

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1800-1890, foreign relations)]

**Document 13: “Western governments . . . no morality nor reason.” *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*
newspaper editorial, February 24, 1877**

We cannot arrive at an equality with foreign powers, because they maintain their conduct not by reason or on moral principles, but depend upon force. We know very well that this is a fact applicable to every western power. . . .

The friendship between western powers is not governed by reason nor by morality. One nation will take advantage of the troubles of another and desire to benefit itself by seeking a quarrel with the one that is in trouble. Equitable principles have been discarded on the European continent, and each nation has to preserve its peace by being well prepared for war. In fact Europe is in much the same condition as our country was at the end of the reign of the Ashikaga Siogun. . . . Emperors, Kings and Prime Ministers are apparently on the most intimate and friendly terms, but the desire of each is to thrust down the other at every opportunity offered. Such is the political condition of Europe. How can we hope to preserve friendly relations with foreigners by relying on their integrity if we are not prepared to use force.

. . . In Europe neither reason nor morality is needed to preserve the independence of nations. If a person desires to cover his bad actions he can do so on various pretexts. An ancient sage says that, when a weak man happens to tread on the toes of a strong man, the latter becomes angry and inflicts punishment upon him. But when the strong man happens to tread on the toes of the weak man, he also becomes angry and punishes him for putting his feet in the way. Such will be the diplomatic action of Europe. This is not the golden age in which morality controls force;



but it is an age when every man in the world strives for his own advantage, regardless of the injuries inflicted upon others or the trouble they may be in.

Even in Europe diplomacy is governed by the strength of each country. And how can we hope that foreigners who regard eastern nations as half civilized will behave with reason and morality towards us! Consider the behavior of foreigners towards us! It is not right at all! The face of our independent country was stained, as our countrymen know, by the convention which was signed by the Tokugawa government. It is now useless to talk of it; but foreigners have taken advantage of various disturbances which occurred at the decline of the Siogun's [sic] power. They forced their way into the heart of our country for the promotion of their own benefit and convenience. . . .

Since the foundation of the present government, considerable progress has been made in friendly intercourse with foreign countries. They various representatives are treated politely by us, and the people are highly favored, preserving their national rights and studying their own convenience; and everything they want it given to them, or permission granted to have it. Thus our government treats foreigners with respect, wishing to hasten the time of the alteration of the convention, by which we shall hold the taxation and judicial powers in our hands. But we fear that the western governments, where no morality nor reason is preserved, will not accede to our desire in this respect.

Source: *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, translated in *The Tokio Times*, February 24, 1877, 95.



Context.

Ushered into the modern world by the American gunboats of Commodore Matthew Perry, the new Meiji government, launched in 1868, set out to make Japan a strong, modern state, fully engaged in international affairs. One of its major challenges was the imperialist approach of the Western powers, which viewed international relations as a means to improve trade and gain political advantages for themselves. By mid-century, the leading nations were in the process of taking colonies and territory throughout Africa and Asia—prompting the Japanese to decide that if they were to survive they would have to follow a policy of *fukoku kyōhei* (rich nation/powerful army).

Questions.

1. Was the editorial writer correct to say that “the friendship between western powers is not governed by reason nor by morality”? What specific things in Japan’s experience with the nations of the West might have made that writer so cynical?
2. As a Japanese official in the 1870s, faced with limited finances and considerable domestic opposition, what policies might you have recommended to avoid being taken over by the Western nations?

**Terms.**

Siogun. A 19th century spelling of “shogun,” the military general who headed the governments of Japan during its medieval and early modern periods, from the 13th to the 19th centuries.

“End of the Ashikaga.” This refers to the “warring states period,” the mid-1400s through the mid-1500s, when Japan experienced continual warfare among competing daimyo domains. The Ashikaga family ruled in name only.

“Convention signed by the Tokugawa government.” Treaties signed between Japan and Western nations from 1854 to 1848, infringing on Japan’s sovereignty. They limited the tariffs Japan could levy on incoming goods to an average of about 5 percent (while Western nations were free to assess any duty they chose), and they stipulated that Westerners in Japan would operate under the principle of extraterritoriality, meaning that if charged with an offense, they would be tried by their own countrymen rather than by the Japanese. These “unequal treaties” continued for decades, until extraterritoriality was ended in 1899 and tariff autonomy was gained in 1911.