The Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan

From the late 12th to the late 19th century, Japan was a feudal society ruled by a series of shoguns. Feudalism is a decentralized system of power in which land owned by a powerful person is divided up and given to others in exchange for work and a promise to fight for the interests of the land owner. **Shoguns** were military leaders in Japan who had absolute power and passed their power down through their families. A government ruled by a shogun was called a shogunate. Historically, the head of the Japanese government has always been an emperor, but during this time period the emperor was just a figurehead.

Plagued by civil war yet again, Japan collapsed into chaos during the 15th century. It was under the Tokugawa Shogunate that Japan was united and a capital was established at Edo (present-day Tokyo) which was a small fishing village. In order to gain and maintain power, the Tokugawa Shogunate allowed the daimyo to continue running their land, but they had to spend every other year in Edo. This gave the shogunate control over the daimyo and Japan until 1867.

**Directions:** You will be completing a gallery walk in which you will visit a series of stations regarding life in the Tokugawa Shogunate. You may work with a partner if you would like.

**Station 1: Society in Tokugawa Japan**
1. How was the Tokugawa Shogunate able to maintain control over Japan?
2. Describe the changes in Japanese society during the Tokugawa Shogunate.

**Station 2: Culture in Tokugawa Japan**
3. Describe traditional Japanese culture during the Tokugawa Shogunate.
4. Describe new cultural achievements during the Tokugawa Shogunate.
**Station 3: Contact Between Europe and Japan**

5. How did the Japanese initially react to Europeans?

6. How did the Tokugawa Shogunate maintain control over religion in Japan?

**Station 4: Japan turns to Isolation**

7. Why did Japan turn to isolation?

8. How was the Tokugawa Shogunate able to consolidate control over trade?

*When you are done with the gallery walk, grab your learning target notebook and answer the following question:*

*How was the Tokugawa Shogunate able to gain, maintain, and consolidate power?*
Station 1: Society in Tokugawa Japan

Tokugawa society was extremely structured due to feudalism. Beneath the shogun were the **daimyo**, or estate lords, who managed and owned the land/fortress. Beneath the lord were the **samurai**, or warriors to protect everyone in the fortress. At the bottom of society were the **peasants** who lived and worked the land inside of the fortress. Fortresses were built with wooden or earthen walls and moat-like ditches. They were equipped with granaries to store rice, blacksmith tables, wells for water, and armories. Peasants made up the majority of the population. Merchants were at the bottom of society, but they gradually became more important as the Japanese economy expanded.

In Japan, Confucian values borrowed from China influenced ideas about society. The ideal society depended on agriculture, not commerce. Farmers, not merchants, made the ideal citizens. In reality, peasants and farmers bore the main tax burden and faced more difficulties than any other social class. Due to the difficulties of life, many of them abandoned farm life and headed to the expanding towns and cities. There, they mixed with samurai, artisans, and merchants.

By the mid-1700s, Japan shifted from a rural to urban society. Edo had grow from a small fishing village to one of the largest cities in the world with over 1 million people residing in the city. Large commercial centers led to increased employment opportunities for women in entertainment, textile manufacturing, and publishing. This was a huge shift in the role of women since most Japanese women led sheltered and restricted lives managing the household and family.
Station 2: Culture in Tokugawa Japan

Traditional culture continued to thrive under the Tokugawa Shogunate. Samurai attended ceremonial noh dramas which were based on tragic themes. They read tales of ancient warriors and their courage in battle. This traditional entertainment faced competition in the cities from new styles of art, literature, and drama.

A new type of realistic fiction was developed that shared the hardships of merchant life. Haiku poetry was also developed which presents images rather than ideas. Kabuki theater was also developed during the time period. Actors in kabuki theater dress in elaborate costumes and use music, dance, and mime, to perform skits about modern life. Paintings from the period depict city life.

Haiku Formula:
5-7-5 syllable, 3-lines

From time to time
the clouds give rest
to the moon-beholders.

Matsuo Bashō
Station 3: Contact between Europe and Japan

Europeans began coming to Japan in the 16th century. The Japanese initially welcomed the Europeans during this time period as new technologies and ideas were introduced. The Japanese first encountered Europeans in 1543. The Portuguese brought clocks, eyeglasses, tobacco, firearms, and other unfamiliar items from Europe. Japan was eager to trade, particularly the Portuguese muskets and cannons.

The Japanese purchased weapons from the Portuguese and soon began their own weapons production. Firearms forever changed the tradition of the samurai whose principal weapon had always been the sword. Peasants were trained to form army corps for the daimyo, but the samurai stuck by his traditional weapon. This caused many samurai to later lose their lives in future combat. Due to weapons, fortified castles continued to be built. These castles attracted merchants and artisans and later grew into major cities.

Eventually trading contacts brought Christian missionaries to Japan. European missionaries had converted about 300,000 Japanese to Christianity, but the Japanese found the missionaries to be troublesome. A peasant and samurai uprising led the shogun to blame Christianity as the root of the rebellion since so many rebels were Christian. After this, Christians were persecuted by the shoguns and missionaries were killed or driven out of Japan. Christianity was banned and all Japanese had to practice Buddhism. This eventually led to Japan becoming isolationist.
Station 4: Japan turns to Isolation

When Europeans first arrived, no central authority existed to regulate their entry into Japan. The Tokugawa shoguns recognized the value of European trade, but wanted to exclude missionaries and merchants. By 1635, Japan sealed its borders and instituted an isolationist policy known as the Sakoku Edict of 1635.

Most commercial contacts with Europeans ended. Only one port, Nagasaki, remained open to Dutch and Chinese merchants. This allowed for the Tokugawa shoguns to have a monopoly on foreign trade with the Dutch and Chinese which continued to be profitable. For more than 200 years, Japan was closed to Europeans and the Japanese were forbidden to leave the country. Japan continued to develop as a self-sufficient country free from European influence or colonization.

Excerpts from the Sakoku Edict of 1635

1. Japanese ships are strictly **forbidden** to leave for **foreign** countries.

2. No Japanese is **permitted** to go abroad. If there is anyone who attempts to do so secretly, he must be **executed**. The ship so involved must be **impounded** and its owner arrested, and the matter must be reported to the higher **authority**.

3. If any Japanese returns from **overseas** after **residing** there, he must be put to death.

4. If there is any place where the teachings of **padres** (Christian priests) is practiced, a thorough **investigation** must be ordered.

10. Samurai are not **permitted** to purchase any goods originating from foreign ships directly from Chinese **merchants** in Nagasaki.