

JAPANESE POSTCLASSICAL CULTURE

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PART I - EARLY IMPERIAL CIVILIZATION (500-800)

Overview

Increased contact with the Asian mainland brought with it new technologies, ideas, and institutions that would prove transformative. The Chinese written language, with its complex ideographic system, was arguably the most crucial import. Chinese philosophical, religious, and cosmological systems— Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, among others— were gradually introduced and painstakingly studied. These are text-based traditions, and mastery of their complex abstractions was a daunting challenge. Moreover, new styles of architecture, music, and arts based on Chinese— and, to a lesser extent, Korean— models were also introduced, and the Japanese nobility eagerly embraced artistic cultivation and aesthetic sensitivity. A key political development was the adoption of the Chinese imperial system, together with its sophisticated administrative and legal institutions. Absorbing this vast array of tangible and intangible civilizational imports required centuries of learning and adaptation by the elite clans, and this was accomplished by making the necessary accommodations with the established political, social, and religious institutions and authorities.

Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism

Buddhism, in the form of six major sects that had achieved prominence in China, found fertile soil in 6th-century Japan. Having originated in northern India, Buddhism is a universal religious faith embracing the core values of compassion, respect for all life, salvation, enlightenment, and selflessness. Its sectarian diversity spans monastic and meditative practices favored by the elites, and more ‘democratic’ practices offering salvation to the masses in exchange for sincere prayer and ritual observance. Its beliefs are inscribed in sacred texts called sutras, whose recitation and interpretation became the vocation of a priestly class, itself derived from the aristocratic elite. Large and influential sects gradually arose, together with imposing temples and impressive Buddhist arts (painting, sculpture, calligraphy), and they would amass considerable wealth and temporal power. The native Shinto religion, with its own clerical and institutional base, would manage to coexist— and eventually coalesce— with Buddhism— a remarkable example of religious convergence and mutual accommodation.

For its part, Shinto maintained its ‘ownership’ of the foundational accounts of Japan and its people. The creation myths, which in effect linked the divine realm of the *kami*— in particular, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu— and the ‘sacred’ imperial line, would be written down in the form of Japan’s first written record, the *Kojiki* (Chronicle of Ancient Matters, 712). This foundational narrative proclaims the divine origins of the Japanese islands, the sacred quality of the land, and the deep spiritual connection between the Japanese people— especially the imperial line— and the land. More pragmatically, it also served as a justification for imperial sovereignty and authority.

Unlike Buddhist and Shinto, Confucianism is not a religion *per se* but instead presents a sophisticated social philosophy and ethical code, meant to guide proper conduct and ensure a harmonious society. Like Buddhism, it is a text-based tradition, presenting the teachings of Confucius and his many disciples together with extensive commentaries. The Confucian Classics, in the aggregate, present a credo of harmony, order, stability, and balance, with family and familial relations as its foundation. Comprising the centerpiece of Japanese schooling from its inception, the Confucian teachings espouse the virtues of duty, filial piety, benevolent rule, and dedicated study. As a political institution, Confucianism and its conservative value system has throughout Japan’s history served leaders who sought to justify their exercise of power and authority.

Adopting the Imperial Model

The 7th century is marked by the rise to power of Japan's first great leader, Prince Shôtoku (574-622). A key proponent of Sinification as a vehicle for strengthening the nation, Shôtoku was a great patron of both Buddhism and Confucianism, which he achieved through the backing of the powerful Soga clan. His reign witnessed the construction in 607 of a great Buddhist temple complex, the Hôryûji, and the promulgation of a seventeen-article Confucian-style Constitution. There ensued the establishment of centralized political institutions and bureaucratic structures, a system of taxation and land reform, and important codes and regulations based on Tang dynasty models. Missions were dispatched to China in order to absorb and transmit Chinese learning at its source.

A tangible outcome of this prolonged exposure to—and emulation of—Chinese civilization was the construction, in the early 8th century, of a fixed imperial capital at Nara (710-784). Japan's first 'permanent' imperial center, modeled upon the Tang capital at Chang An, featured an orderly, symmetrical city design, with the imperial palace as its central feature. The capital was home to the imperial court and a civil bureaucracy whose authority was meant to extend to the distant provinces of the relatively new nation. The courtiers adopted many basic features of the Chinese institutions that were their models—for instance, its sophisticated administrative system, with its many offices and civic functions; the Confucian rationale for ethical political governance; the Chinese calendric system, with its imperial era names (*nen*); and the many tangible trappings of the Chinese imperial court—architecture, modes of courtier dress and stylish decor, the use of written Chinese (*kanbun*) for official documents and records, courtly ceremonials and rituals, Chinese court music (*gagaku*), and so forth.

Literary Landmarks

Three 8th-century literary products of the Nara court can be said to represent the wellspring of Japanese literature and a foundation of the nation's collective memory. The *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712), widely regarded as Japan's first book, provides a mythological account of the creation of the Japanese islands through the agency of ancestral *kami* deities, and the divine emergence of the imperial line from its *kami* origins. This seminal work, written in an archaic form of Japanese, represents a synthesis of the imported Chinese imperial system and native Shinto beliefs and legends. Several years later there appeared the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) a retelling of the *Kojiki* account in the Chinese language, with a more elaborate genealogy of the imperial lineage. This work was evidently intended both to demonstrate a mastery of written Chinese—ostensibly a strong claim to 'civilized' status—and to provide a compelling rationale for Japanese imperial rule. These works would be revisited in subsequent ages to reinforce a sense of cultural roots and collective identity.

In the mid-8th century, a group of Nara courtiers produced Japan's first, and arguably greatest, anthology of poetry—the *Man'yôshû* (Collection of Myriad Leaves, ca 750). One of the treasures of world literature, this collection of over four thousand verses is an anthology of Japanese poetry spanning a century and a half, including the work of the Nara compilers themselves. Inspired by classical Chinese verse that had circulated among the aristocratic class, the poetry of the *Man'yôshû* established certain techniques, genres, and themes that would guide Japanese poets well into the modern period. Most importantly, it would elevate the 31-syllable *waka* form as the poetic standard, and figures such as Hitomaro, Akahito, Okura, and Yakamochi as forebears of a civilization that would prize poetry and poetic sentiment and venerate its great poets.

The Rise of Buddhism

A crucial development in 8th-century Japan was the dramatic rise of Buddhism and its patronage within the Nara imperial court. In particular, the reign of Emperor Shômu (729-749), also known as the Tempyô era, is associated with the spread of Buddhism and the construction of great Buddhist temples that would in effect threaten to overshadow and even displace the imperial establishment. The erection of the great Tôdaiji temple complex in 752—which includes the world's largest wooden structure—stood as the high water mark of Buddhism in Japan and the nation's emergence as the epicenter of the Buddhist world. Another important Nara period structure is the Shôsôn, an imposing wooden structure originally included in the Tôdaiji complex. It would serve as a repository of

thousands of artifacts collected during Shōmu's reign from all parts of the civilized world— Rome, India, Persia, and China. In effect, the Shōsōin represents the final resting place of artifacts that traveled across the great Silk Road to what could be considered its far-eastern terminus. Closed to the public until the Meiji period, the Shōsōin treasures— some of them on display in the Japanese National Museum in Tokyo— provide a material cross-section of world civilization circa the 8th century.

The Fate of the Nara Capital

Owing to the fanatical patronage of its Buddhist institutions, the late 8th-century Nara court— and by extension the nation itself— was on the verge of becoming a theocracy. Hemmed in by Buddhist temples and powerful Buddhist clerics, the court officials were challenged in their capacity to conduct affairs of state and maintain a secular orientation. Fearing the viability of the imperial institution, it was decided to relocate the imperial capital and rebuild it in a way that would strengthen the imperial center and place the now-established Buddhist temples on the periphery. The new site, modern-day Kyoto, would serve as Japan's imperial capital, and the center of its cultural life, until the late-19th century.

Readings

Carter, Steve, *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1991), 17-71

deBary, William Theodore, et al (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (Columbia, 2001-05), Volume 1

Philippi, Donald (transl.), *Kojiki* (Princeton, 1969)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 19-47

Discussion Questions and Topics

If Japanese civilization is an amalgam of native and borrowed influences, how can we detect this merging and melding in the material and literary artifacts of the early imperial era? Given the prominence of Shinto as a source of shared identity, how is it reflected and represented?

Compare the *Kojiki* and *Man'yōshū* as Japanese cultural icons? Consider the sense in which modern-day Japanese might derive inspiration from these seminal works. Conversely, consider the universality of these works— especially the *Man'yōshū* poems by Hitomaro and Okura— and the humanistic spirit that they epitomize.

Consider the rapid expansion of Buddhism during this period, and the manner in which it was reined in and brought in line with potential rivals— especially Shinto. How does this pattern of mutual accommodation compare with the history of religion elsewhere in the world?

Excerpts

1) *Kojiki*, Book I: The Beginnings of Heaven and Earth

The names of the Deities that were born in the Plain of High Heaven when the Heaven and Earth began were the Deity Master-of-the-August-Centre-of-Heaven, next the High-August-Producing-Wondrous Deity, next the Divine-Producing-Wondrous-Deity. These three Deities were all Deities born alone, and hid their persons. The names of the Deities that were born next from a thing that sprouted up like a reed-shoot when the earth, young and like floating oil, drifted about medusa-like, were the Pleasant-Reed-Shoot-Prince-Elder Deity, next the Heavenly-Eternally-Standing-Deity. These two Deities were likewise born alone, and hid their persons.

(Translation: Basil Hall Chamberlain; Source: sacred-text.com)

2) Two selections from the *Man'yōshū*

At Tago Bay

I came out and looked afar—
To see the pure white
Of Mount Fuji's lofty peak
Amidst a flurry of snow
-- Akahito, early 8th century

Our life in this world—
To what shall I compare it?
It is like a boat
Rowing out at break of day
Leaving not a trace behind
-- Sami Mansei, early 8th century

Source for the above: Steven Carter, *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1991), 38, 51



Nara: Tôdaiji, Great Buddha Hall (Wikipedia)



Nara: Shôsôin (Wikipedia)

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PART II - CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION: THE HEIAN COURT (800-1200)

Overview

Although the city of Kyoto is very much alive and well in the 21st century, having survived the Pacific War relatively unscathed, it contains precious few relics of the Heian era— fewer than in Nara, which lasted less than a century as imperial capital. Yet the Heian period has long been heralded as the Golden Age of classical Japanese civilization. Its artifacts, though, are predominantly literary and artistic, and these evoke an other-worldly society of elegant courtiers, ethereal natural imagery, and a secular religion of beauty and stylishness. Largely the product of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, sensitivity, and elegant understatement. Although the Heian court served as the nation's political center, we are far less interested in its administrative affairs and factional rivalries than in the lives of the courtier class and the products of their creative genius. Subsequent ages would revisit the Heian era as a token of homage to Japan's cultural roots and a touchstone of its national identity.

The Heian Court

In the wake of the failure of the Nara imperial court to establish itself as an autonomous entity, a new imperial center was constructed at a nearby site. Kyoto was officially inaugurated in 794, and it would remain the imperial capital until 1868. It was chosen as a propitious site, with hills on three sides and a river— the Kamogawa— running through its center. Like Nara, Kyoto was built on the symmetrical Chinese model, but the major Buddhist temples were relocated in the adjacent hills and therefore not in a position to dominate the imperial center. The palpable Chinese influence that marked the prior period gradually waned during the Heian era, with distinctive native styles and genres coming to the fore. This so-called 'wa/kan' dualism— which gave rise to parallel Chinese and Japanese styles and practices in society and the arts— emerged during the Heian and would characterize Japanese culture well into the modern period.

For the courtier class, which numbered in the several thousands, Kyoto was the center of civilization. This was a world governed by rules of taste, style, proper decorum, and suitably aristocratic breeding and cultivation. One was expected to be conversant with literary matters and to be capable of producing an elegant *waka* poem, in an appropriate calligraphic hand, whenever the occasion demanded it. The men, who occupied official court ranks, were expected to function in written Chinese (*kanbun*). They occupied a strict hierarchy and vied for status within the Chinese-style bureaucratic system. And their families and clans were themselves part of a hierarchical order of power and influence. The men could have multiple wives and consorts, and the court ladies could have multiple amorous relationships. Aristocratic wives could own property and live relatively independently; the stereotype of abject, subservient Japanese womanhood does not apply here.

Behind the imperial throne, power and influence were vested in several aristocratic clans. It was the Fujiwara clan that emerged as the most powerful. In fact its most celebrated figure— Michinaga (966-1028)— became the model for Prince Genji, the romantic hero of Japan's greatest literary work.

Buddhism extended its reach during the Heian period, and Kyoto was the site of many important temple complexes. The Enryakuji, build on Mt. Hiei, to the northeast of the capital, was the center of the great Tendai sect of Salvationist Buddhism, and its location was seen as protecting the capital from baleful influences. The Shingon sect, whose esoteric practices and aura of mysticism strongly appealed to aristocratic tastes, took hold on Mt. Kōya, under the leadership of the legendary priest Kūkai. Veneration of the Lotus Sutra, formulaic prayers of supplication (*nembutsu*), the appeal of religious ceremony and ritual, and the cultivation of a spiritual mindset can be said to characterize the age. However, the fruits of Japan's aristocratic culture were reserved for a privileged elite and could hardly be imagined, much less appreciated, by the commoner masses.

Heian Culture

Heian culture is indelibly marked by the imperial court and its rich brocade of ceremony, ritual, and cultivated pursuits. Its literature reflects a palpable indifference to the outside world and the comings-and-goings of ordinary folk. In other words, Heian Japan reflects a center-periphery binary that would strongly mark the nation's cultural history. Heian codes of beauty, elegance, sensitivity to nature and seasonal change, and cultivated refinement are epitomized in Lady Murasaki's immortal *Tale of Genji*, which conveys the look and feel of Heian society through

the lives and tastes of its courtier class. The figure of Prince Genji embodies the essential courtly virtue of *aware*—sensitivity, empathy, and refined sensibility.

Courtly sensitivity was channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression; it was unthinkable for a courtier to be incapable of producing a well-crafted poem, which would be routinely called for at the court and in one's romantic encounters. Poetry in the formal *waka* style (31 syllables) was taken quite seriously, and it became a way of life for serious poets whose aim was to have their work included in one of the many anthologies— some commissioned by the Emperor himself— that were produced. Aside from court poetry, Heian writers indulged themselves in personal writing— diary (*nikki*) and essay (*zuihitsu*), most importantly— and these would almost invariably incorporate poetry as well. It was during the Heian era that autobiographical expression tinged with poetic sentiment became a fixture of Japanese literature. Canonical examples of such writing set a standard of style and diction that survive to the present day.

Aside from literary pursuit, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative pursuits, spanning music and dance, painting, calligraphy, and so forth. Their patronage of Buddhism encouraged the production of devotional objects and artifacts— sculpture, religious paintings and ritual devices, and of course architecture. The Heian arts— especially literature— tended to be produced in a group context, which privileged the role of the master practitioner, the emergence of certain standards of practice and critical judgment, and— eventually— the formation of schools and coteries whose 'signature' techniques would be passed down in a hereditary lineage. This group orientation in the Japanese arts has survived to the present day, in a variety of forms.

Late Heian

The 12th century brought with it a decline in the political efficacy of the Kyoto courtiers. Rival warrior clans emerged on the scene and in effect challenged the imperial center, although there was never any question of overthrowing the regime. As the court grew increasingly isolated and the courtiers retreated into a cocoon of refined ineffectuality, the powerful samurai clans rose to dominance. The gradual isolation of the Kyoto court corresponded with the rise of a provincial aristocracy and a warrior class tasked with imposing order. The political and military center of gravity shifted away from Kyoto, yet the elegant culture and elitist cachet of the court would continue to exert considerable 'soft power' as the nation entered a prolonged feudal phase. Once established, the Heian 'brand' of classicism would long endure.

Readings

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

Miner, Earl, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, 1968)

Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Kodansha International, 1994)

Tyler, Royall, (transl.), *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu (Viking, 2001)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 48-76

Discussion Questions and Topics

Appreciating the qualities of a 'courtly age' presents certain challenges. What do you regard as the challenges of comprehending Heian culture? Are there aspects of it that you find distasteful? What do you most like and admire about such a culture?

Can culture be 'gendered' either masculine or feminine? If so, what criteria might be applied? Do you agree with the 'feminine' reading of Heian society and culture?

What other court societies can you identify? How would you go about comparing them to Heian Japan? Are there factors relating to its East-Asian roots that might make the Heian court essentially different from Western court societies?

In order to better understand Heian Japan, what sort of information would you want to have? How important is having access to materials in the Japanese language?

Excerpts

1) From *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shônagon (*Makura no sôshi*)

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer, the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!

In autumn, the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter, the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season's mood! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes. (Source: www.goodreads.com)

2) From *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (*Murasaki Shikibu nikki*)

It is useless to talk with those who do not understand one, and troublesome to talk with those who criticize from a feeling of superiority. Especially one-sided persons are troublesome. Few are accomplished in many arts and most cling narrowly to their own opinion. (Source: www.goodreads.com)



Scene from the Tale of Genji Scroll (*Genji monogatari emaki*, 12th century) (Wikipedia)

PART III MEDIEVAL JAPAN (1200-1600)

Overview

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the 12th century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel administrations— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate— a hereditary institution whose clan lineage would change hands several times. The period was marked by the growing power and autonomy of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. Medieval history is marked by their rivalry, alliances, and occasional conflicts. The primacy of the samurai class inspired a ‘warrior code’— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan’s subsequent history.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy, in tandem with their role as warriors. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austere and solemn tones and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan’s medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation’s collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures. Over the centuries, the feudal order became increasingly decentralized, devolving into a complex web of *daimyō* alliances and rivalries and, ultimately, a century of civil strife. The challenge of reunifying a divided nation would culminate in the advent of Japan’s final shogunal regime, under the aegis of the Tokugawa clan.

The Gempei Wars (1180- 1185)

The dawn of the medieval era is marked by the rivalry of two powerful warrior clans— the Taira and Minamoto— and a conflict that lasted for decades in the mid- and late-12th century. It culminated in the so-called Gempei Wars, which resulted in a great victory for the Minamoto forces under the headship of Yoritomo, and the defeat of the redoubtable Taira chief, Kiyomori. Years later, the Gempei Wars would be recounted in Japan’s great warrior epic, *Tale of the Heike*, which went on to rival Murasaki’s *Tale of Genji* as Japan’s great literary classic. This anonymous work combines accounts of bloody battles and heroic exploits and a mood of lyrical melancholy surrounding the decline and fall of the once-proud Taira clan. Its signature theme of ephemerality and evanescence— *mujō*— would underlie many important products of medieval Japanese culture.

The Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

Minamoto Yoritomo’s victory over the Taira forces led to his decision to create a new administrative regime, the Shogunate (*bakufu*), with himself as its first leader. The new Shogun built his capital in Kamakura, hundreds of miles east of Kyoto, whereupon ensued what would be nearly seven centuries of parallel rule by an Emperor and a Shogun. The Kamakura Shogunate managed to establish a modus vivendi with the Kyoto imperial center while reigning in the hundreds of *han* domains and establishing its authority. A major challenge to the nation itself occurred in the late-13th century, in the form of two massive invasion forces under the headship of the great Mongol warlord, Kubilai Khan. The cost of providing fortifications proved very costly to the Shogunate, but typhoon winds ended up sinking the bulk of both armadas. Thus emerged the ‘Divine Wind’ (*kamikaze*) myth, which would subsequently be deployed as a token of Japanese invincibility and a rallying cry for the nation in times of war.

This period is also marked by the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist temples throughout the land. In contrast with the patronage of Zen by the warrior class, Salvationist Buddhism, which centered on devoted prayer to Amida Buddha, took hold among the masses. It was in this context that the charismatic 13th-century figure, Nichiren (1222-82), called for unswerving faith in the Lotus Sutra as the sole gateway to salvation— with himself as the nation’s messianic leader.

A number of factors— for instance, intrigues within the imperial court and the emergence of two rival imperial lineages— led to the decline and fall of the Kamakura Shogunate in the mid-14th century. These events are recounted in a 14th-century warrior epic, the *Taiheiki*, that is second only to the *Tale of the Heike* as a classic of samurai literature. A rival warrior clan, the Ashikaga, managed to fill the power vacuum and establish itself as the new shogunal regime. Unlike Yoritomoto, however, the Ashikaga headman— Takauji— built his headquarters in the very center of Kyoto, in a district called Muromachi.

The Muromachi Period (1358-1573)

The Muromachi Shogunate, located in the very shadow of the imperial palace, would prove ineffective in political terms, but its very proximity to the court and its well-established cultural refinement would inspire important artistic achievements. Under the patronage of the third Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimitsu (1358-1408), a new genre of classical drama, Noh, established itself in Kyoto. This austere, lyrical, deeply spiritualized performative art is closely identified with Zeami (1364-1443), Japan's most celebrated dramatist. Rivaling the classical Greek drama (both feature masked characters), Noh would achieve a virtually unparalleled level of artistic virtuosity, and its repertoire of plays is still performed by hereditary schools of actors, some of whom trace their pedigree back to the 15th century.

The patronage of Zen Buddhism by the warrior elite is a key element in Japan's medieval culture. The period witnessed the construction of important Zen temples devoted to meditation— for example, Kyoto's Ryōanji temple, whose famous rock garden counts among Japan's most popular tourist destinations. Alas, the tourist throngs are not very conducive to quiet meditation.

The 'Zen spirit' did much to encourage the spread of meditative arts— archery, calligraphy, pottery, and— most importantly— tea ceremony, *chanoyu*. An exercise in restrained, austere formalism, tea ceremony represents a fusion of many traditional arts— pottery, flower arrangement, interior design, calligraphy— in a ritualized performance meant to focus the mind and spirit. Its major schools attract many thousands of practitioners in present-day Japan— and elsewhere.

The late-Muromachi period (15th century) witnessed the erosion of shogunal control and the rise of the hundreds of *daimyō* domains that form the map of feudal Japan. Prolonged civil strife in and around Kyoto caused many courtiers to leave the capital and settle in the provincial domains, where they gradually spread the fruits of court culture and cultivated pursuit. This prototype of shared culture and national identity emerged well before the modern period. At the same time, a politically-decentralized Japan stimulated the rise of provincial towns and cities, the most prominent of which served as administrative centers of the *daimyō* domains. The gradual rise of an urban population brought with it a nascent merchant class, a money economy, social mobility, and an expanding marketplace.

The Sixteenth Century

A momentous epoch in Japan's history, the 16th century witnessed the nation's first encounter with Western civilization. In 1543, Portuguese merchants arrived from the southern seas, followed several years later by a Jesuit mission intent on spreading the gospel in Asia. This ushered in what would be termed Japan's 'Christian century.' Following the Portuguese, ships from Spain, Holland, and England brought an assortment of Western products, together with samples of modern science and technology, to this East Asian feudal outpost. Christianity and its exotic trappings proved very seductive, and many Japanese converted to the foreign faith. The 'Southern barbarians' (*nanbanjin*), as they were collectively termed, also brought with them modern weaponry, and it was not long before several powerful *daimyō* were producing their own musketry and artillery pieces. This was also the age of castle construction, with the status-conscious *daimyō* rivaling one another in the size and majesty of their castle fortresses. These would eventually become yet another icon of 'traditional Japan.'

Japan's 'close encounter' with the West happened to coincide with a struggle among the leading feudal lords, who were intent on filling the power vacuum left by the ineffective Muromachi shogunate. The so-called 'warring clans era' (*sengoku jidai*) culminated in the emergence of three warlords who set in motion a process of reunification that held profound implications for the nation's future. First there was Nobunaga (1534-82), a brilliant and ruthless strategist—the first to make use of musketry in battle, which would outmatch even the most brilliant swordsman. Nobunaga's forces entered Kyoto in 1568, and within five years he deposed the Muromachi shogunate and began the process of national reunification. In the process he laid waste to the great Enryakuji temple compound on Mt. Hiei, whose thousands of monks refused to acknowledge his authority. Poised to take the reins of power, Nobunaga was assassinated at the height of his powers.

Nobunaga's death in effect ushered onstage an individual who ranks among the key figures in Japanese history—Hideyoshi (1536-98). A low-level samurai who rose to a stature that virtually exceeded that of the Emperor, Hideyoshi devised a sophisticated administrative system intended to unite the divided nation. It entailed a strict social hierarchy dominated by the samurai class, and a strong central authority built upon elaborate regulations and controls. An enthusiastic patron of the arts—especially tea ceremony—Hideyoshi built a castle compound at Momoyama, south of Kyoto, that featured lavish artistic displays and decorations. The so-called 'Momoyama style'—typically associated with the Kanô school of decorative painting—has long been a fixture of Japanese visual arts.

A man of extravagant ambition (if not outright megalomania), Hideyoshi sought to extend his rule to the Asian mainland. He invaded Korea in the 1590s, and the memory of his army's depredation survives in modern-day Korea—which was of course subject to more recent Japanese militarist incursions. Not content to conquer Korea, though, Hideyoshi targeted China as well. His death in 1598 put an end to this singular example of Japanese expansionism.

Japan's ultimate reunification would be the work of Hideyoshi's successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616). Leveraging the accomplishments of his two predecessors, Ieyasu would establish a shogunal regime that served as Japan's transition to the modern age.

Readings

de Bary, William Theodore, et al (eds), *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (Columbia, 2001), Volume 1

McCullough, Helen Craig (transl.), *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, 1988)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 77-163

Discussion Questions and Topics

Despite the obvious differences, Heian and medieval society and culture can be said to share a good deal. What are the similarities and differences, as you glean them from the available sources?

How would you go about comparing Japan's medieval and feudal society with that of Europe? Are there universal qualities that mark an age as 'medieval' or 'feudal'?

The image of the samurai— and a certain dominant 'warrior strain'— can be said to mark our understanding of Japanese civilization more so than images of courtly elegance. How would you argue for, and against, this proposition?

How would you characterize the arts and culture of medieval Japan? Do they help you arrive at a deeper understanding of this period in Japanese history? Can they be appreciated as 'great arts' irrespective of the context from which they emerged?

What interests you about Japan's late-medieval encounter with the West? What of popular accounts, such as James Clavell's *Shogun*?

As with the Heian period, what is left out of the medieval record is the circumstance of ordinary Japanese who lived out anonymous lives in villages and towns and had little contact with elite culture or politics. What would you want to know about Japan in the medieval period that is not available in the usual sources?

Excerpt from *The Tale of the Heike*

The sound of the Gion Shoja bells echoes the impermanence of all things [*shogyô mujô*]. The color of the *sala* flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night. The mighty fall at last; they are as dust before the wind. (Chapter One: Preface; translated by Helen Craig McCullough)

Images



Depiction of Battle of Yashima, from *Tale of the Heike* (Yale University Art Gallery)



Portrait of Hideyoshi, 1601 (Wikipedia)



Chanoyu tea room (Wikipedia)



Ryoanji rock garden, Kyoto (Wikipedia)



Noh theatrical performance (Wikipedia)