HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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JAPANESE GOVERNMENT

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POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Postclassical Japan

Overview: Japan in the postclassical period constituted one of several cases in which an effort to build a more ambitious government structure ultimately failed – because of internal resistance and arguably a lack of sufficient prior political experience. Japan began sending missions to China in the 6th century. Over time, the result brought Japan a writing system (adapted to a very different spoken language); Buddhism and a variety of artistic forms; some influence from Confucianism; and a variety of more advanced technologies. Not surprisingly, a deep interest in the Chinese state seemed to offer another compelling opportunity, but imitation foundered after several decades, leaving Japan with a decentralized feudal system and a distinctive political legacy of its own.

Government origins Agriculture and iron technology were introduced rather suddenly to Japan via migrations from the Asian mainland. An early result was the formation of many, possibly hundreds, of regional kingdoms. Warfare and negotiation gradually created a more unified state, in the centuries after 250 CE, and a hereditary line of emperors (who still exist today as the world's oldest dynasty).

Chinese influence Growing contact with China brought efforts to establish Confucian values for officials and even an attempt at a merit-based bureaucracy, in the 7th century. Further reforms after 645 aimed at further centralization. The government claimed ownership of all land, to be distributed equally to farmers, and compiled a registry of households to serve as the basis for taxation. The government began to construct a grandiose capital (now the city of Nara), while also promoting Buddhism in response to a series of natural disasters.

Decentralization From 794 onward the power of the central state declined steadily – though it sponsored a number of cultural achievements in art and literature. Internal power struggles and the increasing isolation of the emperor led to neglect of administration. A variety of nobles and Buddhist orders seized land, reducing available tax revenues and support for the military. Landowners, again including many Buddhist factions, began to set up military forces of their own, recruiting the famous *samurai* soldiers and effectively establishing a decentralized, and often fractious, feudal system. Internal warfare became common.

Kamakura shogunate and after Military success brought one clan to power after 1185. The emperor, now largely a figurehead though invested with religious symbolism, named one leader a *Shogun,* exercising some central power despite the continued existence of various local armies. The system, which would be reproduced more successfully around 1600, bore some resemblance to feudal monarchies in Western Europe, in that there was some central authority but without extensive government functions. Feudal lords came together twice in the late 13th century to defeat a threatened Mongol invasion, but the effort depleted the shogun's financial base and actually led to further decentralization. Shogunates continued in name from the 14th century onward, but any central power depended on negotiations with powerful regional lords, called *daimyos*, who frequently disobeyed central directives. Civil wars were frequent, and by 1477 hundreds of regional feudal states dotted the islands. A number of rival Buddhist temples also set up their own armies, effectively forming part of the feudal

system. This was the political pattern in place when the Portuguese first arrived in Japan (by a seafaring misadventure) in the middle of the 16th century,

Legacies This checkered political experience did not prevent periods of considerable economic and demographic growth and cultural creativity, though the worst civil wars clearly took a toll. The continued existence of the emperor and the precedent of shogunate rule were features that would later be revived and reworked to generate more effective government, though the feudal system survived in principle until 1868. Japanese feudalism resembled its entirely separate though coterminous Western counterpart in many ways, a clear response to the absence of effective central control combined with a strong landed aristocracy and an equally strong military ethic. Peasant-serfs depended heavily on the protection the daimyos could offer, in return for labor service and taxation in kind. Japanese feudalism was however somewhat different from its Western analogue. Samurai solders were more fully dependent on the regional lords than were Western vassals on their aristocratic superiors; they had less control over their own land and resources. This may account for the fact that Japanese feudalism did not generate a tradition of consultations between lords and vassals that, in the West, would ultimately produce the first version of a parliamentary system. Japanese feudalism, in contrast, more fiercely emphasized group loyalty, the unwavering devotion of samurai that could, among other things, lead to ritual suicides when a lord was defeated in battle. Many historians believe that this tradition of group loyalty would later contribute to the organizational culture of industrial Japan, in contrast to the more individualistic business operations in the West.

Study questions

1. Why were Japanese leaders drawn to the idea of a strong central state, but why were they unable to follow through?
2. What was the relationship between shogun and emperor?
3. What were the chief legacies and results of the Japanese feudal system?

Further reading

Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations* (Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013)

Jeffrey Mass, *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World* (Stanford University Press, 1997)

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Early Modern Japan

Overview Political innovation was greater in Japan, where the Tokugawa shogunate introduced greater internal peace and stability from approximately 1600 onward. Governments in both countries developed successful policies in dealing with Western traders (policies that were quite different from those of the Islamic empires and Russia), though Japan opted for greater isolation than China did.

Tokugawa regime The Tokugawa clan gained control over most of Japan after victory in the endemic feudal wars, forming a government (under the figurehead emperor, who had virtually no real authority) in 1603. The regime was able to end internal conflict while retaining the feudal class in principle; each major feudal lord administered a province, but under some central authority; and some separate government officials operated as well, as the regime established a hierarchy of offices independent of the feudal system. The control of the central Shogun increasingly superseded separate feudal authority. And the central administration directly operated foreign policy, coinage, weights and measures, and public works. The feudal lords pledged loyalty to the Shogun. But normally each regional administration had considerable leeway, even in taxation policy, while carrying out public works and maintaining military order. All of this was a substantial departure from the political system of earlier centuries, and it underwrote growing internal economic prosperity. At the same time, in keeping with the new political tone, Confucian ideas spread more widely, though the government also supervised Buddhist and Shinto activities.

Foreign policy for several decades prior to the Tokugawa, Portuguese trade and missionary activity had attracted considerable Japanese interest. Briefly under the Tokugawa a mission was actually sent to Spanish America, in the interests of trade. But in 1835 the regime pulled back, introducing the Seclusion Laws. . It feared the example of Spanish control of the Philippines, and the larger threats to Japanese culture and its feudal military structure. Christian missionaries were attacked. The regime decreed that only Chinese, Korean and Dutch ships could enter Japanese harbors, and then under strict limitations. Japanese were not allowed to travel abroad. For over two centuries the Tokugawa managed to make this policy work, without significant internal or external challenge.

Study questions

1. How did Japanese and Chinese foreign policies compare?
2. How was the Tokugawa shogunate able to establish greater internal stability?

Further reading

Conrad Totman, *Tokugawa Ieyau: Shogun* (Heian International, 1983)

19TH CENTURY

19th Century Japan

Special features Japan's response to the Western challenge, as it presented itself forcefully after 1853, was unusually successful, and government initiatives and internal reforms were at the heart of the response. The pattern may seem unexpected, particularly in its contrast to China. Japan, though more isolated, had the advantage of a past tradition of imitation (from China) that may have provided inspiration, including the realization that imitation did not have to mean loss of identity. The Tokugawa Shogunate, though not without problems by the early 19th century, was relatively stable, another contrast with China at that point. Further, Japanese contacts with Dutch traders expanded somewhat in the later 18th century, providing more knowledge of developments in European science. The Japanese government did not seek change, and it debated response for over a decade: but then it jumped in vigorously.

The spur In 1853 an American fleet landed in Tokyo Bay and demanded that the Japanese open their markets. This was followed by British and further American visits, and a few episodes of limited bombardment. The result was a fifteen year debate, and near civil war, between factions that hoped to maintain the status quo and those that argued that Japan must reform to deal more effectively with this new threat. The reformers won, and a new emperor in 1868, called Meiji, or the enlightened one, launched a period of rapid change that, fairly quickly, led to the early stages of Japanese industrialization. In essence, the government, aided by some segments of the samurai class and a new group of entrepreneurs, took the lead in quietly revolutionizing Japanese society. (Note: the idea of government-guided "revolutions from above" most clearly applies to 20th-century cases, such as Turkey, but it may fit the Japanese experience as well.)

Form of government For starters, the Meiji government abolished feudalism and other legal inequalities. The shogunate ended and was replaced with direct imperial rule – after centuries in which the emperor had been a shadowy religious figurehead. A new charter urged the formation of "deliberative assemblies" to allow expression of public opinion, while in principlel all positions now were open to talent ("the common people…shall be allowed to pursue his own calling"). A new council of state was established, along with a new system of local administration, and office holding was limited to four years. Many former officials, including nobles, were still utilized, but the government set up new prefectures to administer the nation's regions. Reform discussions continued into the 1870s, though there were also a number of popular protests that were put down with force; laws severely limited criticism of the government in the press and also popular gatherings (where police presence was required). An independent judiciary was established, and new regional assemblies established. Great debate occurred, at the ministerial level, as to which Western government model to follow. Initial partisans of the British or American models gradually lost ground, in favor of the more limited German approach to parliamentary democracy. Finally in 1889 a new constitution clearly established a mixed parliamentary and absolutist model. The emperor named

the chief ministers, though the prime minister in fact had considerable authority. An imperial Diet included an elected house (with franchise limited by property qualifications, to about 1% of the total) and an upper house with a mixture of nobles and imperial appointees. Furthermore, control of the military was kept largely separate. Even with these limitations, however, political parties began to emerge, usually operating in a spirit of compromise.

Functions From the outset the new state paid great attention to taxation, with a number of administrative reforms. The needs of an expanding government (most particularly, the growing navy) required additional measures, and in 1889 the Japanese enacted an income tax – one of the first in the world not as a temporary wartime measure. This began to replace primary dependence on taxes on land and liquor. A host of legal changes were introduced. In family law, concubinage was outlawed. In 1872 the government decreed adoption of the Western clock – a huge change in popular habits that was quickly carried through. Public health measures expanded, quickly resulting in population growth. In 1872 the government decreed compulsory primary education for both boys and girls. A centralized national system was sketched, with 250 regional districts. Full implementation was delayed by resource constraints and some popular resistance, plus a shortage of qualified teachers, but by the 1890s most children were in fact attending government schools; literacy increased rapidly. The government also set up a number of new secondary schools and universities, from which most of the expanding bureaucracy were recruited. Rigorous examinations (and some fees) were required for university entrance, but graduates could be assured of solid government jobs. Finally, the government moved actively to promote economic growth. It rapidly created a railroad network, and set up a number of model factories, particularly in armaments and heavy industry; Japanese industrialization proceeded with a mixture of state and private initiative. Along with all this, the military was expanded and modernized, and the size of the bureaucracy grew steadily. A real functional transformation occurred, in the space of just a few decades.

Nationalism and religion Complementing these rapid changes was a distinctive mix of nationalism, emperor worship, and religion. During the 1870s a number of European and American advisors were employed to help guide the new school system, but at the end of the decade the government shifted gears, emphasizing the importance of community and national loyalty in the schools. Western materials on civics and ethics were replaced. Even in the 1870s the government backed a new effort to promote the Shinto religion, and this initiative expanded steadily. Emperor worship became a key part of state dogma, and Japanese history was massaged to suggest that this emphasis dated back to the nation's origins. Promotion of a rather traditional family structure, with women enjoined to serve as "wise mothers", complemented this ideological approach. Obviously, the Japanese were creating a distinctive combination of an effective modern state with a special kind of nationalist ideology.

Foreign policy These various changes were accompanied by another innovation – an activist, aggressive foreign policy, imitating contemporary patterns in Western Europe. Successful wars against China and then Russia gave Japan the beginnings of an empire, particularly through control over the Korean peninsula; and further appetites were directed toward China.

Study questions

1. Why did Japanese authorities place such emphasis on emperor worship and Shintoism?
2. What kinds of compromise were reflected in the structure of the state, by 1890?
3. What were the main functional changes for the government?
4. Was this a "revolution from above", orchestrated by the Meiji state?

Further reading

Donald Keene, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and his world, 1852-1912* (Columbia University Press, 2002)

W.J. Macpherson, *The Economic Development of Japan, 1868-1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Rotern Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (Taylor and Francis, 2009)

20TH CENTURY

Japan

Overview The nations of East Asia have had diverse political experiences over the past century. North Korea, freed from Japanese control but under Soviet influence, developed a strongly authoritarian family dynasty, which also managed to create a powerful military apparatus. South Korea and Taiwan underwent a somewhat familiar transition from authoritarian to democratic. Japan, after loss in war and American occupation, became a stable democracy. China came under communist control in 1949 and has maintained a strongly authoritarian regime, but with a number of shifts in policy and governance. The region may despite diversity display some core unity around a residue of Confucian values that emphasize stability and community cohesion – on strong display in the well organized regional response to the Covid pandemic of 2020-1. In another interesting similarity, in the 21st century regimes in the region struggled against population stagnation or decline without permitting much immigration.

Japan After authoritarian military rule during the 1930s and World War II years, Japan under American occupation became a democracy, with female suffrage. Emperor worship was banned, and the emperor became a ceremonial figurehead. Parliamentary democracy proceeded in Japan without major disruption, with considerable freedom for press, religion and the like. During much of the postwar period, while there was political competition, the Liberal Democratic Party dominated, meaning that negotiations within the party were often more important than inter-party transitions. The Japanese system was also noteworthy for the close relationship between government and business – what some competitors referred to as "Japan, Inc." Government support for business helped propel the economy forward, making Japan at one point the world's second largest economy. By the 1980s, government measures helped the nation deal with considerable environmental pollution, with air quality improved in major cities. The government also renounced militarism: Article 9 of the new constitution disavowed war, and while Japan did ultimately build a military force it was clearly defensive in nature, with public opinion (for the most part) firmly resisting fuller military development. By the 21st century Japan was facing new problems of population decline; here, government measures to encourage more female participation in the labor force and provide assistance in child care had more inconclusive results.

"Pacific Rim" Taiwan came under control of the Chinese Nationalist government in 1949, as it was forced out of China proper – though the People's Republic continued to claim Taiwan as part of its territory. Initially, the new regime established authoritarian controls. Similarly in South Korea, its independence reestablished, an authoritarian regime took hold; this extended past the period of the Korean War, when North and South Korea clashed (with great power participation) with ultimately inconclusive results (though military expenditures remained high on both sides). Strong governments in both South Korea and Taiwan helped support rapid industrial growth, as the Pacific Rim became one of the world's most dynamic industrial regions. By the later 20th century and into the 21st, both countries evolved toward functioning democracies, with multi-party competition and considerable protection for individual rights. The city-state of Hong Kong, under British rule, also established a functioning democracy. The British ceded Hong Kong back to the People's Republic of China in 1997, which in turn pledged to maintain the existing structure – "one country, two systems". However increasing repression within China spread to Hong Kong by 2020, and competitive democracy effectively ended.

Study questions

1. Did government systems and policies in East Asia demonstrate any common features?
2. What have been the many changes in the governance system in communist China since 1949?
3. Do government systems help explain the unusual economic success of most East Asian nations in the past half-century?

Further reading

Kerry Brown, *China's World: the global aspirations of the next superpower* (I.B. Tauris, 2017)

Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (Norton, 1991)

William Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (3rd ed., St. Martin's, 2021)

Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: a modern history* (Norton, 2005)