

Japanese Government – Postclassical Period

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.

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.

Readings

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