

The Japanese Experience: Voluntary Isolation and Modernization.  
Faculty of Arts, Cairo University , January 2004

The Japanese Experience of Voluntary Isolation  
and Modernization

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Abstract :

This paper addresses the Japanese policy of voluntary isolation which directly preceded its experience with the process of modernization.

The voluntary isolation policy extended over more than two centuries (1637-1853 A.D.) In 1854, an American army led by the navy commander Mathew Perry invaded Japan, and one result of this invasion was that Japan was forced to gradually open up to the surrounding countries and the world. The modernization did not happen overnight immediately after the invasion, but it gradually started to take shape and we can talk about the real start of modernization as occurring around one decade after the invasion. What is unique about the impact of that invasion is that Japan itself neither fell under the American influence nor did it embrace the American or western model; i.e. Japan was not westernized.

We discuss in this paper some of the factors and historical changes that explain how Japan was able to strike a unique balance between maintaining and dignifying its unique heritage on the one hand, and passing successfully through the modernization process on the other. Japan's modernization had both positive and negative sides, but we show how the positive aspects much outweighed its negative sides. We argue that such study benefit developing nations interested in effecting positive changes in their respective countries through assessing, adopting or adapting the strategies and techniques of Japan for modernization. The paper, therefore, addresses the following four main topics:

- (1) The unification period that preceded the policy of Japan's voluntary isolation of itself, and the impact of that policy on

the subsequent modernization process.

- (2) The influence of the feudal lords who controlled the agricultural lands of Japan and channeled the policy of voluntary isolation.
- (3) The rationale or the causes of the voluntary isolation policy.
- (4) An exposition of both the positive and negative impacts of the voluntary isolation policy on the economic, administrative, and educational fields and how they influenced and shaped the modernization process in Japan.