

Japanese government has taken many forms since the history of the islands was first written down. It has been everything from a direct monarchy, to a parliament -based system like that of Germany to today's representative democracy. But perhaps the most famous and culture-defining governments have been Japan's shogunates, military dictatorships that combined the decentralization of feudalism with the iron grip of a single ruler who wielded absolute authority over everyone in the country. All men were loyal to their lords, and all lords were loyal to the shogun, the supreme commander of the country's entire military leadership. It is during this period that we get the political institutions that have captured the Western imagination, emperors ruling in name only, all-powerful military leaders, the samurai, with their strict code of honor and loyalty to one's lord until death or suicide, the shadowy *ninja*, assassins who stalked and killed those others wanted dead, and of course, the rebellions and political intrigue that brought down entire systems of government in amazingly short periods of time.

Japan has had only three shogunates throughout its history, each of which has an impressively long duration, lasting through 10-15 shoguns apiece. Each shogunate was formed in response to different political situation, and thus governed Japan-and was deposed-in a different way.

The first shogunate to exist in Japan was the Kamakura Shogunate, which lasted from the 1100's to the 1300's. The defining feature of this shogunate was something not seen anywhere else in the world, a peaceful transition from a centralized government to a feudal system based on fiefs and lords without any loss of organization. The period does rise out of violence, however; Japan's first civil war, the Genpei war was fought between two families, the Taira clan, which, despite previous run-ins with Imperial and Fujiwara authority, were an incredibly powerful political force, and the Minamoto, who lent military assistance to the Fujiwara clan, the regents for the emperor. Trouble starts in the 1130's, when the emperor Go-Sanjo denies the Fujiwara a leadership position and instead establishes the *insei*,

an Imperial office to gather land and samurai directly for the Imperial household. When there's a succession crisis, the Taira and the Minamoto draw battle lines. Following rebellions, outright war results in the Minamoto wresting power away from the Taira and establishing a military dictatorship.

The first Kamakura shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo, was responsible for moving the center of power away from Heian, renaming Heian to Kyoto, and setting up shop in Kamakura, where he founded the *bakufu*, or “tent government”, ruled from the battlefield. Instead of following a tradition of direct Imperial authority, Yoritomo sets up a system of *shugo*, military governors of prefectures gifted to them with far more authority than their Imperial counterparts. He also appoints bailiffs from his samurai, who receive a payment for keeping order in a certain prefecture, as well as other deputies throughout the country. Following the death of Yoritomo, a permanent regency is established by the Houjou clan. Following the installment of Houjou no Tokimasa, his daughter Masako pulls the strings, ruling with and deposing shoguns who pose a threat to Houjou power and installing offices in Kyoto to police the Imperial family, following an unsuccessful Imperial bid to reclaim power.

In addition to redefining the political landscape, the Kamakura government also issued the *Gosebai Shikimoku*, Japan's first new law code since the introduction of the *Ritsu-Ryo* code centuries earlier. This new document contained rules regarding land disputes and the authority of feudal officials. This new military law code would remain in effect for the next 600 years. This new emphasis on martial discipline gives us fantastic historical epics like the *Heike Monogatari*, which chronicles the rise and fall of the Taira clan, as well as lifelike and detailed wooden sculptures, which were in high demand due to the explosion of Buddhism. During this period, we see the rise of Zen Buddhism and sects based off the dominant *Tendai* school of Buddhism. Of these sects, one of them, Nichiren, gained popularity, as it predicted that Japan's lack of adherence to the Lotus Sutra would result in a catastrophic invasion, which did come to pass.

The Mongol Invasions divide the Kamakura Shogunate in two. Following repeated refusals to swear fealty to the Mongols, the Japanese are invaded by the Mongols, and are saved by a typhoon. In the interim between the two invasions, the Japanese are mobilized the shogunate to defend themselves as a nation, and we see an early kind of nationalism. With the defeat of the second, much larger, Mongol fleet by dedicated samurai resistance, another typhoon and possible sabotage, there's a revival of traditional shinto practices and reverence for the emperor. This is part of what eventually does the shogunate in. The shogunate can't compensate for massive samurai debt, and there's no land to be awarded in a defensive war. In addition, the regency is plagued by nepotism, office stacking and fraud. The final regent, Tatatoki, was so grossly offensive and incompetent that he was deposed in 1333. Thus, the Kamakura shogunate collapses.

Following the collapse of the Kamakura shogunate, there's a brief interlude called the Kenmu Restoration, in which the Emperor Go-Daigo attempts to win back power with the help of Ashikaga Takauji, a figure who has betrayed the Kamakura shogunate to help him out. Takauji ends up betraying both sides twice, and his chief lieutenant questions the need for an Emperor. In the aftermath of the fighting, the Ashikaga shogunate rises to power. Takauji and his sons begin giving military governors land holdings, pushing Japan closer to feudalism and splitting it into enormous pieces. The Ashikaga shogunate also brokers a deal that ends the 2-court system, putting one emperor back on the throne, as well as reestablishing ties with China.

Arts flourish under the Ashikaga shogunate, notably *No* drama, endorsed by the shogun Yoshimitsu, as well as the building of massive new temples like the *Kinkakuji* in Kyoto. Unfortunatley, the period is politically unstable, the Ashikaga shogun Yoshinori is assisinated by a vassal in what would come to be known as the Kakitsu affair, and the system starts to fall apart. A succession crisis between a shogun's son and brother erupts into the Onin war, which destroys huge parts of Kyoto.

While displaced artisans spread throughout Japan and sow knowledge of craftsmanship techniques, the Home Islands are quickly carved up into provinces owned by 20 or so families. This is the beginning of the Sengoku Period, a time of near perpetual civil war that will last until 1603.

Following the unification of Japan by Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu founded the last, and most famous, shogunate, which bears his name today. The Tokugawa shogunate saw Japan evolve from a feudal society to a modern urban one. However, it also locked Japan off from the outside world, prohibiting almost all trade. This isolation allowed Japanese culture to flourish uninfluenced by the Western world, however, it also caused Japan to fall behind technologically. This urbanization, combined with a view that Japan was falling behind the Western powers, set the stage for the Meiji restoration that ended the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868.

Following a succession crisis, Ieyasu puts the Toyotomi threat to his power out of the way for good by destroying their base in Osaka and forcing Toyotomi Hideyori to commit seppuku. Shortly before his death, Ieyasu grabs Ryukyu for Japan, and enforces the first of three policies that come to define the period, *Hei no Bunri*, or forced class division. While the policy had begun before the Tokugawa Shogunate began, Ieyasu enforces it. Samurai are no longer allowed to live among the locals. All lords must have only one castle, and keep all their samurai there to be watched over. This cements class division, but also leads to the development of cities surrounding important castles. Japan experiences the world's only non-industrial urban boom at this time, and population skyrockets. The other two key policies were enacted by Ieyasu's grandson, Tokugawa Iemitsu. The first was a policy known as *sankin koutai*, and it mandated that daimyo live in Edo every other year, build mansions for their wives and children as hostages and drain their wallets on massive bands of retainers. As the daimyo get drawn more under the thumb of the shogun, challenges to the class and government structure become harder and harder. The final policy, *sakoku*, locked Japan from any outside influence,

and prohibited Japanese from leaving on pain of death. Europeans were not allowed into the country past an artificial island in Nagasaki, and all people coming to Japan had to be affiliated with the Dutch East India Company.

These policies result in a complete transformation of Japanese society. Conscribed peasant labor becomes obsolete, and is replaced by standard wage labor. Manufacturing moves into massive workshops, and huge markets open up, some of which continue to exist today. Fixed pricing, the beginnings of consumer credit, and free gifts for valued customers became the norm. Merchants also begin to organize on groups called *kabunakama*, early trade unions that coordinated pricing, location and shared activities. Housing becomes commodified, with 80% of castle town residents living in rented space. Landlords become an organized economic group and frontage is taxed for businesses on main streets. Citizens are organized into self-policing groups and there's almost no need for a police force. The population is regularly documented and recorded, and movement between different parts of the country becomes impractical, and in some cases unnecessary.

As sex is also commodified, pleasure quarters, such as Yoshiwara in Edo, become centers of Japanese theater, food, art and prostitution. Prostitutes set the standard for Japanese female fashion, and the pleasure quarters helped along an explosion of Japanese art, from prints, to writing to kabuki, all aimed at the masses, not aristocratic society. Street gangs and organized crime flourish and feed Japan's black market gambling dens.

Following this period of cultural flourishing known as the Genroku Period, reforms are put in place to halt the advancement of predatory capitalism and reconcile it with the old feudal structure. As Japan begins to stagnate near the end of the Tokugawa period, the idea of *kokugaku*, national study, becomes popular. By the time Japan accepts the opening of its country, there's already a very strong sense of Japanese nationalism.

Japan's three shogunates were all markedly different from each other, but there are some general patterns that emerge. The shogunates become less military-oriented as time goes on, from the Kamakura shogunate's seizure of power from a unified Japanese state to the Ashikaga shogunate's attempt to simply keep order to the Tokugawa shogunate's reunification and pacification of the country. We also see this in the way samurai were seen by society; there's a gradual transition from a warrior who simply fights to a cultured bureaucrat who make a cultured living by the pen. The problem of keeping unity becomes less and less of an issue, but there grows the problem of efficiently allocating resources as population grows. The Tokugawa shogunate does a more efficient job at this, simply because it cements people into certain living arrangements and occupations by law. However, this allows the shogunate to ossify, and problems that would have ordinarily be noticed, solved, or even provoked a revolution or change in government went unnoticed or were not addressed. The stability afforded by each shogunate did universally produce a flowering of the arts and culture, however, it was only the last shogunate that managed to make the leap from an unstable wartime government that derived strength through its vassals to a civil organized government that derived power through its structure. That's why the changes to society brought by the Tokugawa shogunate, from the elevation of merchants to the rapid urbanization of the country, had such a strong and permanent impact on Japanese society.