Japanese and European Feudalism

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Although Japan and Europe did not have any direct contact with one another during the medieval and early modern periods, they independently developed very similar socio-political systems. Often, these systems are labeled as feudal.

What is feudalism? The great French historian Marc Bloch defined it this way: "A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary...; supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man...; [and] fragmentation of authority - leading inevitably to disorder."

In other words, there are peasants who are tied to the farm land and work for protection plus a portion of the harvest, rather than for money. Warriors dominate the society and are bound by codes of obedience and ethics. Finally, there is no strong central government; instead, lords of smaller units of land control the warriors and peasants, but these lords owe (at least theoretical) obedience to a distant and relatively weak duke, king or emperor.

Similarities between Japanese and European Feudalism

Feudal Japanese and European societies were built on a system of hereditary classes. The nobles were at the top, followed by warriors, with tenant farmers or serfs below.

There was very little social mobility; the children of farmers became farmers, while the children of lords became lords and ladies. (One prominent exception to this rule in Japan was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, born a farmer's son, who rose to rule over the country.)

In both feudal Japan and Europe, constant warfare made warriors the most important class. Called "knights" in Europe and "samurai" in Japan, the warriors served local lords.

In both cases, the warriors were bound by a code of ethics. Knights were supposed to hew to the concept of chivalry, while samurai were bound by the precepts of bushido, or "the Way of the Warrior."

Both knights and samurai rode horses into battle, used swords, and wore armor. European armor was usually all-metal, made of chain mail or plate metal. Japanese armor included laquered leather or metal plates and silk or metal bindings. European knights were almost immobilized by their armor, needing help up on to their horses, from where they would simply try to knock their opponents off their mounts.

Samurai, in contrast, went with light-weight armor that allowed them quickness and maneuverability, at the cost of providing much less protection.

Feudal lords in Europe built stone castles to protect themselves and their vassals in case of attack. Japanese daimyo also built castles, although Japan's castles were made of wood rather than stone.

Differences between Japanese and European Feudalism

Japanese feudalism was based on the ideas of the Chinese philosopher Kong Qiu or Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius stressed morality and filial piety, or respect for elders and other superiors. In Japan, this functioned as the moral duty of daimyo and samurai to protect the peasants and villagers in their region, and the duty of the peasants and villagers to honor the warriors and pay taxes to them in return.
European feudalism was based instead on Roman Imperial laws and customs, supplemented with Germanic traditions, and supported by the authority of the Catholic Church. The relationship between a lord and his vassals was seen as contractual; lords offered payment and protection, in return for which vassals offered complete loyalty. It is interesting that these two very different legal/moral systems ended up creating such similar socio-political structures.

Another difference between these two feudal systems is their timing. Feudalism was well-established in Europe by the 800s CE, but appeared in Japan only in the 1100s as the Heian period drew to a close and the Kamakura Shogunate rose to power. European feudalism died out with the growth of stronger political states in the sixteenth century, but Japanese feudalism held on until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

A key distinguishing factor between the two is land-ownership. European knights gained land from their lords as payment for their military service; they thus had direct control of the serfs who worked that land. In contrast, Japanese samurai did not own any land. Instead, the daimyo used a portion of their income from taxing the peasants to pay the samurai a salary, usually paid in rice.

Samurai and knights differed in several other ways, including their gender interactions. Samurai women, for example, were expected to be strong like the men, and to face death without flinching. European women were considered fragile flowers who had to be protected by chivalrous knights. In addition, samurai were supposed to be cultured and artistic, able to compose poetry or write in beautiful calligraphy. Knights were usually illiterate, and would likely have scorned such past-times in favor of hunting or jousting.

Finally, knights and samurai had very different approaches to death. Knights were bound by Catholic Christian law against suicide, and strove to avoid death. Samurai, on the other hand, had no religious reason to avoid death, and would commit suicide in the face of defeat in order to maintain their honor. This ritual suicide is known as seppuku (or "harikiri").

**The Four-Tiered Class System of Feudal Japan**

Between the 12th and 19th centuries, feudal Japan had an elaborate four tier class system.

Unlike European feudal society, in which the peasants (or serfs) were at the bottom, the Japanese feudal class structure placed merchants on the lowest rung. Confucian ideals emphasized the importance of productive members of society, so farmers and fishermen had higher status than shop-keepers in Japan. At the top of the heap was the samurai class.

**The Samurai Class:**

Feudal Japanese society was dominated by the samurai warrior class. Although they made up only about 10% of the population, samurai and their daimyo lords wielded enormous power.

When a samurai passed, members of the lower classes were required to bow and show respect. If a farmer or artisan refused to bow, the samurai was legally entitled to chop off the recalcitrant person's head.

Samurai answered only to the daimyo for whom they worked. The daimyo, in turn, answered only to the shogun.

There were about 260 daimyo by the end of the feudal era. Each daimyo controlled a broad area of land, and had an army of samurai.
The Farmers / Peasants:

Just below the samurai on the social ladder were the farmers or peasants.

According to Confucian ideals, farmers were superior to artisans and merchants because they produced the food that all the other classes depended upon. Although technically they were considered an honored class, the farmers lived under a crushing tax burden for much of the feudal era.

During the reign of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, farmers were not allowed to eat any of the rice they grew. They had to hand it all over to their daimyo, and then wait for him to give some back as charity.

The Artisans:

Although artisans produced many beautiful and necessary goods, such as clothes, cooking utensils, and woodblock prints, they were considered less important than the farmers. Even skilled samurai sword makers and boatwrights belonged to this third tier of society in feudal Japan.

The artisan class lived in its own section of the major cities, segregated from the samurai (who usually lived in the daimyos' castles), and from the lower merchant class.

The Merchants:

The bottom rung of feudal Japanese society was occupied by merchants, both traveling traders and shopkeepers.

Merchants were ostracized as "parasites" who profited from the labor of the more productive peasant and artisan classes. Not only did merchants live in a separate section of each city, but the higher classes were forbidden to mix with them except on business.

Nonetheless, many merchant families were able to amass large fortunes. As their economic power grew, so did their political influence, and the restrictions against them weakened.

People above the Four-Tier System:

Although feudal Japan is said to have had a four tier social system, some Japanese lived above the system, and some below.

On the very pinnacle of society was the shogun, the military ruler. He was generally the most powerful daimyo; when the Tokugawa family seized power in 1603, the shogunate became hereditary. The Tokugawas ruled for 15 generations, until 1868.

Although the shoguns ran the show, they ruled in the name of the emperor. The emperor, his family and the court nobility had little power, but they were at least nominally above the shogun, and also above the four tier system.

The emperor served as a figurehead for the shogun, and as the religious leader of Japan. Buddhist and Shinto priests and monks were above the four-tier system, as well.

People below the Four-Tier System:
Some unfortunate people also fell below the lowest rung of the four tier ladder.

These people included the ethnic minority Ainu, the descendants of slaves, and those employed in taboo industries. Buddhist and Shinto tradition condemned people who worked as butchers, executioners, and tanners as unclean. They were called the eta.

Another class of social outcasts were the hinin, which included actors, wandering bards, and convicted criminals.

Prostitutes and courtesans, including oiran, tayu, and geisha, also lived outside of the four tier system. They were ranked against one another by beauty and accomplishment.

Today, all of these people who lived below the four-tiers are collectively called "burakumin." Officially, families descended from the burakumin are just ordinary people, but they can still face discrimination from other Japanese in hiring and marriage.

Growing Mercantilism Undermines the Four-Tier System:

During the Tokugawa era, the samurai class lost power. It was an era of peace, so the samurai warriors' skills were not needed. Gradually they transformed into either bureaucrats or wandering troublemakers, as personality and luck dictated.

Even then, however, samurai were both allowed and required to carry the two swords that marked their social status. As the samurai lost importance, and the merchants gained wealth and power, taboos against the different classes mingling were circumvented with increasing regularity.

A new class title, chonin, came to describe upwardly-mobile merchants and artisans. During the time of the "Floating World," when angst-ridden Japanese samurai and merchants gathered to enjoy the company of courtesans or watch kabuki plays, class mixing became the rule rather than the exception.

This was a time of ennui for Japanese society. Many people felt locked in to a meaningless existence, in which they just sought out the pleasures of earthly entertainment as they waited to pass on to the next world.

An array of great poetry described the discontent of the samurai and chonin. In haiku clubs, members chose pen names to obscure their social rank. That way, the classes could mingle freely.

The End of the Four Tier System:

In 1868, the time of the "Floating World" came to an end, as a number of radical shocks completely remade Japanese society.

The emperor retook power in his own right, in the Meiji Restoration, and abolished the office of the shogun. The samurai class was dissolved, and a modern military force created in its stead.

This revolution came about in part because of increasing military and trade contacts with the outside world, (which, incidentally, served to raise the status of Japanese merchants all the more).

Prior to the 1850s, the Tokugawa shoguns had maintained an isolationist policy toward the nations of the western world; the only Europeans allowed in Japan were a tiny camp of 19 Dutch traders who lived on a tiny island in the bay.

Any other foreigners, even those ship-wrecked on Japanese territory, were likely to be executed. Likewise, any Japanese citizen who went overseas could never return.

When Commodore Matthew Perry's U.S. Naval fleet steamed into Tokyo Bay in 1853 and demanded that Japan open its borders to foreign trade, it sounded the death-knell of the shogunate and of the four-tier system.