

## Site Quest: Creating a Guide to the “Foreigners”

### Teacher Background Notes, page one of one

By the 1850s, Japan had been ruled by a single family for more than 200 years. The family was called the Tokugawa and the leader was known as the shogun. The shogun ruled over a country consisting of 250 domains, each headed by a local lord called a daimyo.

To promote peace and stability, the Tokugawa ruling family had closed Japan to most outside influences, including Western trade, in the early 1600s. Japan had existed in relative isolation from the West since that time.

In 1853, U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry led an American fleet of four warships into Edo Bay, close to the Tokugawa capital city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). Perry demanded that Japan open relations with America and informed the Tokugawa government (called the Bakufu) that he would return the following year for the Tokugawa leader's response.

Perry returned in 1854 with a larger fleet. The Tokugawa government had little choice but to agree to American demands for trade. On March 31, 1854, the two sides signed the Treaty of Kanagawa.

In the Treaty of Kanagawa, Japan agreed to provide hospitality for shipwrecked sailors and to open two ports (Hakodate and Shimoda) to provide Westerners with access to supplies. Most importantly, the treaty provided for the establishment of a U.S. consulate in Shimoda after 18 months had passed, thus laying the groundwork for full-scale commercial relations between Japan and the outside world.

After difficult negotiations lasting two years, the U.S. consul to Japan, Townsend Harris, negotiated a commercial treaty with the Tokugawa government. The Harris Treaty—formally titled the United States-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce—went into effect in 1859. Among its provisions were:

1. Exchange of diplomatic representatives.
2. Opening of five ports to unimpeded trade.
3. Extraterritoriality for American citizens.
4. Protection for American traders from high tariff barriers.
5. Prohibition of opium commerce.

Within a short time, the Netherlands, Russia, England, and France had negotiated similar treaties with Japan. The commercial agreements became known in Japan as the “unequal treaty system.” They denied Japan tariff autonomy. They prohibited Japanese authorities from prosecuting foreigners who committed crimes on Japanese soil. They also included a third demeaning stipulation in the form of “most-favored-nation” clauses. Under this last provision, any additional privileges one foreign nation might extract from the harried Japanese government (such as the further reductions of import duties that took place between 1858 and 1866) would also be extended to other nations having a treaty with the Japanese.