

Japanese Social History

Introduction Japanese society emerged largely independent of other societies in East Asia even though it developed more than a thousand years after Chinese civilization had. It was in the enviable position of being aware of how society was structured and what had worked on the mainland, but was largely free from military coercion. Because of its geographic position as a set of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean, the Japanese were free to pick and choose what elements of culture to borrow and what to discard as unsuitable. As a result, Japanese society often resembled elements of northeast Asian culture, but was distinctive in its own ways. For example, Japanese elites in the Nara Period (710-794) adopted a number of Tang Dynasty government and social structures, but adapted them to meet the needs of a small, largely rural system struggling to establish itself. Japanese society has therefore been closely linked to its neighbors on the mainland, but has always maintained its own identity. In particular, Japan's martial heritage (the samurai), and the extent to which it dominated society for almost a millennium, has no continental analogue.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Gender and Social Relationships. For most of the neolithic period people lived in small groups where many if not most social relationships were based on some level of kinship ties. Fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, and other extended family were all a part of any given group--which was likely a patriarchy. When groups got larger and small villages emerged, family ties were still paramount. Daughters were likely married out but sons likely were not. Women were pregnant for many if not most of their childbearing years and often died in childbirth. Men hunted, fished and fought, and suffered injury and death from those activities. Though likely, it is not known whether serial monogamy was practiced in mating partners. Boys learned life skills from older men in the group and girls learned from older women. To the extent possible, families cared for the old and infirm, although few would have survived into their dotage. The struggle to survive in an age where disease, injury and unexpected death were constant companions even for the young and healthy provides context for social relationships. It indicates that flexibility and utilitarianism must surely have governed most of humanity. Orphans must have been adopted, widows remarried and wanderers taken in.

Class. Class as we understand it in the contemporary world had almost certainly not yet emerged in the neolithic era. It is associated with civilization and is a social construct found where relatively large numbers of people live in close proximity to each other. Given that, early on, very small groups lived in caves and in very small villages, social structures were rudimentary at best. Later, neolithic Japanese began to construct pits with fires in the center around which huts made of wood, straw and mud were constructed. In warm, wet periods, multiple, large pits were sometimes constructed that could accommodate several dozen people, demonstrating the appearance of small villages. Still, settlements were highly dispersed so that humans would not compete for limited resources. There are no known cities from this period. Warmth and security from attack and predation were primary goals as well as the pooling of resources. The collection and production of food was the most important task of all neolithic societies. As Japan transitioned to the bronze age, the capacity to store food stuffs increased dramatically. However, this storage capacity would likely not be enough to get through entire seasons and certainly not enough to navigate years of drought or pestilence. As the era progressed, there likely emerged some stratification of society with village headmen and others controlling a disproportionate amount of resources. For most, however, subsistence was tenuous and often difficult.

Funerary. There is ample evidence that neolithic people placed great value on the rites and ceremonies associated with death. Early in the period, a small number of simple funerary items associated with that person's life were sometimes included in a burial. If a hunter, a weapon might be included. If a woman, a pot or other kitchen item might be in evidence. Later in the period, the number and value of funerary items increased, depending on the status of the individual. In some cases, elaborate and expensive burial shrouds covered the bodies along with jewelry made of shells and other items. Even infants were interred, sometimes in large pots and in other protective coverings. It is very likely that shamans played some role in the ceremonies associated with the internment of the dead.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Gender. In iron age Japan, gender roles were well established. Family units were dominated by a patriarchy and women were rarely allowed to participate in public life. Non-aristocratic women were expected to bear a son who would eventually become head of household and pass on the family name. This was her foremost duty. Still, peasant women worked alongside their husband in the rice paddies during the labor intensive planting and harvesting season. As the Yamatai state began to emerge in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, men went to fight, kill and be killed, thereby leaving many women the total responsibility for subsistence and family life for longer periods of time. Of course, social convention often did not (and still does not) apply to aristocratic women, some of whom emerged to become prominent figures in society. For example, the Chinese sources tell us that a woman—Pimiko—emerged to rule the earliest state. She was succeeded by another woman—Iyo.

The Effect of Rice on Society. The primary difference between Neolithic period Japanese and iron age Japanese was rice. However small this distinction may seem today, it marked a fundamental change in the way society was ordered. Instead of moving from time to time when seasons changed or when resources dwindled, Japanese lived long-term in settlements and villages, some of which grew quite large. Society was ordered around the cultivation, storage, distribution and protection of this most important food stuff. When successfully implemented, rice cultivation provided a stable, reliable source of excess calories, which in turn allowed for population increases. A larger population required more social structure, the careful control of resources and the development of local government. Villagers had to learn how to get along with those who were not necessarily members of the same family or clan. Standards of normative behavior had to be set, mutually agreed upon and carefully followed.

The rudimentary pit dwellings that characterized the Neolithic and bronzes ages were abandoned and more permanent above ground dwellings began to be built. In general, villages were built on new ground and the archaeological evidence indicates few if any settlements were built on old settlements. This is likely because the physical needs of a hunter-gatherer society were very different than those associated with rice paddy farming. Iron age dwellings had to be fairly close to rice paddies, water and irrigation infrastructure, but higher and far enough away from water so as to not be flooded periodically. Village dwellings were also grouped around rice storage buildings so that they could be controlled and protected and food easily distributed.

Class. The cultivation of rice allowed for some specialization in society. Because of its high caloric value, successful rice farmers could usually produce more calories than could be consumed by an individual or family. This freed other members of society to engage in pursuits other than agriculture. Some became religious figures, others village headmen, and still others were freed to develop martial skills which could be used to protect the village and farming infrastructure. On a related topic, it is also during this period that we see the first evidence of some stratification of society, although its precise contours are not known. For example, prominent men were sometimes buried with multiple wives, which indicates that some men were likely denied the opportunity to find a mate. In short, the cultivation of rice created an environment in which Japanese society could emerge.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Class. The stratification of society began in earnest in the 5th and 6th centuries. Prior to that time, virtually everyone was somehow involved in or linked to subsistence agriculture—either cultivation, storage, distribution or protection. Even religious figures spent time beseeching the spirits to provide good harvests. As political and social structures began to mature, larger segments of the population were removed from cultivation and were engaged in more specialized pursuits. This led to a recognizable triangle-shaped social structure of monarchs, aristocrats, clergy, bureaucrats, skilled laborers, village leaders all the way down to peasants. Still, 95% + of the population were peasants. Most lived in small villages and rarely had contact with anyone other than other villagers, village headmen, low-ranking clergy, a few skilled laborers and perhaps itinerant peddlers. Most peasants had little to no access to education and lived lives similar to their immediate ancestors. Dwellings were small, hand built and had thatched roofs, small windows and rudimentary chimneys.

Gender Roles. Both peasant men and women worked hard or didn't live long. Women were generally keepers of home and hearth. Their primary job was to gather and prepare food, and men worked the fields and rice paddies. However, it should be noted that during planting and harvest seasons, both genders and all age groups could be found in the paddies. Indeed, religious festivals grew up around women transplanting rice into flooded paddies. Men sometimes hunted and trapped animals if they had access to forests and other lands. Village life revolved

around family and the village headman. He was the intermediary between government officials who set rice (tax) quotas and the peasants. His job was to collect the tax, keep the peace and settle disputes before they came to the attention of officials above the village level. It is believed that spouses were selected by parents and girls in particular were married at a very young age. If sufficiently nourished, women spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing and could expect to lose a significant number of their offspring to injury or illness in childhood.

Aristocratic society was highly ritualized and refined in the Heian period (794-1185). Virtually all lived in the city of Heian. Men were head of household, generally well educated and earned a living. Women were a part of public life mostly insofar as they were objects of desire and/or wooing by men or vice versa. Many aristocratic women were literate (at least partially) and free to attend parties and poetry exhibitions but could not expect to rise to positions of leadership outside of their homes—and no woman has become emperor or shogun since the 8th century. Aristocratic men were expected to marry for politics and take second wives, concubines or mistresses for love. Women, however, could only be married to one man at a time. Principal wives were expected to remain faithful during childbearing years. Divorce, however, was acceptable and remarriage legal for both genders. Aristocratic women lived in a society which glamorized the taking of lovers and were largely free to participate. Both genders controlled who they had affairs with and could spurn a potential lover or suitor at will.

Social Structure in the Warrior Era. The Gempei War (1180-1185) acted as the catalyst for systemic social change in Japan. During the Heian period (794-1185), society was generally stable and the emphasis was on the civilian sector, the expansion of land under cultivation and maintenance of a functional system. That does not mean, however that the plight of the peasantry was uniformly bright and rosy. Natural disasters, poor harvests, epidemics, capricious government officials, unpredictable and high taxes and the like were all visited upon the peasants from time to time. Life could be difficult. In general, village headmen worked to maintain good relations between different peasant family groups and local officials. Local officials saw to it that the tax was paid, peace was kept and provincial officials kept happy. In the last century or so of the Heian period, another element was added to the social mix: the military. Soldiers didn't fit into the neat categories of society as understood in a civilian system. They weren't government officials, clergy, skilled craftsmen, village headmen or peasants. They were not producers of anything and, by and large, not accountable to local officials. They were small in number but exercised great influence. They also often switched allegiances on the provincial or national level and were, in short, a sort of wild card in the late Heian period—a disruptive force.

After the Gempei War, warriors slowly began to play a larger and more important role in society. As first Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199) and then the Hōjō Regents (1203-1333) expanded their official role, warrior role in society was normalized. The *shugo* and *jitō* system carved out a place for them in society alongside the civilian sector. The Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 and the continued threat of a third Mongol invasion until the death of the Mongol Emperor—Kublai Khan in 1294 played a significant role in the continued shift away from the civilian system to more and more military control. For approximately two decades, the needs of the civilian sector were subsumed to the needs of national defense. Society was mobilized to face the threat of total annihilation posed by the Mongols. Smithies, fletchers, coopers, swordsmiths, armorers, and the like provided goods and services for the campaign against the Mongols. Peasants grew the food, the government helped distribute it to the military and even the clergy offered up prayers for deliverance. When the threat passed, the Hōjō were bankrupt but the military all across the country then came to occupy a central position in society. As Japan passed into the Ashikaga period (1336-1477), society was ordered around the military and became, as the prominent historian Thomas Conlon argues a “State of War.” This social system continued to evolve over the course of many centuries. But the concept of the centrality of the warrior in society remained, in one form or another, until after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Class. Hideyoshi Toyotomi's Great Sword Hunt (*Taikō no katanagari*) of 1588 at the end of the Warring States period (1477-1600) had the effect of demilitarizing the population and of returning to the government the monopoly on the tools with which one could commit violence. It also had the effect of separating the peasantry from the military. All peasants were required to turn in their weapons to the authorities and all warriors were to move to castle towns and submit to the authority of their lord. Warriors were also not allowed to do any job that was not a part of their military training or otherwise sanctioned by the state. In this way, most members of society became a part of an accountability unit. Over the course of the first few decades of the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), the four classes of society were clearly demarcated. One was not free to move between classes of society, thereby making them almost castes.

The Samurai. Samurai were at the top level of society during the Tokugawa period. They represented between 7-8% of the population and it was their job to keep the peace. After the Siege of Osaka (1614-1615) and the Shimabara Rebellion (1637-1638), however, there was little for warriors to do. There were no significant external threats and, though very small domestic uprisings sprang up from time to time, the country was largely at peace. Indeed, some would say that the late 17th and 18th centuries in Japan represented a second golden age. The *daimyō* payed stipends to most of their retainers, money that came from taxation, and the samurai then sought out positions working for the government. The samurai lived under a different set of rules than the peasants and, though they could summarily execute a peasant if they presented a threat, that was an extremely rare event which later required a full investigation, potential sanction for the samurai a great deal of trouble. Samurai and most peasants did not run in the same social circles and did not regularly interact on a daily basis. The one exception was samurai who acquired a bureaucratic position (a not insignificant number) who might have cause as a government official to regularly encounter a member of the peasantry. This changed later in the period. In addition, sons and daughters of peasants and samurai occasionally married, but it was frowned upon—and samurai had to get permission to marry in advance from their lords.

The Peasants. Peasants were at the second level of society in the Tokugawa period. They represented 80%+ of the population. The life of the peasant had not much changed over the previous millennium. Their job was to work the fields and produce the food that they and other members of society consumed. The plight of the peasant was intimately tied to agricultural and weather patterns. Unlike in the Warring States period when a rival lord might unexpectedly seize their entire crop, burn it in the field, poison their water supply or otherwise disrupt the cycle, the Tokugawa period was more predictable. In most years, the peasants produced enough to feed themselves and pay the tax. There might be a little left over to trade for fabric, farm implements or other items they themselves could not make. Some farmers were naturally more adept than others and acquired land and material goods. In very bad years, the weather might not cooperate or insects might decimate a harvest. In these dark times, peasants succumbed to malnutrition, illness and starvation. Things could get so bad that families would result to selling children or infanticide.

Craftsmen and Merchants. Skilled laborers made up the third level of society. This group mostly lived in large villages and in the cities. They were masons, carpenters, coopers, smithies, and the like. They were an essential part of society and provided goods and services that were necessary in an agrarian age. The lowest class of society was the merchants. According to the ideology of the day, they were perceived as producing nothing of value and lived off the labor of others. Peasants grew the food. Skilled craftsmen did specialized jobs and the samurai acted as a constabulary and bureaucracy. Merchants only moved goods from place to place and bought and sold items. Because of this, they were understood to be the least important class of society and were treated as such.

Gender. Gender roles were well defined by the early modern period. The chaos of the Warring States period (1467-1600) which had undermined customary roles for both genders gave way to more traditional patterns after the Tokugawa seized power. In general, peasant women took care of the home and family and worked in the rice paddies during the labor intensive times of sowing and harvesting. Peasant men worked the fields and did other heavy labor. Both took their turn caring for children once they were old enough to provide labor. As might be expected, men of the samurai class practiced the martial arts, learned to read and write and many later became government bureaucrats. Women of the samurai class were expected to bear children, particularly boy children, and to look after them until the age of ten or so. Marriages were arranged by family members or matchmakers for virtually all classes of society. Women played no role in public life.

The 19th CENTURY

Class. As Japan entered the late 18th and early 19th centuries, cracks in the social system that had remained hidden from view for several decades began to become more evident. The samurai class was supposed to be the ruling class, followed in rank order by the peasantry, skilled laborers and finally merchants. However, the system increasingly became inverted in the early 19th century. *Sankin kōtai* (the system of alternate residence in Edo) and other economic pressures had reduced the fortunes of many *daimyō* and caused them to become increasingly dependent on loans from the merchant class. Some prominent merchants had become very affluent, so wealthy in fact that the shōguns had singled out a few for property confiscation over the years. In other instances, a number of merchant households were ruined when they were forced to make large loans to well-connected *daimyō*, who then refused to make payments. By the early 19th century, careful merchants camouflaged their wealth and found ways to not make loans to the ruling class. But this had the effect of limiting or removing capital from the economic system. Still, many *daimyō* from the great families all the way down to the lowest samurai retainer struggled with diminished budgets and even bankruptcy. In addition, the competition for a shrinking number of government positions (in relation to a larger samurai population) increased, creating an environment in which corruption could flourish. The samurai, as a class, were struggling and were increasingly seen by the other members of society as contributing little.

The Peasants

In the Edo period, peasants were tied to the land, although they were not serfs. Mobility was limited and permission had to be secured to travel from place to place, to change jobs or to change residences. It was impossible to stop being a peasant, a merchant or a craftsman. (In most instances, one could not stop being a samurai either.) Social mobility was virtually impossible and society became static. Village headmen were responsible to their *daimyō* for the actions of their charges and sometimes for the collection of taxes. When village headmen could not maintain order, the samurai bureaucracy stepped in and meted out severe punishment. In the late 18th century and early 19th centuries, Japan suffered from several major periods of famine, hardship and natural disasters. Conditions deteriorated to the point where infanticide and the selling of children were no longer rare occurrences among the peasants. These periods, for example, the Tempō famine of 1833-1837, were severe and widespread. They disrupted society and demonstrated the weakness of the shōgunate.

The Samurai

Over the course of Edo period, the samurai had been transformed from a fighting force to a bureaucratic work force. Still, the number of samurai in Japan had increased as the population increased, but the treasury (and government stipends) had remained much the same. This caused serious hardship for lower-ranking samurai in particular. When it became clear that the Tokugawa could no longer protect the country from increasing foreign incursions in the 1850s because of pre-existing internal weaknesses, samurai from other parts of Japan overthrew the ruling dynasty and proclaimed the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Ironically, the same samurai who had led the effort to overthrow the previous government moved quickly to minimize the role of samurai in Japan. Within eight years, the samurai were effectively dissolved as a distinct class of society, as were all other class distinctions.

Gender. Gender roles had not changed much from the early modern period to the early 19th century. In the middle of the 19th century, political chaos had loosened some social conventions among the samurai and peasantry. However, traditional roles still largely held sway. Peasant women had responsibility for home and family and peasant men worked the rice paddies and did other heavy labor. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the new elites decided to investigate gender roles in western nations and some women (particularly in the large cities) began to experiment with western dress and patterns of behavior. This lasted until late in the 19th century, but was ultimately not accepted by most of society. It should be noted that men also experimented with western attire and patterns of behavior. However, both men and women briefly returned to traditional roles by the turn of the 20th century until rapid industrialization began the transformation of gender expectations.

EARLY 20th CENTURY (1900-1950)

Glorification of the Military. In the early 20th century, Japanese society had learned to value the military as an important element of its national identity. The traditions of the samurai were warmly embraced and military adventurism had largely paid dividends. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 was a clear success and, though costly in both men and treasure, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was understood to be a turning point for Japan's expansion into the mainland. Above all, WWI demonstrated just how much could be gained by the careful application of aggressive diplomacy and military power. For Japanese society, there was little opposition to its use and the rush to acquire empire became a national priority. Still, neither Japanese society nor its economy can be described as "militarized" until the 1930s. Indeed, in the period of Taishō openness, the military endured its fair share of criticism. In particular, leftists (anarchists, socialists and communists) were very willing to argue that aggressive military action was not in the interest of the working man.

In the early 1930s, young military officers took the lead in promoting ultra-nationalism. They gave speeches, published pamphlets and journals and created an environment where assassination was not uncommon. These "righteous patriots"—as they called themselves—targeted anyone they perceived threatened the interests of the state or the prerogatives of the Emperor. Politicians (including even Prime Ministers, Finance Ministers and the like), public intellectuals, military officers, leaders of industry were all assassinated or targeted for assassination. Anyone who advocated for more democracy, less authoritarianism and more freedom was also warned. In short, a culture of fear and intimidation was used to silence the opposition. All of this was done by those who claimed to be patriots and the most sincere adherents of the cult of the Emperor.

Class. In the early 20th century, rapid industrialization had transformed society. Millions of peasants had moved into the burgeoning cities to work in the factories, unfettering them from their traditional roles in agriculture. These factory workers labored 12+ hours a day, 6 days a week. Many lived in squalid conditions and were paid a pittance. As might be expected with this level of exploitation, labor began to organize and many Japanese elites were shocked to discover that were hard to control or ignore. Communists, radical socialists, anarchists and other groups emerged in the 1910s, 20s and early 30s. These groups were perceived to be an existential threat by the ruling elites and were targeted for suppression. In the countryside, the Meiji Restoration had not yielded a more just society and absentee landlordism became a plague for the peasantry. In the years before the war with China began, nearly 50% of all land was worked by laborers and sharecroppers who did not own their own fields.

By the middle of the 1930s, the social narrative glorifying the military and military adventurism had become nearly impossible to counter. Society was carefully divided and sub-divided into small accountability groups and enforced by auxiliaries of the justice and interior ministries—and the *kempeitai* (military police). These accountability groups were small enough to ensure that those who espoused heterodox ideas were exposed and dealt with either through judicial or social sanction. Opposition political figures were jailed or effectively silenced, censorship rules strictly enforced and fines and confiscations were regular occurrences. Once in place in the 1930s, the leadership of Japan maintained a firm grip on society and monitored and tightly controlled the public narrative.

By any measure, Japanese society was generally willing to embrace the culture of militarism without much coercion. Propaganda was effective and largely unnecessary in the early years of the Pacific War. The campaign against China was a stalemate but the successes of 1941 and early 1942 provided society hope for a quick and easy conflict. However, the setbacks and failures of 1943 and early 1944 were minimized in the press and Japanese society was not prepared for the sacrifices to come. It was only in late 1944 and 1945 that cracks began to show in the social veneer of wartime Japan. As city after city was decimated by bombing, and word arrived that hundreds of thousands of soldiers had died, it became impossible to hide the truth that Japan was losing the war. Nonetheless, the social narrative was so resilient that Japanese women and school children began to drill for battle to repel the enemy invader in 1945. For Japanese society, it was impossible to consider that its vaunted military was incapable of protecting neither the Emperor nor the nation. When surrender occurred in August of 1945, Japanese society was traumatized in many ways. Its dominant social narrative of ethnic and military superiority was exposed as a lie. The Emperor was even forced to renounce his divinity.

Gender. Industrialization disrupted traditional gender roles in the early 20th century. Women by the millions moved into the cities and went to work in the factories. Most female workers were between the ages of 18 and 30 and were not married. Indeed, many women wanted to work for a few years, save money and then return to the rural areas to marry and have children. Factory owners preferred women to men because they could pay them less. However, during the time they worked in the cities, they existed outside the social control of their families. This liberated women while they lived in the urban environment and to a certain extent after they returned to their

villages. They returned with different expectations for their role in society and were more assertive than before. Men who worked in urban factories were similarly affected but the transition was not as great. Of course, during the many wars of the early 20th century, men were conscripted by the millions and shipped to various parts of the country and the world. Those who returned were profoundly affected by their experiences. Many became lifelong pacifists and came to abhor violence in a way that their samurai ancestors would not have understood or appreciated. These experiences helped redefine masculinity and femininity in Japanese society as the final war came to a close in 1945.

Late 20th Century (1950-1999)

New Freedoms. The militarism of the war-time years gave way to occupation and then to a fully-functioning open, democratic society as Japan moved into the 1950s. During the occupation, Japanese still did not enjoy most of the freedoms they now take for granted. Occupation officials placed restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom to live where one pleases, freedom to travel; implemented price controls, rationing of food and all consumer goods, and the like. This means that Japanese society had endured some form of authoritarian control from the early 1930s until the early 1950s. As might be expected, in the last 24 months of the occupation, social unrest became a real concern for SCAP (Supreme Command of the Allied Powers) officials. It appeared that Japanese had begun to internalize the teachings of SCAP officials on the importance of openness in the public sphere. Finally, the occupation came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952 and the Japanese were back in control of their own destiny.

The devastation of the war, however, was so great that Japanese were most interested in economic recovery and growth. In general, Japanese worked extremely long hours, sacrificed and saved money for the future. They spent very little on consumer goods, lived in small houses or tiny apartments and hoped for stability and a return to normality.

Gender. After the war and occupation, women were freed from formal social restrictions, but nonetheless mostly returned to traditional roles in society. The main breadwinner in the home was to be the husband. Women would often enter the work force as recent graduates but would resign when they married and started a family. As a result, Japanese society came to resemble a patriarchy, at least in the public sphere. When women married, they often moved into a multi-family dwelling where they were expected to care for their husband's parents as well as their own husband and children. Mothers-in-law, who were supposed to give up many of their household duties when a daughter-in-law moved into the home, often refused to step back and let someone else run the household. This caused a great deal of stress in the family then and is occasionally still a problem. In contemporary Japan, women have more freedom of choice. They can still enter the work force and increasingly are not expected give up their careers when they marry. Still, a sizable number of women exit the workforce to care for their families.

Class and Population. Japan is a medium-sized country and is roughly the size of the U.S. state of California. However, it is 75% mountainous, which means that only 25% of the land in Japan is suitable for farming or habitation. The population of Japan is 128 million and ranks 10th among the most populous countries in the world. The Japanese government is aware that such a large population is likely not sustainable but still offers incentives to families to produce more children because of the need to maintain the social safety net. Nonetheless, the vast majority of couples have decided to have fewer than two children. As a result, the population of Japan has stopped growing and has begun to decrease. Indeed, within two generations, the United Nations predicts that Japan's population will decrease to approximately 87 million. That is a drop of 41 million people! Though life will undoubtedly be more comfortable for Japanese with that many fewer people, the smaller population is expected to cause significant social disruption. Since very few nations in the modern era have experienced this sort of population decline (outside of war), it is not known how this will affect society and the economy.

Most contemporary Japanese consider themselves to be middle class. However, this phrase has very little meaning today because of its expansiveness. Anyone who has a stable job and can pay rent and buy food—even if they don't make much money—considers themselves to be middle class. On the other end of the spectrum, wealthy land owners who own large homes and other properties also consider themselves to be middle class. Indeed, it is not clear how different groups understand the designation. There is, however, an increasing number of homeless and destitute, a condition that was rarely seen between the 1960s and the end of the century.

Readings

- 1) Mark Hudson, *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands*, (University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
- 2) Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, (Kodansha America and Knopf Press, 1964)
- 3) Pierre Francois Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, (Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 4) Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 5) John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).
- 6) Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Questions about national origins, migration patterns, ethno-genesis and cultural beginnings have often dominated Japanese historical, archaeological and anthropological scholarly discussions. Why might this be the case? Why do you think that Japanese scholars were so keen to prove where their distant ancestors came from? What difference, if any, does it make to contemporary Japan culture and identity?
- 2) The Mongol juggernaut seemed to be an unstoppable force for virtually all the people groups they encountered. Neither the Europeans states, the Russian princes, the Persians, nor the Chinese were able to put up an effective defense against the overwhelming military might of the Mongol hoards. Yet, the Japanese leadership decided to stand and fight and, if unsuccessful, risked cultural oblivion. What motivated the Hōjō to take such a firm stance knowing the stakes? Was this decision a “fool’s courage” or was it a calculated risk? Though successful in their defense, Japan was forever changed by their brush with annihilation. What effect did the Mongol invasions have on the culture, government and economy of Japan?
- 3) Hideyoshi began the process of dividing Japanese society into what later became codified under the Tokugawa as the four classes: samurai, peasants, skilled craftsmen and merchants. For more than two centuries, there was little intermarriage between these groups and virtually no social mobility. It created stability in a country that had enjoyed very little in the previous century. However, it also came at a cost. What were the advantages and disadvantages of such a system? Did the system stifle or facilitate technological innovation? Was the economy negatively or positively affected by it? Was cultural growth stifled or promoted by it? How might it have been modified to minimize the worst abuses evident in the system? In the final analysis, was the division of Japanese society in the Edo period a positive or negative policy.
- 4) The phrase historians often use to describe the period of authoritarianism in the 1930s is “militarism.” It applies to Japan and Japan alone during this period. How is it understood today? How was it understood in the 1930s? To what extent can it be compared, if at all, to Fascism? How are they different? How are they the same? Did the goals of the militarists and Fascists coincide? If so, where? Were their respective ideologies too divergent to ever coexist in the long run, or were they co-sympathetic?

Texts

1) From the *Nihongi*, 720 CE (The Chronicles of Japan), translated by W. G. Aston, 1896, pp. 202-211. On the Emishi and the Death of a Prince. In the public domain.

In the summer of the 40th year of the Emperor Keikō's reign [12th emperor], there was a rebellion by eastern barbarians, and the frontier was in the state of siege. ... The Emperor addressed his ministers. "The eastern country is not secure, and numerous rebellious chieftains have sprung up. In the case of the Emishi, the revolt is total, and they frequently steal from our loyal subjects. Whom can I send to suppress this rebellion?" To this inquiry, none of the ministers knew how to answer.

[After another prince had refused to bear arms, concealing himself in the thicket,] Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto manly proclaimed. "It has not been many years since I subdued the Kumaso. Now the Emishi in the east are reveling against us. If we allow it to continue, there can be no universal peace. Your subject is aware of the difficulties and begs of you to be sent to quell the rebellion." The Emperor gave a battle axe to Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto and gave him the following charge: "We hear that the eastern barbarians are men of violent disposition, making crime as their credo. Their villages have no chiefs, and towns have no masters. Each of them covets a territory and plunders one another. Their mountains and fields are inhabited by malicious deities and demented demons, who stop traffic and bar the roads to cause difficulties. Amongst those eastern barbarians, the Emishi are the most powerful. Their men and women live together in promiscuity and they make no differentiation between father in son. In winter they dwell in holes and in summer they live in nests. They use furs as their clothing and drink blood. Brothers are suspicious of one another. ... When they receive a favor, they forget it, but if an injury is done, they repay it with vengeance. ... They plunder our frontier, and steal from our people the hard-earned products in agriculture and sericulture. When attacked, they hide in the grasses and if pursued, they enter into the mountains. From the olden days, they have not been able to receive the influence of our benevolent civilization. ... Heaven has taken pity on my want of intelligence and on the unmanageable conditions of the country, and has sent you to execute the work of heaven so as to perpetuate the existence of our imperial institution. My empire is your empire, and this position I hold is your position. Use your profound judgement and wisdom to guard against iniquity and rebellious movement. Exercise your authority with majesty and pacify people with virtue. Whenever possible subjugate people without recourse to arms. Use carefully chosen words to teach moderation to rebellious chiefs. If it fails, eradicate those malicious demons by displaying your armed might. ...

When Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto first reached Suruga, the brigands falsely pledged allegiance. They urged the prince to hunt, claiming that their field was rich in large deer, whose breath was like the morning mist and legs dense woods. Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto believed their words, and went into the middle of the field to hunt. The brigands, intending to kill the prince, set the field ablaze. Realizing that he had been deceived, the prince brought out his flint and steel and kindled a counter fire. The prince cried out: "I am almost betrayed," and burnt all the brigands and exterminated them. ...

Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto turned to Owari, and married a daughter of the lord of Owari by the name of Murakumo, and remained there for a month. While there he heard that there was a ferocious deity on Mount Ibuki in Ōmi. He took off his sword and left it in the house of Miyazuhime, and then set out on foot to investigate. When he reached Mount Ibuki, his way was blocked by a great serpent which was the incarnation of the mountain god. Without knowing that the main deity took the shape of a serpent, Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto reasoned: "This great serpent must be a messenger of the ferocious deity. Unless I can kill the main deity, there no use being bothered by its messenger." So he strode over and went on. The mountain god raised up clouds and made freezing rain to fall. The hills were covered with mist, and the valleys were darkened. The prince could no longer find his way. ... All he could do was to brave the mist and force his way onward. Finally when he succeeded in escaping from the mountain, he was not quite himself, looking like a drunken man. ...

It was at that time that Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto first became ill. With great difficulty, he made his way to Owari and entered the house of Miyazuhime, and then moved on to Ise and to Ōtsu. ... When he reached the field of Nobo, the pain became almost insufferable. He made arrangements to have the prisoners he obtained in wars against the Emishi sent to the Ise Shrine as part of his thanks offering, and dispatched Kibi-no Takehiko to the Emperor to report. ... The prince died on the field of Nobo at the age of thirty. ... The Emperor ordered his ministers and functionaries to bury the body of the prince in a tomb of the Nobo field in the land of Ise.

Now, Yamatotakeru-no-Mikoto, taking the shape of a white bird, left his tomb (*misasagi*) and flew towards the direction of Yamato. The ministers opened the coffin, only to discover the empty clothing remaining, and there was no corpse. Messengers were sent to follow the trace of the white bird. It stopped on the plain of Kotohiki in Yamato, so another tomb was erected. The white bird flew on again until it reached Kawachi, and remained in the village of Furuichi. Accordingly, the third tomb was erected. Men of those days called these three tombs (*misasagi*), “the white bird *misasagi*.” Finally, the white bird soared high above in heaven, and nothing is buried in the *misasagi* except his clothing and official cap. ...

2) “The Splendor of Kiyomori.” From the *Heike Monogatari*, (compiled in the early 14th century), found in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Vol. 45, 1919, by A. L. Sadler. Chapter 5: In the public domain.

Not only did Kiyomori himself live in splendor and luxury, but all his house likewise shared his prosperity. His eldest son Shigemori was Naidaijin and Sadaisho, his second son Munemori was Chunagon and Udaisho, his third son Tomomori was Chujo of the third grade, his eldest grandson Koremori Shosho of the fourth grade; sixteen of his house in all held offices of the higher grade (Kugyo), while thirty had right of entry to Court. The whole number of his family who drew revenues from the provinces as military officials were about sixty persons. All others who appeared are of no account in the world. Since long ago in the era of Nara no Mikado the office of Nakae-no-Taisho was first instituted in the fifth year of Shingi, and Nakae was changed to Konoe in the fourth year of Daido, only on three or four occasions have brothers occupied the offices of the Right and Left together. In the time of Montoku Tenno, on the Left was Yoshifusa as Sadaijin-no-Sadaisho, on the Right, Yoshisuke as Dainagon no Udaisho; they were the sons of Fuyutsugu, the retired Sadaijin. In the time of Shujo-in, Saneyori Ono no-miya dono was Minister of the Left and Morosuke Kujo dono of the Right; they were sons of Teijin Ko. In the time of Go-Rei-zei-in, Norimichi O-nijo dono was Minister of the Left and Yorimune Horikawa dono of the Right; they were the sons of the Kwampaku Mido. In the time of Nijo-in, Motofusa Matsu dono was Minister of the Left, and Kanezane Tsuki-no-wa dono of the Right; they were the sons of Hoseiji dono. All these were the sons of Regents. Among the sons of ordinary people there is no precedent.

3) “The Buke Shohatto” (Laws for the Barons), promulgated by the shōgun Iemitsu Tokugawa on August 5, 1635. Found in *Asiatic Society of Japan, Transactions*, 38:4, 1911, pp. 293-297. In the public domain

1. The taste for the Way of literature, arms, archery and horsemanship is to be the chief object of cultivation.
2. It is now settled that the Daimyō and Shomyō (i.e., the greater and lesser Barons) are to do service by turns at Yedo. They shall proceed hither on service every year in summer during the course of the fourth month. Latterly the numbers of their followers have become excessive. This is at once a cause of wastefulness to the provinces and districts and of hardship to the people. Henceforward suitable reductions in this respect must be made. On the occasions of going up to Kyoto, however, the directions given may be followed. On occasions of government service (i.e., military service) the full complement of each Baron must be in attendance.
3. The erection or repairing of new castles is strictly forbidden. When the moats or ramparts of the present residential castles are to be repaired, whether as regards the stonework, plaster, or earth-work, a report must be made to the Bugyōsho (i.e., the Mag-istracy at Yedo) and its direction taken. As regards the (Yagura, hei and mon) armories, fences and gates, repairs may be made to restore them to their previous conditions.
4. Whether at Yedo or in any of the provinces whatsoever, if an occurrence of any sort whatsoever should take place, those (Barons and their retainers) who are there at the time are to stay where they are and to await the Shogun’s orders (from Yedo).
5. Whenever capital punishment is to be inflicted, no matter where, nobody except the functionaries in charge is to be present. But the coroner’s directions are to be followed.
6. The scheming of innovations, the forming of parties and the taking of oaths is strictly forbidden.

7. There must be no private quarrels whether amongst the (Kokushu) greater Barons or (Ryoshu) the other Feudatories. Ordinary circumspection and carefulness must be exercised. If matters involving a lengthy arrangement should arise they must be reported to the Magistracy and its pleasure ascertained.
8. Daimyō of over 10,000 koku income, whether they be lords of provinces (domains) or lords of castles, and the heads of departments (monogashira) in personal attendance on them are not to form matrimonial alliances (between members of their families) at their private convenience (i.e., they must apply for the Shogun's permission before doing so).
9. In social observances of the present day, such as visits of ceremony, sending and return of presents, the formalities of giving and receiving in marriage, the giving of banquets and the construction of residences, the striving after elegance is carried to very great lengths. Henceforth there must be much greater simplicity in these respects. And in all other matters there must be a greater regard for economy.
10. There must be no indiscriminate intermingling (of ranks) as regards the materials of dress. Undyed silk with woven patterns (Shiro-aya) is only to be worn by Court Nobles (Kuge) and others of the highest ranks. Wadded coats of undyed silk may be worn by Daimyō and others of higher rank. Lined coats of purple silk; silk coats with the lining of purple; white gloss silk, colored silk coats without the badge are not to be worn at random. Coming down to retainers, henchmen, and men-at-arms, the wearing by such persons of ornamental dresses such as silks, damask, brocade or embroideries was quite unknown to the ancient laws, and a stop must be put to it.
11. Those who may ride in palanquins are all persons of distinction who are connections of the Tokugawa clan; lords of domains (Kuni) and lords of castles having 10,000 koku and upwards; the sons of provincial Daimyō (beneficiaries), lords of castles; chamberlains and higher functionaries, and the legitimate sons of such (i.e., sons by their wives; but not sons by their concubines); persons (of any rank) above fifty years of age; of the two professions of doctors of medicine and soothsayers (astrologers, onyoshi) and invalids and sick persons. Apart from the above named, irregularities must be prohibited; but those who have applied for and received official permission to ride are not included in the prohibition. As regard the feudal retainers in the provinces, those who may ride are to be definitely specified in each fief. Court Nobles, Abbots of royal or noble birth, and ecclesiastics of distinction are not to be included in this regulation.
12. Retainers who have had a disagreement with their original lord are not to be taken into employment by other Daimyō. If any such are reported as having been guilty of rebellion or homicide they are to be sent back (to their former lord). Any who manifest a refractory disposition must either be sent back or expelled.
13. When the hostages given by sub-vassals to their mesne lords have committed an offence requiring punishment by banishment or death, a report in writing of the circumstances must be made to the Magistrates' office and their decision awaited. In case the circumstances were such as to necessitate or justify the instant cutting down of the offender, a personal account of the matter must be given to the Magistrate.
14. The lesser beneficiaries must honestly discharge the duties of their position and refrain from giving unlawful or arbitrary orders (to the people of their benefices): they must take care not to impair the resources or well-being of the province or district in which they are.
15. The roads, relays of post horses, boats, ferries and bridges must be carefully attended to, so as to ensure that there shall be no delays or impediments to quick communication.
16. No private toll-bars may be erected, nor may any existing ferry be discontinued.
17. No vessels of over 500 koku burden are to be built.
18. The glebelands of shrines and temples scattered throughout the provinces (domains) having been attached to them from ancient times to the present day, are not to be taken from them.

19. The Christian sect is to be strictly prohibited in all the provinces and in all places.
20. In case of any unfilial conduct the offender will be dealt with under the penal law.
21. In all matters the example set by the laws of Yedo is to be followed in all the provinces and places.

All the foregoing provisions, being in conformity with the previous enactments of this (Tokugawa) House, are hereby reimposed and definitely established and must be carefully observed.

4) The Imperial Rescript on Education, 1890. Found in *Japanese Education* (London: John Murry, 1909), in the public domain.

Know Ye, Our Subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation, extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the law; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The Way here set forth in indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you. Our subjects, that we may all attain to the same virtue.

I, the Emperor, think that my ancestors and their religion founded my nation a very long time ago. With its development a profound and steady morality was established. The fact that my subjects show their loyalty to me and show filial love to their parents in their millions of hearts all in unison, thus accumulating virtue generation after generation is indeed the pride of my nation, and is a profound idea and the basis of our education.

You, my subjects form full personalities by showing filial love to your parents, by making good terms with your brothers and sisters, by being intimate with your friends, by making couples who love each other, by trusting your friends, by reflecting upon yourselves, by conveying a spirit of philanthropy to other people and by studying to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

Thus, please obey always the constitution and other laws of my nation in your profession in order to spread the common good in my nation. If an emergency may happen, please do your best for Our nation in order to support the eternal fate and future of my nation. In this way, you are my good and faithful subjects, and you come to appreciate good social customs inherited from your ancestors. The way of doing this is a good lesson inherited from my ancestors and religion which you subjects should observe well together with your offspring.

These ideas hold true for both the present and the past, and may be propagated in this nation as well as in the other countries. I would like to understand all of this with you, Our subjects, and hope sincerely that all the mentioned virtues will be carried out in harmony by all of you subjects.

The 30th day of the 10th month of the 23rd year of Meiji (1890).