CHAPTER 19 - EAST ASIA IN THE LATE TRADITIONAL ERA

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examines the development of China and Japan, noting the cultural similarities and political differences. China discovered a centralized bureaucratic government that it replaced each time it broke down. Thus China's history developed in a cyclical manner with historical trends that cut across dynastic lines. But Japanese history is longitudinal and reflects a new and different configuration: centralization to a manorial regime, decentralization to centralized feudalism. Japan was like the West in that it never found a pattern of rule that worked so well, it was recreated again and again. The chapter also underlines the dynamism of both China and Japan. These were not static societies; the West simply had accelerated.

The Ming (1368-1644) and the Ch'ing (1644-1911) were China's last dynasties. The first was Chinese, the second a dynasty of conquest in which the ruling house and a segment of the military were foreign (Manchus).

China's population doubled during the Ming from about 60 million to 125 million at its conclusion. It continued to grow to more than 400 million in the nineteenth century and this became an important factor in the growth of commerce and in the establishment of the scholar-gentry class. The chapter then details the important crops and patterns of Chinese settlement and focuses on China's third commercial revolution between 1500 and 1800. By the early nineteenth century, China was the most highly commercialized nonindustrial society in the world.

The political system of China was closely connected with an expanded role of Confucianism. A large segment of the population was familiar with its ideals and values, especially in that the state was identified with family, a concept that brought greater unity and integration to Chinese society. The emperor wielded greater control over the country and generally continued a pattern of direct, personal rule. His despotic powers were exercised brutally at times and his majesty was reflected in the Forbidden Palace in Beijing. The bureaucracy during the Ming-Ch'ing period was efficient and largely a product of the ethical commitment of its officials. The competition to become a mandarin was intense, but resulted in capable administrators. The final component of the Chinese political system was the gentry. It was an immediate layer between the elite bureaucracy above and the village below. The Chinese gentry were generally urban and owned land, which enabled them to avoid labor and function in the same social class as magistrates. The gentry class was the local upholder of Confucian ideals and became the sustainer of the dynasty in times of crisis during the nineteenth century.
In 1644, the Ming dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the Manchus who had been vassals of the Chinese and thus partially Sinified at the time of the conquest. They presented themselves as the conservative upholders of the Confucian order in the face of Chinese rebel chaos upon the fall of the Ming dynasty. As the Manchus were a tiny function of the Chinese population, they adopted institutions to maintain themselves as an ethnically separate elite group. In addition, the "dyarchy" or appointment of a Chinese and a Manchu to key positions in the central government strengthened Manchu control. The chapter then details the accomplishments of two able Manchu emperors: K'ang Hsi and Ch'ien Lung.

The chapter continues to explain the Ming-Ch'ing foreign policy. This was a period of rapid expansion and "managed" frontiers. Maritime expeditions were launched to East Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and Arabia between 1405 and 1433. The expeditions ended abruptly because of inadequate financial returns, but it did prove that the Chinese had the necessary maritime technology and decided not to use it. The Japanese and the Mongols were the most aggressive forces against the empire until the Manchus arrived. By the 1660s Russian traders reached northern Manchuria and established fortified outposts. These were eliminated in the 1680s by K'ang Hsi. Chinese contact with Europeans increased with Portuguese traders and the Jesuit order of the Catholic church. The Jesuits studied the Chinese language and classics which helped them establish firm bonds of trust. Tenuous relations with the papacy undermined Jesuit contacts with China and by the mid-eighteenth century the emperor had banned Christianity.

The culture of the Ming-Ch'ing period was sophisticated and admired, particularly painting, poetry, calligraphy and philosophy. Chinese today, however, see the novel as the characteristic cultural achievement of the Ming and the Ch'ing. Examples include the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and All Men are Brothers.

The next division of the chapter relates the events in Japan from 1467-1868. Within this time period, two distinct segments are evident: 1) the Warring States Era (1467-1600) and 2) the Tokugawa Era (1600-1868).

The warring states era saw the unleashing of internal wars and monarchy that scourged the old society from the bottom up. Within the space of a century, all vestiges of the old manorial or estate system had been destroyed and almost all of the Ashikaga lords had been overthrown. The samurai gained new privileges in society and changed the concept of land tenure in Japan. The period resembled feudal Europe in some ways. New weapons such as the thrusting spear and the musket changed the art of warfare.

The Tokugawa era that followed saw Japan reunited and stable, with a stronger government than ever before. Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa ruler, moved the capitol to Edo (modern Tokyo) and took the title Shogun. The Tokugawa established legal codes to regulate the imperial court, temples and shrines and
also the "hostage system" that required the permanent presence of the nobility at Edo. This transformed feudal lords into courtiers. Another key controlling factor of the Tokugawa was a national policy of seclusion. No foreigners (with few exceptions) were allowed to enter Japan, and on pain of death no Japanese could venture abroad. This policy was strictly enforced until 1854.

During the Tokugawa period, Japanese culture was brilliantly transformed, preparing it for the challenge it would face during the mid-nineteenth century. Two hundred and fifty years of peace and prosperity provided a base for a broad, complex culture. The chapter goes on to detail some of the most important artistic and literary works. Confucianism replaced Buddhism among the ruling elite. National studies became more important during the Tokugawa period and Japanese linguistics became its most enduring achievement.

The chapter ends with a section on the spread of Chinese learning into the surrounding areas of Korea and Vietnam. These peoples modeled their governments on those of China. They accepted Chinese Buddhism and Confucianism, and with them, Chinese conceptions of the universe, state, and human relationships. But Koreans and Vietnamese also spoke non-Chinese tongues, saw themselves as separate peoples, and took pride in their independence. The chapter then details the Koryo dynasty and Choson Era in Korea, as well as the history of Vietnam to about the mid-19th century.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **China's Third Commercial Revolution:** This occurred between 1500 and 1800 and resulted in China being the most highly commercialized nonindustrial society in the world. One stimulus to commerce was imported silver from mines in western Japan and Mexican and Peruvian silver brought in by Spanish galleons via Manila. Market towns grew rapidly and resulted in the commercial integration of locally intermediate and large cities, although this did not lead to a national economy.

2. **China's Political System:** Government during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties was not influenced by the massive demographic and economic changes of the period, but remained much like that of the Sung or Yuan, only improved and stronger. Historians sometimes describe it as the "perfected" late imperial system. This system was able to contain and use the new economic energies that destroyed weaker late-feudal polities of Europe. The sources of strength of the perfected Ming-Ch'ing system were the spread of education and Confucian doctrines, a stronger
emperor, better government finances, more competent officials, and a larger gentry class with an expanded role in local society.

3. **China's Foreign Policy:** Some scholars have contended that post-Sung China was not an aggressive or imperialist state. They cite its inability to resist foreign conquest, and the civility, self-restraint, and gentlemanliness of its officials. The early Ming convincingly disproves this contention. Chinese emperors expanded its borders to the Sungari River in Manchuria and expelled the Mongols from Yunnan in 1382. Troops were sent to northern Vietnam and even into the Gobi desert. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China drove the Russians from the lower Amur River, invaded Tibet and gained millions of miles of new territory through treaties with Russia. It is a comment on the Chinese concept of empire that even after China's borders began to contract in the nineteenth century, the Chinese continued to view the limits of maximal expansion under the Manchu as their legitimate borders. The roots of the present contention over borders between China and the Soviet Union go back to these events during the eighteenth century.

4. **The Later Tokugawa Economy:** Commerce grew slowly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the commercial growth was in countryside industries - sake, soy sauce, dyes, silks or cotton. The expansion of labor in such rural industries may explain the population shrinkage in late Tokugawa cities. The largest question about the Tokugawa economy concerns its relation to Japan's emerging industrialization, which began later in the nineteenth century. Some scholars have asked whether Japan had a "running start." Others have stressed Japanese backwardness in comparison with European late-developers. The question remains unresolved.

5. **Late Traditional East Asia in World Perspective:** Many reasons have been offered as to why an industrial revolution along European lines did not occur in East Asia. Some have suggested a lack of capital, the absence of a puritan work ethic, failure of a scientific revolution and others. There is no consensus on this, just an affirmation that economic growth did not lead to a breakthrough in machine industry. Comparisons can be made between the efficiency of Asia and European bureaucracies. Officials were men of talent, who became obstacles to modernity. A final point concerns the difference between Chinese and Japanese attitudes toward outside civilizations. The Chinese lack of interest in outside cultures can be explained by the coherence of its core institutions of government. In contrast, the Tokugawa Japanese reached out for Dutch
science despite a national policy of seclusion. This difference would shape the respective responses of China and Japan to the West in the mid-nineteenth century.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Chinese History: 10 - China: The Restoration.* Indiana U. 22 min.


*Chinese History: 12 - China: Coming of the West.* Indiana U. 20 min.


*Japanese Armor.* Japan Broadcasting Company. 30 min.

*The Japanese Sword as the Soul of the Samurai.* Kensharo Productions. 24 min.