- As we saw in an earlier lecture, one key turning point in the lead-up to World War II was the takeover of Manchuria by the Kwantung Army in 1931.
  - The takeover marked a clear break with the United States, which refused to recognize Japanese control of Manchuria or the puppet government of Manchukuo established by Japan in 1932.
  - It also marked a precipitous decline in the ability of Japan’s civilian government to restrain the military. The government in Tokyo had not authorized the takeover of Manchuria and didn’t attempt to roll back military actions there.
  - Most important, the takeover of Manchuria fostered a culture of insubordination within the Japanese military. The Kwantung Army had acted independently of the Army High Command and, instead of being punished, had acquired its own puppet state in China.

- The army’s tolerance for this sort of freelance imperialism quickly came back to haunt it. Within just a few years, one the leaders of
the Manchurian takeover, Ishiwara Kanji, complained that officers in the Kwantung Army were ignoring their superiors and carving out puppet states across north China, then presenting Tokyo with a fait accompli.

- By 1937, Japan had seized much of north China, but at the highest levels, there was still hope for some sort of cooperation with Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Chinese Nationalist government. The idea was to exploit Chiang’s fear of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. Japan believed that it could take as much of north China as it wanted, and Chiang would be content with what was left. But that plan collapsed when Japan initiated a full-scale war in China.

**The Sino-Japanese War**

- Although the Japanese army was preparing for war, until 1936, it was too internally divided to have a comprehensive plan to conquer all of China. Then, in February 1936, one army faction attempted a coup; when that coup failed, the leaders of the losing faction were purged, allowing the winning faction to finally begin planning for total war. The Japanese bureaucracy began developing a five-year plan for national mobilization to prepare for protracted warfare.

- There was a clear awareness on the part of the government that Japanese industrial capacity was inadequate for war in 1937, but a skirmish erupted between Japanese and Chinese forces near Beijing in July of that year. This time, Chiang Kai-shek was less concerned with fighting the communists and more concerned with fighting Japan; he began moving more troops to the area.

- The government in Tokyo became furious that the leader of China had suddenly gotten serious about defending his nation, and a debate erupted within the Japanese cabinet concerning what action to take.
  - According to the government’s own planning documents, the correct answer was to deescalate the conflict, implement the five-year plan, and wait until 1942 to crush Chiang.
But in the end, the government acted on the unfounded assumption that a decisive blow against Chiang Kai-shek would bring him to his knees. The extent of this catastrophic mistake became apparent in less than a year.

- Japanese troops won victories in Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, but Chiang did not surrender—even after the fall of Nanjing, his capital. Japan was now fighting a guerilla war in China, a war it had started without a plan. This lack of preparation helps explain the brutality with which Japanese troops treated the Chinese population. The Rape of Nanjing is the most horrible example, during which Japanese troops killed tens of thousands of noncombatants.

- The war with China dragged on; year after year, Japan lost more men, with no victory in sight. The magnitude of this disaster was clear by 1940, so clear that a member of the Japanese diet, Saitō Takao, gave a speech in which he dismantled Japan’s conduct of the war and demanded that the government explain its own propaganda.

  - The government’s official policy was that Japan would respect the independence of China, would not seek territorial concessions or an economic monopoly there, would respect third-party rights, and would withdraw its troops once the war was over. At the same time, however, Japan’s leadership referred to the conflict as a *seisen*—a “holy war” for establishing a new order in Asia.

  - Saitō pointed out that billions of yen had been spent fighting in China; 100,000 men had been lost; and victory had never been clearly defined. Saitō’s speech was censored, and he was voted out of the diet, although he was reelected in 1942 and even lived to tell his story after World War II.

  - The key point here is that the Sino-Japanese War was obviously a quagmire by 1940, and those voices with the courage to say so were stifled or ignored. But the worst was yet to come: To resolve the China quagmire, the government recklessly expanded the war to include the United States and its allies.
U.S. Involvement

- Tensions between Japan and the United States came to a head in July 1941 when Japan seized south Indochina. In response, the United States and its allies declared an oil embargo on Japan; America and Britain also froze all Japanese assets.

- In Japan, these moves were interpreted as a demand that Japan surrender its empire. Hara Yoshimichi, chair of the imperial Privy Council, argued that if Japan gave in, it would give up all it had gained in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars and from the Manchurian Incident. Hara believed that the very existence of Japan was being threatened and concluded that the nation had no choice but to go to war with the United States.

- It’s important to note, however, that none of the U.S. demands in 1941 mentioned Korea or Taiwan, the colonies Japan had gained in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Further, Manchuria was not really an issue; the United States had refused to recognize Manchukuo since its founding but had done nothing more. As for Japanese gains in China, they were clearly unsustainable; the U.S.
demand in this regard was merely an insistence that Japan recognize the futility of trying to rule all of China.

- In addition, nothing in the 1941 exchanges between the United States and Japan threatened, as Hara had put it, “the existence of Japan.” Instead, the United States asserted that an attack by Japan would provoke a war that might result in U.S. control over the Japanese home islands.

- Interestingly, Hara wasn’t a militarist or even a staunch advocate of war. In fact, he was leery of a broader confrontation with the United States. But at a critical moment, even he began speaking in propaganda.

- Because of this inflated sense of what would happen if Japan withdrew from China in 1941, the costs of that action seemed larger than the costs of attacking the United States.

- Still, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, military planners knew that if war with America went on for more than two years, Japan would lose. Its navy and merchant marine were simply not large enough both to fight the United States and Britain and to safely supply Japan with imported food and raw materials.

Pearl Harbor and its Aftermath

- The December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor is probably one of the most well-known events in military history. The United States lost eight battleships, hundreds of aircraft, and thousands of men. Japanese losses were minimal, but Pearl Harbor was a significant defeat for Japan.

- For Pearl Harbor to be successful, the United States would have to have abandoned the Pacific theater to focus on Europe. As soon as it became clear that America—with its vastly greater industrial capacity—planned to keep fighting in the Pacific, the clock started running for Japan.
Six months after Pearl Harbor, at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, Japan effectively lost the war. The Japanese navy assumed that the U.S. navy was broken and demoralized, not realizing that six of the eight battleships sunk at Pearl Harbor were being repaired. Further, the Japanese didn’t know that U.S. intelligence had broken their code. At Midway, the Japanese navy lost four aircraft carriers and the United States, one.

The simple fact was that if America was able to fight that well six months after Pearl Harbor, it was no longer reasonable to assume that the war would end soon. However, the same flawed decision making that had led Japan to war made it impossible for the Japanese government to accept that fact for another three years—at a cost of millions of lives in China, at least a million lives in Japan, and more than 100,000 Allied casualties.

Historians are still trying to understand how three events combined to force Japanese surrender: the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945; the Soviet Union’s abrogation of its neutrality pact with Japan and attack on August 8; and the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9. It seems certain, however, that the prospect of fighting the Soviet Union made surrender to the United States suddenly look like an appealing option.

Consequences of War in Japan

- The diffusion of responsibility for starting the war made it difficult to allocate postwar responsibility in Japan. In 1946, the Allies set up a war crimes tribunal, and prosecutors began looking for a Japanese version of Hitler or the Nazi Party. Ultimately, however, the prosecution couldn’t make a case for a massive conspiracy; instead of evil by master plan, Japan had experienced evil by collective irresponsibility.

- Another outcome of the war was that many of the Japanese elite were eager to cooperate with the United States in the postwar period. Some may have believed that the United States had saved
Japan from its own poor decisions, while others probably credited America with saving Japan from the Soviet Union.

- Perhaps the most striking consequence of the war is a deep-rooted Japanese pacifism. More than two generations later, most Japanese people still associate troops overseas with disaster and remain tenaciously averse to war.

**Suggested Reading**

Cook and Cook, *Japan at War*.

Fogel, *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*.

Hasegawa, ed., *The End of the Pacific War*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Are there precedents for Japanese actions during World War II, or do those actions reflect a break in Japanese history?

2. How does Japanese commemoration of the war compare with parallel practices in other countries?
In this lecture, we engage an aspect of Japan that is both vastly important and, for historians, tremendously difficult: the family. As we know, families are one of the main ways that societies transmit values and traditions. But what’s frustrating for historians is that we know about the past primarily through written records, and for most of human history, the written record neglects mundane aspects of daily life. Thus, historians must use indirect sources, such as literature or legal documents, to learn about family life. Bearing in mind this challenge, this lecture offers a sweep through about 10 centuries of Japanese history, starting with the court society of the Heian era and ending with the Japanese family today.

Models of Japanese Family Life

- We can identify three main models of Japanese family life: (1) the aristocratic model, or the *uji* system; (2) the samurai model, or the *ie* system; and (3) the modern model. Historically, these three models overlapped to some degree, but we can think of the *uji* model as dominant until the 1200s, the *ie* model as dominant from the 1300s to the 1900s, and the modern family as largely a postwar phenomenon.

- Both the *uji* and *ie* models feature many children and intergenerational connections, whereas the modern Japanese family is generally a nuclear family with two parents and one or two children.

- In addition, *uji* were sprawling family units with many branches and complex kinship ties. In contrast, the *ie* family model was more linear, with a single patriarch and a clear, single-stranded line of succession.

The *Uji* Model

- The *uji* model is quite suitable for a marriage politics approach to power. The idea here is to have many children, marry them off, and use the blood ties to their offspring to build a dense web of political
alliances. This sort of marriage politics was a central feature of Heian-period Japan.

- To allow for fluid webs of power, Heian marriage had multiple patterns. A husband and wife could live separately, live together with the wife’s parents, live together with the husband’s parents, or form their own household. Even after marriage, however, Heian noblewomen kept control of their own property and could dispose of it without their husband’s approval.

- It’s sometimes tempting to draw a strict contrast between matriarchy and patriarchy, but Heian society offers us a good reason not to do so. In the Heian court, keeping women independent in marriage often served their fathers’ interests. Recall that during this time, the goal for a nobleman was to marry his daughter to the emperor so that the next emperor could be his grandson. Thus, keeping women independent in marriage was partly about securing power for their fathers.

The *Ie* Model

- The *uji* model, with its webs of interaction, was strikingly different from the *ie* model of later samurai society, which was a society built on war.
  - We might think of the *ie* system as a military command model of the family; dense webs of influence are fine in court politics but not good in battle, where a clear and unitary command structure is desired.

  - This helps us understand why the *ie* system did not favor partible inheritance. A man who controlled an army of 20,000 would want to pass that military power down as a whole, rather than breaking it up.

- This contrast between the aristocratic families of the Heian court and the samurai families of later centuries is useful as long as we realize that the early samurai still thought much like courtiers. In other words, the shift from the *uji* system to the *ie* system was a gradual transition.
- In the 1200s and 1300s, the legal codes of the first shogunate in Kamakura showed a strong courtier influence; women still had the powers of Heian society. For example, according to Kamakura law, if a man gave property to his wife and later divorced her, he could reclaim the land only if he could prove that she was guilty of some serious transgression.

- Early samurai law seems to have enabled women to perpetuate their own family lines independent of their husbands. Childless women or women without sons could adopt a male heir to convey property.

- Moreover, when a woman inherited her husband’s land rights, the shogunate allowed her to manage the land just as any male vassal would. Of course, women hired proxies to perform certain vassal duties, such as military service, but they could manage estates on their own.

- This period of fluidity produced one of the most powerful women in Japanese history, Hōjō Masako, wife of the first Kamakura shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo.
  - After her husband’s death in 1199, Masako became a Buddhist nun, but that was a cover to allow her to run the shogunate indirectly. As a power behind the throne, she removed male figureheads who opposed her, including her own son and father.
  - What’s noteworthy about Masako’s life is that she commonly ruled in concert with a male relative, and she was discrete about her power, but there’s no question that she was decisive in sustaining Hōjō control over the shogunate. We can think of her as emblematic of women in the early stages of warrior rule, when women could still control property and manage their own affairs.

- As samurai culture developed, however, so did the ie family structure. A decisive factor in this development was probably the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281; resisting the Mongols required real combat, and having women send proxies didn’t fit that need.
In any case, by the late 1300s, women had largely lost the right to inherit or amass property, and families began to have a single male patriarch who had commanding authority over his wife and children.

- Interestingly, under the *ie* system, the power of the patriarch was not limited to power over women and children; household heads also had authority over their siblings.
  - Because the *ie* system did not favor partible inheritance, a younger son often needed his elder brother’s permission to marry because a younger brother’s wife would become a member of the elder’s household, as would any children of the marriage.
  - This structure gave rise to the Japanese saying “The sibling is the beginning of the stranger.” Within the *ie* system, younger siblings, especially brothers, had great reason to resent their fathers’ chosen heirs.

**Commoner Approaches to Family Life**

- Beginning in the 1600s, with the economic boom of the Tokugawa peace and the spread of basic literacy, we start to get a better understanding of how commoners lived, and we note a striking contrast between samurai and commoner approaches to family life.

- Legal documents tended to squeeze commoner families into a samurai mold, but farm families simply didn’t think about women in the same way. For these families, some level of compatibility between husband and wife was important, especially if the family was not wealthy and the couple needed to work together to make ends meet.

- For this reason, attitudes toward both marriage and divorce were different for farm women than for samurai women. In cases of divorce, for example, farm families were often more willing to take daughters back and help them remarry. It’s also true that girls from poorer farm families were often allowed to choose their own marriage partners, while those from wealthier families tended to enter arranged marriages at an earlier age.
Modern Family Life

- With the Meiji Restoration, the new government attempted to create a national standard of civil law. This project wasn’t completed until the 1890s, but ultimately, the idiosyncrasies of local laws and customs were eliminated. To a large degree, these reforms pushed samurai attitudes toward the family onto the rest of society. In a sense, Meiji law merged samurai and Victorian attitudes toward the family and effectively codified the idea that women have inferior rights to men.

- Striking changes in Japanese family structure came with the U.S. occupation after World War II. The postwar constitution in Japan was heavily influenced by progressive U.S. policies. For example, the postwar constitution has an equal rights clause; women are fully equal to men before the law, and family law must be based on “individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.”

- In constitutional law, postwar Japan is a nation of gender equality, but some aspects of Japanese civil law still reflect the ie system. For example, in Japan, everyone is registered in a koseki (a household register); because everyone in a household should have the same family name, the koseki system makes it difficult for women to keep their original family names after marriage. This tends to collide with the constitutional idea that everyone is equal and an individual before the law.

- Perhaps the greatest challenge for families in modern Japan is the low birthrate and low rate of family formation.
  - In the 1920s, a Japanese woman had, on average, more than 5 children. This number dropped to around 2 in the 1950s, and today, it’s around 1.4. This low birthrate is not remarkable for an economically developed country and reflects the fact that women in such countries are delaying marriage and limiting fertility because they can earn money independently and because government support for child rearing has been limited.

  - For years, the Japanese government has been in a state of mild panic over low Japanese fertility. Because Japan has the highest
life expectancy in the world, demographers envision a large elderly population and a shrinking working-age population and corresponding tax base.

- One obvious solution is to make it possible for women to both raise children and participate in the labor force, but for years, neither the government nor Japanese business could escape the mindset of women staying at home with children while ambitious men worked 70-hour weeks.

- This situation seems to have reached a breaking point in 2005, when the Japanese population actually began shrinking. As a result, the Japanese government has discovered flex time and the idea of work-life balance. The Japanese have also begun to discuss the need for government and business to support working men and women as parents in both law and policy. This is a sea change from attitudes that prevailed in Japan for most of the postwar era.
Early results in this realm are promising; the birthrate has actually ticked up a bit since 2005. But reversing Japan’s shrinking population will happen only as part of a series of broader changes: new attitudes toward family structures, a new understanding of gender roles, and new attitudes toward work in an era of sluggish economic growth—challenges faced by families around the developed world.

Suggested Reading

Ochiai, “Debates over the Ie and the Stem Family.”

White, Perfectly Japanese.

Questions to Consider

1. Compared to European families, have Japanese families changed more or less over the past millennium?

2. How are other countries dealing with challenges to conventional family structures? How does Japan compare?
Althought most of us are familiar with sushi and sake—the basics of Japanese cuisine—in this lecture, we’ll move beyond those basics to the enormous diversity and complexity of Japanese cuisine, or what many now call Japanese foodways, the culture of food. We’ll talk first about contemporary Japanese food culture, then we’ll trace that culture back through cycles of Japanese isolation and globalization. Along the way, we’ll explore the importance of ritual in Japanese foodways, the connections between diet and class, and innovations stemming from both Western contact and the isolated Edo period of peace and prosperity.

**Restaurants in Modern Japan**

- One striking feature of Japanese foodways is the sheer number of restaurants in Japan. In fact, Japan has twice as many restaurants per capita as the United States. In Tokyo alone, there are an estimated 160,000 restaurants—10 times as many as in New York.

- One reason Japan has so many restaurants is that Japanese homes are small, and until recently, Japanese kitchens were extremely simple; even ovens are still somewhat rare in Japan. These factors motivate Japanese people to eat out often and to choose restaurants where they might entertain, rather than having dinner parties at home. Further, Japanese restaurants tend to be small, which can make them feel like an extension of one’s home. Regulars in a Japanese restaurant might get to know the owner and other patrons.

- Restaurants in Japan often have clear identities and distinct clienteles, such as patrons from a specific profession. The same is true of hostess clubs, which are drinking establishments with female staff members who pay lavish attention to their male clients. Some hostess clubs fall into a gray area with escort services and prostitution, but in many cases, their appeal is largely conversational.
Another consequence of having many tiny restaurants is that they specialize in serving one type of food, such as sushi, soba and udon (buckwheat and wheat noodles served in a light broth), or tempura.

In addition to being highly specialized, Japanese dining is also highly contextual. Slightly different rituals apply in different types of restaurants. For example, one bowl of dipping sauce is served with kushikatsu (deep-fried skewers of meat, seafood, and vegetables), which means that it’s bad form to double dip. But with tonkatsu (fried pork cutlets), each patron is given his or her own dish of sauce. With yakitori (grilled chicken on skewers), diners don’t usually add sauce because the chef should have basted the dish properly.

All cultures have rules for how to eat, but for centuries, the Japanese have reveled in discussing and reading about the right way to eat, the right season for eating certain types of food, the right restaurants, and so on. Indeed, there is a great sense of seasonality with food in Japan; some foods are associated with certain festivals and holidays, and even in everyday eating, there is an awareness of what’s in season and what isn’t.

**Ancient Foodways**

- As mentioned in an earlier lecture, wet-rice agriculture came to Japan from China and the Korean peninsula; although no one in Japan today would consider rice especially Chinese, many ancient Japanese foodways reflect that early wave of Chinese and continental influence. For example, the brewing of soy sauce came from the continent, as did miso (fermented bean paste) and noodles.

- Despite such influences, ancient Japanese cuisine was distinctive in several ways. Some of our oldest records of Japanese foodways emphasize eating raw foods. Sashimi, for example, dates to the Heian period. In the earliest records, fish was sliced thin and dipped in vinegar soy sauce, which became popular once commercial brewing developed.
• The Japanese preference for fish and seafood over meat also goes back many centuries, but everything in traditional Japanese cuisine is secondary to rice—long considered the staff of life in Japan. The importance of rice is reflected in the language; *meshi* and *gohan* (casual and polite terms for “rice”) can also mean a meal. The equivalent in English would be the use of the word *bread* to mean food in general.

• A simple Japanese meal going back to the medieval era was defined as rice, a soup, and a vegetable. Such a meal is known as *ichijū issai* (“one soup, one side dish”). A more substantial meal would be one soup and three sides: *ichijū sansai*.
  ○ A basic Japanese broth—again, going back centuries—is made from kombu (sea kelp) and, often, shavings of dried bonito, a large fish similar to tuna. This can be a clear broth, or miso paste, tofu, or mushrooms may be added.
  ○ Because rice was considered the main dish, anything served in addition to the soup was called a side dish (*okazu*); this dish could be fish or vegetables. Until modern times, animal protein was quite rare in the Japanese diet, in part for economic reasons and in part because of a Buddhist aversion to the slaughter of animals, especially cows and pigs.
  ○ Thus, until the 1800s, Japan had limited animal husbandry and virtually no dairy products. Poultry and eggs were more common than beef or pork but still quite rare. Fish and shellfish were the
most common animal products, although still unusual for most people. Most Japanese were de facto vegetarians until the modern period.

**Diet and Class**

- Although most of the Japanese population worked as farmers until the 20th century and grew a great deal of rice, that grain remained a luxury. To eat highly polished white rice was a sign of great wealth. Most commoners ate less polished rice stretched with a less desirable grain, such as millet. Of course, the irony is that brown rice stretched with millet is quite healthy as a staple grain, while highly polished white rice is not.

- In the absence of animal products, such as pork; vegetables, such as kale and cauliflower; or fruit, such as oranges, a diet rich in white rice leads to a deficiency of vitamin B₁, or thiamine. Such a deficiency causes a breakdown of the nervous system, including mental confusion and difficulty walking, as well as cardiovascular problems. Collectively, these are symptoms of the disease beriberi.
  - Until the late 1800s, beriberi was rare, and it was a disease of affluence. Some shoguns suffered from beriberi, but ordinary people almost never did.
  - The disease became tragically common as Japan got richer and more people could eat white rice, but meat was not yet cheap enough to be a regular part of the diet.

**Foodways in Later Centuries**

- During Japan’s second wave of globalization, the period of the 1400s and 1500s, the traditional diet didn’t change dramatically, but contact with the West did bring some innovations.
  - For example, the Japanese developed a type of sponge cake called kasutera, which was an adaptation of the Portuguese dish *pão de Castela* (“bread from Castile”).
  - Tempura also seems to have come by way of Portugal. The name is a corruption of the Portuguese word *temporas,*
meaning “days” or “time,” a reference to the four times a year when Portuguese Catholics avoided meat and ate fried vegetables and fish.

- It was also in the 1500s that Japanese warlords developed a taste for Western wines.

- Ironically, the greatest transformation of the Japanese diet didn’t occur until the 1700s, during a period of relative isolation. This transformation took place because the 1700s was a period of extended peace, relative prosperity, and urbanization—all significant factors in developing food culture.

- As you recall, under the Tokugawa, Japan enjoyed domestic peace for more than 250 years, and the shogun’s capital of Edo was transformed from a sleepy fishing village to a bustling city of more than 1 million people. This new population was of two types: (1) daimyo and their retainers and (2) large numbers of tradesmen and merchants who provided for them.

- The daimyo were required to spend about half their time in Edo, and they brought with them their high-ranking samurai retainers. Because there was no war, this wealthy and powerful elite chose to compete in the dining room instead of on the battlefield. Daimyo began hosting lavish dinners to show off, leading to an explosion in the demand for kaiseki, highly formal Japanese dining.

- Kaiseki drew from the formality of the tea ceremony, with an exacting concern for presentation. It sometimes involved 14 courses, including sakizuke, an appetizer; hassun, a seasonal specialty; mukōzuke, a seasonal sashimi; takiawase, a steamed dish; and so on.

- The elite who ate these dinners were supported by hundreds of thousands of tradesmen and merchants—carpenters, masons, roofers, shopkeepers, and others. Their appetites
spawned the growth of thousands of food carts and other venues for quick meals.

- The Edo period also saw the spread of the sweet potato. Probably introduced via the Philippines and China, the sweet potato was promoted by the eighth Tokugawa shogun, Yoshimune, because it was a way to use fields that were unsuited to rice cultivation. Today, sweet potatoes appear everywhere in Japan: roasted on street carts, fried in tempura, or turned into imo shochu, a fiercely strong liquor.

**Western Impact in the 19th Century and Beyond**

- In the late 1800s, Japan experienced another wave of globalization, with Japanese people traveling to Europe, the New World, and China and foreigners coming to Japan. The Western impact on the Japanese diet during this time was enormous.

- Japanese observers were not quite sure why Westerners were bigger or more powerful militarily, but they assumed it was at least partly the result of the Western diet. Thus, the government aggressively promoted cattle ranching and dairy production. This led to the invention of new dishes specifically created to use these new ingredients, including sukiyaki with beef and tonkatsu.

- Another key development during the 19th century was the stronger influence of continental Asian cuisine. In the Edo period, Chinese food was rare in Japan, but in the late 1800s, thousands of Chinese workers came to Yokohama and Kobe, and Chinese food became increasingly available. This led to the creation of hybrid foods, such as “Chinese-style” noodle dishes that are actually unknown in China.

- In recent decades, the Japanese love of eating out has only intensified. In 2013, Tokyo boasted 15 three-star establishments (as rated by Michelin), eclipsing 10 in Paris and 7 in New York. It’s remarkable that even after years of slow economic growth, the Japanese support so many highly rated restaurants and take world-class cuisine as a point of national pride.
Suggested Reading

Rath and Assmann, Japanese Foodways, Past and Present.

Questions to Consider

1. What factors have shaped the integration of foreign food into Japanese foodways?

2. Do other food cultures show waves of foreign influence similar to Japan’s?
Beginning soon after World War II and continuing into the 1980s, the Japanese economy grew at an unprecedented rate. For example, in the 20 years between 1955 and 1975, Japan’s economy grew more than 435 percent. During this time, Japan blazed the trail that led to Westerners buying expensive durable goods, such as televisions or cars, from East Asian countries. Further, this run of growth occurred during a period of free and openly contested elections in a stable, multiparty democracy. Of course, since the 1990s, Japan has experienced sluggish growth, but in this lecture, we’ll explore the boom years. We’ll identify six factors that answer the question: Why did the Japanese economy grow so quickly?

**U.S. Support**
- One reason for Japan’s rapid economic growth after World War II is that the United States, which represented nearly half the world economy in the postwar era, wanted Japan to be a model of capitalism in the developing world. China had gone communist, India was politically neutral, and Korea was divided and devastated by war. To convince others that industrial capitalism could work outside of the West, the United States needed a success story.

- The key element of this strategy was a cheap yen. In 1949, the value of the yen was set low against the dollar: 360 yen to the dollar. This encouraged Japanese exports by making Japanese products seem cheap to American consumers. And for many years, the Japanese economy was so small that the United States could easily absorb its exports without any impact on U.S. industries.

**Japan’s Workforce**
- A second factor in Japan’s stunning growth was its cheap and motivated workforce. Although many of Japan’s industrial plants were destroyed in the war, its workers had gained experience with the basic rhythms of industrial life: showing up on time, punching a
clock, and so on. In addition, the process of pulling workers out of the fields and into the cities had taken place in the 1910s and 1920s.

- Japanese labor was fairly quiescent, in part because Japan’s unions were relatively apolitical; with the intensification of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the U.S. occupation had barred communists from union activity.

- But workers were also highly motivated because Japanese management made sure that the gains realized during times of economic growth were reflected in worker paychecks. Further, in many large companies, workers could count on lifetime employment. A sense of allegiance to a company was also supported by the corporate pay scale. In Japan, the management-to-worker salary ratio was astonishingly small—in the teens, compared to a modern U.S. ratio of 350 to 1 (annual pay rate of an average U.S. CEO to an average worker).

- For all these reasons, workers felt a connection to their employers. Mitsubishi auto workers felt that they were part of the Mitsubishi family, with management in the same broad middle class. Workers believed that the enemy was not management but their rivals at Toyota.

**Emphasis on Quality**

- A related factor in Japanese economic growth was the ability of Japanese businesses to motivate their workers to embrace quality targets. Workers were treated with respect and dignity and paid well; those who pointed out inefficiencies or defects were praised, and their insights on improvements were sought. As a result, everyone in the company felt responsible for, and proud of, the product.

- Japanese industrialists gleaned these ideas for treatment of workers from American advisors. In particular, Japanese businessmen celebrated one advisor, William Edwards Deming, an engineer and statistician who came to Japan during the U.S. occupation and gave an influential series of lectures on quality control.
Deming pioneered the key ideas behind the later doctrines of Total Quality Management and Six Sigma. His primary insight was that quality is not about removing defective products at the end of the assembly line but about not making defective products in the first place. Every stage of management and production should be geared toward making a perfect product.

In the 1950s, Deming’s ideas were radical. Managers, he insisted, should not be feared, nor was it their job to discipline workers. Instead, Deming argued that workers want to be productive, efficient, and proud of their work; the task of managers is to make that happen.

Following Deming’s lead, Japanese manufacturers began integrating design and production to lower defects and improve quality. They included advice from shop-floor workers and made the goal of constantly improving manufacturing techniques part of corporate culture.

**Western Research and Development**

A fourth factor in Japanese economic success is the benefit derived by Japanese companies from research and development conducted in the West from the 1950s into the 1970s. During this time, companies in the United States and Europe developed cutting-edge technologies, such as the liquid crystal display (LCD), that they were willing to license or sell to Japan.

Why did Western companies sell or license their patents instead of developing them on their own? One obvious reason was that the Japanese were starting from scratch. For example, the United States was slow to adopt new steel technology because the industry already had a huge infrastructure in place. It would have been extremely difficult to tear down working mills to try new technologies. But the war had destroyed much of Japan’s infrastructure, necessitating new construction and easing the way for experimentation with new technologies.
In addition, in the postwar period, Japanese companies were largely insulated from short-term market forces. They could afford to try new technologies that required years of development and bear those costs even if it meant short-term losses.

**Financing of Japanese Business**

- Another factor behind Japan’s economic miracle relates to the financing of Japanese business. During the postwar boom, Japanese businesses relied more on loans than on stock sales. This practice meant that government loan guarantees were incredibly powerful.

- As part of economic planning, the Japanese government targeted key industries for growth, then supported those industries by guaranteeing their bank loans. Although government ministry guidelines were technically voluntary, those who complied with them would receive steady lines of credit, not just from official government banks but also from private lenders.

- The issue of investment capital introduces another key aspect of postwar industry: Many Japanese companies were part of complex webs of cross-investing and ownership; thus, when Japanese corporations did raise capital by selling stock, the investors were often affiliated companies, and when they got loans, it was often from affiliated banks.

- In Japanese, these webs of affiliated companies are called *keiretsu*. The major *keiretsu* of the postwar era were **One of Japan’s *keiretsu*, the Mitsubishi Group, comprises more than 500 major companies, including Mitsubishi Motors, Mitsubishi Aircraft, Nikon Corporation, and the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ.**
Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Yasuda. The largest *keiretsu* have affiliates in virtually every industry.

- Most *keiretsu* had prewar roots, and the occupation briefly considered breaking them into independent companies, but that plan was shelved as part of the Cold War goal of rebuilding Japan’s economy; for this reason, reforms were limited to rather superficial restructuring.

- In terms of investment, Mitsubishi affiliates, such as Mitsubishi Bank, funded other affiliates, and different affiliates all bought one another’s stock and products. Such deals insulated companies from quarterly market pressures. For example, if Mitsubishi Aircraft had a rough quarter, its access to capital was virtually unchanged. The affiliates were all in business together for the long term.

- It’s difficult to quantify exactly how powerful the *keiretsu* were during Japan’s era of rapid growth, but we can say that until the financial crisis of the 1990s, nearly 60 percent of the large firms on the Tokyo stock exchange were affiliated with one of six large *keiretsu*. Further, the Japan Fair Trade Commission has estimated that almost 90 percent of all domestic business transactions are “among parties involved in a long-standing relationship of some sort.”

**Role of the Japanese Government**

- The final factor driving Japanese economic growth is the role of the government. In addition to providing loan guarantees, the government also created several ministries that promoted economic development. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) was initially the most important.

- In the 1950s, MITI targeted several key sectors for growth, including steel, electric power, shipbuilding, chemical fertilizers, synthetic textiles, plastics, and automobiles. To promote these
industries, MITI either offered direct government loans or provided loan guarantees to private banks; it also offered government land at low cost and special tax breaks. Without question, these policies worked. For example, Japan became the world’s largest shipbuilder in the 1950s, and nearly 60 percent of that industry’s capital came from government banks.

- Equally important was the government’s inaction—its failure to break up cartels even when companies were in clear violation of Japanese law. Japan had anti-monopoly and fair-trade laws, but for decades, the government did not enforce laws on price fixing or other forms of collusion, and it allowed and even encouraged *keiretsu*.
  - For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the government allowed firms in the electronics industry to fix prices. During this time, seven major companies colluded to sell televisions at or below cost in the United States while charging more than twice as much for comparable products in Japan.
  - The goal was to gain market share and drive U.S. producers out of business, and both strategies worked; the number of U.S. television manufacturers fell from 27 in 1960 to 5 in 1980. Meanwhile, Japanese manufacturers gained close to 50 percent of the U.S. market, then carefully coordinated price increases so that they were no longer selling on tiny or even negative margins.
  - In the 1970s, these practices drew a hostile response in the United States. The Japanese economy had grown so large that America could no longer continue to absorb Japanese imports. Thus, the relationship between the two countries changed: The United States shifted from promoting Japanese exports to blocking them.

- In the 1970s, many of the fundamentals of Japanese postwar growth, including U.S. support for exports and a cheap yen, seem to have been eliminated, marking the end of the nation’s economic growth. But the Japanese economy rebounded from the crisis of
the early 1970s rather quickly and growth continued, although at a slower rate.

- Japanese companies adapted to the new relationship with America. They began moving production to the United States to work around import restrictions, and they began buying American companies to maintain access to U.S. markets. The increase in gas prices gave Japanese cars an advantage because manufacturers in Japan were quicker to raise fuel efficiency. Finally, Japanese domestic demand began to grow, making Japan less dependent on exports.

- In retrospect, however, the feeling of wealth experienced by Japanese consumers after decades of privation had a downside: Although it fueled domestic demand, it also supported a large real estate bubble. We’ll return to the bursting of that bubble and its aftermath in our last lecture.

**Suggested Reading**

Allison, *Precarious Japan*.

Samuels, 3.11: *Disaster and Change in Japan*.

Vogel, *Japan as Number One*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Which aspects of the Japanese “miracle” were closely related to Japanese culture? Which aspects can or have been replicated elsewhere?

2. How did nearly four decades of robust growth shape Japanese politics and society?
In this lecture, we’ll discuss the work of two giants of Japanese cinema, Ozu Yasujirō and Kurosawa Akira. Both are acclaimed masters of film, and their work regularly appears on top 10 lists of the greatest films ever made anywhere. Instead of a more standard overview of Ozu and Kurosawa, we will look at them in the context of the theme we’ve been exploring throughout this course: the relationship between globalization and Japanese culture. As we’ll see, both directors are distinctly Japanese, but they are also deeply connected to world cinema, in particular, to American films.

Ozu Yasujirō’s *Tokyo Story*

- Ozu’s 1953 film *Tokyo Story* was inspired by a 1937 American film, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, directed by Leo McCarey. The two films are strikingly similar, but McCarey’s version has an American sense of right and wrong—a biblical moral sense—while Ozu’s version has a more Buddhist sensibility.

- *Make Way for Tomorrow* is a brutally unsentimental movie. It takes an unflinching look at how American families deal with aging and economic hardship. In the film, Barkley and Lucy, an elderly couple, are losing their house to foreclosure; they ask their five adult children for help, but only two are willing to assist them. Unfortunately, neither has enough space for both; thus, Barkley goes to live with his daughter Cora, and Lucy goes to live with her son George.
  - Because there is no extra bedroom at George’s house, Lucy must share a room with her teenage granddaughter. The granddaughter loves her grandmother, but she stops bringing her friends home and starts staying out late. George’s wife complains that the situation must change or the daughter will get a “reputation.”
  - George chooses to accommodate his wife and daughter over his mother. It seems clear that George is making the wrong choice,
but he’s somewhat redeemed because he’s at least pained by the decision, while his siblings seem too selfish to care.

- Ozu never saw *Make Way for Tomorrow*, but it was a favorite film of his longtime screenwriter, Noda Kōgo, who recommended that Ozu make the film. The result is that some characters are almost identical in the two films. But *Tokyo Story* is also a distinctively Ozu film. Instead of a narrative illustrating a biblical commandment, it is a quiet and complex rumination on the nature of family, the signature feature of an Ozu film.

- In Ozu’s version, Shūkichi is the husband in the elderly couple, and Tomi is his wife. They live in the town of Onomichi, near Hiroshima, with their youngest daughter, Kyōko. They are traveling to Tokyo to visit their son, their daughter, and their daughter-in-law, who lost her husband in the war.
  - When Shūkichi and Tomi arrive in Tokyo, they are utterly neglected by their children. Kōichi, the son, is roughly parallel to George in the American film; he seems to be well-intentioned, but he still ignores his parents. The daughter, Shige, is closely parallel to Cora, one of the bad daughters in the McCarey film.
  - The striking difference in this film is the addition of the seemingly wonderful daughter-in-law, Noriko. She is both widowed and the poorest of the children, but she takes time off from work to take her late husband’s parents sightseeing around Tokyo.
  - Ozu repeats the device of separating the aging parents. Tomi spends one night with Noriko, and Shūkichi stays with Shige, who is openly disgusted by her own father. As in the McCarey film, the elderly parents talk about their disappointment with their children and wonder whether their children’s behavior reflects on their upbringing.
  - On the journey back to Onomichi, Tomi falls desperately ill, and once there, she lapses into a coma. The children gather
at her deathbed and stay for the funeral, but after a distinctly unemotional ceremony, they head back to Tokyo.

- The complexity of Ozu’s film comes together in the last few scenes. For example, Kyōko, the youngest daughter, who will now live with her widowed father, is furious with her sister, Shige, who has grabbed some of their deceased mother’s belongings.
  - Kyōko is rightfully disgusted, but the situation isn’t completely clear cut. Through bits of dialogue, we’ve learned that the father, Shūkichi, was once an alcoholic, and he only stopped drinking when Kyōko was born. Thus, Kyōko—but not Shige—grew up with a sober and loving father. In fact, Shige had wanted to throw her father out of the house when he had come home drunk after he had promised not to drink again.
  - Shige is as bad a daughter as Cora, but Ozu denies us McCarey’s stark biblical clarity. Shige may be a bad daughter, but Shūkichi was also a bad father.
  - We also get hints that the daughter-in-law, Noriko, may be good only because she is too scarred by problems in her first marriage to seek another partner and move on with her life.

- McCarey ends his film with a sense of rupture. The husband, Barkley, is sent off to California to live with another daughter, while Lucy is left behind at the train station, soon to move to a retirement home. We’re left with the sense that if only their children weren’t so selfish, this wouldn’t have happened. The adult children in Ozu’s version are just as selfish, but the separation of the parents comes from Tomi’s death. There seems to be something more profound at work here because even morally perfect children can’t stop their parents from dying.

- Ozu drives home this cycle of life and death by repeating a scene from the beginning of the film at the end. Early in *Tokyo Story*, a neighbor walks past the window and makes small talk with Shūkichi and Tomi about their upcoming trip to Tokyo. At the end,
the same neighbor passes by and makes similar small talk. Tomi has died, but it’s clear that life goes on; death changes everything, but it also changes nothing.

○ This is a profoundly Buddhist perspective. Change is inevitable, including children growing up and moving away and parents growing old and dying. In Buddhism, moral behavior is essential—if you are immoral, you will be unhappy—but being good won’t stop change or prevent loss.

○ This theme of impermanence is central to Ozu’s filmmaking. There’s a sweet sadness to many of his films and a sense of acceptance: We cannot stop change; everything will slip away.

Kurosawa Akira’s Yojimbo

- Kurosawa Akira was also an internationally acclaimed director, but he was known for his action films. His 1961 film Yojimbo fits our theme of Japan’s global connectivity; it is clearly influenced by American film, but it also had an impact in the other direction: It forever changed American film.

- Yojimbo was inspired by the film version of Dashiell Hammett’s novel The Glass Key and by Hammett’s novel Red Harvest. It’s also infused with an older Japanese tradition: the story of the rōnin, the masterless samurai.
  ○ In 1860, just before the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, a nameless rōnin, played by Mifune Toshirō, wanders into a small town that is in the grip of a gang war between a fellow named Seibei and his former henchman, Ushitora. The war has left the town paralyzed by fear. The situation is so bad that one of the few good men in town, the innkeeper, tells the rōnin that it would be best if both gang bosses were dead.

  ○ At first, the rōnin is willing to sell his services to the gangster, Seibei, but when he discovers that Seibei plans to kill him once the big fight is over, the rōnin decides to have some dark fun and get the two gangs to kill each other.
- Both gangs are so devoid of redeeming qualities that as an audience, we cheer on the rōnin, waiting for all the gang members to be killed. But the rōnin, despite his gruff exterior, has a buried moral compass; he learns that one gang has kidnapped a farmer’s wife. The rōnin frees the woman, killing all the guards and further inflaming the gang war, but he is exposed by a thank-you note from the farmer’s wife.

- The hero is captured and tortured, but he escapes with the help of the innkeeper. Then, the innkeeper is kidnapped while in town to get medicine for the rōnin. The rōnin goes back into town, and in a spectacular action scene, all the gang members are killed.

- Visually, what’s striking about Yojimbo is that the scenes in which Mifune Toshirō faces off against the bad guys are lifted from John Ford Westerns, but the buildings are from 1800s Japan—not something we see in other Japanese samurai films.

- Unlike a John Ford Western, however, there’s a dark comedy to Kurosawa’s film. For example, the rōnin is the hero, but he’s nameless, dirty, and unshaven, and he keeps scratching himself as if he’s got fleas. Further, for much of the film, he tries to get the two gangs to kill each other—not a very noble pursuit. Mifune is taciturn but in a strangely cryptic, almost smirking fashion. He doesn’t glower, directly intimidating his rivals; he’s somehow removed from the enemy, viewing everything with ironic detachment.

- Mifune’s final line is: “Well, it will be quiet in this town now”; with one sword stroke, he then frees the innkeeper and leaves town. The effect is both heroic and strangely apocalyptic: the nameless, dirty hero leaving a town that is now “peaceful” because the main street is full of dead bodies. The hero is moral but also disturbingly dark.

- That new vision of a dark hero changed movies forever. Kurosawa and Mifune made a sequel the following year called Sanjūrō, and the Italian director Sergio Leone released a remake in 1964, A Fistful of Dollars, starring Clint Eastwood. American critics didn’t
quite know what to make of *A Fistful of Dollars*, but *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther presciently suggested that Eastwood’s character might be “a new non-hero.” Since then, Eastwood’s remake of Mifune’s darkly heroic antihero has become a staple of modern film.

- Legal issues surrounding *A Fistful of Dollars* and later films, including a 1996 remake, *Last Man Standing*, are a remarkable measure of Kurosawa’s status as a global director. He has long been understood as an international filmmaker, while Ozu is more commonly described as a quintessentially Japanese filmmaker. But as you watch more recent Japanese films, consider the tensions between speaking mostly to Japanese viewers about Japanese issues and making overtly cosmopolitan films, adapting foreign literature, and directing with a global audience in mind.

### Suggested Reading

Desser, ed., *Ozu’s Tokyo Story*.


### Questions to Consider

1. How do Kurosawa’s Shakespeare films, such as *Ran*, reflect both Japanese and cosmopolitan influences?

2. Ozu is sometimes describes as a quintessentially Japanese filmmaker. Do you agree?
Historians often search for turning points, moments in time when everything changed. In the case of modern Japan, we find that moment beginning in early 1989 and extending over the next 24 months. Over those two years, four events took place that changed Japan forever: (1) the Shōwa emperor, Hirohito, died; (2) the Tiananmen Square massacre occurred in China; (3) the Japanese real estate bubble burst; and (4) the stock market crashed. It’s fair to say that decades later, Japan is still sorting out the repercussions of that remarkable stretch of time. In this lecture, we’ll look at each of these events in turn.

The Death of Hirohito

- The Shōwa emperor, Hirohito, died in January 1989 after suffering from intestinal cancer. He was in a coma for weeks before he died, and his impending death cast a long shadow over the last months of 1988 and the start of the new year.

- The death of the emperor marked the start of a new era, both figuratively and literally. By tradition, Japan officially marks time according to the ascension of each emperor; thus, the ascension of Hirohito in 1926 marked the beginning of the Shōwa period. Hirohito’s successor chose to call the new era Heisei, which roughly translates as “achieving peace.”

- The start of this era came with a slew of new questions about both mundane and important issues. One major question related to the role of the emperor in modern Japan. It was impossible to dodge this issue because the Japanese needed to figure out how to behave while the emperor was dying.
  - Although attitudes have changed somewhat, at the time, Japanese families typically did not disclose the diagnosis of a fatal condition to a patient. Because Hirohito was a public figure, everyone knew that he was dying, but the media did
not report on that fact. Further, the public was asked to show *jishuku* ("self-control") and not engage in festivities. This request disrupted the hotel and restaurant industries, which would usually have been busy with New Year celebrations.

- The death of the Shōwa emperor was, in some ways, a strange, slow-moving trauma. Many older Japanese observed that it reminded them eerily of the last years of World War II, when everyone suspected that the war was lost, but public discourse was disconnected from that reality.

- In commemorating the emperor’s death, people also had to reflect on Hirohito’s life. What exactly was his role during the war? Before 1989, that debate had largely been smothered by a story that the U.S. occupation had encouraged: that the emperor was somehow both head of state and free from any responsibility for the war. But in 1989, painful questions and intense debate on this issue reappeared. Perhaps the most striking example of how explosive the issue became was the case of the mayor of Nagasaki, Motoshima Hitoshi.

  - In December 1988, when asked whether he thought the emperor bore responsibility for the war, Motoshima answered in the affirmative. At a later press conference, he said that if the emperor had “pressed his senior staff to end the war sooner, the Battle of Okinawa and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could have been avoided.”

  - The reaction to Motoshima’s remarks was strong. He was a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, Japan’s main center-right party; the party insisted that he retract his remarks, and when he refused, he was expelled. The extreme right called for “divine wrath” to pour down on Motoshima.

  - In 1990, Motoshima was shot by a rightwing extremist, but he recovered, and in 1991, ran for a fourth term as mayor of Nagasaki. The Liberal Democratic Party opposed him, but all the other parties rallied behind him. Motoshima stood his ground on his statements about the emperor and won a fourth term.
This story is a fairly striking measure of how the emperor’s death opened up old wounds and unresolved issues. The people of Nagasaki rallied behind a mayor who had been rejected by his own party and targeted for assassination by the extreme right. And it’s fair to say that Japanese people today are still struggling with two related issues: How do we commemorate the war, and how does an emperor fit into our modern political system?

Tiananmen Square Massacre

- Another major shock of 1989 was the Tiananmen Square massacre in China. In April of that year, students began gathering in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, a high-ranking Chinese Communist Party member known as a reformer. Their protests quickly turned into a movement demanding freedom of the press, freedom of speech, government transparency, and an end to political corruption.

- Although the government was conciliatory at first, its tone changed when the students began to gather support from Chinese workers and farmers, lower-ranking party officials, and police. Finally, with the protests spreading, Chinese leaders sent the army into Beijing, and hundreds were killed. The protests were crushed and, with them, all hope of further reforms.

- The response in Japan was one of heartbreak. Tokyo had welcomed the promise of a democratic China, a peaceful, capitalist neighbor with more than a billion consumers eager to buy Japanese goods. After the massacre, it seemed as if the end of the Cold War had missed East Asia. Just as the Berlin Wall was coming down in Germany, Beijing was returning to conventional Leninist communism, with strict control of the press, direct censorship, and absolute one-party rule.

Asset Bubble and Stock Market Crash

- The dashed promise of a democratic neighbor was deeply disappointing, but the economic news at home was even worse. In late 1989, the Japanese economy began to implode, starting what some
call a two-decade recession. The primary issue was an asset bubble that central government planners had been worried about for years.

- In 1985, commercial real estate prices in Tokyo jumped 42 percent; the next year, the increase was 122 percent, and in 1987, another 54 percent over 1986. Such numbers were unsustainable, but they were also paralleled in other parts of the economy.
  - For example, residential real estate prices in Tokyo rose more than 100 percent in 1987, and residential prices in Osaka jumped 500 percent in five years.
  - The Nikkei 225 stock index also surged, passing 13,000 for the first time in 1985; in 1989, it hit almost 40,000.

- The Japanese government knew that something was amiss, but by the time the Bank of Japan started to raise interest rates to cool off the economy, it was too late. The Nikkei 225 lost more than 35 percent in 1990. Despite a few rallies, it dropped to under 15,000 in 1992, then to a little more than 8,000 in 2002. The real estate picture was only slightly less bleak.

- Thousands of Japanese companies went from being insanely wealthy to nearly broke. The bubble was especially severe for banks, whose reserves were suddenly worthless; the entire Japanese banking system began to look insolvent. Although the banks had become zombies, they tried to maintain the appearance of *keiretsu* banks, keeping affiliated companies afloat with infusions of credit.

- Finally, in the early 2000s, the government began pressing banks to merge. This created such entities as the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation, a merger of Mitsui and Sumitomo, the banks of two rival *keiretsu*. Today, Japan is full of merged banks, a situation that has transformed the corporate landscape; the old *keiretsu* system is a shadow of its former self.

- The bubble also had a devastating impact on consumer confidence. People who already owned property in the 1980s passively
became multimillionaires, but after 1989, they returned to being ordinary citizens. Those who borrowed money to buy at the peak were financially destroyed. These outcomes have shaped people’s perspective on the world, decreasing consumer spending and long-term investment. Consumer confidence and spending have also been suppressed by falling real wages.

- The overall impact on the Japanese economy has been decisive. By most measures, Japan has seen economic growth of only a few percentage points in total since 1990. Further, no one has a clear sense of how to solve Japan’s economic stagnation.

Japan’s Place in the Modern World

- Despite the gloomy economic statistics, by other measures, daily life in Japan actually improved after 1989. For example, during the course of two decades of supposed economic disaster, Japanese life expectancy continued to increase. In addition, Japan has the lowest violent crime rate in the world. To the dismay of economists, Japanese consumers have also become exceedingly frugal, which means that 20 years of slow growth have made living in Japan more affordable.

- This new vision of a frugal Japan has come into conflict with the older vision of Japan as an industrial superpower. That conflict came to a head after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, when all of Japan’s nuclear power plants were taken offline and the government asked people to reduce power consumption.

After the disaster, the government fully intended to restore Japan’s nuclear capacity because, according to official planners, Japan needs power for economic growth.

Interestingly, the Japanese public overshot the government’s targets for reducing power consumption to the point where green activists could argue that Japan doesn’t need nuclear power; it just needs to maintain its frugal energy use.

- This battle over Japan’s energy needs is part of a larger underlying question: What is Japan’s place in the modern world? One way in which that question unfolds is seen in how Japanese people view the past.

- A tiny but loud minority wants to scrap constitutional restrictions on the Japanese military and restore Japanese national pride; this outlook is based in a nostalgic view of the 1930s. Alternatively, those who are eager to restart rapid economic growth look back fondly on the boom years of the postwar era, the 1960s and 1970s. And some argue that Japan’s future lies in restrained growth; they look back to the Tokugawa period—more than 200 years without war or major technological innovation but a period that produced a rich cultural life.

- The Japanese people seem to be searching for a past that they can be proud of. The first plan for modern Japan was to become a military superpower, which worked for a time. The next plan was to become an economic superpower, which also worked for a time. Some are now wondering: What’s next? Will Japan become a sustainability superpower?

- As we’ve seen throughout this course, Japan is both deeply cosmopolitan and subject to the forces of insularity and isolation. That tension has shaped Japanese culture for millennia and will continue to do so well into the future.
Suggested Reading

Allison, *Precarious Japan*.

Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which problems facing Japan are unique to Japan? Which are common to all late-industrial or postindustrial societies?

2. How do major U.S. media sources describe Japan’s paradoxical combination of prosperity and stagnation?
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