

The End of the Shogunate

For nearly three centuries (approx. 1600-1868), Japan existed as a feudal society under the relatively tranquil rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which attempted to keep the nation isolated from rest of the world, resisting change or progress. For more details on the history of the Tokugawa Shogunate, please refer to our other liner notes (available on the web).

The last few years of Tokugawa rule were characterized by an unstable, highly chaotic political scene. The arrival of US Admirals Perry in 1853, and Harris in 1856, offered convincing proof that the western nations were far more advanced than Japan was in every way, especially in matters military, economic and technological. This realization planted the seeds of the final downfall of the Shogunate, which was by this time considerably weakened.

The Meiji Restoration

Modern Japan begins in the fall of 1868, when the era name "Meiji" was proclaimed and ruling authority was officially restored to the new emperor, Meiji. At that time only sixteen years old, he had been petitioned by the final Tokugawa Shogun, Keiki, to accept the restoration of power the year before in order to resolve political chaos that the Shogunate could no longer control.

Emperor Meiji, who ascended the throne in 1867, and reigned until his death in 1912, was a firm supporter of western ideas, unlike the Tokugawa seclusionists. He helped Japan to emerge from feudalism into a modern age, quickly transforming the nation into an Eastern superpower. Meiji's centralized bureaucracy replaced the balance of power between the Shogunate and the autonomous domains. The military authority of the samurai class was replaced by a conscript army, based on the Prussian model. Under his orders, official missions (some in the form of foreign exchange students!) were dispatched to examine western countries.

The sudden modernization was not universally embraced. Importing Western philosophies, many of which contradicted long-held traditions, outraged many. Others, however, enthusiastically viewed anything western as the new ideal.

As Japan's seclusionist policy ended, it became clear that other nations viewed Japan as a backward nation. To correct this, the leadership devised a new policy of "Fukoku Kyohei" (lit. "Enrichment of the Nation, Strengthening of the Army") in the belief that the rapid enlargement of trade and the establishment of foreign colonies were essential for Japan's survival in the modern age. In other words, they stole a copy of the Western power's playbook.

The new government also cooperated closely with "zaibatsu" --- major merchant families and other plutocrats. By 1872, private banks were established, and the government offered for sale, at low prices, many previously government-run enterprises, such as mining and shipping, to prominent zaibatsu houses such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi (the same giants which prosper to this day). These successful ventures not only boosted the economy, but also played a major role in enhancing the nation's military capabilities.

"Ain't It Grand, it's the World Renewal!"

In the late 1860's, peasants staged the so-called "Yonaoshi Ikki", uprisings to reform the society, calling for "world renewal", criticizing the Shogunate and, in many areas, the rich as well.

The "Eejanaika" ("Ain't it grand!" etc) Movement of 1867 persisted in many parts of the nation for over a year. Exactly how it began is the subject of many tales, of which the interpretation offered in Red Lion is but one.

Pro-imperial forces, in order to excite the peasants living in Shogunate territories to rebel, promised a 50% tax reduction and stated that the Emperor would alleviate the suffering of the people.

Sagara Sozo (1839-1868), receive an order to lead a mission to spread this news. After organizing a troop called the "Sekihō-tai", he promptly set out eastwards to Edo.

The anti-Shogunate movement spread rapidly, thanks to the Sekihō Troop's efforts. But, at the same time, anti-taxation and anarchist tendencies grew as well.

What Sagara did not know was that the imperial order he had received was in fact a deliberate scheme to foment rebellion in the Shogunate provinces, and thus weaken Shogunate's capacity to wage war.

Meanwhile, in Edo, the Tokugawa Shogunate surrendered without fighting a single battle. The new government was now ready to institute its policies, but first had to deal with the minor problem of the all those promises the Sekihō Troop had made on their behalf.

Public pressure mounted, forcing the leaders of the imperial forces officially to claim that Sekihō Troop was a group of "imposter imperial troopers". Sagara, and seven others, were arrested and executed, in what is regarded in one of the most sordid episodes of political expediency in modern Japanese history.

In 1870, surviving members of the Sekihō troop built a cemetery to commemorate their leaders, and in 1928, the government offered an official apology, clearing their name and officially honoring the troop.

"Nengu" - The Land Tax

These taxes were levied on the rice crop. The actual tax rates varied greatly from year to year, and also by location. For many years the Shogunate required 40%, and in some areas that were under Daimyo control, up to 70%, of the entire crop!

Names

Part of social reforms under the Meiji Restoration called for elimination of the class system founded by the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Starting in 1869, the government classified the populace into four major categories: court aristocrats, upper-class samurai, lower-class samurai, and common people (in 1870).

The common people were permitted to adopt family names in 1870. Prior to this, most commoners were only known by their given name, and possibly an additional alias --- which might be their trade, district name, even a nickname.

Gonzo's "real name" is "Gonzo of Shinden". "Shinden" refers to a rice field.

His other "name" is "Minamoto-no Gonzo", a royal name indicating high social standing.

Other names:

Amagaeru (the newsman). This is actually a nickname, which means a "rain frog".

Akage ("Red Hair"). These wigs not only were worn by certain imperial troop leaders, as seen in the film, but also by Kabuki actors who played the parts of a beast or a monster.

The joke about a dressed-up lion ("Shishimai") comes from the fact that Gonzo greatly resembled these lions, which are often seen in Japanese, as well as Chinese, festivals.

Dozaemon was a legendary 18th century warrior, whose skin seemed so white and bloated that he was often taunted because he resembled a drowned corpse. Eventually this became an euphemism for a drowned corpse!

Kisoya's singing "Kiso no Nakanori". This folk song, "Mr.Nakanori of Kiso River", was picked for Kisoya to sing because Kisoya's name is actually Kiso; the "ya" means shop or store.

Research Notes:

A considerable amount of historical research was necessary in translating Samurai Cinema's films and in compiling the information contained here. Among the many sources we have consulted, the following were especially helpful:

- 1) "Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan" Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Oishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) "Japan - A Historical Survey" Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) "A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963
- 4) "The Emergence of Meiji Japan" Marius Jansen, ed. Cambridge University Press, 1995

Production Staff

Japanese Production Staff

Produced by Mifune Toshiro and Nishikawa Yoshio
Screenplay by Okamoto Kihachi and Hirosawa Sakae
Photography: Saitoo Takao
Art: Ueda Kan
Sound Recording: Ichikawa Masamichi
Lighting: Satoo Sachiroo
Music: Satoo Masaru
Mixing: Shimonaga Shoo
Assistant Director: Tanaka Yoshikazu
Editing: Araki Yoshihiro
Makeup: Kobayashi Shigeo
Battlemaster: Kuse Ryuu
Film Development: Tokyo Developing Laboratories
Production Manager: Yamazaki Eiichi

Directed by Okamoto Kihachi

US Production Staff (Subtitling)

Executive Producer: Robert J. Woodhead
Translator: Shin Kurokawa
Dialogue Checker: Ueki Natsumi
Cultural Consultant: Hisayo Klotz
Subtitling Director: Robert J. Woodhead

Cast

Mifune Toshiro

Iwashita Shima

Takahashi Etsushi
Terada Minoru

Otowa Nobuko, Mochizuki Yuuko, Yoshimura Jitsuko, Okada Kaai, Koyama Shigeru, Amamoto Hideo, Hanasawa Tokue, Kishida Mori, Sunazuka Hideo, Hidari Bokuzen, Mutsu Goroo, Kusano Daigo, Tomita Nakajiro, Tokita Fujio, Hamamura Jun, Sakai Sachio, Yamamoto Ren, Hasegawa Hiroshi, Nomura Shooji, Kitagawa Mika, Noguchi Kawako, Suda Ayako, Iwasaki Chie, Mitobe Sue, Nakayama Yutaka, Chii Takeo, Achiba Nobusuke, Sawanobori Mamoru, Kinoshita Akio, Kimura Tomiyuki, Maruoka Shooichiroo, Uno Shooji, Yoshida Shooji, Sado Kinuyo, Asari Kazuko, Ishido Yooko, Sarami Aiko, Toyoda Yooko, Shimazu Kimie, Kawamura Shigeko, Taniguchi Yumiko, Majima Jun, Matsubara Michi, Takahara Toriko, Kihei Yoshie, Tanaka Hiroshi, Yamaguchi Hiroyoshi, Asakawa Kooji, Kimura Hiroto, Tanaka Hajime, Katoo Shigeo, Mito Yoshihiro, Umabe Hiroyuki, Itoo Jun'ichi, Nana Yookai (Mifune Pro.), Narrator: Nakaya Ichiroo

Ito Yunosuke
Tamura Takahiro