**Japan’s Adaptability**

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            The island across from China has adopted foreign ideas and political systems to develop into one of the most influential and economically powerful countries, known as Japan. Japan started in 11,000 BCE, when a group of nomads, mostly hunters and gatherers, took refuge on the main island of Japan. The nomads progressed slowly. After all, they could not stay in one place because they lacked the knowledge of farming. However, in 300 BCE, the first nomadic farmers arrived in Japan, bringing with them the first steps of civilization. The inhabitants could now live in permanent villages and focus on technological advancements. The nomads were now equipped with bronze tools and a sense of governance based on their religion, Shinto, the way of the gods. Throughout its history, Japan has harnessed its perception of foreign nations as a catalyst for internal transformation and national growth. Japan used the ideas from China to advance towards a civilized state. European weapons inspired Japan to advance in warfare tactics. The rapid advancement of the West forced Japan to incorporate its customs.

            Japan used the ideas from China to advance towards a civilized state. The earliest and most formative foreign influence on Japan came from China. During the Nara period, Japanese envoys studied the institutions of the Tang Dynasty and brought back innovations that reshaped Japan’s government, religion, and societal norms. From these innovations, Japan implemented the ritsuryō legal code, which was modeled after Chinese bureaucracy and established centralized imperial authority.

Confucian principles, borrowed from the Chinese, provided ideological support for hierarchical governance. The principles, in short, argued that submission to imperial rule is required for social harmony.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, Buddhism, introduced through Korean intermediaries in the 6th century, became a state-endorsed religion. Buddhism went far beyond Japan’s previous religion in rationalizing the purpose of life. In short, Buddhism theorizes that “all living beings, animals as well as men, are doomed to successive lives in an endless and hateful cycle of existence. The state in which any being is reborn…depends on past deeds and the intention behind them (karma)…however, this is really a secondary consideration because, for the Buddhist…to live is to suffer. Therefore the great aim if the believer is to break the cycle of rebirth and so be free from suffering forever” (Caiger 41).

Prince Shōtoku championed Buddhist ethics and Chinese administrative structure to unify the court and promote social discipline. The deep desire for a centralized imperial state controlled by a single emperor, law, and appointed officials forced Japa into reform. The most significant reform to bring Japan closer to this goal was the Taika Reforms of 645 CE, which expanded these foreign ideas by reorganizing land ownership and government ranks, mirroring the Tang dynasty’s systems of merit and law. “The creation by the Japanese of a unified state under an emperor seryed by bureaucrats was just such an undertaking — the result of conscious borrowing of Chinese ideas and practices by the court of Yamato” (Caiger 37).

While these reforms helped Japan evolve from clan-based rule to centralized governance, they also initiated a process of ideological narrowing. Buddhism’s rise, for example, pushed aside native Shinto practices, and state control over temples became a mechanism for consolidating political power. Thus, Chinese models brought civilization but also centralized control over religious and cultural life.

European weapons inspired Japan to advance in warfare tactics. Foreign influence intensified in the 16th century with the arrival of the first European traders, who introduced firearms. The addition of firearms accelerated the conquering of parts of Japan that had yet to come under imperial rule. Initially unfamiliar with gunpowder weaponry, Japanese warlords quickly recognized its tactical value. They began replicating and improving upon these firearms, integrating them into military strategies that would redefine samurai warfare.

One such man to adapt to the addition of firearms was Oda Nobunaga. The Battle of Nagashino in 1575 demonstrates Nobunaga’s exceptional ability to adapt to changing warfare. His men used arquebuses, which were slow and required manual reloading, meaning they could not continuously fire. However, Oda Nobunaga addressed these issues by implementing a rotation system to break traditional cavalry charges, as this allowed his men to fire continuously. The rotation system allowed his men to overpower his enemy, the Takeda clan. The sheer force of domination Oda brought to his enemy showed Japan that its military could not cling to old ideals and traditions and must adapt to the West’s superior technology to maintain its political and military advantages.

However, this innovation came with implications. The mass production and deployment of firearms under centralized rule, especially under the later Tokugawa shogunate, contributed to a monopoly on violence. Warfare became tightly regulated by the state, and the samurai class transitioned from warriors to bureaucrats. This process is similar to the earlier Chinese-style centralization, demonstrating that Japan utilizes foreign innovations to reinforce its domestic authority.

The rapid advancement of the West forced Japan to incorporate its customs. Japan’s response to Western imperialism in the 19th century represents the most dramatic moment of adaptation. The arrival of Commodore Perry’s fleet in 1853 exposed Japan’s vulnerability. Matthew Perry came back to Japan in 1854 and was shown to see Japan’s form of wrestling, sumo wrestling, and was displeased. Perry, however, brought America’s latest technology, which delighted the Japanese official. However, this showed Japan that while Western nations industrialized and expanded globally, Japan remained technologically stagnant. Due to the lack of technological advancements, America was able to force Japan into a treaty without even needing to fire a shot. Japan was now nothing more than a subordinate of foreign governments. Decades of unjust crimes and insults towards the Japanese went unpunished, “these injustices—a rape unpunished or an assault excused” (Gordon 50).

As tension and inflation rose, the legitimacy of the Tokugawa rule began to decline. The bakufu’s chief councilor, Abe Masahiro, asked the current daimyo his opinions towards Perry’s fleet. Some domains that were anti-Tokugawa, such as Satsuma and Chōshū, recognized the need to modernize their country. The Tokugawa clan had no successor, and the current shogun, Iesada, was weak and dying; however, the clan still needed a successor to prove its claim to the ruling family. The family continued to accede to American treaties, but the other domains could no longer tolerate any more treaties.  Eventually, they overthrew the Tokugawa regime and led Japan into the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a revolutionary program of Western-inspired reforms.

The first significant change was the abolition of the daimyo domains, which had been Japan’s primary form of government for over 250 years. Rolls inside the imperial court were now based on merit and required examinations or a specific test instead of family ties or any other type of connection. The second significant change was the elimination of the status system. The Meiji government reduced the many samurai classes to now only two: shizoku, the upper samurai, and sotsu, the lower samurai. The Meiji Constitution, enacted in 1889, reformed the military from the ground up, and by the mid-1890s, Japan could effectively protect its own country and confidently engage in foreign conflicts. Next, Japan adopted a schooling system based on European and American models. Japan incorporated Western technology, education systems, and legal codes. Railroads, telegraphs, and schooling transformed the country.

Still, with Westernization came ideological suppression. Christianity remained somewhat controlled. The Meiji government revoked the bakufu’s anti-Christian laws because they believed that to form a country with economic and political power, its people must be educated. To circumvent this problem, they decided that there would be no protection for religious activity, thus controlling them with the fear of being protected by other religions. The rapid changes in Japan raised a question in their minds, “to what end are we making these changes? As we build railroads and adopt European-style construction, do we have a unique identity as Japanese people? If so, what is it” (Gordon 111)? A magazine called *The Japanese* asked this question, “What is today’s Japan? The old Japan has already collapsed, but the new Japan has not yet risen. What religion do we believe in? What moral and political principles do we favor? It is as if we are wandering in confusion through a deep fog, unable to find our way” (Gordon 112). To handle this fear of an unknown future, the Meiji government “defined and limited the cultural as well as social and political terms of debate” (Gordon 113)

Throughout its history, Japan has drawn on foreign cultural, religious, and political models to strengthen its institutions, consolidate authority, and assert its global status. This was possible because “isolation from the Asian continent, which gave the Japanese security from attacks by foreign peoples, provided the chance for a distinctive civilization to evolve in Japan. It also had the effect of making the Japanese more self-conscious in their dealings with foreign cultures, more willing to borrow deliberately when the need became apparent” (Caiger 37). Chinese civilization provided bureaucratic and religious blueprints; European weaponry revolutionized military tactics; and Western modernity offered tools for industrialization and empire-building.

However, in every case, adaptation comes with a cost. Ideological control tightened, religious plurality narrowed, and disagreement was often suppressed. Japan’s rise was forged through calculated borrowing, but at the same time forced Japan to go against their previous traditions. Japan is a nation empowered by foreign ideas yet constantly redefining them to protect its own identity.

Works Cited

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2. Gordon, A. (2013). *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*

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1. This document is found in Nihon11i. Part II, pp. 129-33 or, in adapted form, in Tsunoda, Soun: es of the Japanese Tradition, pp. 50-53. (Caiger) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)