

The Perry Expedition and the “Opening of Japan to the West,” 1853–1873

A Short History with Documents

By PAUL H. CLARK

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Reviewed by Daniel A. Métraux



The arrival of US Commodore Matthew Perry's squadron of four ships into Tokyo Bay on July 8, 1853, is one of those great watershed moments of modern history. This event led to the rapid transformation of Japan from a weak isolated nation into one of the world's major world powers in less than fifty years. The Japanese response to the West's forced opening of its doors would soon alter the balance of geographical power around the world and create a model that other, lesser-developed nations would follow in their endeavors to modernize themselves.

The years covered by Clark in this book extend from the final calamitous years of the Tokugawa shogunate, which had ruled since the early 1600s through the first decade of the new Meiji government that seized power in 1868. These years saw the beginning of the process that led to the transformation of Japan from a secluded, anachronistic, semifeudal society into a far more open, progressive, and increasingly prosperous country.

Japan's successful transition is especially remarkable if one considers the turmoil that it was experiencing at the time of Perry's arrival. At this time, Japan found itself engaged in a serious insurrection that eventually would lead to the creation of an entirely new government and the abandonment of the Tokugawa Era *Sakoku* (“closed country”) policy. There was simultaneously a series of natural disasters and bitter famines that only added to the chaos and confusion during this difficult time. Japan's ability to withstand these shocks and crises quickly led to it becoming a modern world power.

Paul H. Clark, Professor of History at West Texas A&M University, has produced a significant work that deals in depth on the motivations and deeds of both the Western nations that sought to open Japan and the Japanese who fought hard to keep foreigners at bay. Clark argues that “the role played by the Western imperialists, though consequential, was not as all-pervasive as has been portrayed by many historians writing in English. This book therefore seeks to emphasize more of the Japanese perspective on Commodore Perry's visits” (61).

While it is true that the arrival of Perry's fleet brought about a change in the dynamic in Japan to help bring about the collapse of the creaky old Tokugawa regime, it was the Japanese themselves who brought about a change of government in 1868: “Thereafter, it was the Japanese who would . . . meet the challenge posed by the West by dramatically strengthening their economy and undergoing rapid industrialization” (61). Clark

thereby disputes the thinking of many Western historians that the Japanese had little control over their destiny during this critical time in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s.

Clark divides his book into two very complementary sections. The first part consists of four chapters of the author's analysis of the growing economic and social changes challenging the Tokugawa regime from the late 1700s until its collapse, as well as the motivations of France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States for wanting to force Japan to end its policy of *Sakoku*. The second section contains twenty-nine documents produced by both Western and Japanese sources. These documents include an 1852 letter written by President Millard Fillmore addressed to the leaders of Japan explaining the purpose of the Perry mission, letters composed by Perry giving his impressions of the Japanese he encountered, reports on the cruelty of Japanese toward Western prisoners who had landed in Japan prior to Perry's visit, and various Japanese commentaries on political and social unrest in Japan. Other valuable documents include the 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa officially opening Japan, the Meiji Charter Oath of April 1868, and the decree abolishing feudalism in Japan in 1869.

Clark is correct in his assertion that the United States did not send the Perry mission to Japan for reasons of trade. Many American whaling ships like the one depicted in Melville's *Moby Dick* were sailing in the Japan Sea near the Japanese islands, and there was a growing number of shipwrecks in Japanese waters. American and other sailors were quickly arrested for violating Japan's seclusion laws. Many of these sailors were imprisoned, and on occasion tortured and even executed. Other ships ran out of water and food, which necessitated landing in Japan.

Another factor was that Japan lay on the major trade routes to China and that Western steam ships needed to buy Japanese coal and fresh

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provisions. The goal of the Perry mission was to get the Japanese to deal with foreigners in a more humane manner and to open a couple of Japanese ports to Western ships requiring coal and provisions.

This book is especially useful for teachers with little background in Japanese history who are planning a full course or a module on the opening of Japan and its rapid emergence as a major world power by the early 1900s. Clark writes in a clear and concise manner, and includes many insightful documents that will enhance the teacher's ability to deal with the many issues facing Japan and the West in the late 1800s.

Clark's work also permits the teacher to make a case study of the reasons for Japan's success as opposed to China's collapse in the late nineteenth century. Japan had few natural resources but grew in wealth and power, while China with all its resources experienced a monumental collapse. What must a more backward nation do to emulate the success of a country like Japan?

The first reason is one of attitude. China saw itself as being superior to the West and thus tried to expel the foreigners. The Japanese came to realize their weaknesses and opened their doors to Western ideas and technology. During the Tokugawa Era, the Japanese had emphasized the importance of education, and as Clark notes, they were among the most literate societies in the world. The new Meiji regime realized the importance of education and early on issued decrees to create a nationwide network of schools that would educate both boys and girls. China failed when it refused to educate and advance more than a few people.

Another factor was the 1869 decree abolishing feudalism and creating a strong central government that would guide Japan in its modernizing pursuits. The Japanese government brought about the abolition of all distinct social classes, thus allowing everybody the opportunity to get an education. It was philosopher and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi who once stated that "Heaven helps those who help themselves." During the Meiji Era, any male who worked hard, got a good education, and who was ambitious could lead a successful and productive life.

Tragically, Chinese leaders were looking to the past to find ways to save their country, while Japanese were looking to the future and to the West for their inspiration. China only began to experience meaningful growth and prosperity in the early 1980s after Mao's death when the government opened China to Western technology, travel, education, and investment.

Clark's book is very well-written and researched. It will benefit teachers with little background in Asian studies and serve as a refresher for those who desire to catch up on developments in the field. It would also serve as a fine text for world, East Asian, and modern Japanese history courses. ■

DANIEL A. MÉTRAUX, Professor Emeritus of Asian Studies, has been teaching in his field for forty years, thirty-two at Mary Baldwin College. His specialty is modern Japan and Korea, but he teaches a full spectrum of Asian studies courses. Métraux is the author of fourteen books and many book chapters and articles. He served as Editor of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* and as President of the Southeast chapter of the Association for Asian Studies. He is Editor of the *Virginia Review of Asian Studies*. Twice a Fulbright Scholar, he has lived, taught, and studied in Japan for over five years. He received his doctorate in East Asian Studies from Columbia University. Métraux has also taught at Doshisha Women's College in Japan and was a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University in 2002.