

EARLY MODERN JAPANESE CULTURE

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

TOKUGAWA JAPAN (1600-1868)

Overview

The outcome of the late 16th-century reunification process enabled Ieyasu, the Tokugawa clan chief, to establish a new regime—the third and final Shogunate. Tokugawa Japan, with its nearly three centuries of stable political order, witnessed the emergence of an urban-based society, a dynamic and productive domestic economy, and many iconic cultural products. A samurai-centered social hierarchy and authoritarian regime sought to pacify the populace and eliminate threats to those in power. And a wealthy merchant class, essentially challenging the prerogatives of the samurai ‘overlords,’ created a vibrant, free-wheeling culture of amusement and entertainment. The officially-espoused samurai virtues of self-restraint and austerity stood in stark contrast to the consumer tastes and hedonistic propensities of those with money to burn.

Tokugawa Japan was largely isolated from the world, owing to the shogunal policy of national seclusion (*sakoku*) that sought to stave off possible incursions by Western colonial powers and their proselytizing Christian religions. Yet the era is marked by significant economic, technological, and educational advancement, and it served as a chrysalis for Japan’s emergence as a modern nation in the late 19th century. Many of the defining qualities associated with Japan and its people—including questions of identity and collective memory—can be traced to Tokugawa institutions and influences.

Shogunal Policies

A brilliant strategist with a powerful base of support, Tokugawa Ieyasu and his forces were victorious at the pivotal Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Having consolidated his power, Ieyasu established a new shogunal regime in Edo, a small town not far from the Kamakura site of Yoritomo’s shogunate. He set about implementing the administrative program initially devised by Hideyoshi. The so-called *baku-han* system entailed the establishment of a strong shogunate (*bakufu*) with broad administrative powers, which would oversee a nation comprised of several hundred domains (*han*). The *daimyō* lords were accorded a degree of autonomy but were all subject to taxation and other policies aimed at forestalling insurrection or any organized threat to the center in Edo. A system of censorship was put in place, weaponry was confiscated, and movement along the major roads was strictly controlled. The Emperor remained in splendid isolation, together with his imperial entourage, in Kyoto. The Tokugawa political order, which thus shared both feudal and modern characteristics, has been termed ‘pre-modern’—*kinsei*, in Japanese. It proved remarkably successful, despite internal contradictions and tensions.

Borrowing from Hideyoshi, Ieyasu put in place an idealized, Confucian-style social hierarchy, with the ‘virtuous’ samurai class at the top and the ‘lowly’ merchant class at the bottom. Schooling would be predicated on instruction in Confucian texts and instilling the virtues of duty and obedience— yet another way of reinforcing the regime’s legitimacy. Elaborate rules and regulations governed virtually all activities, with the aim of achieving a peaceful and orderly society. The samurai, no longer required to serve in a warrior capacity, were ‘repurposed’ in administrative posts and as physicians and scholars. Their swords became mere status symbols, and the once-vaunted samurai martial virtues assumed an idealized form in the so-called ‘warrior code’ of *bushidô*.

The *sakoku* policy of national seclusion in effect relegated Tokugawa Japan to a marginal position in a newly-globalized world order. Among the foreign powers that had access to Japan during the prior period, it was the Dutch that managed to avoid summary expulsion. Their trading mission in far-off Nagasaki, in the form of a small headquarters— Dejima, by name— built in the harbor, would serve as Japan’s sole window upon the West for centuries. Western learning— in the form of Dutch and German books on medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and so forth— was highly prized by the Shogunate, which sought a monopoly on this invaluable source of modern knowledge. But others managed to gain access to this scarce commodity, and gradually word spread of new medical procedures, scientific principles, and artistic techniques.

Cities and Merchants

A burgeoning Japanese economy, unfettered by domestic strife and disorder, led to the rise of a merchant class— the *chônin*— and the expansion of cities and urban society. Edo, the shogunal capital, grew dramatically, ranking among the world’s largest cities by 1700. And Osaka, in the Kansai region to the west, became a fiscal center and home to a vibrant urban market. Money talked, and those who had it were free— notwithstanding the strictures put in place by the authorities— to use it as they chose. An irrepressibly secular spirit prevailed, and it gave rise to a culture of consumption, entertainment, and pleasure-seeking that inspired many iconic representations of ‘traditional Japan.’

Tokugawa Culture and Arts

Money talked in Tokugawa Japan. And the *chônin* merchants had plenty of it. Their quest for enjoyment helped foster a distinctive culture of entertainment centering on the pleasure quarters (*yûkaku*), where fashionable geisha were available to those who could afford them, and kabuki actors plied their trade for the mass of paying customers. Being stylish and in-the-know was all the rage, and the reigning spirit of hedonism and materialism stood in stark contrast to the more lofty samurai values of stoicism and righteous self-denial.

A noteworthy renaissance in the Japanese arts began as of the late-17th century. The so-called Genroku years (1675-1725) are associated with three major figures in fiction, theater, and poetry.

Saikaku (1642-93) was an Osaka-based writer whose tales of ill-starred lovers, crass merchants, and the comings-and-goings of ordinary folk caught in a web of desire and delusion earned him a lasting reputation. Chikamatsu (1653-1724) is known as the great playwright of the *bunraku* puppet theater, whose near life-size puppets are manipulated by masked puppeteers. (Together with *kabuki*, *bunraku* is still performed widely in Japan.) Chikamatsu's 'love-suicide' (*shinjû*) plays, which enact the tragic fate of lovers who must resort to suicide in the hope of rebirth in the Buddhist paradise, are masterpieces of Japanese drama.

The best-known Genroku figure is Bashô (1644-94), an Edo samurai who renounced his pedigree and became a professional poet. He mastered the seventeen-syllable *haiku* form, making it available to all who were moved by the lyrical spirit— not only the elites. Thanks to Bashô— and many generations of poetic disciples whom he has inspired— *haiku* poetry has become a fixture of world literature.

The Tokugawa arts extend in many directions. Woodblock printing achieved a remarkable level of virtuosity, and 'pictures of the floating world' (*ukiyo-e*)— depicting famous actors, courtesans, and scenes of everyday life— have been treasured by collectors around the world for over a century. Traditional residential architecture flourished, with the hallmark *tatami* mats and sliding *shôji* screens. Pottery, lacquerware, *ikebana* flower arrangement, tea ceremony, calligraphy— these and many other arts and crafts flourished during the Tokugawa. Practitioners generally belonged to a formal school, with its own hereditary lineage, and a rigorous master-disciple system of training and apprenticeship. Such training, part of the 'traditionalism' so strongly associated with Japan in the modern day, is still practiced by those devoted to the survival of these arts— including many foreigners.

The Question of Identity

The isolation of Tokugawa Japan, together with the Shogunate's officially-sponsored ethical code, can be said to have fostered a distinctive mode of nativist identity and 'Japanese-ness.' Most notably, the so-called 'warrior code' of *bushidô*, and its credo of loyalty, honor, selflessness, and martial spirit, stood as a 'pledge of allegiance' that was built into the fabric of Tokugawa education and civic virtue. This is not to say, however, that these virtues were uniformly internalized by all Japanese.

The notion of samurai honor is most famously represented in accounts based on a historical incident in 1703, when forty-seven retainers of Asano, *daimyô* of the Akô domain, exacted revenge on the shogunal official responsible for the death of their liege lord, whereupon they were obliged to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*). Collectively referred to as *Chûshingura* (Treasury of Loyal Retainers), accounts of this famous vendetta, which began to appear in the early 18th century, include famous *kabuki* and *bunraku* plays, fiction and poetry, and modern-day film and TV productions. This cultural trove has served both to reinforce the myth of samurai loyalty and self-sacrifice and to call into question its viability in the modern era.

An ideological current in the mid- and late-Tokugawa period sought to counter the dominance of Chinese-based Confucian studies and reaffirm claims to native cultural and spiritual roots. What emerged was the so-called ‘Nativist Studies’ (*kokugaku*) movement. Centering on the brilliant scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), this intellectual community argued for the crucial significance of foundational Japanese works such as the *Kojiki*, *Man’yôshû*, and the *Tale of Genji*. In addition to laborious textual study and commentary, the *kokugaku* group also helped promote a discourse of Japanese uniqueness that drew upon Shinto mythology and imperial divinity. This renewed focus on the Emperor as Japan’s true sovereign would eventually constitute a serious challenge to the Tokugawa regime itself.

Bakumatsu: The Demise of the Shogunal Order

The Tokugawa Shogunate, which had managed for two centuries to oversee a disparate and contentious assemblage of *han* domains and stave off potential challenges by rival *daimyô*, would face the existential challenge of Western expansionism in the 19th century. The *sakoku* policy was successfully enforced until 1853, when American steamships under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Edo Bay and in effect presented an ultimatum to the Shogun to open up the country. The so-called ‘Black Ships’ (*kurofune*) returned the next year to conclude their negotiations, and within several years the Shogunate had established diplomatic treaties with the U.S. and other Western powers.

No longer secure behind its ‘bamboo curtain,’ the Shogunate sent delegations of samurai to America and Europe in what amounts to a ‘crash course’ in Western civilization. Yet the shogunal system itself would prove incapable of staving off the Western powers and maintaining the status quo. The regime was beset by many challenges— to ‘expel the barbarians’ (*sonnô jôhi*— in effect a thinly-veiled critique of shogunal ineptitude), which was utterly impossible, and to restore the authority and sovereignty of the Emperor, whose symbolic power had been greatly enhanced on account of the *kokugaku* movement. The opportunity was ripe for sworn enemies of the regime— chiefly from the far-off Satsuma and Chôshû domains— to combine in an overthrow of the Shogunate. Following a brief military campaign, the Imperial loyalists— the so-called *shishi*— brought an end to Tokugawa rule and ushered in a new era.

Yet the Tokugawa order, notwithstanding its inability to survive the Western challenge, did pave the way for the nation’s transition to modernity. For one thing, its people had achieved a high rate of literacy, thanks to a de facto public education system comprised of schools that were housed in local Buddhist temples (*terakoya*) across the land. The samurai class, in their ‘peacetime role’ as scholars, physicians, and bureaucrats, helped set the stage for the establishment of modern universities, medical science, and political administration. And their strong work ethic and sense of duty would be recast as a civic value for all Japanese. Finally, the sophisticated and productive Tokugawa mercantile sector facilitated the establishment of modern business and marketing enterprises.

Thus, the Tokugawa period ended not in a revolutionary overthrow of a despotic regime but in an evolutionary restructuring that was the work of far-sighted samurai who willingly relinquished their swords and status in order to bring the nation into the modern era.

Readings

de Bary, William Theodore, et al (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (Columbia, 2005), Volume 2.

Gordon, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan* (Oxford, 2014, 3rd edition), 10-59

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (Columbia, 2002)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 164-234

Discussion Questions and Topics

Tokugawa Japan is a seeming mass of contradictions and incongruities— the official dominance of the samurai and their austere values, versus and the ‘unofficial’ rule of money and pleasure-seeking; a seemingly strong central authority, versus the fact of a divided and hostile aggregation of *daimyô* domains; the isolated, inward-looking nation, versus its fetish for information about the world; a code of male privilege and patriarchy, versus the reality of ambitious and successful women. What aspects of this fascinatingly complex society and culture most interest you?

The myth of samurai honor and valor is, paradoxically, a product of ‘peacetime Japan’ during the Tokugawa. How did the myth circulate in the pre-modern period and how would it be reinvented in modern Japan?

Which (if any) of the iconic Tokugawa arts are you particularly drawn to? Which do you find distasteful or simply pointless?

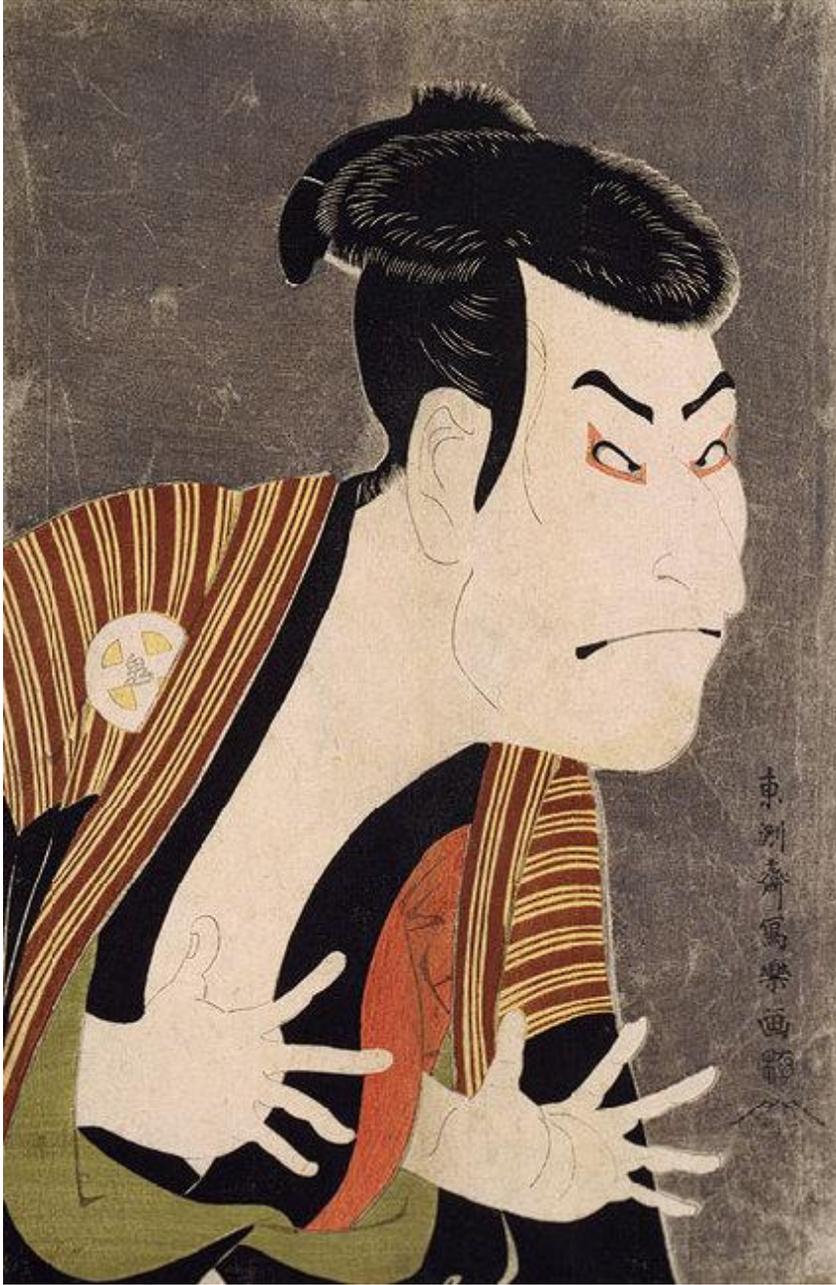
As is the case with samurai culture, the world of Japan’s geisha is hierarchical and quite complex. What comparisons can be drawn between these two key domains of Tokugawa— and Japanese— civilization?

‘The ancient pond/ A frog jumps in/ The sound of water’ (*furuike ya/ kawazu tobikomu/ mizu no oto*). Some have exalted this haiku poem by Bashô as a gateway to enlightenment; others have dismissed it as seventeen pointless Japanese syllables. How do you ‘read’ this iconic product of the Tokugawa literary arts?

Images



Woodblock print depiction of a dramatic scene from the *Chûshingura* vendetta tale. (Wikipedia)



Kabuki actor print by the *ukiyo-e* artist Sharaku, 1794 (Wikipedia)



Ukiyo-e print featuring popular geisha, circa 1800 (Wikipedia)

北亞墨利加人

ペルリ像



1854 woodblock print of Commodore Perry (Wikipedia)