

# THROWING OFF ASIA I

WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF DOMESTIC "WESTERNIZATION" (1868-1912)

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## Chapter One: Westernization

What does it mean to speak of people, cultures, or nations responding to "the challenge of the Western world"?

What does "Westernization" involve in concrete practice?

Beginning in the mid-19th century, no non-white, non-Christian, non-Western nation met this challenge more dynamically and dramatically than Japan. Long before its recent accomplishments in automobiles and electronics and pop-culture phenomena like *manga* and *anime*, and long before its disastrous plunge into militarism and war in the 1930s and 1940s, Japan was widely recognized as the great nation-building "success story" of the non-Western world.

In the 19th and early-20th centuries, Japan alone among the major countries of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East succeeded in escaping colonial or neo-colonial domination by the United States and expansionist nations of Europe. Japan alone adopted an agenda of industrialization and "Westernization" that enabled it to emerge as a global power in its own right. Indeed, when the victorious nations of World War One met at Versailles in 1919 to dictate peace terms and form the League of Nations, Japan participated as one of the "Big Five" powers, alongside the United States, England, France, and Italy.

This was an extraordinary accomplishment, particularly when one considers how backward the country had appeared to be only a few generations earlier.

For seven centuries, from the late-12th century until 1868, Japan was ruled by a warrior elite. For over two centuries, beginning in the 1630s, the feudal government based in Edo (present-day Tokyo) had enforced a strict "closed country" (*sakoku*) policy that prohibited Japanese from leaving and foreigners from entering.

While Europe and the United States experienced scientific and industrial as well as political revolutions, and adopted expansionist policies, Japan turned inward—embracing seclusion and, at least at official levels, venerating tradition.

Cities grew, commerce flourished, and literacy became widespread during this long period of isolation. Peace and relative prosperity spawned the vibrant popular culture we can still visualize vividly today through traditional woodblock prints (which first appeared in the 17th century). Still, in the mid-1800s Japan was a small, introverted,

resource-poor, and fundamentally agrarian society. Even within the context of Asia alone, it seemed dwarfed in China's shadow in every way—historically, culturally, physically, and on any imaginable scale of human and natural resources.

This was the country Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States encountered when his warships made two visits in 1853 and 1854 to force the feudal government to abandon the "closed country" policy.

This was a daunting challenge to Japan's leaders, who were aware of Western imperialism and "gunboat diplomacy" elsewhere—including in China next door. In the notorious "Opium War" of 1839 to 1842, defeated China was forced to accept and legalize the opium trade of the Western powers. In the sordid "Arrow War" of 1856 to 1858, shortly after Perry's mission to Japan, the British and French had bombarded Canton and Tientsin and forced China to make additional humiliating concessions.

No one was sure, at the time, whether Japan would sink or swim.

No one anticipated that Japan would or could throw off seven centuries of feudal rule quickly and announce—as the new government did within a matter of months—that "evil customs of the past shall be broken off" and "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule."

Certainly no one dreamed that in 1894 and 1895, a mere 40 years after Perry's arrival, Japan would be capable of mobilizing a modern army and navy and bringing China to its knees—and, 10 years after that, doing much the same to mighty Tsarist Russia.