

Japanese Economic Innovations – Postclassical Period

Introduction Japanese society created a stable, high-functioning and integrated economy in the iron age and early post classical period. As was true of all early societies, its foundation was a thriving and well-managed agricultural sector. Farming sustained stable populations and provided a reliable basis for taxation. It produced excess in most years, which allowed for significant segments of society to specialize in sectors other than farming. Japanese growers were extremely capable and worked in concert with the government to build and manage infrastructure projects that all used to their advantage. For more than a millennium, Japan was largely self-sufficient in agriculture and enjoyed a thriving commercial sector (when the country was at peace). At the beginning of the 19th century, however, conditions changed worldwide and Japan entered a short period of economic contraction and humiliation. It had missed the industrial revolution. In the post Meiji Restoration era which began in 1868, Japan began a crash course of economic transformation and industrialization. It was extremely successful in catching up to the west. By the 1930s, Japan's economy produced more and the nation was wealthier than European countries such as Italy and Hungary. After the war, Japan turned its attention to reconstruction and the export economy and was again extremely successful. The economic recovery is a testament to the thrift, hard work and sacrifice of the Japanese labor force. As of this writing, the Japanese economy is a world leader and ranks third in the world in GDP output.

POST-CLASSICAL AGE (500-1500)

Innovation and Agriculture. The economy of post classical Japan was based on agriculture, and in particular, the production of rice. Rice was (and is) the single most important food stuff in Japan. This was facilitated because the crown supported the dispersal of knowledge of advances in agriculture such as crop and field rotation, the use of fertilizers and the like. Irrigation and flood control projects were high priorities. The government took seriously the problem of security and sought to end enduring problems with banditry and the like. Rice also acted as the basis of land holding for much of Japanese history. Land holdings were not only determined by geographic measurement, but by the fertility of land under wet rice cultivation. This is because Japan is mostly mountainous and is largely unsuitable for cultivation. Therefore, wealth (and one's tax bill every year) was determined as a percentage of that which was produced. For example, a large and successful landowner might own land that produced 1,000 koku (1 koku equals approximately 5 bushels and is normally enough to feed one man per year) of rice. The yearly tax rate might be 300-400 (or more) koku. Rice was then traded for silver and made its way into the treasury. It should be noted that the average peasant didn't cultivate more than a few koku of rice per year nor did he regularly eat rice before the modern era. It was simply too dear to be consumed by the producers. Instead, peasants often ate millet and vegetables. Meat was rarely consumed, largely because of its expense and because of Buddhist considerations. If close to the coast or fresh water sources, fish and other aquatic life provided protein, as did tofu. As might be expected, industries grew up in Japan to support tertiary agricultural pursuits such as fishing and sericulture.

Readings

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