

In speaking about the epic history of Japan, I often use a somewhat simplified but very useful schema:

HISTORY OF PRE-MODERN JAPAN	
PALEOLITHIC (Pre-history)	35,000 - 11,000 BC
JOMON Period	11,000 - 300 BC
YAYOI Period	300 BC - 300 AD
YAMATO (Kofun) Period	300 - 710
CLASSICAL PERIOD	
Asuka Period	538-710
Nara Period	710-792
Heian (Kyoto) Period	792-1185
FEUDAL PERIOD – Age of the Shoguns	
Kamakura Period	1185-1338
Muromachi Period (Ashikaga Shogunate)	1338-1570
Onin War - 10-Year Civil War	1467-77
Sengoku Period (Fragmented, Warring Warlords)	1477-1600
Azuchi (Nobunaga)-Momoyama (Hideyoshi) Period - Reunification	1570s-1600
Tokugawa (Edo) Period - 268 Years of Tokugawa Shoguns	1600-1868

Each of these periods is fascinating and complex, as are their interrelationships. In this précis on the “great unifiers,” we will be **focusing on the late Feudal Period** in the above chart and specifically on the late 16th century. For a more detailed account on the earlier Feudal Period and its origins, see my handout on HISTORY OF PRE-MODERN JAPAN. Note that Japan’s classical period ends in roughly 1185 when then the shogun – the top military warlord - seized absolute power and the emperor became a marginalized figurehead only. This was a military coup and ushered in Japan’s feudal period which lasted almost 700 years. The feudal period itself is often divided into 4 sub-periods: the first shogunate founded by Minamoto Yoritomo but known as the Kamakura Shogunate because it was centered in Kamakura outside of Tokyo, the second successor shogunate founded by Ashikaga Takiuji in 1333 which was centered in Kyoto around Muromachi and is known as the Muromachi Shogunate, the chaotic and violent Sengoku Period (aka Warring States Period) in which multiple warlord clans vied for power and Japan was divided into warlord fiefdoms, and finally the enduring (1603-1868) Tokugawa Shogunate named after the last ruling dynasty. The Sengoku or Warring States Period was ushered in by an outright 10-year civil war from 1467-1477 known as the Onin War. The warring *daimyos* (literally ‘big men’) fought themselves to exhaustion and there was no true victor. In its aftermath a fractured, chaotic, and violent Japan was to be the prevailing situation for over a century. The Sengoku Period is the era that Kurosawa depicts in all of his great samurai films including *Throne of Blood*, *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, *Kagemusha*, and *Ran*. The Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan’s last (if you don’t count Douglas MacArthur as ‘The Last Shogun’, as I do) was by contrast a period of unity, rigorous control of everything and everybody, relative (but not complete) isolation from the rest of the world, and for the most part peace and stability. The term *Pax Tokugawa* is often used to describe the long period of peace ushered in by the Tokugawa shoguns. In discussing the 3 great unifiers, I’ll focus on the transition from the disunity and chaos of the Sengoku Period to the unified and stable Tokugawa Period. That transition involved gradual unification of the warring factions into a true Japanese state under 3 successive larger-than-life shoguns.

The first great unifier was **Oda Nobunaga** (1534-1582). A *daimyo* of decisive military action, an amoral murderer of anyone in his way including family members and Buddhist monks, and a man without mercy or scruples, Nobunaga was a Saddam Hussein-like strongman who, like Saddam, managed to pacify bitter enemies and unify much of Japan under his sword. There is a famous parable about a nightingale who would not sing, and how each of the 3 great unifiers would deal with it. Nobunaga would kill the bird for not singing and move on. Nobunaga was an early adopter of western weaponry (remember that the *nanban* = southern barbarians = us Westerners) arrived in Japan in the 1500s during the

Sengoku Period). He unified central Honshu and ended the last remnant of the non-viable Ashikaga Shogunate. A violent man, Nobunaga died a violent death. An enemy burnt him to death in a temple in Kyoto where he was enjoying a tea ceremony (though some accounts say he killed himself before being immolated).

The second great unifier was **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** (1536-1598). Hideyoshi was born the son of a low-ranking samurai but at a young age had attached himself to the up-and-coming Nobunaga, eventually rising from servant to the top-tier inner circle due to his unswerving loyalty and bravery. After Nobunaga's assassination, Hideyoshi gathered an army and through a series of battles emerged as the new shogun and assumed his mentor's mantle with a continued unification campaign. Hideyoshi's hegemonic control was characterized by policies which transformed Japan, including disarming all but the samurai (known as "The Great Sword Hunt"—think of guns being outlawed in the US and the campaign it would take to disarm the entire populace). This edict did not please the farmers but it did please the Buddhist clerics who melted down the metal swords of the farmers and re-fashioned them into Buddha statues. This is one of many examples of Buddhism as a tool of the state in Japanese history – the monks were Hideyoshi's best agents for the disarmament edict. Hideyoshi also froze the social order into four classes, in order of social standing: samurai, farmer, artisan and – at the bottom – merchant. He implemented a massive and meticulously well-organized land survey and taxation scheme (with rice as the currency). He was a great negotiator and diplomat. If the nightingale wouldn't sing, he would coax it to sing. He had a love-hate relationship with the Christians – loved their weapons and trading role, hated their religion and political threat. It gradually turned to mostly hate and mass executions. Hideyoshi succeeded in unifying greater Japan and many scholars would say he is the greatest of the 3 unifiers. He was shrewd but also grandiose; Osaka Castle was one of his pet projects. He set his sights on conquering China, and launched several invasions of Korea as a stepping stone - all were unsuccessful, but a sign of things to come. Before he died in 1598 he appointed his 5 year-old son Hideyori as his successor and appointed his most powerful *daimyo* ally, Tokugawa Ieyasu, as regent, to protect and serve his son until his son came of age. Ieyasu had other plans for who should be the next shogun: himself.

The patient, wise, and shrewd **Tokugawa Ieyasu** was Japan's 3rd great unifier. He fought the supporters of Hideyoshi/Hideyori and others for several years, ultimately emerging victorious at the famed Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. This ushered in the 265-year Tokugawa Period, definitively ending the Sengoku Period and consolidating the social changes and political and economic infrastructure that the great Hideyoshi had put in place. If the nightingale wouldn't sing, Ieyasu would wait for it to sing. The shogun being a hereditary military dictatorship, Ieyasu's heirs ruled until the Meiji Restoration (actually a revolution, creating modern post-feudal Japan) in 1868. Ieyasu moved the capital to Tokyo, then known as Edo, which means bay. He built the strongest central government Japan had ever known. The second coming of the *nanban* southern barbarians – in this case Commodore Perry and his black ships in 1853-54 - was to catalyze forces which would mortally wound the atavistic feudal shogunate and thrust Japan headlong into modernity.

Another parable which compares and contrasts the roles and temperaments of the 3 great unifiers is the parable of the pie: Nobunaga kneaded the dough, Hideyoshi baked the pie, and Tokugawa Ieyasu ate the pie. One last note for those interested in feudal Japan: you will often see the shogunate referred to as the **bakufu**, e.g., the Kamakura Bakufu, Muromachi/Ashikaga Bakufu, and Tokugawa Bakufu. The word *bakufu* literally means tent, and represents the shogun's military tent encampment and headquarters in the field. So the term is used metonymically in a poetic way: the shogun's tent represents the entire shogunate.



Oda NOBUNAGA



Toyotomi HIDEYOSHI



TOKUGAWA Ieyasu