The start in 1598 of Tokugawa Ieyasu’s reign as shogun of Japan marked the beginning of a long period of almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. This “era of seclusion” had especially detrimental effects on both shipbuilding and ship operation, for all overseas trade and voyages were prohibited and only coastal and inter-island services allowed. For over 250 years the most important activity for Japanese wasen (small, traditional wooden sailing vessels) was to carry rice, sake and fruit to the major population centres at Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto.

The arrival of Commodore Perry and a fleet of United States warships in what is now Tokyo Bay during 1853 rapidly changed this situation. The already weakened Tokugawa regime was unable to cope with a further set of problems caused by the arrival of foreigners demanding that Japan be opened to trade, and in 1868 it was replaced by a new government operating in the name of the Emperor Meiji. While the new rulers faced the daunting task of “westernizing” almost every aspect of Japan’s economic, social and political life, from the beginning they were prepared to give shipping a very high priority.

The reason for this decision was the belief that control over external communications had enabled Europe to exploit the trades and resources of China and many other countries in the East. Accordingly, the Japanese government made every effort to support its shipping industries which were successful in retaining the coastal routes in the face of foreign competition. Japanese operators, frequently using British-built steamers, were then able to extend their trades to include a number of short-sea services and over time to break into ocean traffic, which had been dominated by European and American companies.

Government assistance to Japanese ship operators was at first limited to the guarantee of dividends, which meant that adequate capital was always available to the regular or shasen lines. Later its major financial support was provided through subsidization of route mileage (which helped to encourage entry into long-distance trades) and the state promoted what it deemed desirable characteristics by giving extra aid for size, speed and the provision of special facilities, such as refrigeration.
and radios. As a result, and assisted by the rapid growth of Japan’s overseas trade, the merchant fleet quickly expanded. While by 1910 it had become the third largest in the world, its 1.25 million net tons was much smaller than the U.K. fleet, which comprised over twelve million net tons at the same time (see Table 1).

The great success enjoyed by Japanese ship operators was not, however, replicated by the country’s shipbuilders. The lack of efficient steel production and viable engineering industries were considerable handicaps which could only be overcome gradually. Nonetheless, government regulations providing full operating subsidies only for domestically-produced tonnage were steadily introduced and gradually encouraged production in Japanese yards. By 1914 the industry thus was capable of building all types of ships but at costs—even with the benefit of low wages—which were still significantly above the international (especially the British) level. On the eve of the First World War Japan still found it economic to import fifty percent of its vessels, while exports did not exist. Nevertheless, annual construction had reached 86,000 gross tons—a total which made it the sixth most important producer in the world.

During the First World War Japan was able to expand its output of ships considerably and by 1919, 323 steam vessels totalling 636,271 tons were constructed. This enormous production, however, was achieved at a time that costs were unimportant to the Allied powers desperate for shipping at virtually any price. It also owed much to a “ships for steel” arrangement which had been made with the United States. Consequently, once the artificial war-induced demand had been satisfied the Japanese found it difficult to compete with traditional builders in Europe. Output fell sharply: by 1922 it was down to 102,035 gross tons and declined to only 48,185 gross tons in 1925. As a result, the already operative policy of importing technology from the West was extended. Improvements, which were subsequently further refined and developed domestically, particularly at Mitsubishi’s Nagasaki shipyard, helped to place production on a more viable basis. Still, it was not until shipbuilding was placed on a quasi-war footing in the 1930s that substantial growth was attained again. By 1935 output had risen to 143,914 gross tons and Japan accounted for ten percent of world production. Nonetheless, the 1919 figure was not exceeded until 1943.

In December 1941, when Japan became involved in war with the United States and the United Kingdom, her mercantile marine amounted to almost six million net tons of ocean-going vessels. In addition her fleet included a further one million tons of coastal and fishing craft, many of wooden construction. These totals were increased by the 3.3 million tons built during the war and the 822,000 tons either captured or salvaged. Although substantial, these additions were insufficient to offset the severe losses inflicted principally by American submarines and aircraft. Only 1.5 million tons remained afloat by the end of the war in August 1945.

As only 557,000 tons of this total, plus 105,000 tons of wooden vessels, were seaworthy Japan faced a desperate shortage of capacity to provide for essential coastal and inter-island services. This situation was only gradually and partially relieved as backlogs of repairs and maintenance were overcome and as many bomb-damaged craft—including some raised from where they had been sunk—were brought back into active operation. The Supreme Commander Allied Powers (S.C.A.P.), acting through Japanese agencies, then permitted the resumption of construction of merchant vessels, but progress was slow and output remained low.