

Japanese Gender Relations – 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)

Gender Roles. Both peasant men and women worked hard or didn't live long. Women were generally keepers of home and hearth. Their primary job was to gather and prepare food, and men worked the fields and rice paddies. However, it should be noted that during planting and harvest seasons, both genders and all age groups could be found in the paddies. Indeed, religious festivals grew up around women transplanting rice into flooded paddies. Men sometimes hunted and trapped animals if they had access to forests and other lands. Village life revolved around family and the village headman. He was the intermediary between government officials who set rice (tax) quotas and the peasants. His job was to collect the tax, keep the peace and settle disputes before they came to the attention of officials above the village level. It is believed that spouses were selected by parents and girls in particular were married at a very young age. If sufficiently nourished, women spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing and could expect to lose a significant number of their offspring to injury or illness in childhood.

Aristocratic society was highly ritualized and refined in the Heian period (794-1185). Virtually all lived in the city of Heian. Men were head of household, generally well educated and earned a living. Women were a part of public life mostly insofar as they were objects of desire and/or wooing by men or vice versa. Many aristocratic women were literate (at least partially) and free to attend parties and poetry exhibitions but could not expect to rise to positions of leadership outside of their homes—and no woman has become emperor or shogun since the 8th century. Aristocratic men were expected to marry for politics and take second wives, concubines or mistresses for love. Women, however, could only be married to one man at a time. Principal wives were expected to remain faithful during childbearing years. Divorce, however, was acceptable and remarriage legal for both genders. Aristocratic women lived in a society which glamorized the taking of lovers and were largely free to participate. Both genders controlled who they had affairs with and could spurn a potential lover or suitor at will.

Readings

- 1) Mark Hudson, *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands*, (University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
- 2) Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, (Kodansha America and Knopf Press, 1964)
- 3) Pierre Francois Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, (Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 4) Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).