

Western Missionaries in Japan in the Meiji and Taisho Periods

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Background and Goals

After having almost no communication with the Western world for over 200 years, Japan was forced to open its doors in 1854 by a fleet of American gunships. Although western dignitaries and businessmen immediately began to establish settlements in Japan it was almost five years before Christian missionaries were able to enter the country. Japan's problematic history with Christianity made it difficult for many missionaries to work openly. Even with these challenges, missionaries across the country were able to create lasting institutions and communities which influence Japan to this day.

After taking three modern Japanese history classes I became interested in learning more about Christian missionaries in Japan. Although missionaries were highly influential in many parts of Japan, their work is often not emphasized in history. I had many goals for my research. The most broad of these goals was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact and influence of missionaries across Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) Japan. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary for me to create smaller, more specific goals for my time in Japan. While all missionaries did a wide array of things, my focus was primarily on missionaries and education. One of the most important goals for my trip was to visit the schools that missionaries had established to see what they have developed into today. It was at these schools that I hoped to conduct my historical research by finding primary and secondary documents which related to the missionary founders. I also planned on visiting historical archives which would contain documents related to missionaries.

Results

My research provided positive results both academically and culturally. I was able to visit and conduct research at ten schools across Japan. Not only did I work with professors at these institutions but I was also invited to speak with students about my research and America.

At both the universities and archives I visited I was able to access and copy numerous primary and secondary documents only available in Japan. These documents ranged from letters to family members to annual reports to mission boards. After reading through many of these documents and learning more about the institutions I visited, it became very clear that the presence of the founding missionaries is still felt today.

I will be using the results of my research to help compose my senior honors thesis in the history department. Being given the opportunity to travel to Japan and witness the impact of missionaries first hand has made my research that much more meaningful.