

Feudalism in Japan

Rise of Feudalism in Japan

In contrast to Europe, where feudalism declined, Japanese feudal institutions increasingly replaced national ones after the 11th century. Emperors continued to reign, but they no longer ruled. Their power was replaced by provincial lords. These lords managed the estates, fought the wars, and supervised the peasant population. The economic and political structure of Japan encouraged a more decentralized power structure. Japanese government resorted to fixed tax quotas, which were collected by the regional authorities. This enhanced power at the local levels. The court began a new fighting system based on local mounted warriors, the samurai. They generally came from well-to-do families who could afford the costly armor and equipment. Their initial purpose was to preserve order and help collect taxes, but from 10th century onward they also contributed to the disorder as participants in regional military coalitions.

1. Why did feudalism begin in Japan?

The Samurai

By 1200, the Japanese military forces had emerged as potent force for either change or stability. The samurai dominated Japanese feudal society. The name samurai came from the verb meaning "to serve." It was expensive to be a warrior, as you had to supply your own armor, horse, and weaponry. Armed with bows and arrows and curved swords, Japanese warrior aristocrats were called either "samurai" or "lord" or "bushi" ("noble warrior"). A feudal-style relationship existed between the lord and his samurai; and the samurai often served the same family for generations. It was different from European feudalism in that the samurai weren't rewarded by being given estates to run directly — the system which created medieval Europe's pyramid-style pattern of land ownership. Instead, the lord provided the samurai with income derived from his agricultural estates. In return the samurai was expected to serve his lord with absolute loyalty.

1. Explain the relationship between a lord and the samurai.

Bushido

Bushido was the samurai code of conduct. The samurai held to a highly developed warrior ethic, which stressed personal bravery, honor and loyalty. It stressed a hard life and avoidance of luxuries, and expected a samurai to face pain and death with indifference. The warrior code stressed family honor — much of combat hinged on man-to-man struggles; and samurai warriors would shout out their lineage and exploits before battle. Beaten or disgraced warriors were expected to commit ritual suicide. This ritual was called seppuku. The Bushido code did not wholly exclude samurai women, who were also expected to be brave and choose death rather than submit to shame. The rise of the samurai and feudal system thwarted any hope the peasants might have had of improving their status — over the next several centuries, Japanese peasants were reduced to serfdom, bound to the land and treated as the property of the local lord for whom they worked. They were separated by rigid class barriers from the warrior elite, and forbidden to dress like them, carry swords, or ride on horseback

1. What were some attributes of the Samurai?
2. How were peasants treated during Japanese feudalism?

JAPANESE AND EUROPEAN FEUDALISM

Read the selection below comparing and contrasting feudalism in Japan and Europe, and complete the chart that follows.

Japan's warriors, who were known by the term of *samurai*, "servitors," placed great emphasis on the military virtues of bravery, honor, self-discipline, and the acceptance of death. Lacking any religious injunctions against suicide, they commonly took their own lives in defeat, rather than accept torture and possible humiliation in capture. Suicide by the gruesome and extremely painful means of cutting open one's own abdomen became a sort of ritual used to demonstrate will power and maintain one's honor. Vulgarly called *hari-kari*, or "belly-slitting," but more properly known as *seppuku*, this form of honorable suicide has survived on occasion into modern times, and suicide by less difficult means is still considered an acceptable and honorable way to die.

The prime virtue in the Japanese feudal system, as in that of Europe, was loyalty, because the whole system depended on the bonds of personal loyalty. In Europe, with its background of Roman law, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as mutual and legalistic. In Japan, the system has placed less emphasis on law and more on morality- that is, on the moral sense of the ruler, since his right to rule was theoretically based on his superior wisdom and morality. Hence, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as one of unlimited and absolute loyalty on the part of the vassal, not merely a legal contract.

Still, family lineage and honor were of great importance in medieval Japanese society, because inheritance determined power and prestige as well as the ownership of property. The Japanese avoided the problems of the Western hereditary systems, by permitting a man to select among his sons the one most suitable to inherit his position and also by using adoption when there was no male heir by birth. The husband of a daughter, a young relative, or even some entirely unrelated person could be adopted as a completely acceptable heir.

Japanese feudal society differed from that of Europe in two other revealing ways. In Japan there was no cult of chivalry which put women on a romantic pedestal, as though they were fragile, inferior beings. The Japanese warriors expected their women to be as tough as they were and accept self-destruction out of loyalty or family. Also Japanese warriors, though men of the sword like their Western counterparts, had none of the contempt that the Western feudal aristocracy often showed for learning the gentler arts. They prided themselves on their fine calligraphy or poetic skills.

The Samurai vs. The Knight

The Samurai and the English knight both serve as a mascot for their respective cultures, and they have much in common. The samurais wore protective helmets and armor and fought with two curved swords. Samurais, who came into power from 1000 to 1200, put a great deal of value on honor and discipline. They honored skills such as horsemanship and the ability to fight with a bow and arrow, but their value was placed on a much higher level, dealing with strong, self-discipline, bravery, and total obedience and honor towards their lords.

It was an unspoken standard that if a samurai were disgraced they would ritualistically kill themselves in repentance. Knights, and the idea of chivalry, were based on the same concept but it had several differences as well. The knight wore a helmet and an outfit of interlaced metal rings called a mail that was eventually replaced with plated armor. A knight's typical weapons were lances, swords, maces and battle-axes, and like the Samurai they rode on horseback. The code of chivalry, the code intended to keep the same honor in knighthood as there was among the samurai, stated that a knight must protect women and the feeble, fighting against injustice and evil, along with a sworn faith and deep love for the Christian faith. On face value this shared much in common with Samurai, however the knights were not as dedicated or as disciplined as the samurai. The code was broken regularly and greed was as prevalent as honor. Knighthood and the Samurai had the same ideals in mind, demonstrating that many of the ideals behind the two feudal governments may have been similar as well.

	FEUDAL JAPAN	FEUDAL EUROPE
SIMILARITIES	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.
DIFFERENCES	1.	1.
	2.	2.
	3.	3.
	4.	4.
	5.	5.

This life of a samurai was a long and difficult one. They were subjected to strict rules and attributed many of these rules to the ritualistic training each samurai received. The advice below was given by a Japanese samurai in 1348:

“There must be no negligence in the samurai’s service. He must get up at four in the morning and practice martial exercises. Then he may have a meal and afterwards shoot with a bow and matchlock and ride on his horse. And those who are proficient in these exercises will be promoted accordingly.

If he wished for diversion he may find it in hawking, stag-hunting and wrestling. With such things he must amuse himself.

His clothes must be of cotton and pongee. It is an offense to spend money on clothes so that one is embarrassed in other ways. Weapons must be provided in accordance of one’s standing, and retainers have to be kept. And in the time of war money has to be spent. In ordinary social intercourse there must be only one guest beside the host, and unhulled rice only is to be eaten. However, when military exercises are held there may be a large gathering.

Military rules and etiquette are what a samurai has to know. Those who are given to unnecessary luxury will be held culpable. A stop must be put to all frivolous posturing and sword dancing. When a sword is drawn it is to kill someone. Serious concentration is the secret of everything, so those who go in for these frivolous pastimes will be required to commit seppuku.

A samurai must be diligent in his studies. He must read military works and particularly pay attention to matters of loyalty and filial duty.

There must be no making poems and verse capping. If a man is inclined to luxury and aesthetic pleasures he will become debilitated and no better than a woman.”

1. What are some ways a samurai strengthens himself? Use specific examples.
2. How must a samurai act in public? Use specific examples.
3. What happens to a frivolous samurai? Use specific examples.