

Japanese Social Structure-Postclassical period

Introduction Japanese society emerged largely independent of other societies in East Asia even though it developed more than a thousand years after Chinese civilization had. It was in the enviable position of being aware of how society was structured and what had worked on the mainland, but was largely free from military coercion. Because of its geographic position as a set of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean, the Japanese were free to pick and choose what elements of culture to borrow and what to discard as unsuitable. As a result, Japanese society often resembled elements of northeast Asian culture, but was distinctive in its own ways. For example, Japanese elites in the Nara Period (710-794) adopted a number of Tang Dynasty government and social structures, but adapted them to meet the needs of a small, largely rural system struggling to establish itself. Japanese society has therefore been closely linked to its neighbors on the mainland, but has always maintained its own identity. In particular, Japan's martial heritage (the samurai), and the extent to which it dominated society for almost a millennium, has no continental analogue.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Class. The stratification of society began in earnest in the 5th and 6th centuries. Prior to that time, virtually everyone was somehow involved in or linked to subsistence agriculture—either cultivation, storage, distribution or protection. Even religious figures spent time beseeching the spirits to provide good harvests. As political and social structures began to mature, larger segments of the population were removed from cultivation and were engaged in more specialized pursuits. This led to a recognizable triangle-shaped social structure of monarchs, aristocrats, clergy, bureaucrats, skilled laborers, village leaders all the way down to peasants. Still, 95% + of the population were peasants. Most lived in small villages and rarely had contact with anyone other than other villagers, village headmen, low-ranking clergy, a few skilled laborers and perhaps itinerant peddlers. Most peasants had little to no access to education and lived lives similar to their immediate ancestors. Dwellings were small, hand built and had thatched roofs, small windows and rudimentary chimneys.

Social Structure in the Warrior Era. The Gempei War (1180-1185) acted as the catalyst for systemic social change in Japan. During the Heian period (794-1185), society was generally stable and the emphasis was on the civilian sector, the expansion of land under cultivation and maintenance of a functional system. That does not mean, however that the plight of the peasantry was uniformly bright and rosy. Natural disasters, poor harvests, epidemics, capricious government officials, unpredictable and high taxes and the like were all visited upon the peasants from time to time. Life could be difficult. In general, village headmen worked to maintain good relations between different peasant family groups and local officials. Local officials saw to it that the tax was paid, peace was kept and provincial officials kept happy. In the last century or so of the Heian period, another element was added to the social mix: the military. Soldiers didn't fit into the neat categories of society as understood in a civilian system. They weren't government officials, clergy, skilled craftsmen, village headmen or peasants. They were not producers of anything and, by and large, not accountable to local officials. They were small in number but exercised great influence. They also often switched allegiances on the provincial or national level and were, in short, a sort of wild card in the late Heian period—a disruptive force.

After the Gempei War, warriors slowly began to play a larger and more important role in society. As first Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199) and then the Hōjō Regents (1203-1333) expanded their official role, warrior role in society was normalized. The *shugo* and *jitō* system carved out a place for them in society alongside the civilian sector. The Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 and the continued threat of a third Mongol invasion until the death of the Mongol Emperor—Kublai Khan in 1294 played a significant role in the continued shift away from the civilian system to more and more military control. For approximately two decades, the needs of the civilian sector were subsumed to the needs of national defense. Society was mobilized to face the threat of total annihilation posed by the Mongols. Smithies, fletchers, coopers, swordsmiths, armorers, and the like provided goods and services for the campaign against the Mongols. Peasants grew the food, the government helped distribute it to the military and even the clergy offered up prayers for deliverance. When the threat passed, the Hōjō were bankrupt but the military all across the country then came to occupy a central position in society. As Japan passed into the Ashikaga period (1336-1477), society was ordered around the military and became, as the prominent historian Thomas Conlon argues a “State of War.” This social system continued to evolve over the course of many centuries. But the concept of the centrality of the warrior in society remained, in one form or another, until after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Readings

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Pierre Francois Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, (Columbia University Press, 2003).