

Japan and Asia: A History of Isolation and Intervention

The concept of isolation and insulation from Asia has a long history in Japan. The geography of Japan, as an island country, naturally applied a level of distance and safety from itself and the rest of Asia. Notwithstanding this geographic distance, Japan has culturally been greatly influenced by Asian politics and culture, especially from China. For its part, it has intervened in several times on the continent, most importantly in the early twentieth century when it colonized Korea and Manchuria. This pattern of interaction is not unusual. In fact, Japan's relationship with Asia is not unlike Britain's relationship with Europe. Britain, also an island country, has from time to time greatly influenced continental European politics; but it has always guarded its distance and difference from the continent.

Japan in the Chinese World

Contact and influence from China has a long history in Japan. As was the case with Korea, the Japanese adopted adapted the Chinese character system to writing Japanese. The Japanese also adopted and adapted Buddhism and Confucianism from China. The influence from China increased precipitously with the rise of the Tang Dynasty in China (618–907). During this time the Japanese adopted many features of Chinese culture, especially courtly culture. Even the city Heian-kyo (Kyoto) was designed to be a replica of the Tang capital of Changan.

A Complicated Relationship

In the tenth century, the Japanese Heian Imperial Court prohibited Japanese people from leaving the country or conducting private trade with China or Korea. This was not due to any real aversion to foreign countries. It had more to do with the fact that the Heian court wanted to retain exclusive access to the various foreign items that were exotic to Japan, and therefore expensive. It



would then either use such precious merchandise to sustain its refined culture in the capital or to reward loyal supporters and retainers. However, even in the early days of that policy it really only affected Japan's relations with Korea; and over time it was increasingly ignored by either powerful provincial nobles or private traders, especially after power began to flow to the Kamakura shogunate established in 1192.

By the 12th and 13th centuries there was much freer trade between China, Korea and Japan. A semi-private flow of trade was conducted by both the Imperial court and the shogunate for different reasons significant to both governmental systems. One Chinese trade inspector in the mid-thirteenth century noted upwards of fifty Japanese ships that arrived to trade with China in a year. And contacts were not limited to just the exchange of material goods. It is estimated that during that same century over seventy Japanese monks had ventured in Japanese ships to China to seek further spiritual knowledge and development.

The Mongols

Since at least the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), changes in China, which called itself the Middle Kingdom as a reflection of its central importance in Asia, have resulted in changes across much of Asia. Japan is no exception to this principle. For example, as the declining Song Dynasty (960–1297) was further weakened by the Mongol invasions, its ability to suppress pirates in the waters in and around major Chinese ports was also weakened. Because of this, the Song Dynasty sought the assistance of the Kamakura shogunate in Japan (1192–1333) to resist these pirates and maintain safe trade routes. Japan responded by sending two suppression expeditions against the troublesome pirates in 1227 and 1265. Notwithstanding these attempts, the activities of pirates continued to trouble the waters and relations between China, Korea and Japan well into the 14th and 15th centuries.



When the Mongols finally defeated the Song Dynasty and created their own Chinese dynasty, the Yuan, the effects of this change were strongly felt in Japan. Twice, in 1274 and 1281, the Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368) the Mongols invaded and attempted to conquer Japan. The Kamakura shogunate and its army of samurai warriors, with the help of two typhoons, were able to repel both attacks. But the long term effects of the Mongol invasion undermined Kamakura politics and power leading to a civil war and the eventual establishment of the Ashikaga shogunate (1336–1573). Changes also came to China around this time as the Ming Dynasty (1368–1655) took over from the Yuan, and political and economic relations between Japan and China were re-established.

Western Influence

Beginning in the sixteenth century, a new presence emerged in Asia, Europeans. The Portuguese, who had managed to sail around Africa into the India Ocean in the fifteenth century, had arrived in Japan in 1543. They established a port at a small southern Japanese fishing village called Nagasaki. From here the Portuguese established not only trading but religious relationships with the Japanese. So successful were the Portuguese missionaries that by 1600 there were approximately half a million Catholics in Japan.

This missionary success, however, came at a great price to the wealthy Buddhist monasteries that had great political influence at this time. The increasingly aggressive moves of the Portuguese also alarmed the power in the government itself. The elite in Japan recognized the conversions and conquests occurring under the Spanish in the Philippines, and were anxious to make sure it didn't happen in Japan. Under the famous warrior, statesman, general, and unifier, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), the Japanese launched an official and comprehensive assault on Christian and foreign influence in Japan. Under the policies of Tokugawa Iemitsu (r. 1623–1651), the anti-foreign campaign became much stronger. This continued the process of isolation with the outside world that culminated with the issuing of the edicts in the 1630s that effectively



sealed off Japan from outside influence. The only connection maintained with the outside world was the very restricted trade with China and the Netherlands through the port of Nagasaki. Only in the eighteenth century did these policies of isolation begin to be lifted. And strong contact with European countries would not again occur until the mid–nineteenth century.

Instructions

As you read about the complex relations of Japan with its continental neighbors and European traders, come to some conclusions as to the causes and consequences of Japan’s oscillating policies of isolation and influence. Then complete the graphic organizer below with notes from the reading.



Reading Analysis

Use the graphic organizer below to take notes as you read.

Economic Relations	
Cultural Relations	
Imperial policies	Policies of the Shogunate



