

Establishment of the Tokugawa System

*T*oyotomi Hideyoshi's death in 1598 occasioned an intense two-year power struggle to determine who among the most powerful daimyo should succeed him as overlord of the land. At a decisive battle fought in October 1600 at Sekigahara, near Kyoto, the coalition of daimyo forces led by Tokugawa Ieyasu triumphed over an alliance of daimyo from western Japan. He emerged in a preeminent position, able to dispose of all those daimyo who would not accept his overlordship and in possession of an immense amount of territory acquired as the spoils of war, which he could divide among his loyal followers.

From this position of strength the Tokugawa family spent the next several decades building a new system of government. This was accomplished by institutionalizing the control measures devised by themselves and their predecessors during the march toward national unification. It is extremely important to grasp the basic outlines of this system because it provided the framework of Japanese politics and society from which modern Japan emerged.

The Tokugawa Bakufu

In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu was invested by the Emperor with the position of *shogun* (generalissimo), traditionally the highest military office in the land. Although in reality Ieyasu's position depended entirely on his own military power, since he had fought his way to the top of the feudal hierarchy, Ieyasu made much of his investiture: the Emperor, although without real political power or even much private wealth, was regarded as the source of political legitimacy, the locus of sovereignty, and the symbol of national unity. In the seventh and eighth centuries, when the Chinese imperial model had been adopted by the Japanese and the capital was established first at Nara and then at Kyoto, the prestige and influence of the imperial family were at their

zenith. Even in that time, however, a tradition of the Emperor reigning but not ruling was beginning to take root. Over the next centuries, political power slipped into the hands of the Kyoto nobility and then, as the central government declined, into the hands of feudal fighting men in the countryside. But even as power fragmented and Japan entered a period of full-blown feudalism, the old imperial system, centered in Kyoto, remained the source of legitimacy. The Tokugawa were careful to observe this tradition, not only by seeking to be appointed shogun by the Emperor, but also by acquiring court titles and establishing family ties with the nobility—and ultimately with the imperial house itself. Thus Tokugawa Ieyasu and his descendants who succeeded him as shogun were technically appointed officials, holding the civil and military functions of government delegated by the Emperor.

While these lines of legitimacy were established through the old imperial system in Kyoto, the reality of Tokugawa power depended on stabilizing the coalition of daimyo through which national unification had been achieved. Ieyasu established his seat of government in Edo (present-day Tokyo), where his new castle was built. Government by the shogun, often referred to as the shogunate or *bakufu* (a term meaning military government), was an extremely complex and intricate mechanism. Basically the shogun administered the country along two lines.

First, roughly one-quarter of the land belonged directly to the Tokugawa family, amassed during their rise to power. These lands, scattered throughout the countryside but mostly concentrated in central Honshu, the Tokugawa administered directly through their own samurai retainers. In this category of direct Tokugawa rule were all the important mines, the major seaports, including Osaka and Nagasaki, and the old capital city of Kyoto. Within these direct holdings the bakufu raised its funds, and its rule was in every way absolute.

Second, the remainder of the country, approximately three-quarters of it, was governed indirectly through the daimyo, all of whom after 1600 swore allegiance to the Tokugawa. It was this second, indirect mechanism of governing the country that gave the Tokugawa their greatest concern. Here their power was by no means absolute; it depended on maintaining the coalition of daimyo. Among the daimyo there were some who were very powerful, and the possibility of an anti-Tokugawa alliance among them was an ever-present danger. Because the Tokugawa were not strong enough fully to subjugate the daimyo, the latter were left largely autonomous within their own domains. The bakufu regulated the external affairs of the daimyo's domain but refrained from interfering in internal affairs so long as the daimyo gave no sign of disloyalty toward the Tokugawa.

During the two and a half centuries of Tokugawa rule, the number of daimyo varied between 240 and 295. A daimyo was officially de-

fined as a lord possessing a *han* (domain) with an assessed productivity of at least 10,000 *koku* of rice (1 *koku* = 4.96 bushels). The size of daimyo domains varied considerably; the largest was assessed in excess of 1 million *koku*.

There were three different categories of daimyo:

1. The *shimpan* (related) daimyo were members of Tokugawa branch families. If the main line of the family died out, a shogun would be chosen from among these lords, who came to number twenty-three.

2. The *fudai* (house) daimyo were retainers of the Tokugawa house. Most of them were vassals of the Tokugawa prior to the decisive battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Because they owed their status to the Tokugawa, they were considered trustworthy and they helped staff the central councils of the shogunate. Their domains were relatively small. The largest was the Ii house of Hikone with lands assessed at 250,000 *koku*. By the eighteenth century the house lords numbered in the neighborhood of 140 daimyo.

3. The *tozama* (outer) daimyo were those who had taken Tokugawa Ieyasu as their overlord only after the battle of Sekigahara. Because their pledge of loyalty was relatively recent, they were generally regarded as less trustworthy and therefore excluded from positions in the shogunate. Indeed, among the outer daimyo were lords who had fought against the Tokugawa coalition at Sekigahara, the two most important of which were the domains of Satsuma and Chōshū. Although they had submitted to the Tokugawa after Sekigahara, they still could not be trusted and had to be kept under constant surveillance. (Eventually, two and a half centuries later, it was those two domains that led the overthrow of the shogunate.) Not all of the outer lords had traditions hostile to the Tokugawa. Kaga domain, for example, had been allied with the Tokugawa at Sekigahara, though it had not yet taken Ieyasu as overlord. Many of the outer daimyo possessed very large domains. Kaga was officially assessed in excess of 1 million *koku*, Satsuma at 770,000, and Chōshū at 369,000. (Lands held directly by the Tokugawa were assessed in excess of 7 million *koku*.) The outer lords numbered approximately 100.

In addition to the early allegiance of the daimyo, the size of the *han*, determined by the amount of rice they were capable of producing annually, was a significant measure of importance. By the early eighteenth century, 20 large domains were in existence and assessed at 200,000 or more *koku*, 78 middling-size domains assessed between 50,000 and 200,000 *koku*, and 161 small domains assessed between 10,000 and 50,000 *koku*. As Harold Bolitho writes,

It was its size, more than anything else, that determined the range of possibilities and responsibilities of any given *han*. Large *han*,

wherever situated, whenever established, and whatever the original political affiliation of their daimyo, were likely to have greater military authority, more regional influence, and greater economic diversity than small ones. Their responsibilities, too, whether to larger numbers of samurai or peasants, were correspondingly more onerous. This in turn predisposed them to a rather higher degree of assertiveness than would have been the case with smaller han . . . [which] had little control over their destiny.¹

Tokugawa Control System

To maintain hegemony over this unwieldy feudal coalition, the Tokugawa depended on various control measures:

1. *Rearrangement of domains.* One of the most important control measures was the power the shogun had to rearrange or reassign landed holdings for strategic reasons. In this way the disposition of fiefs could be arranged so that potentially disloyal daimyo would be shunted to remote positions or hedged in by loyal daimyo. The shogun could increase or reduce the size of a han depending upon its loyalty. After the battle of Sekigahara, allies of the Tokugawa were rewarded with larger holdings. In addition, at the outset of the Tokugawa Period, the shogun confiscated many domains and created new ones. During the first century of the period, 200 daimyo lost their domains and 280 han transfers shifted daimyo, their vassals, and their families to another part of the country. Thereafter, as the bakufu felt more secure, the system stabilized, and such changes became less frequent.

2. *Alternate attendance system.* By far the most important method devised for controlling the daimyo was the alternate attendance system. Under this system all daimyo were obliged to alternate their residence periodically between their domains and Edo. Ordinarily this meant residing in Edo every other year. While they were in Edo, the shogunate could maintain surveillance over them. When they returned to their domains, the daimyo were required to leave behind their wives and children as hostages. In theory, sojourns in Edo were arranged so that about half the daimyo would be in attendance at any particular time.

Surveillance was not the only purpose. The system also served as a continuous drain on the economic resources of the daimyo. They had to build and maintain houses in Edo for their families and retainers, a considerable number of whom accompanied them on their biennial trip. While in Edo the daimyo were required to perform certain types of ceremonies as well as guard duty. The bakufu made periodic levies for money and labor. A daimyo might be instructed to repair a castle, a



An early seventeenth-century Japanese portrayal of a European ship arriving.
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

shrine, or a bridge. It became common for daimyo to spend a substantial portion of their domains' tax income for the costs of the alternate attendance system.

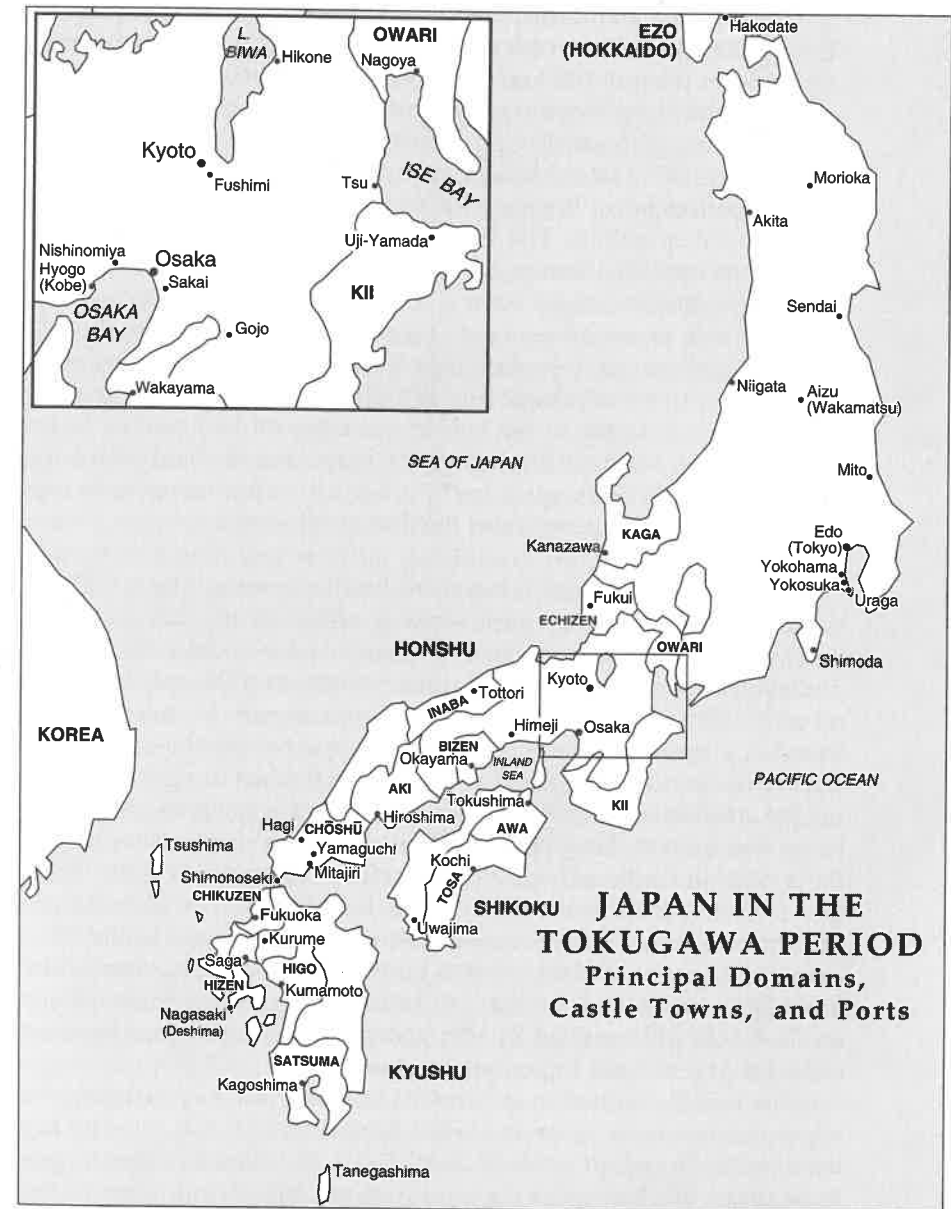
3. *Strict management of foreign relations.* To ensure Japanese security and sovereignty and to enhance its own authority, the bakufu brought the management of Japan's foreign relations under its firm control. The most striking aspect of this effort came to be called the seclusion (*sakoku*) policy. This policy was designed to cut off the lords—particularly the powerful outer lords—from the military and economic sources of strength that foreign trade might offer them. It was also intended to eliminate Christianity as a source of social disruption in the stable order the Tokugawa were trying to establish. The Jesuits in their earlier efforts had succeeded, according to their own estimates, in making hundreds of thousands of converts. How meaningful these estimates are is difficult to say, but they did have some successes. Perhaps what was most disturbing to the Tokugawa was the conversion of several important daimyo. Measures to limit the activities of Western missionaries had already been initiated under Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Under the Tokugawa those measures became more stringent: all missionaries were expelled, converts forced to recant, and fiendish persecutions sanctioned. By 1650 Christianity was almost completely eliminated.

Trade, too, was brought under the tight control of the shogunate. Prior to 1600 strong indications of a quickening expansionist impulse were found. Commercial ties with other parts of East and Southeast Asia had grown; most notably, Toyotomi Hideyoshi with grandiose plans of empire had made an abortive invasion of the Korean peninsula in the 1590s. This expansionist urge, however, had to be suppressed, for the requirements of social stability were paramount.

By three seclusion decrees issued in the 1630s Japanese were prohibited from traveling abroad and the size of ships being built was limited to that necessary for coastal trade within the Japanese archipelago. All trade with Western countries was ended except for commercial ties with the Dutch, who were permitted a small trading station on the tiny island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki. Here the Dutch merchants were virtually prisoners, kept under constant surveillance. Somewhat like the daimyo, the Dutch were compelled to make periodic trips to Edo to pay their respects to the shogun.

Englebert Kaempfer, a German doctor serving with the Dutch trading station, described the ludicrous audiences with the shogun (whom he mistakenly called "the Emperor") in 1691:

As soon as the [head of the trading company] came thither, [the attendants] cried aloud *Hollanda Captain* which was the signal for him to draw near and make his obeisance. Accordingly he crawled



on his hands and knees to a place showed him between the presents, ranged in due order on one side, and the place where the Emperor [Shogun!] sat on the other, and then, kneeling, he bowed his forehead quite down to the ground, and so crawled backwards like a crab, without uttering one single word. . . . The mutual compliments being over, the succeeding part of this solemnity turned to a perfect farce. We were asked a thousand ridiculous and impertinent questions. The Emperor . . . ordered us to take off our capps, or cloaks, being our garments of ceremony; then to stand upright that he might have a full view of us; again to walk, to stand still, to compliment each other, to dance, to jump, to play the drunkard, to speak broken Japanese, to read Dutch, to paint, to sing, to put our cloaks on and off. Meanwhile we obeyed the Emperor's commands in the best manner we could, I joining to my dance a love-song in High German. In this manner and with innumerable such other apish tricks, we must suffer ourselves to contribute to the Emperor's and the Court's diversion.²

Because the measures taken to restrict Japanese contacts with the Western world were the most striking aspect of the bakufu's strict management of foreign relations, historians have characterized the Tokugawa intentions as negative, reactionary, and xenophobic. More recently, however, some historians have begun to interpret the bakufu's purpose in a more positive light by stressing the shogunate's effort to construct a new system of foreign relations designed to shore up the stability and legitimacy of the Tokugawa government both at home and abroad. They point out that substantial contacts with other parts of Asia continued, although carefully supervised by the Tokugawa. That is, at the same time that the bakufu acted "to restrict those aspects of external affairs deemed inimical to Japan and to the interests of the bakufu, it also strove to build a diplomatic structure which would enhance bakufu legitimacy, assure Japan a sense of security in an East Asia still troubled by war and piracy, and maintain Japanese access to a secure and expanding foreign trade."³

The bakufu wanted to enhance its own authority by bringing foreign relations under its strict control. Unlike earlier shoguns who had been willing to adopt a vassal relationship to China in order to promote trade, the Tokugawa shoguns asserted Japan's autonomous status. In its foreign relations, the shogun took the sovereign title "Great Prince of Japan" (*Nihon-koku Taikun*) and, rather than accept a subordinate position in a Sinocentric world order, refused official relations with China. This did not mean isolation from the continent. On the contrary, the bakufu oversaw a burgeoning nonofficial trade with Chinese merchants operating in Nagasaki. The Tokugawa maintained of-

ficial diplomatic ties with Korea and a substantial trade was conducted through the daimyo of Tsushima, a pair of islands in the straits between Kyushu and the Korean peninsula. The bakufu received numerous tribute missions from the Ryukyu islands and maintained a vigorous trade with the islands through the Satsuma domain in southernmost Kyushu. In sum, the Tokugawa established a "monopoly" on the conduct of external relations as a means to legitimate its new power.

4. *Ideology.* A fourth control directed primarily at the daimyo and their retainers was the use of ideology. To reinforce the dominance of the Tokugawa and of the samurai class, the founders of the regime drew on Confucianism, Shintō, Buddhism, popular religion, and ritual to create an eclectic ideology that would legitimate their rule and provide a philosophical foundation for the social and political order taking shape. Confucianism was not new in Japan. It had been introduced centuries earlier but it had never been so appropriate as it now became. Confucianism held up familial relations as a proper model for government, relations between parent and child being analogous to those between ruler and subject. Because political authority derived its legitimacy from its ethical basis, the ruling elite must by their exemplary moral conduct set an example for the rest of society. Social distinctions were held to be in the natural order of things, and each class, each age, each group had to fulfill its obligations and maintain its proper place if society was to preserve harmony. In sum, Tokugawa society promised to be much more ordered, settled, and regulated than earlier times; and Confucian concepts of a hierarchical society in accord with nature, of benevolent paternalism in government, of an ethical basis for administration, and of a meritorious officialdom, all coincided with Tokugawa purposes.

No less important than the adaptation of neo-Confucianism to the new circumstances, Tokugawa ideology drew on a variety of other sources to exalt and legitimize the new rulers. Shintō mythology was most useful. Ieyasu was rendered a Shintō deity and his burial site at Nikkō, north of Edo, was made into a splendid mausoleum to venerate the founder of the new order. The shrine was built at his expense and daimyo were expected to pay regular homage there. An extraordinary demonstration of the lengths to which the Tokugawa went to establish their supreme status was the arrangement of the marriage of the shogun's daughter to the emperor in 1620. A daughter of this union was crowned empress in 1629, the first time since the eighth century that a woman had ascended the throne. Ideologists both drew upon the imperial court to legitimize the Tokugawa and encroached upon the imperial charisma by refocusing national religious ritual away from the court toward a new center in Edo and Nikkō. Through

this syncretic ideology, the Tokugawa "transformed their military power into sacred authority, their rule into an embodiment of the Way of Heaven."⁴

In addition to these controls, other measures were taken to regulate the activities of the daimyo. Many of them were codified. These directives regulated contacts between daimyo, the contracting of marriages between daimyo families, the repair of castles, and so on. Barriers were established on the main highways to monitor the comings and goings of daimyo and their retainers. A system of passports provided further means to check on travel.

Government at the Domain Level

Within their own domains, or han as they came to be called later, the daimyo were left with a great deal of autonomy, free from interference as long as they did not behave in any way regarded as disloyal by the shogunate. The daimyo paid no taxes to the shogunate, although they were subject to periodic exactions of money and labor. Within the han a daimyo was absolute. His position was hereditary, passing ordinarily to his eldest son. When there was no heir, one was adopted. In practice, because the daimyo spent much of his time in Edo, his leading vassals often tended to exercise actual administrative leadership in the han.

The samurai class constituted 6 percent or 7 percent of the population and alone had the right to wear swords and to assume a family surname. It would be a mistake, however, to think of the warriors as a homogeneous group, for there was a great deal of spread or differential within the class. Warriors ranged from the shogun and daimyo at the top, down to the foot soldiers at the bottom. The high-ranking warriors served on the Council of Elders or in some other capacity as advisors to the daimyo. They also acted as heads of guard groups or standing army units, as chiefs of police, as supervisors of financial affairs, and as liaison agents between the daimyo and the shogunate. The middle ranks of samurai served in bureaucratic posts having to do with administration of the castle town, the collection of taxes, and the management of religious and educational affairs. They may also have headed various lesser units of the militia. At the lower levels, warriors served as clerks or as low-ranking military men.

Thus a minute gradation of hierarchy existed within the samurai class with great differences between top and bottom. In Chōshū, for example, Albert Craig tells us that among the 5,675 direct vassals of the daimyo were 40 different ranks. This differential in status was reflected in the annual rice stipend warriors were paid, as the tabulation shows.⁵

Income (koku)	Number of families in the group
More than 100	661
More than 70 and less than 100	202
More than 50 and less than 70	339
More than 40 and less than 50	472
Less than 40	4,001
Total	5,675

Consciousness of rank and observance of status distinctions were maintained throughout society. At the domain school for sons from samurai families in Kaga—to give one interesting example—Ronald P. Dore tells us that regulations provided that any boy from the highest-ranking families was permitted to come to school accompanied by two retainers, as well as one servant to take care of his sandals during school hours and another to hold his umbrella on rainy days. Children from the next rank "could have one retainer, a sandal-minder, and an umbrella-holder. The next, one retainer and a sandal-minder, but they should carry their own umbrella. Younger sons, and those of the lowest rank, should come without servants; the school would provide someone to look after their sandals en masse."⁶

The educator Fukuzawa Yukichi, writing in 1877 after the destruction of the Tokugawa system, looked back with loathing at the status distinctions that were observed in speech, dress, and daily intercourse:

An *ashigaru* [foot soldier] always had to prostrate himself on the ground in the presence of an upper samurai. If he should encounter an upper samurai on the road in the rain, he had to take off his *geta* [clogs] and prostrate himself by the roadside. . . . Upper samurai rode on horseback, lower samurai went on foot. Upper samurai possessed the privileges of hunting wild boar and fishing; lower samurai had no such privileges. . . . The broad distinction between the upper and lower classes was, however, accepted unquestioningly, almost as though it were a law of nature rather than an invention of man.⁷

Village Government

As a result of the withdrawal of the warriors from the countryside into the castle towns, the actual administration of peasant villages fell into the hands of village headmen. The lord appointed from among his vassals supervisors who would oversee the work of headmen. But within the village itself there was considerable autonomy. Each village, led by its headman, was largely self-governing, and the daimyo

would not interfere as long as order was maintained and the taxes were paid to the lord.

The headman came from among the peasants themselves—generally from the old, prestigious, and wealthy families in the village. In many villages the position was hereditary; in others the office was rotated among leading families in the village; and occasionally the headman was elected by propertied villagers. He was responsible for keeping records, settling disputes, maintaining order, and above all for apportioning and collecting the tax that was levied on the village. Often he operated with the help of a village assembly and village codes. By allowing the headman certain visible symbols of status, such as elegant clothing and housing, the lord encouraged the peasants to respect and look up to the headman. The typical village comprised between fifteen and forty clustered houses and was characterized by a strong sense of solidarity, encouraged by centuries of close living and by the cooperative nature of farming. The conformity of everyone in the village to group sentiment was usually ensured by a variety of social pressures, not the least important of which was gossip. The successful headman governed by building up a consensus; and disputes within the village were generally settled by conciliation, compromise, and patient negotiation, in which the headman played the leading role.

Family and the Role of Women

The fundamental institution of all classes of Tokugawa society was the household or family unit. The new sedentary and peaceful life-style of the Tokugawa Period helped to solidify the principle of a society organized around family groups, each pursuing a hereditary "household occupation." This was an important development in Japanese social history. As Bitō Masahide writes, "the research of sociologists and anthropologists has made clear that beginning in the seventeenth century, 'houses' of this kind constituted the basic units of Japanese society, and indeed the house has come to be recognized as a characteristic feature of Japanese society."⁸ In general, the ideal family was said to have many distinctive characteristics. First, it was an extended family. It was not simply a nuclear family of husband, wife, and children, but would include several generations. Typically, the core of this extended family group, known as the stem family, was composed of grandparents, their eldest son who was their heir, his wife, and unmarried children. Other sons, when they married, formed branch families that were still part of the larger unit, while daughters left the family at the time of their marriage. The household was more than a biological unit because it often included nonkin such as employees, servants, or an adopted male heir.

Many ties held a large lineage group together, but most important was the economic interdependence of its members, who united in pursuing the family occupation. As Dore describes these economic links, "even in the samurai class . . . the income from the feudal lord's granaries was an endowment of the family rather than of individuals and it did not necessarily vary in amount whether, at any particular time, there was one male from the family in the lord's service or three. . . . A farming family gave the branch family a portion of the family land, a merchant gave the branch family a section of the main family's trade or at least offered all its wholesale buying facilities to help the branch family establish itself in a new area. Similarly, artisan families taught the craft, secured entrance for its branch family into the guild and helped in marketing its products."⁹

A second important characteristic of the Tokugawa household was the emphasis placed on solidarity and continuity through time. The members of this basic unit of social organization were expected to sacrifice personal desires to benefit the group as a whole. Individuals therefore found their identities in the symbols of the family, such as the family property, including the physical house itself, inherited from the ancestors; the traditions of the family, which in upper-class families were sometimes codified in a family constitution; and above all, in the worship of family ancestors. The family name, honor, and status were of constant importance. Anyone's misdoings reflected not only on that individual but on the entire family including the ancestors and descendants. Continuity of the family was regarded as a moral duty: rather than let a family die out, a childless couple would adopt an heir.

A third characteristic of the Tokugawa household was that much greater emphasis was placed on the parent-child relationship than on the husband-wife relationship. For example, in the code of obligations for samurai promulgated in 1684, a man mourned thirteen months for his parents, but only three months for his wife. For a woman, as Dore observes, "marriage is conceived of less as an entry into conjugal relations with a particular man than as entry into another family group. . . . Marriage gives the husband exclusive sexual rights in his wife, but not vice versa. His children by women other than his wife could be adopted into his family. When she enters her new family, the bride goes through a period of explicit training by her mother-in-law in the 'ways of the family.'"¹⁰ A seventeenth-century Confucian treatise entitled *The Great Learning for Women* admonished samurai women to remember that

it is the chief duty of a girl living in the parental house to practice filial piety towards her father and mother. But after marriage, her chief duty is to honour her father-in-law and mother-in-law—to honour them beyond her own father and mother. . . . Never

should she be remiss in performing any tasks they may require of her. With all reverence must she carry out, and never rebel against, her father-in-law's commands. . . . A woman has no particular lord. She must look to her husband as her lord and must serve him with all worship and reverence.¹¹

A fourth characteristic was the practice of male primogeniture. Ordinarily the eldest direct male descendant inherited the leadership of the household. Succession did not normally await the death of a former head but would occur when the elder son was sufficiently mature to handle family affairs and the father was ready to retire. Widows might succeed to the headship during the minority of their children and, on occasion, daughters might inherit headship, but once married their husbands would replace them.

Fifth, both power and responsibility resided with the househead. In the determination and arrangement of a marriage, the authority of the househead was decisive. Hierarchical relations were maintained throughout family life to inculcate an instinctive respect for relative age and male superiority. On the other hand, in addition to power, responsibility fell on the househead to ensure the well-being of all members of the group. Widowed sisters or unemployed younger brothers could expect the househead to help them.

Many variations on this general pattern of household characteristics existed. Class differences were evident for example in matters of sex, marriage, and divorce. In all these matters more formality was found in the samurai class and greater casualness among peasants. Premarital sex and divorce were more prevalent in the peasant class. Regarding the choice of marriage partner, Dore writes:

That marriage was arranged by parents was true of all classes of society, but there were variations in the extent to which either the man or the woman concerned had the right to refuse an unattractive mate. Among the samurai, the wedding ceremony was often the occasion of the first meeting of the bride and groom, since the bride often came from a distant part of the country. . . . In the merchant class of the towns, however, an opportunity for the prospective partners to survey each other and to express their personal wishes became an institutionalized part of the marriage process. The *miai*, as this was called, was a deliberately contrived, but by an agreed fiction accidental, meeting arranged by go-betweens for the prospective partners and their families. After the meeting either party could express displeasure with the prospective mate and the negotiations could then be dropped without either side necessarily feeling offended. . . . This system gradually became more general in urban areas, and the modern word for an arranged marriage is a *miai*-marriage (as opposed to a "love-marriage").¹²

Considerable class and regional differences existed in the power and role of women in the family. In the samurai class, the wife of the househead oversaw the family's domestic matters, exercising control over consumption, the servants, and her daughters-in-law. If widowed, she often increased in power over other important matters such as marriages and disposition of capital. The women of wealthy peasant families were often relatively well off: they could be educated, travel widely, and carry considerable weight in family and village matters. For a poor peasant wife, work was strenuous: "it invariably encompassed planting, cultivating, weeding, and harvesting paddies and vegetable fields; in economically advanced regions women also cultivated cash crops such as vegetables or tobacco, raised silkworms, spun thread, or wove cloth for market."¹³ In the average merchant family too the wife kept books and waited on customers. Because commoner women were often integral to the productive work of the family, males had to be more involved than is commonly thought in child rearing and housework. Regional differences were found too. In some parts of the country peasant women had the reputation of ruling the roost and even serving as househeads. In sum, as one scholar who studies the subject concludes, "It is impossible to establish a single portrait of rural women."¹⁴

The Character of the Tokugawa System

The period of unification culminating in the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate is one of the great seminal periods in Japanese institutional history, comparable to the founding of the imperial state on the Chinese model around the year 700 and to the creation of the modern nation-state after 1868. It will be useful to conclude this chapter by assessing the nature of the Tokugawa system and the unique form that it took.

Tokugawa institutions were fundamentally shaped by the purpose of ending the turmoil and upheaval of the Warring States Period. In Europe, the modern nation-state was born out of a similarly feudal period as monarchies steadily expanded their power. Japan too achieved a new degree of political unity, but centralization under the Tokugawa stopped short of what was achieved in Europe. As we have seen, the domains survived with a considerable amount of autonomy; the daimyo were preserved as direct vassals of the Tokugawa shogunate. This system is therefore often described as centralized feudalism.

Some historians have wondered why the new rulers did not press unification to its logical conclusion by eliminating the daimyo. To these scholars it appeared that Japan could have followed a course

similar to that of Europe, but its progress was arrested midway in its evolution from feudal decentralization to national centralization. The unifiers, as Mary Elizabeth Berry writes, made an aggressive and systematic attack on the roots of social disorder and lawless violence.¹⁵ They instituted policies that would prevent disturbances of the peace. They disarmed the peasantry, removed samurai from the countryside, brought foreign affairs under strict control, eliminated religion as an independent force, and put constraints on daimyo independence. They emphasized the notion of the "common good" or "public interest" and suppressed the possibilities of personal factions and private alliances. In short, they went to great lengths to eliminate the bases of defiance and disturbances of the peace.

But, the Tokugawa did not choose to further consolidate and centralize their power. They did not press on to achieve a monopoly of military power in the shogunate. They did not try to establish a national system of taxation. They did not try to control the production and distribution of the food supply. They did not create a national bureaucracy. Such measures would have moved them in the direction of the centralized monarchies emerging in Europe in this period. Instead they left control over local government, taxation, and military force to the daimyo. The Tokugawa system is therefore known as the *baku-han* system—a combination of bakufu and han rule, a "feudal-central hybrid."¹⁶ It appears that the initial impetus toward centralization stalled. Why?

The comparison with Europe in 1600 may be misleading. Feudalism in Japan was not yet ready to disintegrate at this time. The process of national unification in Japan had to follow its own distinctive course. The unifiers had been dependent on feudal alliances at every step along the way to consolidating national power. The Tokugawa shogunate lacked the independent military and administrative capacity to unite the country; it was dependent on the compliance of the daimyo. Each needed the other. For the daimyo, joining in this system provided a kind of collective security and legitimacy. In other words, given the residual strength of the daimyo in 1600, centralization went as far as it could. It went as far as was necessary to establish order, stability, and peace. The Tokugawa could be satisfied with this degree of centralization. As James W. White writes, "the power of the Tokugawa in 1600 was sufficient to establish political stability and civil order with the acquiescence of the daimyo; elimination of their prerogatives would have entailed further rebellion, and they too had much to gain from the peace that acquiescence entailed."¹⁷ Subsequently, after the Tokugawa system stabilized, the daimyo were subject to central control and supervision. Most important, as we shall see, the vigorous growth of the commercial economy under the Tokugawa system steadily eroded the strength of the daimyo. These developments then

created the possibility of greater centralization and the birth of a highly centralized nation-state in the nineteenth century.

Unless we understand the reasons why unification followed this path it will seem as though Japan missed an opportunity to develop as a centralized state in 1600. In fact, for a long time many historians did believe that the Tokugawa system halted progressive trends such as the emergence of a fluid class system, free cities, and vibrant international contacts. To these scholars the Tokugawa system seemed rigid, repressive, and reactionary. This view that the Tokugawa control system was a retrogressive step, a turning back of the clock, is known as the "refeudalization thesis" because it interpreted the Tokugawa system as a "reformulation . . . of the essential components of medieval feudalism in a more politically stable and highly organized form."¹⁸

This view of the Tokugawa system as essentially feudal, repressive, and outmoded was once widely held. In the aftermath of World War II when the Japanese searched their history to try to understand what had gone wrong, many identified the Tokugawa system as the cause of the national tragedy because it prevented progress toward a more open Japanese society.

In recent decades, many historians have interpreted the Tokugawa system in a more favorable light. Rather than stressing its despotic nature, they have found progressive trends in the Tokugawa society and economy. They have termed the Tokugawa years as Japan's "early modern period" by "drawing attention away from the period's feudal aspects and toward those long-term trends related to the emergence of the modern Japanese state and economy after 1868."¹⁹

Notes

1. John Whitney Hall, ed., *Early Modern Japan*, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 190.
2. Englebert Kaempfer, *History of Japan* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1906), 295–297.
3. Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 233.
4. Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570–1680* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 289.
5. Reprinted by permission of the publishers from *Chōshū in the Meiji Restoration* by Albert M. Craig, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, copyright © 1961 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, p. 113.
6. Ronald P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 181–182.