

Medieval Japan: An Introductory Essay

by Ethan Segal, Michigan State University

Introduction

Medieval Japan may call to mind honorable sword-wielding samurai and stealthy ninja assassins. These figures, often seen in popular movies and games about pre-modern Japan, are only loosely based on reality. In fact, many different types of people helped shape the medieval period. Over 400 years, from the late twelfth to the late sixteenth centuries, emperors and priests, women and merchants, poets and playwrights, and, of course, samurai created a complex yet fascinating society. Samurai governments administered the country in tandem with the older imperial government. Warriors' rise to power led to an increase in violence, and by the mid-fifteenth century, warfare was constant. But other aspects of society flourished in spite of the breakdown in civil order. Buddhism enjoyed the strong support of both samurai and commoners. Such new cultural traditions as the tea ceremony became popular. The arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century forced the Japanese to change their view of the world.

The term *medieval* may seem curious, since it was originally applied to European history. It described a “middle” period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the start of the Renaissance. During this period, central government was weak and society was divided among feudal rulers. Sixteenth-century Japan was divided among warlords known as *daimyō*, and Europeans who visited Japan at that time felt it resembled medieval Europe. Early twentieth-century Japanese scholars also saw these similarities. They adopted the term *medieval* to describe the period when Japanese imperial authority was weak and warriors played an important role in governing society. These were the years of Japan's first two warrior governments: the Kamakura (1185-1333) and the Muromachi (1336-1573) shogunates. What were those warriors like? What roles did they play in Japanese history? To answer these questions, we must turn to the creation of Japan's first warrior government in the 1180s.

The Genpei War

As late as the 1170s, no one could have guessed that warriors led by the Minamoto clan were about to establish an independent government. Most warriors served as middle-level officials in the provinces, working as managers on government-owned public lands or on private estates (*shōen*). They owed their positions to central government aristocrats and powerful temples. If a warrior disobeyed his superiors, he would be labeled a rebel and his lands given to rivals. Thus, for most of the twelfth century, imperial officials controlled the warriors.

©2008 Program for Teaching East Asia, University of Colorado. Permission is given to reproduce this essay for classroom use only. Other reproduction is prohibited without written permission from the Program for Teaching East Asia.

The two greatest warrior clans of the time were the Taira (also known as the Heike) and the Minamoto (a.k.a. Genji). Both served members of the imperial family and the Fujiwara family of regents. In the 1150s, the Taira were on the winning side in a pair of disputes that helped them rise to positions of power. The Taira leader, Kiyomori, became Grand Minister and married his daughter to a future emperor. In contrast, the Minamoto were on the losing side in both conflicts. As a result, the clan's adult male leaders were killed and the boys sent into exile.

By 1179, Kiyomori had made himself a virtual dictator. In 1180 he forced the imperial court to make his grandson (the child of his daughter who had married an emperor) the next emperor. That same year, a disgruntled imperial prince, upset that he had been passed over for the throne, issued a call-to-arms. Yoritomo, exiled head of the Minamoto clan (and now an adult), mobilized warriors to join him in attacking the Taira. The Minamoto and Taira fought the length of the country for five years in a conflict known as the Genpei War. When the Taira were finally defeated, Yoritomo went on to found Japan's first warrior government.

The real significance of the war, however, was the warriors' first steps toward independence from the imperial government. Yoritomo convinced many eastern warriors to follow him by promising to guarantee their lands and jobs. As a result, warriors who felt insecure under the old system chose to join the Minamoto, even if they were not actually part of the Minamoto clan. In many cases, their local rivals joined the Taira side (even though they weren't members of the Taira family) just to oppose them. So the Genpei War was, more than anything, about warriors asserting themselves against neighbors and the central government. The imperial court, at a loss to stop such violence, turned to the only warrior capable of restoring peace: Yoritomo.

The Kamakura Bakufu

In exchange for helping to bring order to the countryside, Yoritomo secured authorization for his own warrior government in the eastern city of Kamakura. His government is known as the Kamakura *bakufu* or shogunate. Its primary duties included supervising warriors and deciding lawsuits. Yoritomo rewarded loyal warriors by appointing them as *jitō* (military land stewards) on private estates. These *jitō* served as police and tax collectors. While *jitō* worked on individual estates, Yoritomo later began appointing other warriors as *shugo* (military governors) over entire provinces. *Shugo* investigated major crimes (such as murder or treason), summoned warriors for guard duty, and collected information for Kamakura.

Yoritomo himself held several titles, including shogun. Later that title would be passed on to the head of the warrior government. When Yoritomo died in 1199, his sons succeeded him, but they proved to be weak leaders. Real power was maintained by the family of Yoritomo's wife, Hōjō Masako. Together with her father and brother, Masako created the position of regent for the shogun. Male members of the Hōjō family served as regents from 1203 until 1333. Masako herself was never regent, but she was a very influential person with much authority in Kamakura.

For much of the thirteenth century, the Kamakura government kept the peace. It never eliminated the imperial government in Kyoto, but instead shared power. Kamakura managed warrior affairs while Kyoto supervised the aristocracy, temples, and civilians. The *bakufu* also created an advanced legal system. Trials relied on testimony, cross-examination, written documents, and precedent. Outcomes could be appealed. Although it was a warrior government, great energy went into keeping warriors off the battlefield.

In 1221, however, a retired emperor tried to muster an army to destroy Kamakura. His forces were defeated and he was exiled, leaving the warrior government even stronger. Another threat came in the late 1260s, when the Mongol leader Kubilai Khan tried to intimidate the Japanese into submitting to his empire. Japan's warriors rejected Kubilai's diplomatic efforts, so Mongol-led armies attempted to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. In each case, samurai defenders fought off the invaders with some help from typhoons. Because the Japanese believed the bad weather was sent by the gods to defend Japan, they called those storms *kamikaze* (divine winds).

Samurai of the Kamakura Period

Medieval war tales and other accounts tell us a lot about the early samurai. Leading warriors were usually mounted archers. Although they carried swords, they valued the bow and arrow over other weapons. These samurai were quite independent. They supplied their own weapons, armor, provisions, and attendants. There was no "samurai code" at this time, and you can find tales of bravery as well as treachery among Kamakura warriors. Many fought in order to earn fame and rewards. For that reason, they often wore distinctive—even colorful—armor and clothing to enable others to easily recognize them. Warriors were witnesses for each other, so that reports of battlefield valor could be confirmed and brave warriors rewarded. For example, the personal account of Takezaki Suenaga, a samurai who fought against the Mongols, makes no mention of fighting to defend Japan. Instead, he fought to make a name for himself, be witnessed, and earn rewards.

Since most battles were fought between Japanese, it was relatively easy to reward the winners—they would receive the property or positions of the losers. But the Mongol invasions proved much more challenging. Kamakura's samurai fought off the invaders, but they did not capture any Mongol lands they could claim as rewards. Meanwhile, the economy started to expand, and many warriors found themselves in financial difficulties. Some had to use their lands as collateral to borrow money. If they failed to repay loans, they had to forfeit their property. At the same time, the Hōjō family took advantage of the invasion crisis to further solidify its own hold on government, excluding members of other warrior families from top positions. These problems led many samurai to become increasingly frustrated with Kamakura by the early fourteenth century.

New Directions in Buddhism

Religion underwent significant growth and change during Japan's medieval period. The major Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines controlled estates in the provinces. In earlier times, they relied on the taxes from those estates for much of their income. Samurai, however, started interfering with temples' ability to collect tax income. As estate taxes became increasingly

unreliable, religious houses needed to find additional sources of income. Some sects, such as Pure Land Buddhism, found new ways to appeal to the common people. Others, such as Zen, gained popularity among the warriors.

Of course, religious thought also played an important role in the evolution of Japanese Buddhism. Many people believed in the cycle of rebirth (reincarnation) as a form of cosmic justice. Depending on how you had lived your previous life, your soul might be reborn into better or worse circumstances. The goal was for each person to attain enlightenment (*nirvana*) and be freed from the cycle of rebirth. However, another influential idea was that Japan had entered *mappō*, the final days of the law. *Mappō* was a degenerate age in which the teachings of the historical Buddha were so distant that people were no longer able to fully comprehend them. Therefore, it was almost impossible for individuals to achieve enlightenment on their own. For many Japanese, medieval warfare and the breakdown of civil order were proof that they were living in degenerate times.

One response was Pure Land Buddhism. Pure Land came from the teachings of a religious reformer named Hōnen. Unlike the Buddhist establishment, Hōnen saw little value to study in the age of *mappō*. He taught his followers to place complete faith in the Buddha Amida. Amida had vowed to save others before achieving enlightenment. Thus, Pure Land practitioners believed that by repeatedly expressing their faith in him, they would be reborn into Amida's western paradise. Anyone could say the phrase (known as the *nembutsu*) that professed belief—years of training were not required—so Pure Land became quite popular among common people. Shinran, one of Hōnen's students, took this logic a step further. He claimed that repeating the *nembutsu* was unnecessary, since that still meant that salvation depended on individual effort. True faith in Amida's mercy was the only hope for mankind. Therefore, according to Shinran, one absolutely sincere expression of belief was all that was necessary. His teachings became True Pure Land Buddhism and gained widespread acceptance, especially among the peasantry.

Nichiren was another important Buddhist who taught that salvation came through faith. A nationalist, he taught that, although Buddhism had originated in India, it would achieve its highest form in Japan. He valued the Lotus Sutra above all other Buddhist scriptures. Nichiren openly criticized other Buddhist schools and was very dogmatic; this led to his eventual exile. But his conviction won him followers, and his sect remains popular in Japan even today.

Zen Buddhism also won acceptance in Japan during the medieval period. It was based on Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, and the great Japanese Zen priests Eisai and Dōgen both trained in China. The faith they brought back to Japan promoted meditation (*zazen*) and the contemplation of questions with no logical answers (*kōan*) as paths to enlightenment. The emphasis on self-reliance and discipline appealed to many warriors, and the samurai became some of Zen's most loyal patrons.

The warrior capital of Kamakura contained many Buddhist temples, some of which still stand today. A major shrine, dedicated to the Shintō war deity, was built at the heart of the city. Numerous Zen temples were constructed during the thirteenth century. Women were just as involved as men, and one famous temple, Tōkeiji, became a site of refuge for women seeking divorces. The proliferation of temples reflected sincere religious devotion, but the dedication in

1252 of a bronze Buddha figure over 40 feet high was surely also intended to rival the great Buddha at Tōdaiji Temple in Nara. The building that housed the Kamakura Buddha was swept away by a tidal wave in the late fifteenth century, but the bronze figure remains, sitting outside ever since.

Literature and the Arts

Poetry remained the most important literary form. Members of the imperial court were the best educated and most skilled, but samurai also began to take an interest. The third shogun, Sanetomo, was considered a very skillful poet. His teacher, the courtier Fujiwara Teika, compiled one of Japan's greatest imperial poetry collections, the *Shinkokinshū*. Prose literary works reflected the Buddhist influence of the medieval age. *The Tale of the Heike* was the most popular. It described the Genpei War and the Taira clan's downfall. Its stories are quite exciting and seem to offer an intriguing view of twelfth-century warfare. But the tale cannot be read as an accurate account of the war. Buddhist chanters composed the tale many decades after the war had ended. They sang it as they played lutes to illustrate Buddhist themes of impermanence and show how the mighty will fall. Similar themes can be found in Kamo no Chōmei's philosophical essay, "An Account of My Hut." Few works by women have survived. A notable exception is the memoir of Lady Nijō, a court attendant. Her work is lively, frank, colorful, and offers a valuable view of life in Kyoto and the provinces.

Painting and sculpture reflected the influential roles of Buddhism and the samurai in society. Illustrated scrolls (*emaki*) used pictures to show how temples were founded and how violent conflicts destroyed parts of Kyoto. Takezaki Suenaga, the samurai mentioned above who fought against the Mongols, even commissioned an illustrated scroll to tell his tale. Another important art form was *raigō*, paintings that showed Amida welcoming people who had just died to his western paradise. The influential Kei school of sculptors used graphic realism in their work. Their famous guardians at Tōdaiji look quite intimidating, even hyper-masculine, with detailed bulging muscles, fierce expressions, and crystals set in the eyes to make them look real.

Kamakura's Demise and the Muromachi Bakufu

In 1331, Emperor GoDaigo tried to capitalize on warrior frustrations by plotting to destroy Kamakura. He was exiled to a distant island, but his supporters fought on. When one of Kamakura's leading generals, Ashikaga Takauji, decided to join his forces, the fate of the *bakufu* was sealed. GoDaigo's army destroyed Kamakura in 1333, and the emperor escaped from exile to lead a new government. GoDaigo was a clever, well-educated man who designed innovative new policies, such as taxing breweries and regulating the acquisition of estates. But since his goal was to restore imperial rule, he gave the most important posts in government to his sons and members of the aristocracy. This left many warriors, including Ashikaga Takauji, upset and angry. Takauji rebelled, and by 1336 his army had taken the capital and forced GoDaigo to flee.

Takauji went on to found the second major warrior government, which lasted from 1336 to 1573. It is known as the Muromachi *bakufu* (or Muromachi shogunate) because its headquarters were in the Muromachi district of Kyoto. It is also sometimes called the Ashikaga shogunate because the shoguns were members of the Ashikaga family. On the one hand, the samurai had more power than in the Kamakura period. That was in part because Emperor

GoDaigo had merged military and civilian posts. There was no longer a civilian governor who might serve as a check on the *shugo*. On the other hand, Takauji's government was weaker than its predecessor. Although Takauji chose a new emperor to serve under his control, GoDaigo set up a government-in-exile known as the Southern Court that provided legitimacy to anti-*bakufu* armies. If a powerful samurai felt mistreated by the Ashikaga, he and his followers might declare themselves loyal to the Southern Court and rebel. This period of frequent fighting lasted until 1392, when the third Ashikaga Shogun, Yoshimitsu, reunified the two imperial courts.

The Muromachi *bakufu* was never as stable as Kamakura had been. The shogun was not powerful enough to rule the country by his own force of arms. Eastern Japan and the island of Kyushu were both semi-autonomous. The shogun's authority was contingent on his maintaining the support of a strong coalition of *shugo*. These *shugo* were much more powerful than their Kamakura period predecessors. Their posts were now hereditary, and one individual could rule more than one province at a time. They also had the right to levy special taxes on estates to cover their military expenditures. Three of the most powerful *shugo* families—the Hosokawa, Hatakeyama, and Shiba—alternated in serving as deputy shogun (*kanrei*), a position designed to help mediate between the shogun and his *shugo*. Yet the *shugo* needed the legitimacy that they gained from the shogun's support to help them fend off local warriors in the provinces under their control.

The Ashikaga Shoguns

Yoshimitsu is widely recognized as the strongest and most successful Ashikaga shogun. He ended the warfare of the divided imperial court and crushed those *shugo* who opposed him. He reopened diplomatic relations and official trade with China. Yoshimitsu was an accomplished poet and a great sponsor of the arts. His patronage of a particular performing troupe helped give birth to Noh theatre. He also is credited with the Golden Pavilion, one of Japan's most famous medieval buildings. Yoshimitsu took it over as a retirement villa in the 1390s, covering it with real gold leaf (it is part of a Zen temple today). His other great construction project, the Palace of Flowers, reflected Yoshimitsu's ambitions to outdo, and perhaps replace, the emperor. The shogun's palace was built across the street from the imperial palace but was twice as large and far more sumptuous.

Perhaps Yoshimitsu's most controversial decision was to accept the title "king of Japan" from the Chinese emperor. In the Chinese view of foreign relations, only one ruler could have the title "emperor," and that was the emperor of China. Other rulers had lesser titles, such as king. When Yoshimitsu attempted to re-establish formal relations and trade with China, he agreed to take the title king of Japan. Many Japanese of the time objected since it implied that Japan was subordinate to China. Yoshimitsu's motives are not entirely clear. Some suggest that he did this in order to bolster his legitimacy at home. Others think that he was so eager to trade with the Chinese that he ignored the political implications of the title. Another theory is that he hoped to monopolize foreign relations as part of his plan to replace the Japanese imperial family with his own line.

Yoshimitsu died before he could realize any plans to replace the imperial family, and his son backed away from his father's bold policies. But shogunal authority remained strong until

1441, when the sixth shogun, Yoshinori, was assassinated. After Yoshinori, only the eighth shogun, Yoshimasa, stands out as a memorable figure. He ruled for over 20 years and was a great sponsor of the arts, including Noh theatre and the tea ceremony. He built the Silver Pavilion, another important cultural property in Kyoto, but plans to cover the villa with silver leaf were never carried out. Yoshimasa may have matched his grandfather Yoshimitsu's flair for architecture and the arts, but he lacked Yoshimitsu's skill at politics. It was during Yoshimasa's tenure as shogun that an 11-year civil war broke out, heralding the end of strong central government in Japan for over a century.

Muromachi Arts and Culture

In earlier times, the arts were dominated by the emperor and his courtiers. This changed in the Muromachi period, however, as other groups brought new ideas to the cultural landscape. Many samurai, now living in Kyoto, developed a taste for the arts. Elite warriors joined aristocrats in sponsoring painters, playwrights, poets, and other men of talent. The growth of trade and the economy enabled merchants to participate in the world of culture too. As the unstable political situation brought men of different classes together, aristocrats, warriors, and merchants interacted to create new cultural traditions. Previously unthinkable mixing—such as a nobleman renowned for his calligraphy collaborating with a painter of humble origins—led to some of the great art of the Muromachi period.

Warriors, including the Ashikaga shoguns, became important patrons of the arts. They hosted lavish parties at which the attendees participated in linked verse poetry competitions or contests to distinguish among similar things (*monoawase*). Tea was also quite popular. Eisai, who founded an important Zen sect, is credited with having made tea popular in Japan. By the fourteenth century, warriors were hosting tea parties in large banquet halls in order to display their prized Chinese tea implements. Merchants responded by favoring native Japanese wares. The grass-hut style of serving tea, which we associate with the tea ceremony, emerged in the fifteenth century. It is attributed to Murata Shukō, who may have served tea for Ashikaga Yoshimasa. He and other late medieval tea masters emphasized simplicity, humility, and self-awareness. Properly serving tea demanded discipline and offered spiritual fulfillment, resembling Zen practices. People began to speak of a Way of Tea. The most famous master, Sen no Rikyū, came from a merchant family but taught tea to the great warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Rikyū served tea in a small, rustic hut. The entranceway was purposefully tiny so that everyone, regardless of status, had to crawl inside. All participants were required to prepare and serve the tea. Rikyū's student, however, saw things differently. Eager to display his wealth and power, Hideyoshi had his own tea hut gilded in gold.

Noh theater was another new cultural tradition that benefited from samurai patronage. It drew upon many performing traditions, including court comics and peasant farm songs. In the late fourteenth century, Kan'ami's troupe attracted the notice of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. Kan'ami's son, Ze'ami, became one of Noh's most important playwrights. Noh performances incorporate spoken dialogue, dancing, and music. Few props are used. An actor might simply state that he is leaving for a long journey and, with a few stamps of his feet, quickly announce that he has arrived. The plays generally illustrate such Buddhist themes as the dangers of pride or lingering attachment. The main character might be a once-beautiful old woman who cannot

forget her youth, or the ghost of a warrior who cannot let go of his military glory. Other plays centered on Buddhist priests overcoming demons. Often several plays were performed over the course of a full day, with short comic pieces called *kyōgen* staged between the major Noh plays.

The Medieval Japanese Economy

The Japanese enjoyed a growing economy during the medieval period. Markets began to develop around the country. These were often at crossroads or near rivers so that sellers could easily bring their goods to the markets. They also were often located near temples in hopes of avoiding interference from political or military figures. In the Kamakura period, markets met infrequently. For example, they might be opened only on days ending in fours (i.e., the 4th, 14th, and 24th of the month) or another number. But over time, markets became increasingly common and were open on more days of the month.

Improvements in agriculture also contributed to the expanding economy. New strains of rice better resisted drought and disease. Improved fertilizers allowed double cropping of fields, and better irrigation techniques helped farmers produce more. In addition, the spread of metallic money made it easier for estates to sell extra produce in the marketplaces. Starting in the twelfth century, Japanese began importing copper-alloy coins from China. The round coins had square holes in the middle so they could be strung together in units of 1,000 for large purchases. Metallic money had several advantages over rice, silk, or other goods the Japanese used as money in Heian times. Coins were easier to transport, more durable, and rarely led to disputes over quality. By the Muromachi period, most urban residents used coins. Even many rural estates paid their taxes in cash.

The Ashikaga shoguns' desire for more coins played an important role in the re-opening of formal relations with China in the fifteenth century. The Muromachi *bakufu*, and later several major temples and *daimyō*, sent merchant boats to China in hopes of obtaining copper coins. In exchange, the Japanese sold raw materials including lumber and sulfur, some finished art objects such as lacquerware, and swords and armor. Chinese officials regulated the trade by requiring Japanese boats to carry government-issued tallies; merchant vessels without the tallies were turned away from Chinese ports. On the whole, merchants did well during the medieval period. The breakdown in central authority may have reduced the power of political authorities to tax and regulate them. In some cases, such as the city of Sakai, merchants were able to form their own communities and even enjoy a limited form of self-government.

Women's Status in Medieval Japan

Over the course of the medieval period, women seem to have lost many rights. In ancient times, women served as rulers. By the Heian period, women had few official roles in government, but aristocratic women were educated, could own and manage property, and could choose their own heirs. Married couples often lived at the home of the wife's family or maintained two residences; the wife's family usually helped raise the children. Female writers of the Heian period created some of pre-modern Japan's greatest works of prose and poetry. But conditions gradually began to change.

In the early Kamakura period, women of samurai families held *jitō* posts. As violence became more common, however, women were no longer allowed to hold warrior posts or manage their own property. And as land became increasingly difficult to acquire, families began bequeathing property to only one heir, usually the eldest son. Married women were expected to join the family of their husbands. Lady Nijō's memoir from the early fourteenth century is one of the last important literary works by a woman of the medieval period. Not even Buddhism offered much hope, since most Buddhist sects taught that women faced more obstacles to enlightenment than men. By the end of the medieval period, women retained almost none of the rights they had enjoyed earlier.

The Ōnin War and the Age of Warring States

From 1467 to 1477, rival coalitions of powerful samurai fought in a protracted conflict known as the Ōnin War. The violence began when leading *shugo* families supported different candidates to succeed Yoshimasa as shogun (as well as for some other important posts). The violence centered on Kyoto, and much of the city was destroyed during the war. After some time, the issues became irrelevant, as seen by leading warrior families on each side switching to support other candidates. Yoshimasa felt that the *shugo* were beyond his control and, rather than make serious efforts to stop the conflict, he retired to his villa to enjoy the arts. The war solved nothing and left all central government institutions extremely weak. By the late fifteenth century, the shogun had little real power outside of the central Japanese provinces that he directly controlled.

The last century of the Muromachi period, from the Ōnin War to 1573, is known as the Age of Warring States. During this time, provincial and regional warlords known as *daimyō* dominated Japan. Some *daimyō* families had formerly been *shugo*, others had been lieutenants or deputies, and some were truly self-made men who had risen through the ranks. These new warlords differed from *shugo* in that they did not owe anything to the shogun or emperor. During the Warring States, warlords could only claim authority over lands they could actually defend. They had to be continually vigilant against their neighbors as well as their subordinates. The age is sometimes characterized as *gekokujō*, which means the lower replacing the higher (or those of humble origins replacing their superiors). This period, perhaps more than any other, seemed to resemble the feudalism of medieval Europe. Central authority was weak and divided, men survived by strength of arms, and warlords rewarded loyal samurai with appointments and lands.

Europeans in Japan

Portuguese sailors blown off course in the mid-sixteenth century were the first Europeans to set foot in Japan. The Spanish soon followed, and eventually the Dutch and the British found their way to Japan too. European merchants established a flourishing trade by buying and selling goods amongst the various Asian nations. Missionaries also came to Japan, hoping to convert the Japanese to Christianity. They enjoyed some success in the southwestern island of Kyushu, where a few *daimyō* became Catholic and ordered those living in their domains to convert as well. The Europeans were strange curiosities to the Japanese, and paintings of them—known as

namban byōbu—show them as Japanese artists saw them, with balloon pants, high frill collars, long noses, and people of color attending them as slaves.

Christianity did not last in Japan. Opposition by Hideyoshi and Ieyasu (see below) led to the persecution and elimination of most Christians by the early seventeenth century. But the Europeans did affect Japanese society. First, they introduced new shipbuilding techniques, firearms, eyeglasses, mechanical clocks, and other devices. Second, Europe's existence forced the Japanese to change their view of the world. Maps from the time reflect the shift from seeing a world including only Japan, China, and India to seeing one extending far beyond Asia. Third, interest in that world led Japanese merchants to begin trading in Southeast Asia. Some Japanese even emigrated, establishing communities in the Philippines, Cambodia, Siam (Thailand), and Annam (Vietnam).

From Medieval to Early Modern Japan

By the second half of the fifteenth century, regional warlords were strong enough to begin competing to unify the country. The names of many such great warlords—Date Masamune, Takeda Shingen, and others—are remembered even today in historical dramas, movies, and more. They and their rivals sought to capture the city of Kyoto, where the emperor and the shogun resided. Although neither could wield much real power, both could provide legitimacy to a warlord seeking to rule the country.

Three warlords are recognized as having succeeded in unifying the country and bringing an end to the violence of the Warring States period. They are often referred to as the “three unifiers”—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Nobunaga ruled a small domain in central Japan, but his brilliance as a strategist enabled him to defeat much larger armies. He was the first warlord to successfully use firearms to win a battle. His innovations in castle development also led to the emergence of grand Japanese castles, with stone ramparts, *donjons*, and more. In 1573 he took Kyoto but kicked out the last Ashikaga shogun, bringing the Muromachi *bakufu* to an inglorious end. Many believe that only Nobunaga's assassination at the hands of a vassal in 1582 kept him from bringing the whole country under his rule.

Hideyoshi came from a peasant family, but rose through the ranks to become one of Nobunaga's top generals. He avenged his lord's death and finished the job of unifying the country. However, Hideyoshi did not succeed through force alone. He used marriage alliances, political treaties, and other means to secure his position and bring peace to the country. Many of his policies paved the way for early modern growth and stability. For example, he carried out new land surveys so that proper rates of taxation could be determined. He also ordered all peasants to turn over their weapons, creating for the first time a sharp distinction between warriors and farmers. In his later years, Hideyoshi set out to conquer China. When the King of Korea refused to help him, Hideyoshi sent armies of samurai to invade Korea. The result was the devastation of the Korean peninsula. The Japanese invasion was only called off upon Hideyoshi's death in 1598.

Ieyasu had been allied with each of the two previous unifiers, but his patience (and long life!) clearly proved a great asset. In 1600 he maneuvered warlords loyal to Hideyoshi's young

son into a major battle that Ieyasu's forces won, making him the most powerful *daimyō* in Japan. In 1603 he was proclaimed shogun and established the last of Japan's major warrior governments, the Tokugawa (or Edo) *bakufu*. The unifiers' policies, and the peace that followed in the seventeenth century, led to profound changes in Japanese society and the start of what most scholars refer to as the early modern period.

Copyright © 2008 Program for Teaching East Asia, University of Colorado. Permission is given to reproduce this essay for classroom use only. Other reproduction is prohibited without written permission from the Program for Teaching East Asia.