

# THE CLOSING OF JAPAN

In 1635, frightened by the spread of Christianity which had been carried to Japan in the 1500s by Spanish and Portuguese missionaries, the Tokugawa Shogun issued the following edict:

## The 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 taken 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 (Christianity) is practiced, a thorough investigation must be ordered.
5. Any informer revealing the whereabouts of the followers of (Christians) must be rewarded accordingly.
6. If a foreign ship has an objection (to the measures adopted) and it becomes necessary to report the matter to Edo, you may ask the Omura domain to provide ships to guard the foreign ship, as was done previously.
7. If there are any Southern Barbarians (Westerners) who propagate the teachings of Christianity or otherwise commit crimes, they may be imprisoned.
8. All incoming ships must be carefully searched for the followers of Christianity.
9. The date of departure homeward of foreign ships shall not be later than the twentieth day of the ninth month. Any ships arriving in Japan later than usual shall depart within fifty days of their arrival. As to the departure of Chinese ships, you may use your discretion to order their departure after the departure of the Portuguese (galleon).

You are hereby required to act in accordance with the provisions set above.  
It is so ordered.

*How would you describe the punishment for a Japanese individual who chooses to leave the country? Why do you think it was so harsh?*

*Do you think these restrictions were helpful or hurtful to the development of Japan? Explain.*

## Tokugawa Sumptuary Laws

One means the Tokugawa government used to reinforce and control the social class system they had instituted was the passage of sumptuary laws—laws prohibiting overt displays of wealth and power such as extravagant dress, elaborate furnishings, and so on—by all except high-ranking samurai and daimyō. The guiding principle of the sumptuary laws was the Confucian principle of hierarchy and proper place that guided Tokugawa society: "Lord and vassal, superior and inferior, should observe what is proper to their station in life."

In the beginning of the period, such laws maintained the actual social hierarchy. However, as the Tokugawa period progressed and the Japanese economy flourished under a period of extended peace, the merchant class became increasingly wealthy. Merchant wealth belied the low official status of this class. At the same time, samurai became more impoverished despite their high official status. The Tokugawa government felt it necessary to pass more and more detailed sumptuary laws in an effort to prohibit the increasingly affluent merchant class from displaying its true wealth. By allowing samurai to display wealth and other classes not, the sumptuary laws helped to enforce an illusion of a stable social class structure with the samurai in the most powerful position. By the 1700s, it was becoming increasingly difficult to enforce sumptuary laws. The following are excerpts from sumptuary laws issued by the Tokugawa government.

### Laws Governing Military Households, 1615:

Without authorization, no retainer may indiscriminately wear fine white damask, white wadded silk garments, purple silk kimono, purple silk linings, and kimono sleeves which bear no family crest. Lately retainers and soldiers have taken to wearing rich damask and silk brocade. This was not sanctioned by the old laws, and must now be kept within bounds.

### Economy of Orders, 1724:

Women's dress has of recent years become more and more showy. Hereafter, even the wives of daimyō shall not use more than a small amount of gold thread embroidery in their garments and shall not wear dresses made of costly fabrics. . . . Expensive lacquerware is not to be bought, even by daimyō. The chairs, chests, and workboxes of their wives are to be plain black lacquer, with no more than a crest as ornament. . . .

### Questions for Discussion:

1. For what purposes did the Tokugawa government issue sumptuary laws?
2. How would you feel about the sumptuary laws if you were a samurai? If you were a wealthy merchant? A farmer? Explain.