

Japanese Military – 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)

The Military. In the 7th and 8th centuries, the emperor established a military. Each province was to provide a certain number of soldiers for a standing army. The soldiers were to drill and be ready in case of emergency. After the period of unification was complete, however, there was little need for a large military, even one of dubious quality, because there were no known external threats after Tang China went into decline. The standing army therefore transitioned to a much smaller, more professional force positioned mostly in the rural areas and commanded by either a member of the Taira or Minamoto clan. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the Japanese military came to be used as a tool for the suppression of the political enemies of the Fujiwara or a retired emperor.

A loyal, standing army controlled by a ruling emperor had ceased to exist long before the Gempei War ended in 1185. Powerful cliques in Heian Japan (794-1185) each called upon their own military units to protect their own interests beginning in the 10th century. In general, two families—the Taira—who had lost in the Gempei War and the Minamoto—who had won, were the most prominent. But others existed, mostly as retainers to one of the two great families. After the Minamoto victory, Yoritomo sent out a number of his most trusted lieutenants to act as *shūgo* and *jitō*. Some went back to their own home areas, others to completely new places. During the long period of the Hōjō regency (1203-1333), many of these families in the provinces emerged to exercise significant military influence in their own right. Under the titular command of the Hōjō regent, these armies controlled their own domains most of the time but could be called upon in time of national emergency. For example, the Hōjō called on the great families of Kyūshū and western Honshū during the first Mongol invasion in 1274 and 10,000 samurai responded. In the second in 1281, 40,000-50,000 samurai from all over Japan acted in defense of the realm. Japan was, for two decades, completely mobilized against foreign invasion. The military was rightly praised as the saviors of Japan and the myth of the samurai was born. It should be noted that these armies fought as small, independent units (and sometimes even as individual warriors) and not as one highly integrated, cohesive army. The structure of the military continued to devolve during the last years of the Hōjō regency and a sort of uneasy equilibrium came to exist. By the time of the Ashigaka shōgunate, no single family—not even the Ashikaga—could claim to be military hegemon of Japan without the consent and/or alliance of one or more of the other great families.

Readings

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