

Heian Japan: An Introductory Essay

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Japan has a long history. Archaeological evidence shows that people have lived in the Japanese islands since prehistoric times, and written records from almost 1,700 years ago describe primitive societies in the archipelago. To make this long history more manageable, historians break it up into periods. Periods range in length from decades to centuries. The Heian (pronounced “Hey ahn”) period, from 794 to 1185 C.E., is one such period.

During the Heian period, an imperial court based in the capital of Heian-kyō (modern Kyoto) wielded the highest political authority in the land. The city’s name means “Capital of Peace and Tranquility,” and the Heian period is usually remembered as having been an age of art, literature, and culture. During these years, Japanese developed a strong sense of native aesthetics. Female authors serving at court, women including Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, created splendid literary works such as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*. Not everything was peaceful, however. Warriors also started to become important political figures in the Heian period. In fact, these four centuries contain a tremendous amount of change. Over the course of the Heian period, society moved from an interest in foreign things to native ones, from elite Buddhism to religion for the common people, and from rule exclusively by those at court to power shared with the newly rising samurai. The ways these political, social, religious, and economic developments interacted with and transformed each other are what make the Heian period so fascinating and important.

Japan before Heian and the Moving of the Capital

For more than a century prior to the Heian period, Japan obsessed over things Chinese. Japanese envoys who visited Tang China found a magnificent civilization far more advanced than their own. Starting in the seventh century, Japanese began trying to refashion their own country along Chinese lines. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the design of the largest pre-Heian capital, a city called Heijō-kyō. Modeled on the Tang capital of Chang’an, Heijō-kyō was laid out in a grid-like pattern, with streets running north-south and east-west. The imperial palace was built in the north so that the Japanese emperor could face south and look out over his people, in keeping with Chinese ideas of geomancy. Because the capital was primarily located in Heijō (modern Nara) between 710 and 784 C.E., these years are referred to as the Nara period.

The Japanese also adopted other aspects of Chinese society. During the seventh century, the court followed Chinese example by declaring all land to be the property of the state and attempting to distribute it to the people on the basis of a national census conducted every six years. They also devised and implemented law codes that drew upon—in some places, actually copied—Tang legal codes. In the early eighth century, the discovery of new sources of copper enabled the court to begin minting copper coins. These coins were almost identical in shape and design to Chinese cash. Officials also reorganized government and created eight bureaucratic ministries that paralleled those in China. Finally, Japanese learned about Buddhism by reading

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Chinese texts and built major temples throughout the city of Nara. Emperor Shōmu, who ruled during the middle of the Nara period, was a devoutly religious man. He constructed the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji Temple, still a popular tourist site today. Even the term we translate as “emperor”—in Japanese, *tennō*—was probably first used in the seventh century by Japanese who wanted to assert the equality of their ruler with the emperor of China. Of course, these changes were not motivated solely by admiration for Tang society. Japanese elites used Chinese ideas about government to strengthen their own hold on power. They thereby created in the eighth century the most powerful state that had existed to date in the Japanese islands.

Emperor Kammu, who took the throne in 781, decided to abandon Nara for a new capital. After a failed attempt to establish a new city at Nagaoka, he moved the imperial court to Heian in 794. Scholars have debated why Kammu moved the capital. Some have suggested that he sought to escape the strong Buddhist influence in Nara. One of his predecessors, Empress Shōtoku, had given a great deal of power to a Buddhist advisor named Dōkyō. Dōkyō had ambitions on the throne itself. Although Dōkyō was deposed and exiled after Shōtoku’s death, some believe Kammu moved the capital to avoid the Buddhist monks and temples already well established in Nara. But Kammu later became an important sponsor of Buddhist institutions himself, so this explanation is problematic. A more convincing theory is that Kammu relocated the capital to an area where his maternal family was strong. There, he could rely on his relatives for support. Regardless of the reason, the court would remain in Heian/Kyoto for more than 1,000 years.

Turning Away from Chinese Models

The city of Heian, like its predecessor Nara, reflected Chinese influence in its design. Much larger than Nara, the new capital encompassed approximately ten square miles. It had broad avenues and streets running parallel and perpendicular to each other. The layout was orderly and regular. Although the city has changed over the centuries, even today visitors to Kyoto find it much easier to navigate than most other Japanese cities. Other Chinese-inspired practices continued into the Heian period as well. For example, the imperial court continued to mint copper coins until the mid-tenth century. But beginning in the late eighth century, and especially in the ninth, Japanese began to move away from Tang models. They started modifying aspects of government and society in their own original ways.

One reason for the move away from Chinese models was the decline of the Tang dynasty. Following the internal rebellions in the mid-eighth century, the Tang began a downward trend from which it never recovered. Japanese were not as impressed on their visits to China. They may even have begun to fear traveling in a country where conditions were unstable. In 894 the Japanese suspended official missions to the Tang. Although Buddhist scholars and merchants continued to move back and forth between China and Japan, no official government missions would occur for 500 years.

Other reasons for the move away from things Chinese sprang from changing conditions in Japan. Kammu, for example, was a particularly active emperor. Among his many innovations, he devised two new offices—the Bureau of Archivists (*Kurōdo-dokoro*) and the Imperial Police (*Kebiishi-chō*). These offices were not called for in the earlier Chinese-inspired legal codes. Also during his administration, government officials gradually stopped conducting the census and redistributing land. Perhaps most dramatically, Kammu changed the structure of the military. In the seventh century, Japanese leaders created a conscript army as one of their steps to strengthen

central government. That army was primarily an infantry of peasants designed to suppress domestic rebellion and defend against possible invasion from the Asian mainland (an expanding Tang dynasty and wars on the Korean peninsula had the Japanese fearful). By the late eighth century, however, an army of peasant foot soldiers was proving impractical. Japan no longer feared foreign invasion. Instead, it was trying to expand northward. Local peoples, whom the Japanese called Emishi, used guerilla war tactics to resist. The Japanese found that soldiers on horseback were more mobile and therefore more effective in these northern campaigns. Peasants, who usually had little or no experience with horses, did not make good cavalry. As a result, in 792 Kammu abolished conscription. He turned to the sons of elites and local militias to provide horses and soldiers for his wars. This was an important step in the eventual rise of the samurai.

Although the Heian period is known as a particularly “Japanese” age, the Japanese still maintained contact with the outside world. Asian kingdoms including Silla and Wu Yue sent diplomats to Japan, and Parhae (located in modern north Korea and Manchuria) regularly sent tribute missions. The court had an official reception center for foreign visitors at Dazaifu, near modern Fukuoka on the southern island of Kyushu. Its officials adhered to detailed protocol when deciding whether to receive foreigners. As Chinese medicines, perfumes, books, and works of art were highly valued by the nobility, merchants from the mainland were generally welcomed. Not all interactions were peaceful, however. Because relaying information to Kyoto took weeks, Dazaifu officials had to make their own decisions in emergencies such as pirate attacks or the brief Toi invasion of 1019. In many ways, Dazaifu became in practical terms the capital of southwestern Japan in the Heian period.

Heian Governance and the Fujiwara

Kammu’s successors were not as capable as he had been. By the end of the ninth century, the most powerful figures at court were members of a noble family known as the Fujiwara. Sometimes compared to the Frankish mayors of the palace in European history, the Fujiwara never replaced the imperial family. Rather, they monopolized key ministerial positions and wielded enough power to control the emperors. To understand how the Fujiwara became so influential, we need to look at marriage, child-rearing, and the role of women in Heian society.

Much of our knowledge of Heian marriage comes from literary works. These works reveal something quite interesting: married couples usually lived at the wife’s family residence. Sometimes they lived separately, and on a few occasions they lived in a new home built for them by the wife’s family. Moving into the husband’s family residence was almost unheard of. As a result, children were most often reared by their mother’s family. That family—especially the maternal grandfather—had great influence over the children. The Fujiwara took advantage of this system to gain influence over the imperial family. They used their political connections to have Fujiwara girls appointed as consorts and empresses. When those girls gave birth to imperial heirs, the Fujiwara grandfathers took charge of raising the children. The Fujiwara came to value daughters more than sons, for only daughters could be married into the imperial house and thereby produce imperial grandsons with Fujiwara blood.

Starting in the mid-ninth century, the Fujiwara men were able to have themselves appointed as regents, making them the most powerful figures at court. The most famous and successful was Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027), who became father-in-law to four emperors and grandfather to three more. Michinaga was a masterful politician who engineered everything

from appointments to governorships to the retirement of emperors. His most famous poem, composed when one of his daughters was made an imperial consort in 1018, reflects his success:

This world, I think,
Is indeed my world,
Like the full moon
I shine,
Uncovered by any cloud!

Yet the Fujiwara hold on power was not to last forever. In the latter half of the eleventh century, the absence of Fujiwara grandsons allowed the imperial house to regain control of its affairs.

The regent did not run the country alone, of course. Heian aristocrats lived in a very hierarchical society in which they were assigned rank. The highest rank (senior first) was reserved for the emperor. Members of the highest nobility who served as ministers of state might hold second or third ranks. Younger up-and-coming nobles and some members of the provincial governing class might hold fourth or fifth rank. The lower ranks were generally given to bureaucratic experts, clerks, and skilled technicians. Possessing a rank made one eligible for appointment to office. As there were more ranked candidates than open offices, however, individuals used gifts (i.e., bribes), political connections, or other means to try to win appointments. Securing office was very important to these men, as it furthered their political careers and guaranteed them income. Sei Shōnagon, a caustic commentator on Heian society, described in her *Pillow Book* how pathetically the candidates for open offices beseeched their superiors and how depressing were the households of those who failed to win positions. Women received rank but were not eligible for offices such as minister or governor. However, powerful women at court were important political figures and often influenced decisions on who received appointments. Even so powerful a figure as Michinaga, for example, owed much of his success to the support of his elder sister Senshi, who had already married into the imperial family.

Although governors were not highly regarded by capital nobility, in the provinces they were important men. The country was divided into 68 provinces. Each had a governor whose duties included collecting and delivering taxes to the capital. At the beginning of the Heian period, these governors were carefully regulated. Starting in the tenth century, however, there was a gradual shift to less central government involvement in provincial affairs. Governors essentially signed contracts to deliver a certain amount of tax income to the government. In exchange, they were allowed to administer their provinces as they pleased. This system invited abuse, and governors earned reputations for their greed. In a few extreme cases, rural elites petitioned the imperial court to have their governor removed. Rarely were such appeals heeded.

Elite Society

Michinaga presided over the high point of elite Heian culture, during the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Eager to make sure that his daughters received imperial favor, he surrounded them with talented female writers—we might call them “ladies in waiting.” These women served his daughters and authored remarkable works of poetry, fiction, and memoirs that remain among the great works of pre-modern world literature. Today, the best known is Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji* as well as of a diary that provides wonderfully detailed descriptions of life at court. *The Tale of Genji* is often hailed as the world’s first novel.

Composed over many years and consisting of more than 50 chapters, it tells the story of the romantic relationships and political intrigues surrounding a handsome imperial prince and his descendants. Although fictional, *The Tale of Genji* has been widely used as a historical source for understanding the Heian period. Not only does it draw upon Murasaki's experiences as a lady at court, some of the characters may have been based on real individuals. Even more important, the psychological sophistication of Murasaki's characters and the beauty of the tale's poetry helped make it the most influential Japanese literary work of the pre-modern era.

The Tale of Genji and other works such as Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, the Mother of Michitsuna's *Kagerō Diary*, and *The Sarashina Diary* offer valuable insight into life among the Heian elites. Women were literate and enjoyed a considerable number of rights, such as the ability to own and pass on property and to choose their own heirs. Their skill in composing elegant poems in a graceful hand and their taste in clothing were considered important assets in attracting men. As for appearance, women took great pride in their long hair but wore elaborate, colorful, many-layered kimono that hid their figures. Social expectations and clothing that limited movement meant women did not travel easily. As they were not given bureaucratic positions in government, they had little need to journey on a daily basis. When they did travel—perhaps to visit a relative or a temple—it was often by ox-drawn cart. This slow means of transportation made a trip of even a few miles seem quite long. Men were more mobile and traveled regularly between their homes and the court, where they served in office. More importantly, for Heian elites, the city of Kyoto was the center of the social, cultural, and political world. The elites seemed to have no desire to live anywhere else. Men being sent to the provinces on official business lamented that they had to leave Kyoto behind.

The high culture that developed in the capital is remembered today as quintessentially Japanese. Like the trends noted above in government, culture moved away from Chinese models. In writing, the Japanese developed their own phonetic script better suited to represent their language than Chinese characters. This script was used by women and for writing Japanese poetry. Official government documents (usually prepared by men) were still recorded in Chinese. The Japanese also refined their own poetic forms and started compiling imperial anthologies of the greatest poems, beginning with the early tenth-century *Kokinshū*. The poems in the *Kokinshū* were *waka* (the name literally means “Japanese poem”) and quite distinct from Chinese-style poems. The most common form (also called *tanka*) had lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Note that *waka* formed the basis for *haiku*, which did not emerge until centuries later.

In painting, artists turned to bright, opaque colors to illustrate native Japanese themes in a style that Heian people labeled *yamato-e* (Japanese pictures). The term implied a clear distinction between Japanese and Chinese art (which was labeled *kara-e* and showed images associated with China), even though *yamato-e* techniques were inspired by Chinese paintings of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries. Buddhism provided another important inspiration for art, as temple architecture and sculpture achieved new heights of grandeur. Heian Japanese also developed the *emaki*, the subject of this unit's lesson. *Emaki* are long illustrated scrolls combining text with painting to tell a story. Some had religious themes, such as those illustrating the founding of a major temple (like the *Shigi-san engi emaki*) or the actions of a vengeful deity (like the *Tenjin engi emaki*). Others illustrated great literary works such as *The Tale of Genji* and Murasaki's diary. The *Frolicking Animals Scroll* was somewhat unique in that it used no color and was accompanied by no text.

Heian Buddhism

Religion, like many other aspects of society, changed in important ways during the Heian period. Earlier Nara Buddhism drew directly upon Chinese traditions and catered to elites. These elites underwrote the cost of temples and turned to religion for protection of the state. The Nara capital contained numerous temples, and each province had a national monastery and nunnery. Rather than proselytize or serve the religious needs of the common people, these religious institutions primarily catered to aristocrats and the government.

When two Japanese monks, Saichō (767-822) and Kūkai (774-835), returned from study in China in the early ninth century, they brought new texts and practices with them. They each went on to found a new Japanese Buddhist sect, Tendai and Shingon, respectively. With Emperor Kammu's support, each established a major religious temple. Tendai's principal temple was (and still is) Enryakuji, located on Mt. Hiei, northeast of Kyoto. Saichō emphasized the importance of the Lotus Sutra as the most important vehicle for advancing on the spiritual path. He was rather dogmatic, insisting on the inferiority of Buddhist traditions that did not recognize the preeminence of the Lotus Sutra. Yet Tendai accepted anyone, regardless of background, who was prepared to study and follow its teachings. In 827, Enryakuji was granted its own ordination platform, meaning individuals could officially be made monks there. This had previously only been possible in Nara. Enryakuji became an important force in political, economic, and religious affairs. In later centuries, monks who trained there went on to found their own Buddhist sects including Pure Land and Japanese Zen Buddhism.

In contrast with Saichō, Kūkai taught that anyone could achieve enlightenment if they studied with him. He emphasized the importance of esoteric rituals and the direct transmission of secret teachings from master to disciple rather than any particular text. Those rituals included special meditative hand positions (*mudras*), paintings (*mandalas*), and mantras (chants). Unlike Saichō, Kūkai enjoyed good relations with the Nara sects, for he held that all of the Buddhist traditions in Japan had something good to offer. Kūkai also believed in helping people and was skilled at many things, including engineering. He is credited with helping to design and build public works projects such as bridges all over the country.

Tendai and Shingon differed from earlier forms of Buddhism in that they granted lay ordinations. People not prepared to devote themselves completely to religious life could study for shorter periods of time at Tendai and Shingon temples. They also offered benefits such as blessings, prayers, and other services to common people (willing to pay, of course). Records show that commoners utilized these services, suggesting that Tendai and Shingon reached at least some people beyond the aristocrats. Popular religious belief may have benefited even more from the efforts of holy men and ascetics who did not join any established Buddhist sect. Instead, they wandered the country, teaching people about Buddhism and offering services for the dead. The widespread production of wooden figures of Kannon, the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion, suggests that people in the provinces may have followed their own forms of Buddhism independent of the elites' religious traditions.

By the middle of the Heian period, belief in Amida's Pure Land had also become widespread. Heian aristocrats came to see themselves as living in *mappō*—the final days of the law, a degenerate age when the teachings of the original Buddha were so distant people were no longer able to comprehend them and achieve enlightenment. Instead, they had to rely on the

compassion of Amida Buddha, who had promised to bring all those who had true faith to the Western Paradise upon their death. There, they too could become buddhas. Those who believed in this would, on their deathbeds, hold a silk cord attached to a figure of Amida (Michinaga reportedly held nine such cords!), in hopes that this would aid their speedy journey to the Western Paradise. We can see such images reflected in Heian art such as the *raigō-zu* paintings of Amida descending to guide a dying soul into paradise.

Finally, we should note that Shinto played an important part in Heian religious life as well. Unlike Buddhism, Shinto was not an organized religion with major texts. Rather, it was a set of native animistic beliefs centered on such natural geographic features as mountains, waterfalls, and trees. The emperor, who was supposed to be a descendant of the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu, was the highest Shinto priest in the land. He spent much of his time conducting religious rituals for the state. A female member of the imperial family usually served as the high priestess at Ise, the most important Shinto shrine. Unlike Western traditions, in which religion is exclusive (you can only belong to one), the Japanese were much more flexible in their beliefs. Shinto and Buddhism coexisted peacefully. During the Heian period, Shinto shrines were often built close to or on the grounds of Buddhist temples, and Japanese devised a system for equating Buddhist deities with Shinto gods.

Commoners, Estates, and Warriors

The Heian aristocracy could never have enjoyed lives filled with romance, poetry, art, and religious devotion without considerable wealth. The two principal sources of income were public (i.e., government-controlled) lands and private estates. As noted above, the government abandoned the periodic census and land redistribution early in the Heian period. Instead, for ease of taxation, land was grouped into small units called *myō*. A responsible local person was chosen to make sure that tax was collected from each *myō*. Unfortunately for the peasants who worked the land, governors became increasingly free to tax them at rates much higher than what was originally called for in the legal codes. In addition, frequent summer droughts and poor farming techniques meant that inadequate harvests and famine were common. Malnutrition and diseases such as small pox made life quite difficult for members of the lower classes. When things grew extremely bad, peasants sometimes abandoned their lands in hopes of finding better living conditions elsewhere.

Some lands came to be held as private estates. These lands were exempt from government taxation. In many cases, they were also closed to entry by government officials. A few estates first appeared in the eighth century, when lands given to major temples and shrines were declared exempt. The practice became much more widespread in the Heian period. Along with religious houses, nobles were granted lands for their services to the state. In addition, government initiatives to encourage the opening of new farmlands meant that ambitious men could claim undeveloped land, commend it to a Heian noble or temple, and have it converted into a private estate. These private estates paid no tax to the central government. Instead, they paid tribute to elite proprietors—usually major temples, high nobles like the Fujiwara, or members of the imperial family. These influential people ensured that the estates kept their exempt status. Thus, the private estate system reflected the conflict of interest inherent in Heian governance: the nobles enriched themselves with income from private estates while simultaneously depriving the central government (which they ran) of tax income.

Unfortunately, we know little about the daily lives of those who worked the estates and public lands because they left behind few written records. The elite residents of the city of Heian, who wrote so prolifically, were only a tiny fraction of the total population. They shared the city with many whom they considered beneath them—servants, merchants, suppliers, etc. In addition, of course, the vast majority of the population lived in the countryside. Many were peasants who grew rice and other grains. Others engaged in fishing, mining, the production of salt, paper, or silk, and other industries. Government tax collectors and private estate proprietors taxed them for all of these goods, thereby underwriting the expense of the luxurious lifestyles of the capital.

Also among Japan's rural residents were hereditary warrior families. Some came from elite provincial families that had exerted regional influence for centuries. Others came from the capital. They used their impressive pedigrees and connections to secure important positions for themselves in the countryside. Among those were the great clans of Taira and Minamoto. Each clan could claim emperors as distant ancestors. Some lesser members of the Fujiwara also achieved prominence outside of the capital. There was no samurai class or samurai code at this time, but members of these families competed for provincial government offices and gained experience fighting against bandits, pirates, government officials who got out of line, and rebellious northerners. They primarily fought from horseback and relied upon the bow and arrow as their most important weapons. Battles might be better labeled skirmishes, for they rarely involved more than a few hundred men and rarely lasted more than a few days.

Two notable exceptions were the uprisings of Taira no Masakado in the tenth century and Taira no Tadatsune in the eleventh century. Masakado captured eight eastern provinces before he was finally crushed. Tadatsune fought off opponents for almost three years before finally surrendering to government forces. Some historians have interpreted the seeming independence of these warriors, and the difficulties that the government had in stopping them, as evidence that the imperial court was losing control of the countryside. In each case, however, the court was able to successfully deputize other warriors to suppress the rebels, rewarding them with appointments to office. It might appear that the capital, with no standing army of its own, was vulnerable to attack from the provinces. In fact, the court's monopoly on legal appointment to office enabled it to play warriors off against each other and manage the countryside effectively.

The Final Years of the Heian Period

In the mid-eleventh century, Fujiwara girls who had married into the imperial line failed to produce a male heir. Thus, an emperor without Fujiwara relatives came to power. He was able to take steps—such as establishing an office to reclaim estate lands for the throne—to weaken the Fujiwara hold on power. His son, Emperor Shirakawa, went even further by abdicating his official position to his own young son but retaining power as a retired emperor and head of the imperial clan. From 1087 until the end of the Heian period, three such retired emperors kept power out of the hands of the Fujiwara.

But not all was peaceful within the imperial family. In 1156, a succession dispute between the emperor and retired emperor led each to call upon warriors to settle their conflict. For the first time, there was fighting in the streets of the capital. Following another such dispute in 1159, Taira no Kiyomori emerged as the pre-eminent warrior leader. He eliminated the adult leaders of the other rival warrior clan, the Minamoto, and sent the young boys of the family into exile. Kiyomori received the rights to estates and titles to government positions in reward for his

services to the retired emperor. Over the course of the 1160s and 70s, Kiyomori gradually began to raise his status in the capital. In 1167 he was appointed to the position of Grand Minister. In 1171 he arranged for one of his daughters to marry an imperial prince. Like the Fujiwara before him, Kiyomori was able to eventually get the child of that union—his grandson—made emperor, seeming to secure his hold on power.

Another imperial prince, however, upset that he had been passed over, issued a call-to-arms. He asked all loyal warriors to rise up and overthrow Kiyomori. Using this call-to-arms as a pretext to mobilize, one of the exiled Minamoto boys (now an adult) named Yoritomo raised an army in eastern Japan. Taira and Minamoto forces fought the length of the country in a series of battles known as the Genpei War (1180-85). Yoritomo stayed in the east during these campaigns, securing his power base and letting his brothers lead armies in pursuit of the Taira. Kiyomori died in 1181, and subsequent Taira leadership proved inept. The Taira armies gradually retreated to the west and were finally eliminated in a naval battle at Dan-no-Ura in 1185. But violence persisted, as many warriors took advantage of the chaos that followed the Genpei War to attack neighbors and encroach upon civilian land rights. The imperial court turned to Yoritomo to quell such violence. He eventually transformed his power into an independent warrior government known as the *bakufu*. Yoritomo became its leader, taking the title shogun in 1192. This marked the beginning of dual government in Japan. The imperial court in Kyoto retained authority over civilian affairs but shared power with a new military government based in the eastern city of Kamakura. This transition from imperial to dual government rule also marked the end of the Heian period.