Tokugawa period

Alternative title: Edo period

Tokugawa period, also called Edo period, (1603–1867), the final period of traditional Japan, a time of internal peace, political stability, and economic growth under the shogunate (military dictatorship) founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu. As shogun, Ieyasu achieved hegemony over the entire country by balancing the power of potentially hostile domains with strategically placed allies (fudai) and collateral houses (shimpan). As a further strategy of control, beginning in 1635, Ieyasu’s successor required the daimyo, to maintain households in the Tokugawa administrative capital of Edo (modern Tokyo) and reside there for several months every other year. The resulting system of semi-autonomous domains directed by the central authority of the Tokugawa shogunate lasted for more than 250 years.

As part of the systematic plan to maintain stability, the social order was officially frozen, and mobility between the four classes (i.e., warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants) was prohibited. Numerous members of the warrior class, or samurai, took up residence in the capital and other castle towns where many of them became bureaucrats. Peasants, who made up 80 percent of the population, were forbidden to engage in non-agricultural activities so as to insure a stable and continuing source of income for those in positions of authority. Another aspect of the Tokugawa concern with political stability was fear of foreign ideas and military intervention. Cognizant that the colonial expansion of Spain and Portugal in Asia had been made possible

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By the work of Catholic missionaries, the Tokugawa shoguns came to view the missionaries as a threat to their rule. Measures to expel them from the country culminated in the promulgation of three exclusion decrees in the 1630s, which affected a complete ban on Christianity. Moreover, in issuing these orders, the Tokugawa shogun ate officially adopted a policy of national seclusion. From 1633 onward Japanese subjects were forbidden to travel abroad or to return from overseas, and foreign contact was limited to a few Chinese and Dutch merchants still allowed to trade through the southern port of Nagasaki.

The national economy expanded rapidly from the 1680s to the early 1700s. The emphasis placed on agricultural production by the Tokugawa shogunate encouraged considerable growth in that economic sector. Expansion of commerce and the manufacturing industry was even greater, stimulated by the development of large urban centers, most notably Edo, Ōsaka, and Kyōto, in the wake of the government’s efforts at centralization and its success in maintaining peace. The production of fine silk and cotton fabrics, manufacture of paper and porcelain, and sake brewing flourished in the cities and towns, as did trading in these commodities. This increase in mercantile activity gave rise to wholesalers and exchange brokers, and the ever-widening use of currency and credit produced powerful financiers. The emergence of this well-to-do merchant class brought with it a dynamic urban culture that found expression in new literary and art forms.

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While merchants and to a lesser extent tradesmen continued to prosper well into the 18th century, the daimyo and samurai began to experience financial difficulties. Their primary source of income was a fixed stipend tied to agricultural production, which had not kept pace with other sectors of the national economy. Several attempts at fiscal reform were made by the government during the late 18th and 19th centuries, but the financial strain on the warrior class increased as the period progressed. During its final 30 years in power the Tokugawa shogunate had to contend with peasant uprisings and samurai unrest as well as with financial problems. These factors, combined with the growing threat of Western encroachment, brought into serious question the continued existence of the regime, and by the 1860s many demanded the restoration of direct Imperial rule as a means of unifying the country and solving the prevailing problems. The powerful southwestern tozama domains of Chōshū and Satsuma exerted the greatest pressure on the Tokugawa government and brought about the overthrow of the last shogun, Hitosubashi Keiki (or Yoshinobu), in 1867. Less than a year later the Meiji emperor was restored to supreme power (see Meiji Restoration).

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