

Japan and the West 日米関係

Japan before 1853

In 1853, Japan had been a virtually isolated country for some 250 years. Before this closing of her doors, Japan had welcomed foreigners. In fact, Japan had a long history of “borrowing” from other cultures, most especially from China, her neighbor to the west. With the act of 1634, however, the Tokugawa shoguns, fearing that foreign commerce and missionary activity would weaken their power, closed Japan’s doors to foreigners – with the exception of a few Dutch and Chinese merchants who were allowed to enter a single port.

During these 250 years, The Tokugawa shogunate ruled Japan from Edo (Tokyo). The shoguns employed daimyos (lords), to administer their estates. In turn, daimyos used samurai to fight their local wars. The emperor of Japan, considered divine, had little real political power and was confined to his elegant palace in Kyoto. The vast majority of the Japanese people were peasants, who worked the land – planting and harvesting rice. This way of life had existed for centuries without any major foreign influence.

Letter from U.S. President Fillmore to the Japanese Emperor in 1853:

The American people have now become quite numerous; our business dealings are very extensive; and we think that if your Imperial Majesty were to change the ancient laws allowing free trade between the two countries it would be beneficial to both.

Our steamships, in crossing the great ocean, burn a great deal of coal, and it is not convenient to bring it all the way from America. We wish that our steamships and other vessels should be allowed to stop in Japan and supply themselves with coal, provisions (food), and water. We will pay for them, in money, or anything else your Imperial Majesty’s subjects prefer.

U.S. President

-Millard Fillmore,

What does the U.S. President want from Japan?



Matthew Perry’s message to the Japanese

President Fillmore sent Matthew Perry, an admiral in the U.S. Navy to Japan to deliver his message in 1853. The following is an excerpt from his statement:

As the United States and Japan are becoming every day nearer to each other, the President desires to live in peace and friendship with your Imperial Majesty, but no friendship can long exist, unless Japan stops acting towards America as if they were her enemies. The United States hopes that the Japanese government will see the necessity of avoiding unfriendly collision between the two nations by responding in favor of the propositions (offers) of friendship, which are now made in all sincerity.

Many of our large ships of war destined to visit Japan have not yet arrived in these seas, though they are hourly expected. I have brought smaller ships to prove my friendly intentions. Should it become necessary, I will return to Tokyo in the coming spring with a much larger force.

-Commodore Matthew Perry to His Imperial Majesty of Japan, July 1853

What is this letter saying? How is the message from Mathew Perry different from the message sent by the U.S. President?

Watch the video clip and answer the questions:

What resources were of interest to the Americans?

How did the Japanese react to Perry's arrival?

What should Japan do?

It is 1853. You are the Shogun (political leader) of Japan. Admiral Matthew Perry of the United States has recently visited your country, asking that Japan open up trade. When he left that he said that he would return to receive the answer. You and your advisors have been discussing the situation.

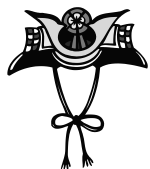
Advisor 1: "They will end up swallowing Japan"

"The Barbarians have been watching our country with greedy eyes for years. We cannot be frightened now by their lying tricks and give them what they ask for. At first, they will give us new technology, machinery, and other strange objects. These things will fool ignorant people. Controlling trade is their main goal. Therefore, they will try bit by bit to make our country poor. After that, they will treat us however they want to. They will insult us and will end up swallowing Japan. Japan will become a victim just like China. If we do not drive the barbarians away now, we shall never have another opportunity."

Advisor 2: "Let us learn their tactics"

"Suppose we get into an argument with the foreigners. We shall then have an enemy to fight who will not be easily handled. We are not the equals of the foreigners in the area of industrialism. Let us trade with the foreign countries and learn their skills and tactics. When we have strengthened our nation, it will not be too late to declare war then."

You are the Shogun of Japan. Write your decision on opening trade with the United States in the memo below. Your memo must include the reasons for your decision.



MEMO FROM THE SHOGUN

To: Japanese Nobles
From: The Most Honorable Shogun
Subject: Opening Trade Relations with the United States

Treaty of Kanagawa – United States and Japan, March 31, 1854

Article I – There shall be a permanent peace... and a sincere friendship between the United States and Japan.
Article II – The ports of Shinoda, Idzu, and Hakodadi are to be used by American ships, where they will be supplied with wood, water, supplies, coal, and other necessities.
Article III – Whenever ships of the United States are wrecked on the coast of Japan, Japanese ships will assist them... whatever articles belonging to the ship wrecked found must be returned.
Article IV – Those shipwrecked persons and other citizens of the United States shall be free as in other countries and not subject to Japanese laws (extraterritoriality).
Article IX - It is agreed that if at any future day the government of Japan shall grant to any other nation privileges and advantages which are not granted to the United States; that these same privileges and advantages shall be granted to the United States.

Who do you think benefited from the Treaty of Kanagawa? Why?



You are the all mighty Japanese Shogun and have heard that there are foreigners who want to trade with Japan. Even though you are an isolated nation, you are aware of what is happening in the outside world.

Why might you want to trade with foreigners?

Why might you NOT want to trade with foreigners?

Give reasons for each

