JAPANESE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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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)

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)

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 it 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.

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 MinamotoYoritomo (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. HideyoshiToyotomi'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.

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. *Sankinkōtai* (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 Tempōfamine 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.

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 early30s. 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.

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.

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

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