

Japanese History

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Japan, Now and Then

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Japan is an island nation in the Pacific Ocean. It is located east of China and the Korean Peninsula, and is part of what we call the Pacific Rim. To people in these lands, the sun seems to rise first over Japan. That is probably why the Japanese call their country Nippon, which means origin of the sun.

There are four major islands and thousands of small ones in the Japanese archipelago (/ar*kuh*peh*luh*goh/). The largest island is Honshu (/hahn*shoo/), the home of the capital city of Tokyo (/toh*kee*oh/), Kyoto (/kee*yoh*toh/), and other great cities. To the south lie the major islands of Shikoku (/shih*koh*koo/) and Kyushu (/kee*yoo*shoo/), and to the north is Hokkaido (/hah*kye*doh/).



Japan is a Pacific Rim nation made up of four main islands.

For several centuries, Japan distrusted outsiders and lived in self-imposed isolation. At various times in their history, the Japanese were deeply influenced by their near neighbors—the Koreans and the Chinese. But they shut their doors almost completely to Europeans and Americans between the 1600s and the mid-1800s. Eventually, however, Japan opened its doors to foreigners.

Today, Japan is one of the most economically advanced nations in the world. Japanese companies ship automobiles and electronic goods all over the world, and hundreds of thousands of travelers fly in and out of Tokyo's busy airports every day.

The Mongols Attack Japan

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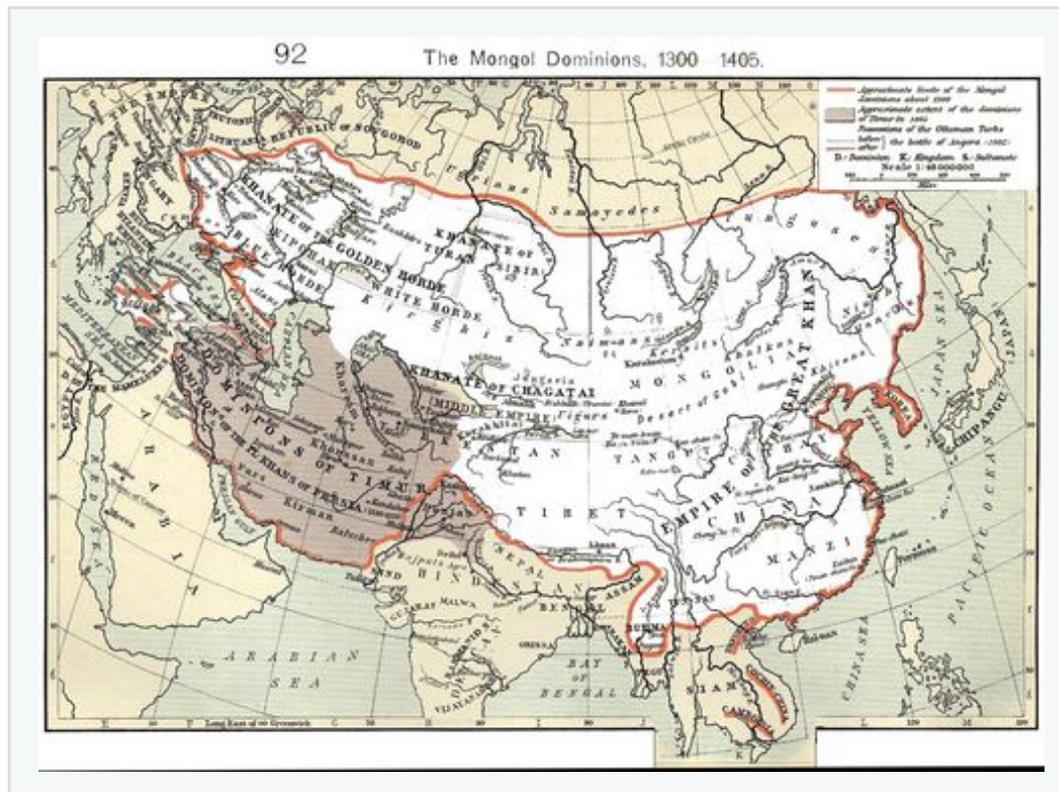
One of the most powerful military forces the world has ever seen were the great Mongol armies of the 1100s and the 1200s. The Mongols created an empire that stretched from China to eastern Europe. The Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, grandson of the great conqueror Chinggis Khan, set his sights on Japan in the late 1200s.

In 1268, Kublai Khan sent a letter to Japan's capital. He threatened to attack if the Japanese did not agree to pay him money to keep peace. Both the emperor and the shogun ignored the threats.



Kublai Khan

Kublai Khan launched an invasion of Japan from Korea. The first attack came in 1274 when a fleet of nine hundred ships arrived on the shores of the empire's southernmost island, Kyushu.



The Mongols created a large empire. In the late 1200s, Kublai Khan attempted to make Japan part of his vast Mongol empire.

On the first day of battle, the Mongol invaders were victorious, and they returned to their ships that night. It was a deadly mistake. A storm blew in, splintering the invaders' vessels and killing one third of their troops. The invasion failed.



The Mongols first tried to invade Japan in 1274.

these two storms was an example of kamikaze (/kah*mih*kah*zee/), meaning divine wind. The gods, wanting to protect Japan, had sent these divine winds to defeat the Mongol invasions.

A much larger attack came in 1281. This time, two separate armies joined in the assault on Hakata Bay. About forty thousand Mongol, Korean, and northern Chinese troops met up with another one hundred thousand troops from southern China. Some 4,400 Mongol warships arrived on the shores of Kyushu. Kublai Khan meant business.

Before the invaders could launch their attack, another storm blew in. This time it packed the fury of a full-scale typhoon, destroying most of the attacking ships and nearly half of the Mongol forces. Once again, the remaining Mongol invaders went home in defeat.

The Japanese did not believe that these storms were accidents or coincidences.

They believed that each of



The Japanese believe kamikaze, or divine winds, saved them from two Mongol invasions.

Europeans in Japan

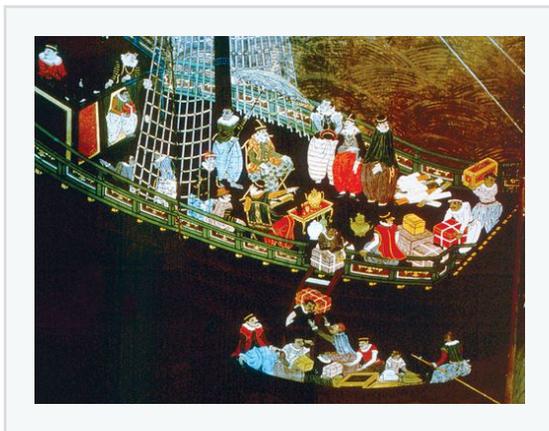
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In September 1543, an unusual ship appeared off the shore of one of Japan's smaller islands. It carried newcomers who came to trade. They brought one item unlike anything the Japanese had ever seen. According to one account, it caused an explosion like lightning and a noise like thunder.

The remarkable object was a musket, and the strangers who brought it sailed from Portugal. The Portuguese had already explored the coasts of Africa and Asia, as well as many of the islands of the Pacific. Now they had come to Japan, bringing the musket—a firearm that would change Japanese warfare forever.



The Portuguese brought muskets to Japan.



The arrival of European traders and missionaries in the 1500s introduced new weapons and the Christian religion to Japan.

Japan at first welcomed the Western traders. After the Portuguese vessels, Spanish, Dutch, and English trade ships also arrived. Japan's lords, called daimyo, were intrigued by Western ideas. They were also eager to obtain firearms. Over the centuries, the daimyo had spent many years fighting among themselves, struggling to determine who would be the shogun, or supreme military commander. The musket soon became an important weapon in these struggles. After the arrival of the Europeans, no daimyo could hope to become shogun unless an army of musketeers backed him.

Along with the Western traders came missionaries. A Catholic group, the Jesuits, hoped to set up permanent missions in Japan. On the west coast of the Japanese island Kyushu, a local warlord offered the Jesuits harborside land in the little fishing village of Nagasaki (/nah*guh*sah*kee/). In time, this village would become the chief city on Kyushu.

For twenty-five years, the Westerners—both traders and missionaries—enjoyed a welcome in Japan. The technology and ideas they introduced would greatly influence the course of Japanese history.

Closing Japan's Doors

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

For many centuries, Japan was ruled by emperors and shoguns, or supreme military commanders. While the emperors were little more than figureheads, the shoguns wielded great power. In 1603, the Tokugawa (/toh*koo*gah*wuh/) family of shoguns gained control of Japan and ruled from the city of Edo, which is now Tokyo. Earlier shoguns had welcomed Western trade and ideas, which had arrived with Europeans in the mid-1500s. But now, the Tokugawa removed the welcome mat, banning all foreign missionaries from Japan. This was done largely because Christian teachings challenged traditional Japanese ideas and beliefs. Also, the governing powers of various Christian churches were not within the control of the ruling shogun. The ruling shogun ordered that no Japanese would be permitted to practice Christianity. He even used torture and execution to persuade people to abandon the religion.

Still, the missionaries and priests kept coming, along with foreign trade ships. The Japanese worried that foreign armies would follow these visitors, determined to turn Japan into a colony. From 1600 to 1668, shoguns barred nearly all Westerners' ships from Japan's harbors. Only the Dutch could visit as they were mainly interested in trade, but even they were confined to one port near Nagasaki.

In 1636, the shogun issued an exclusion order. The order prevented Japanese people from traveling abroad and foreigners from coming in. In 1639, it became against the law to build a big, seagoing ship.

The surrounding seas helped the shoguns isolate their people, although Japan continued to trade with its Asian neighbors.

Under the Tokugawa shoguns, Japan would remain a secluded, or closed, world for more than two hundred years.



The Tokugawa shoguns allowed the Dutch to have a trading post at Nagasaki. No other Europeans or Americans were allowed into Japan. In this image you can see the Dutch trading post.

Forcing Japan's Doors Open

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Beginning in the 1600s, the Japanese leader, called the shogun, closed the nation's doors to nearly all foreign traders. Japan maintained this "exclusion policy," banning trade with all Westerners except the Dutch, for close to two centuries. But in the late 1700s, three nations—Russia, Britain, and the United States—began to knock loudly on its doors.

In the early 1700s, Russia's ruler Peter the Great asked that Russian ships be allowed to stop at Japanese ports for supplies. Peter died before setting up trade relations with Japan, but in the late 1700s, the ruler Catherine the Great tried again. Czarina Catherine tried to force the shogun to open his ports, but the Russian strong-arm methods backfired. Japan closed its doors more tightly. The shogun ordered that any foreign vessel that came close to his shores be destroyed.

Meanwhile, Britain had forced trade agreements with China. The shogun's fears increased. He worried that Japan, too, would be forced to welcome foreign ships.

He was right to worry. In July 1853, four black-hulled American vessels steamed into Tokyo Bay. A stern-faced United States naval officer, Commodore Matthew Perry, came before the shogun. Perry presented a letter from the president of the United States. It demanded that Japan open its ports to trade.

Perry soon made a second visit—this time bringing four extra warships. The American show of force did the trick. The shogun and his advisers knew that they could not stand up against the United States Navy. They signed a trade treaty with the United States.



Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Tokyo Bay in 1853. His visit helped open trade relations between Japan and the United States.

This first treaty turned out to be only the beginning. After agreeing to trade with the United States, how could the shogun refuse other nations? Britain, France, and Russia soon demanded and won trade rights, too. Suddenly, Japan was bustling with foreign traders.

The End of Shogun Rule in Japan

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For over two hundred years, beginning in the 1600s, Japan maintained an “exclusion policy” that banned nearly all western trade ships. However, in the mid-1800s, pressure from Americans led Japan to sign a trade treaty with the United States. Soon thereafter, Britain, France, and Russia won trade rights as well. And Japan was suddenly bustling with foreign traders.

After several years of foreign trade, some Japanese grew unhappy with the arrangement. They thought that the foreigners had been given special privileges, and they blamed the shogun, the ruler, for allowing this to happen. Many Japanese complained about their lives under the shogun. Merchants, although making plenty of money, remained near the bottom of the social ladder. Peasants paid heavy taxes. The samurai warriors, who were much less important than before because of the growing importance of trade, were discontented. The daimyo, or lords, grumbled about being forced to maintain expensive houses in the capital.

Eventually, a rebellion against the shogun broke out. Where did the rebels look for the solution to their problems? They looked to the emperor. Although shoguns ruled the land, an emperor still served as a royal figurehead. “Honor the emperor!” became the rebels’ cry.

In 1867, the shogun stepped down and in 1868, a new government was formed. The emperor was restored to the role of official head of state. Shinto was once again declared the state religion. The Shinto religion reminded people that their emperor ruled as a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu.

This was not, however, a return to the old days when the emperor ran the affairs of state. A new government conducted business in the name of the emperor.

The end of shogun rule marked the end of Japan’s feudal age. The new government announced that rank in Japanese society now included consideration of how much a person knew of Western science and practical affairs. The old system of inherited rank— samurai, peasants,



Japan's last shogun was removed from power in 1867.

artisans, and merchants—was abolished. Japanese of all ranks were equal under the law. Samurai could buy and sell goods, and artisans, merchants, and peasants could serve in Japan’s new modern army.

The Japanese adopted a new attitude about the world they shared. In contrast to the shoguns’ policy of closing Japan’s doors to the outside world, the new government stated that “knowledge shall be sought throughout the world.”

The Japanese began to visit the United States and Europe. They studied Western science and shook off their longtime dislike for trade and commerce. Japan built a mighty naval fleet. The Land of the Rising Sun prepared to take a powerful place in world affairs.