

Japanese Government

Introduction An organized political system was slow to emerge in Japan. China had seen four different political dynasties rise and fall before the end of the iron age and Korea enjoyed no less than three identifiable dynasties in the same era. When Pimiko, the first known monarch in Japan set up her kingdom called Yamatai in the 3rd century CE, Japan was following well established patterns for leadership in East Asia. From the very beginning, however, Japan's governments were complicated. Power structures were murky and it is not clear whether or not even Pimiko reigned and ruled, or whether she was a spiritual figure only. In the Heian period (794-1185), emperors started out as strong rulers but later had that power diluted by the Fujiwara regents, who effectively ruled behind the scenes for 200 years. As Japan moved through the Kamakura period (1185-1333) there was a shōgun and a regent to the shogun (the Hōjō). Thus, by the 13th century, there were four different political institutions existing simultaneously: an emperor, a Fujiwara regent, a shōgun and a regent to the shōgun. It was very difficult to know who was in charge! Though each succeeding political and military dynasty changed the system they inherited, this sort of opacity continued to exist into the contemporary era. Even after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the emperors didn't actually rule and were more of constitutional monarchs or figureheads. Thus, distinctive patterns set long ago have continued to find expression almost two millennia after first appearing.

PREHISTORY-- The Neolithic age (10,000 BCE-2000 BCE)

Political Organization. As hunter-gatherers, the early people of Japan lived in small groups that were limited by the supply of food and other resources readily available to them. Settlements could be very small and often temporary because people groups had to move when resources began to dwindle. These settlements were also widely dispersed and though trade goods and marriage partners could be exchanged so as to not intermarry too closely within kinship groups, they were far enough apart to not compete for limited resources. In the brief, warmer periods, there is evidence of some settlements being large enough to accommodate several dozen people and even for villages to emerge. But for most of the era, people were grouped in significantly smaller bodies. Government, as we think of it today, therefore didn't exist. There is no evidence of a ruler, a central state, a bureaucracy, a set of written laws, a specialized military and the like. At most there was someone like a village headman because resources had to be administered. Association was likely based on kinship and was probably somewhat voluntary and potentially fluid. Clan, family or village leaders provided the only security and stability available. If one was exiled or became a sole survivor of an attack or epidemic, their future was extremely bleak. Life was tenuous and could be rather Hobbesian: nasty, brutish and short. Evidence for just how difficult life could be can be found in population numbers. According to Shuzo Koyama of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, the population of Japan grew very, very slowly in the neolithic period increasing from approximately 20,000 in 10,000 BCE to 75,000 some 9000 years later. Population is believed to have been seriously affected by even small, periodic changes in climate because residents of Japan did not have the ability to store excess food stuffs for very long. During periods of hardship, several poor foraging outings in a row or failed hunting trips could lead to hunger, malnutrition and catastrophe for a small group.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Political Organization. Though iron age (known in Japan as the Yayoi period—300 BCE-300 CE) Japanese had not yet developed writing, other nearby people groups had. The Chinese, in particular, had been writing for at least a millennium. In addition, the Chinese already had a high-functioning central government complete with an autocratic monarch, stable tax base, massive military, vast land holdings and a mature culture. Virtually all the specifics we know about government and culture therefore comes from Chinese sources. In this instance, the short-lived Wei Kingdom (220-265 CE) compiled and finally published a document in 297 CE entitled *Wei Zhi* (The History of the Wei Kingdom) in which mention is first made of a people from the "Land of Wa" (Japan).

According to Chinese documents, Japanese society in the late iron age years had evolved to include over one-hundred known groups. Each group had a leader. Sometime during the 2nd century CE, a great, but unnamed, chieftain emerged among the communities and ruled most of them for several decades, followed by a period in which the Chinese understood that there was no great chieftain. In the 3rd century CE, thirty communities banded together and came to be known as the Kingdom of Yamatai. They selected as their ruler a woman named Pimiko, who had as a part of her duties control of the people through supernatural and religious means. It is unknown the extent to which she actually ruled the people of Yamatai, but she appeared to be more than a figurehead. The Chinese conferred upon her the title of "Queen of Wa," a designation she accepted and used until her death. She is

said to have had many hundreds of female attendants and one male attendant. It is instructive that when she was buried, more than a hundred people were sacrificed and placed in her grave. This indicates that she was very powerful and ruled a significant number of people. After a few years of disorder, one of Pimiko's female relatives, a girl of thirteen years, was placed on the throne. Her name was Iyo, but we know nothing more about her except that her position was subsequently endorsed by the Wei. Though Japan's first chronicle, the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters), published in 711 CE, mentions other monarchs during the period, they are still considered to be mythical. It should be noted that no connection has been made by scholars between Pimiko, a name that means "daughter of the sun" and could refer to one of several high-ranking spiritual leaders or monarchs and Iyo and any of the monarchs named in the *Kojiki*. Japanese archaeologists have not determined exactly where Yamatai was located. Options include Northern Kyūshū and the Yamato Plain (near what is today the city of Nara). Conclusive proof, however, remains elusive.

POST-CLASSICAL AGE (500-1500)

Political Organization. In the early years of Yamato dominance in the 6th century, the extent of Imperial control over the country is not clear. It is believed that they started out ruling in coalition with other clans and slowly overwhelmed their rivals as conditions allowed. By the 8th century, most of Japan from the Kansai area (around present day Osaka) west and south is believed to have been subject to the throne. Western Honshū and most of Kyūshū, though not densely populated by today's standards, was generally settled. Over time, ethnic Japanese colonists continued to migrate northward and by at least the 10th century, the Imperial family claimed all of Honshū. It is clear, however, that the area north of present-day Sendai was very sparsely populated and central control was tenuous. Indeed, the title of shogun first appeared when Japanese military units were sent to subjugate the north. Their commander's title was *Sei-i Tai shōgun* (supreme commander for the subjugation of the northern barbarians). Nonetheless, as the Japanese emperors extended geographic control, they also continued to expand political control.

In the Nara period (710-794) and the early years of the Heian period (794-1185), the Emperor ruled as well as reigned. He named a set of advisors and ministers, most of whom were courtiers, to administer a discrete portfolio. The emperor ruled the provinces through governors, whose job it was to keep the peace, implement imperial decrees and laws—and most importantly see that taxes were deposited into the treasury. The chronicles tell us that many of these governors increasingly became less willing to leave the city, the only civilization in the country and began to spend more time in the capital rather than doing their jobs in the rural areas. During the last years of the Nara era, they would appoint deputies to do their jobs, levy extraordinarily high taxes and sometimes behave in a coercive and intimidating manner. In the final years of Kanmu's (r. 781-806) reign, he cracked down on the worst abuses by creating "circuit inspectors," whose job it was check on court appointees. Slowly, power became more and more centralized in the office of the emperor during the early years of the Heian period.

It was in the best interests of the monarchy during the Nara (710-794) and Heian (794-1185) periods for peasants to expand land under cultivation because it would enlarge the tax base, enrich the imperial treasury and provide additional calories for population expansion. After the Taika reforms of 7th centuries which set out a rational system of landholding, peasants were encouraged to engage in the very, very labor intensive work of transforming land into rice paddies. Few did. Before the first grain of rice could be planted, trees had to be cleared, land leveled, rice paddy levees built, canals dug, sluice gates built and water diverted. Because of the difficulty of the work, peasants would only do this if given tax abatements for several years. In due course, this was forthcoming and it is believed that agriculture expanded some in most years. This was facilitated by a period of domestic peace and the institution of central government. As a result, government budgets in the Nara and early Heian periods came to rely on constant growth decade after decade. However, this period of economic expansion did not last forever. There are many reasons for this. First, most land that could be easily brought under cultivation was transformed early on in the process. Second, land under intensive cultivation became exhausted of nutrients and was abandoned. Third, corrupt government officials demanded extortionist-rates of tax payments. At times these became so high that land was seized and brought under the control of aristocrats who did not pay tax. And then there was the curious phenomenon of aristocrats going to economically-strapped peasants with a promise of lower taxes (rent) if they gave their land to tax exempt aristocrats.

By the 9th century, the Fujiwara family had effectively seized control of the monarchy and whoever was head of the Fujiwara household effectively ruled Japan, a system that lasted for approximately 200 years. The Fujiwara leader married a daughter (or niece) to an emperor or crown prince, which resulted in the next generation being a Fujiwara emperor. Most often, a Fujiwara boy who had not yet reached the age of majority was placed on the throne and required a regent, which then became the Fujiwara head of household. This arrangement lasted long

enough that the positions they occupied became hereditary and the Fujiwara came to be known as the premier court nobles.

Over the course of the Heian period, vast estates called *shōen* began to emerge which paid for the profligate lifestyles of Heian era aristocrats. The life of the peasant didn't change much. But for the Heian aristocrats who had found a way to finance their existence, they had also sown the seeds of systemic economic collapse. By the 12th century, the imperial treasury was nearly empty, which diminished the ability of the government to carry out its essential functions. The very rural areas which produced rice (and wealth) began to give rise to their own elites, many of whom were connected to one or more of the warrior clans.

The changes brought about by the Gempei War (1180-1185) were incremental. Even though there was a shogun, Minamoto Yoritomo didn't immediately move to seize absolute power and to completely replace the civilian structure. Instead, Yoritomo moved to control first his own clan and retainers with the creation of the *mandokuro* (which oversaw administration and finance) and then, over a decade or so, came to appoint additional officials in the provinces. One of his first moves was to appoint *shūgo*, a position best described as constable or military administrator. It is not entirely clear whether or not he was protecting the people in each province or protecting his own (new) prerogatives. Nonetheless, over the decades, the warriors in these positions came to work alongside governors appointed by the civilian administration. Many *shūgo* passed these positions down to their sons and successors and came to control the land in their own right. They became known as *daimyō*, a term best understood as regional lord in a feudal system. Another position Yoritomo created was *jitō*. These were "land stewards" or civilian administrators whose job it was to manage the finances of estates—some of which were quite large. They were, above all to oversee the collection of taxes and generally carry out the will of the shōgun in the provinces. Just like with many *shūgo*, a significant number of *jitō* transitioned from being representatives of the shōgun to being medieval *daimyō*. In this way, the old Heian system where courtiers working for the emperor in the provinces slowly became wealthy and powerful, transitioned to include a different set of elites. Though it took approximately a century, power and authority increasingly devolved away from the capital city of Kyoto to Kamakura—and more importantly—to the provinces in general. By the time of the Mongol invasions, both the central court and courtiers enjoyed power mostly insofar as it originated from Kamakura. Still, both the civil and military authorities continued to exist side by side, with overlapping legal and military jurisdictions.

Taxation. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the Japanese monarchs looked to the Tang Empire in China (618-907) for a deliberate system of landholding and its most important accompanying element, a rational basis for taxation. These were implemented in Japan and became known as the Taika reforms. In this system, peasants were initially allotted 2 tan to farm (about ½ of an acre) per male over the age of 5 years old and 2/3rds of that amount for females over the age of 5. Given that in theory the emperor had provided land for the peasants, failure to pay taxes could result in expulsion from the land and quickly to starvation. Initially, the tax—which was based on crop production—was not too onerous and amounted to only 5%. That number later increased significantly. In addition to raising revenue for the Imperial treasury, this also removed the land from the control of local elites because the Emperor had to rely upon a bureaucracy to administer the system. This system broke down middle years of the Heian period and is credited with contributing to the collapse of Imperial rule—and the establishment of Japan's first shōgunate.

Jōei Code. In 1232, the Hōjō regent Yasutoki handed down a series of legal codes in the aftermath of the Jōkyū war (1221), the failed attempt by a retired emperor to regain some power from Kamakura. It contained a series of fifty-one articles which clarified many discrepancies which had arisen as the old Heian era *ritsuryō* legal system slowly became unworkable in the new age. Among other things, it effectively established the primacy of the shōgunal authority but required warriors to respect higher officials, in particular religious institutions and whatever remained of the civilian structures and court systems. It started as a relatively simple document which was mostly directed at the new warrior elites. However, over the course of time, it became extremely complicated and was expanded to include even non-warriors nationwide. It was superseded by the Ashikaga and other shōguns, but a number of basic concepts remained until 1868.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Political Organization. While the fighting for reunification raged during a two decade period under Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598), each *daimyō* more or less ran their own fief as they saw fit. It is understood that many used some form of martial law, with close control of all areas of life essential to the continued support of military units in the field. Nobunaga had begun to institute reforms, but his efforts were truncated

because of his untimely death. When Hideyoshi proclaimed the ending of hostilities in 1583 (something that wasn't exactly true), he began the process of creating a state apparatus for the peacetime administration of Japan. Given that there had not been a central government in Japan for more than a century since the Onin War ended in 1477, there were many options. However, he didn't stray too far from the existing system. Hideyoshi governed as shōguns had in the previous era, but he never assumed that title. In general, he ruled through existing daimyō. Though he was more than the first among equals, as long as individual domain laws didn't interfere with his own decrees, each daimyō enjoyed considerable autonomy to govern. Hideyoshi had a council of elders, composed mostly of generals who had long served with him, and who advised him in matters of state.

The Tokugawa Consolidation of Power. After Hideyoshi's death in 1598 and subsequent Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) very slowly moved to consolidate his own position. First, he removed all daimyō who opposed him at Sekigahara and confiscated their lands as spoils of war. This made him the single largest landholder in the country. In addition, those daimyō who remained neutral at the time of Sekigahara were understood to be of questionable loyalty. Second, he demanded the emperor name him shōgun, a title he made sure was given to his son, Tokugawa Hidetada, in 1605. Even though he didn't know he would live another decade, this had the effect of solidifying Hidetada as his successor upon Ieyasu's death in 1616. Third, he (and his successors) began to hand down edicts such as the *Buke sho hatto*. These were initially rather minor laws and addressed the behavior of samurai, appropriate attire for samurai, marriage guidelines, rules for turning in neighbors who might be lawbreakers and the like. Later expanded, they acted as the legal basis for increasing the power of the central authorities in the city of Edo (Tokyo) and the continued diminishment of the power of the daimyō in the provinces.

By the turn of the 18th century, the Tokugawa enjoyed a fully functioning government. Over a period of a hundred years, they had discovered through trial and error what was and was not working. The feudal system that the Tokugawa had inherited from Hideyoshi slowly evolved under the Tokugawa and came to be known by historians as "centralized feudalism." Though this would seem to be an oxymoron, it describes a system where local control was the ideal, but where the central government increasingly assumed more and more power.

19TH CENTURY

Political Organization. The new Meiji elites were in no hurry to transfer power to a legislature or any other democratically elected body after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Indeed, the Meiji Constitution finally took effect 22 years after the Restoration! This document, which was authored by Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909) and Inoue Kowashi (1844-1895) was handed down by the Emperor Meiji in 1889. A key (and conscious) omission was the concept of God-given rights. Since the Emperor had given these rights, they were not inalienable and could be rescinded by the same method. In addition, though in theory, the people would have a voice based on their elected representatives in the Diet, real power resided with the oligarchs. For about two decades they decided who among them would form a cabinet and become Prime Minister. This was a position that changed hands quite frequently. It should be noted, however, that though these men didn't always agree with the specific policy decisions of their predecessors or successors, there was a great deal of continuity of vision.

In the early years of the Restoration, the old domains of the Tokugawa period were abolished and in their place governors loyal to the ruling oligarchs were named. A few of the old daimyō (feudal lords) remained in place during the transition. But they no longer owned or exercised control over the land in the way they had before. In a very short period of time, the old feudal system was dismantled and a modern system of local, regional and national authorities was created. Tax rates were determined by the oligarchs and revenue collected by representatives of the central government. A new police force was also required in the years immediately following the Restoration. When the samurai lost their jobs, many traded their swords for police clubs and began to enforce the new laws. Given that the samurai as a class had enjoyed great prestige in society, the police in Meiji era Japan came to be highly respected as well.

The Meiji system was designed to be parliamentary in nature (a Diet), with an upper and lower house. The upper house was composed of peers (a designation created during this period). The lower house was to be the people's house. Over the course of time, the lower house discovered that the only real power it possessed was the power of the purse. It got to decide on tax policy and, in this way only, was able to exert influence on the decision

making process. It didn't much matter for most of the Meiji period (1868-1912) which party had a majority in the Diet because the initiatives of the late Meiji period were decided upon, by and large, by the ruling oligarchs. A national bureaucracy was also created to accompany the new system. It became the highest form of accomplishment to be able to serve the state in this way. Graduates of the new universities competed to enter one of the Ministries. The best and brightest all wanted to help in the creation of the new Japan. Those who could not compete went into the private sector.

EARLY 20th CENTURY (1900-1949)

Political Organization. The Meiji Constitution promulgated in 1889 was functioning quite well as Japan entered the 20th century. The Meiji oligarchs (the approximately two dozen men who had led in the Meiji Restoration and who later governed Japan in the late 19th century) had successfully transformed the government into a well-oiled and high-functioning machine. The Constitution had withstood the challenges of the Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the internal unrest associated with the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905. Still, the greatest challenge was to come with the death and retirement of the Meiji oligarchs. By the end of the Meiji period in 1912, very few of the old leaders remained on the public scene and the transition to party rule seemed eminent. In 1918, the first party politician from the Diet (lower house), Hara Takashi, became prime minister. Soon thereafter, a series of military officers, alternating with party politicians, served as prime ministers until 1932, when the military began to supply the greatest number. Given that there were a total of 23 prime ministers from 1918 to 1945, each prime minister served only slightly more than one year on average. This means that real power was exercised elsewhere, behind the scenes with the remaining oligarchs and with the permanent bureaucracy. With the death of Yamagata Aritomo in 1922 and Matsukata Masayoshi in 1924, only Saionji Kinmochi survived among the old oligarchs and he wanted to retire. Stability was greatly desired in the political realm, but no one had the clout of the founding generation. Political cliques formed and were disbanded when a better situation presented itself. Things seemed unpredictable and there was a political power vacuum that left the Japanese government adrift until the early 1930s. The greatest strength of the founding generation, the oligarchs themselves, had been unable to find an effective way to replicate themselves in the Meiji Constitution. The military stepped into the void.

LATE 20th CENTURY (1950-1999)

Political Organization. The Japanese government was not systematically dismantled during the occupation (1945-1952). Rather, occupation officials decided to purge militarists (about 220,000) from public life and government positions and work with the remaining permanent bureaucracy in an effort to maintain stability in the country. The highest official remaining in the country was, of course, Emperor Hirohito. He was forced to renounce his divinity and made a figurehead. But he was not tried as a war criminal. However, as Japan began to make some strides toward recovery, SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) officials determined that Japan needed a new constitution to replace the old Meiji-era foundational documents. A new Diet was elected and given the task of preparing a document. After the first two attempts were deemed unacceptable by General Douglas MacArthur, SCAP officials themselves wrote a document that was ratified by the Diet. It is still the constitution used in Japan today.

The 1947 constitution created a bicameral legislature with a Prime Minister as the head of government. The party that holds the majority of seats (or works in coalition when in the plurality) in the lower house forms a government and administers the country. Since the new constitution has been in effect, there have been 24 different Prime Ministers. The Liberal Democratic Party governed Japan for all but a few years between 1955 and 1993. Since 1993, the Democratic Party, the Japan New Party, the Japan Renewal Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Democratic Party of Japan and the Liberal Democratic Party have all formed cabinets. Most of the Prime Ministers of Japan in the post-war era have governed from the center-right, center or center-left. There have been very few post-occupation Prime Ministers who could be described as radical or reactionary.

Given the high number of Prime Ministers in the post-war era, most government administration has taken place within the permanent bureaucracy. The bureaucracy in Japan is staffed by highly educated, motivated university graduates. Until quite recently, these have been some of the most highly sought-after positions for university graduates from some of Japan's finest universities. The Japanese government functions efficiently and is understood to carry out essential state functions. Those who enter government service are highly respected members of society.

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