Japan Essay, Research Paper

In Japan And Its World, by Marius B. Jansen, Jansen describes the changing ideas the Japanese have had of themselves and the Western world as well as the ideas the Americans has had of the Japanese. The Japanese have had to adapt to a different world and yet go from a weak country to a major power in today s world.

In the book Japan From Shogun To Sony, by John R. Roberson, Roberson principally discusses a brief history of Japan. He also discusses Japans hardships and what it had to overcome to make it own independent status in the world today. Its difference from Japan And Its World is that Jansen deals more with the ideas economical status of Japan, while Roberson deals with a greater history.

Oda Nobunaga achieved control over the province of Owari in 1559. As many other daimyo, he was keen in uniting Japan. Strategically favorably located, he succeeded in capturing the capital in 1568. After establishing himself in Kyoto, Nobunaga continued to eliminate his enemies. Among them were some militant Buddhist camps, especially the Ikko camp that had become very powerful in several provinces. Nobunaga destroyed the Enryakuji monastery near Kyoto completely in 1571. His fight against the Ikko sect continued until 1580. Rather fortunate was Nobunaga concerning two of his most dangerous rivals in the East: Takeda Shingen and Uyesugi Kenshin. Both of them died before they were able to confront Nobunaga. After Shingen’s death, Nobunaga defeated the Takeda clan in the battle of Nagashino (1575), making use of modern warfare.

In 1582, general Akechi murdered Nobunaga and captured his Azuchi castle. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a general fighting for Nobunaga, reacted very quickly, defeated Akechi, and took over control. Hideyoshi continued to eliminate remaining rivals. He restrained the Northern provinces and Shikoku in 1583 and Kyushu in 1587. After defeating the Hojo family in Odawara in 1590, Japan was finally reunited. In order to bring the country under absolute control, Hideyoshi destroyed many castles that were built throughout the country during the era of civil wars. He forbade the samurai to be active as farmers and forced them to move into the castle towns. In 1587, Hideyoshi issued an edict expelling Christian missionaries. Nevertheless, Franciscans were able to enter Japan in 1593. In 1597 Hideyoshi increased the persecution of Christian missionaries, forbade further conversions, and executed 26 Franciscans as a warning. Christianity was seen as an obstacle in establishing absolute control over the people. Many Jesuits and Franciscans had acted aggressively and intolerant towards Shinto and Buddhist institutions.

After uniting the country, Hideyoshi’s next aim was to conquer China. In 1592 the Japanese army invaded Korea and captured Seoul within a few weeks; however, they were pushed back again by the much stronger Chinese army in the following year. Hideyoshi stubbornly didn’t give in until the final evacuation from Korea in 1598, the same year in which he died and Tokugawa Ieyasu became the most powerful man in Japan. Against his promises he did not respect Hideyoshi’s successor Hideyori because he wanted to become the absolute ruler of Japan. In the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Ieyasu defeated the Hideyori loyalists and other Western rivals.

In 1603, Ieyasu was appointed Shogun by the emperor and established his government in Edo. The Tokugawa shoguns continued to rule Japan for over remarkable 250 years. Ieyasu brought the whole country under tight control. Ieyasu continued to promote foreign trade. He established relations with the English and the Dutch and enforced the persecution of Christianity from 1614 on.

In 1633, shogun Iemitsu forbade traveling abroad and almost completely isolated Japan in 1639 by reducing the contacts to the outside world to very limited trade relations with China and the Netherlands in the port of Nagasaki. Despite the isolation, domestic trade and agricultural production continued to improve. A strict four-class system existed during the Edo period: at the top was the samurai, followed by the peasants, artisans and merchants. The members of the four classes were not allowed to change their social status. Outcasts, or people with professions that were considered impure, became a fifth class.

In 1720 a decline of the financial situation of the government led to higher taxes and riots among the farm population. Also, Japan regularly experienced natural disasters and years of famine that caused riots and further financial problems for the central government and the daimyo. As the merchant class grew increasingly powerful, some samurai became financially dependent of them.

Commodore Perry in 1853, and again in 1854, forced the Tokugawa government to open a limited number of ports for international trade. However, the trade remained very limited until the Meiji restoration in 1868. Many people soon recognized the big advantages of the Western nations in science and military, and favored a complete opening to the world. In 1867-68, the Tokugawa government fell because of heavy political pressure, and the power of Emperor Meiji was restored. The emperor Meiji was moved from Kyoto to Tokyo, which became the new capital. The actual political power was transferred from the Tokugawa Bakufu into the hands of a small group of nobles and former samurai. The Japanese were forced to sign unequal treaties with Western powers.

In order to stabilize the new government, the former feudal lords (daimyo) had to return all their lands to the emperor. This was achieved already in 1872 and followed by the restructuring of the country in prefectures. The education system was reformed after the French and later after the German system. Among those reforms was the introduction of enforced education. Catching up on the military sector was a main concern for Japan in an era of European and American imperialism. Since Japan spent a lot, this led to a financial crisis in the middle of the 1880 s, which was followed by a reform of the currency system and the establishment of the Bank of Japan. The textile industry grew fastest and remained the largest Japanese industry until WW2. On the political sector, Japan received its first European style constitution in 1889. Political parties did not yet gain real power due to the lack of unity among their members.

Conflicts of interests in Korea between China and Japan led to the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95. Japan defeated China, received Taiwan, but was forced by Western powers to return other territories. This made the Japanese army and navy more in need to be greater. Russia and Japan had new conflicts of interests in Korea and Manchuria, and this led to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05. The Japanese army also won this war gaining territory and finally some international respect. Japan further increased her influence on Korea and took her over completely in 1910. In Japan, the war successes caused nationalism to increase even more, and other Asian nations also started to develop national self-confidence.

In 1912 emperor Meiji died, and the era of the ruling clique was about to end. During the era of emperor Taisho, the political power shifted from the clique to the parliament and the democratic parties. In the First World War, Japan joined the Allied powers, but played only a small role in fighting German forces in East Asia. After WW1, Japan’s economical situation worsened. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the worldwide depression of 1929 intensified the crisis.

During the 1930s, the military established almost complete control over the government. Many political enemies were assassinated, and communists persecuted. Navy and army officers soon occupied most of the important offices, including the one of the prime minister. In the In 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations since she was heavily criticized for her actions in China. In July 1937, the second Sino-Japanese War broke out. The Japanese forces succeeded in occupying almost the whole coast of China. The Chinese government never surrendered completely, and the war continued on a lower scale until 1945.

Japan’s next step was the expansion to the South and the establishment of the “Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” which included the freedom of the South East Asian countries from Western colonial powers. In 1940, Japan occupied French Indochina (Vietnam) and joined the Axis powers Germany and Italy. In December 1941, Japan attacked the Allied powers at Pearl Harbor and several other points throughout the Pacific. The turning point in the Pacific War was the battle of Midway in June 1942. From then on, the Allied forces slowly won back the territories occupied by Japan.

In 1944, intensive air raids started over Japan. On July 27, 1945, the Allied powers requested Japan in the Potsdam Declaration to surrender, or bombing would continue. However, the military did not think of surrendering under such terms. US military forces dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9. And also the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan on August 8. On August 14, however, the more moderate emperor Showa finally decided to surrender unconditionally.

In both books there were different views of Japan. Japan And Its World, by Marius B. Jansen, did not illustrate the view I wished it to illustrate. It simply discussed the view and thoughts of the Japanese during obstacles and periods of Japanese history. I preferred Japan From Shogun To Sony, by John R. Roberson, because it was a better book to read and it had a better understanding of each time period discussed. It was also more in depth and gave a good description of the history of Japan in which I was looking for.