

AN OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN IN JAPAN

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Abstract

The Japanese history reveals that women in early Japan enjoyed all rights and privileges when there was matriarchal system and the Shinto religion, a native religion was on its rise. In 7th and 8th centuries women's regime was acceptable in Japan. But the frequent wars, shifting to feudalism, Buddhist teachings regarding the women, and the spread of Confucius teachings particularly concept of feminine role kept women out of school, limited women mobility and freedom, restricted to homes and role assigned them just to please and serve their male family members. In Edo period, the proper guidelines were prepared for women's activity and role in accordance with Confucius teachings.

This paper attempts to present the picture of status of women from very beginning through the major ruling period i.e Feudal rule, Hein rule, Meiji rule, Edo rule and even in today's modernized and advanced Japan. Through this paper it has been tried to put light on the teachings of the various religions/creeds regarding the women's role which deprived them from their equal humanitarian rights and made their position subordinating in Japanese society.

Introduction

Japanese history provides striking examples of changes in the status of women linked to other broad socio –economic trends.¹ The Japanese had no written language for recording history until Chinese language was introduced. The *Kojiki* (record of ancient things) compiled in 712 AD and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) compiled in 720 AD are the chief sources of early Japanese history.² Chinese records state that Japan was divided by Civil War and anarchy from

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147 AD to 190 AD.

The women centered marriage pattern in ancient times contributed enough in entitling women with a considerable religious and political influences. However, the increasing influence and growing acceptance of Confucian and Buddhist views regarding the women's inferiority from the 6th century onward both reflected and reinforced a shift toward patriarchal family structure. However, upper class women were often literate and they retained such rights as property inheritance until they were eroded by the transition to a war oriented feudal economy beginning in the 12th century. The rigid social control system of the Edo period (1600-1868) decreed women's subordination, but women's work always remained indispensable not only in agriculture but also in the developing trades of the cities. Women were less subjected to violence and less isolated from men in Japan than in certain other cultures, and they were never crippled by any such practice as the Chinese foot binding. Further more, their resourcefulness, endurance and strength of character were often expected to equal or exceed that of any man.³

Women Empresses in Ancient Japan

A woman ruler Pimiku (Sum Princess)⁴ played a vital role and succeeded to control over the civil war and anarchy. By her skill in magic, she gained favour of the people who made her their queen. After her death, a great tumultuous was raised and more than a thousand attendants committed suicide. A king was raised to the throne and once again civil war broke out and law and order was not restored until a thirteen years old girl, a relative of Pimiku, was made queen. Chinese travelers to Japan during China's Wei dynasty (220-265) impressed by the frequency of female rulers; referred to Japan as "Queen Country". They also mentioned polygamy in their writings that men of high rank had four or five wives and they were faithful and not jealous.

Six empresses ascended the throne from 592 AD and ruled about 113 years. These two centuries were crucial to the development of the imperial institution in Japan. Written histories the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, established the *Yamato* as the legitimate clan by connecting its descent to the *Sum* goddess.

It appeared that during this early foundation phase of Japanese history female rulers functioned in interim capacity, preventing succession disputes and providing a stabilizing effect. During the reign of Empress Commyo the first permanent capital was established at **Nara** and the **'Taiko Code'** was carefully revised to make it more acceptable to indigenous Japanese customs. Women were also used by politically ambitious families i.e. the Soga and Fujiwara to consolidate their relationship with the imperial family; girls from those families were married to all possible heirs to the throne. Thus, this period was unusual for its large number of female rulers. But women were suddenly and effectively prevented from ruling after the reign of unmarried Empress Koken in the 8th Century. During her reign Buddhism, which was made state religion by her father Emperor Shammu was on the rise. The Fujiwaras were also gaining position due to the skillful exercise of politics. Koken's relationship with a Buddhist monk 'Dakyo', incensed the Fujiwaras because of the possibility that a monk might assume the throne. But when Koken died the Fujiwaras banished Dakyo. After her death, she was succeeded by a male because the council of ministers refused to elevate a woman to the throne. This custom continued for quite a long time.⁵

Early High Status of Women

Modern studies of Japanese women, anthropological data, mythology and early literature show that how Japanese marriages originally centered on women. Until in the eleventh century, it was customary at all social levels for a husband to join the family of his wife (in the marriage pattern called MUKOIRIKIN) or to live

separately and visit his wife on certain times i.e. a pattern called KAYOIKEKKAN. Furthermore, a daughter of a property holding family was entitled to the family house and a share of income rights when an inheritance was divided. Marriage between the children of the same father was originally tolerated if their mothers were different.

The women centered families were customary among peasants for some centuries, after the upper class beginning with the warriors, adopted the practice of sending a bride to join her husband's family with more attention paid to economic or other advantages for both families than to the preferences of the young couple. This type of marriage and related mores eventually spread to all social levels, but vestiges of the older ways seem to have remained in certain rural areas until as late as 19th century. For example, in some parts of the North eastern Japan, the first child of either sex was expected to be the heir, in case of a daughter, her husband was then adopted into her family.

Besides their early central role in families, Japanese women had traditionally an unusually prominent role in dealing with the supernatural. Japan's native religion SHINTO has been one of the few religions in the world to retain a principal female deity, the goddess 'AMATURA SU OMIKAMI.' Her main place of worship, the inner shrine of the ISE SHRINE said to have been founded by the princess YAMATOHIME, the high priestesses. Also serving at Shinto shrine were two major women poets, NUKUTA NO OKOMI and SANO NO CHIGAMI NO OTOME.⁶

Even today, the tradition of women's importance in Shinto is continued by shrine – maidens and occasionally women serving as priests. Furthermore, women's major role in Shinto and Shaminism was apparently linked to actual ruling power in early Japan, as evidenced by such semi-legendary figures as the priestess queen HIMIKO and the warrior empress JINGU. In fact, the 7th and 8th

centuries, women were accepted to reign as empresses i.e. Tenno, but after the court moved to HeianKyo (Kyoto) in 794 AD, women Tenno did not appear again until the 17th and 18th centuries.⁷

Shifting from Matriarchal to Patriarchal

The Seventeenth Article of the Constitution of 604, the Taikwa Reform Edict of 645, the Taiko Code of 702 and its revised version, the Yoro Code, all served to strengthen imperial rule by introducing Chinese methods of government.⁸

The Taiko Code 702 and its revised version Yoro Code 718, based on Confucianism abolished the matriarchal system of inheritance in Japan's clan organization. They established a patriarchal system, which meant subjection of women in matters of property, marriage and divorce. The Taiho and Yoro codes had prescribed "a Chinese patrilocal system in which the bride was brought to live in a subordinate position within the groom's family."⁹

The reasons for the shift to a patriarchal family pattern and women's loss of status are controversial. One common explanation was the development of agriculture. Under the new Confucian style laws in the mid 7th Century, women were barred from becoming government officials i.e. 'Kami' and a woman's share of government distributed lands was set at two thirds of that for a man.

Some sects of Buddhism taught that women were sinful temptresses who might be reborn as men before they could attain enlightenment. Yet many women of the elite actively promoted the spread of Buddhism – notably the empresses KOMYO and DANRIN.¹⁰

Also emerging around this time were two customs that would affect many women's lives, one was the practice of sending hostages to cement alliances and the other was the related practice, continued into modern times, of using marriage to establish ties between families. As early as the 6th century, local chieftains sent female

relatives as hostages to the Yamato court. Then in the following centuries, the imperial court was dominated by so-called marriage politics.

The Heian Period

In 794 the Capital was moved to Heian Kyo (Kyoto) by the first Heian emperor Kammu. Marriage residence among aristocrats in the Heian period is described as matrilocal, duolocal or neolocal. A paradox of Heian period can be seen in the lives of aristocrat women. Limitations were placed on their physical activity by custom, which dictated them not to be seen by men other than their husbands and fathers. Nevertheless they were allowed to inherit and retain property. The education of women was limited to music, poetry and literature.¹¹

Later on in the Heian period (1086 – 1185) the gradual erosion of centralized power led to a social, cultural and military decline. The protracted civil wars, which culminated in the ascendancy of the Minamoto clan in 1185, also removed some of the culturally imposed limitations on the physical and mental activities of women. In this less structured society, the freedom and strength of women improved and the status of Japanese women was at the highest point in the Kamakura period. They were given the right of inheritance, many rich and independent women had a considerable local authority. This right of inheritance was lost with the rise of feudalism. The Samurai ethics which served feudalism by its emphasis on courage, strength and absolute loyalty to one's feudal lord, had seemed at first advantageous to women, that was training of young girls in the Spartan virtues and usage of weapons. Once again the women's right to equal inheritance was abandoned, and their property rights and social status declined. One of the features of feudalism which worked against women was the need to keep holdings intact and a woman could no longer appeal to the competent authorities for protection of her land. As a result the

whole system of inheritance underwent a radical change, while formerly the property had been divided up among all the children, whereas now one son was chosen as the chief heir.¹²

By the 1500 AD the whole of Japan was at war, and in the 16th century a woman was subjected to political expediency. Mothers, daughters, sisters and wives were married and some times given as outright hostages. "In fact, despite all of the pious theories about the immorality of re-marriage of women, they were passed from hand to hand to suit the conveniences of their male relatives." Living in an age when only brute force was valued, women learned to accept themselves as less valuable than men."¹³

Feudalism and Japanese Women

It was with the status of women at this low ebb that Japan entered the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), 250 years of feudalism during which the status of women was finally defined. The sole purpose of woman's learning should be to please her future husband and especially her husband's parents to whom she was to become virtually a slave. Women were encouraged to remain within the home, even to the extent of forgoing religious participation. To temples (Shinto or Buddhist) and other like places where there is a great concourse of people, she should go but sparingly till she reached the age of forty."¹⁴ This device very effectively prevented women from any meaningful contact with other women.

The Confucian concept of the feminine role kept women out of school. Women's legal status during the Tokugawa period was completely dependent, first on her father, then on her husband and eventually on her son. There was no provision for a woman to divorce without her husband's consent. A married woman's existence was controlled by her husband's family. If her husband died, her father-in-law could divorce her by simply "sending the wife away". A woman was unable to become head of a house hold,

to become guardian of her own child, own property or make contacts in her own name.”¹⁵

Thus unable to adapt to the growing merchant class and harassed by western intrusion, feudalism finally collapsed and in 1868, after the folding away of Tokugawa banners the flag of a new regime unfurled.

The Meiji Period

With the collapse of feudalism women took a breath of rest and they expected some rights and benefits from the Meiji emperor. During Meiji period, “Arinori Moi” minister for education in 1885 supported education for women, a single standard of morality and criticized concubinage. Yukuchi Fukazawa, one of the prominent educationists also supported equal opportunities for women. He strongly advocated equality in marriage, separate household for married couples, and the sanctioning of second marriages for women.”¹⁶

Under Meiji law, marriage was still a transaction between two families rather than two individuals. Meiji Civil Law gave woman the right to divorce, which they did not have before 1898 on the grounds of cruelty, desertion or serious misconduct but not for infidelity.¹⁷

Realizing that education was essential to modernization Meiji leaders gave it a high priority, however; the quality of education for boys and girls was unequal. The purpose of girls’ education was just to produce the good wife and wise mother necessary for the maintenances of the family system. Several forces were active in modernizing these unequal conditions in social and political spheres and in the education system.

The Impact of Warfare

The ever present danger of warfare in Japan from 12th to 16th century made it most practical for only one person i.e. the eldest son to inherit family property in order to better consolidate lands and defend them against outsiders. Naturally women's eventual loss of property rights made them dependent on their male family member. Such altered family patterns, war and other social changes like the development of cities led to a growth of prostitution, and brothels were established at major transportation centers.¹⁸

The harsh and sometimes precarious life of the provincial warriors demanded change and endurance from women as well as men. Women of the warrior class were expected to strive, and even die for family honour, if necessary, to help defend their homes; for this they were trained in certain martial arts. If their husbands died, they were expected to take responsibility for raising their children in the warrior tradition.

The Edo Period

The structures considered proper for women during the Edo period were outlined in the 18th century. Confucian style moralistic work 'ONNA DAIGAKU' stressed that a woman should only obey her parents until her marriage, then her husband and his family, then her sons, in her old age. In short, all individual interests should be secondary to those of the family.¹⁹

According to Confucius, a wife should be humble, frugal, hardworking and be well aware of the fact that she could readily be divorced for disobedience, bareness, jealousy, ill health or even for talking too much. In contrast, divorce was legally granted to a wife only if her husband abandoned her or committed a serious crime. Women's could also be punished by death.

The day to day reality of women's domestic lives may not usually have been as harsh as the 'ONNA DAIGAKU'²⁰ and official laws indicate clearly that Japanese women in the Edo period, as they do today took pride in controlling the management of their homes. In particular, older women and mothers were accorded considerable respect and freedom of action. A woman also had more social leverage if her husband had been adopted into her family, in a pattern resembling the former women centered marriages. Many young girls from the lower class became servants for a few years in the homes of elite families, then married and introduced to some extent the customs of such homes into their own, in this way continuing women's role as channels for contact between different social levels.

Despite the limitations imposed by law and custom women at other social levels benefited in many ways which fostered greater stability in countryside and lively economic and cultural development in the cities. Education also spread, especially through the village schools, women's literacy in this period has been estimated at around 15 percent,²¹ a relatively high figure for a pre modern society.

Life was undeniably hard in farming and fishing villages, where over 80 percent of the population lived. Women's work in agriculture such as planting rice and tending silk worms was as demanding as men's work. Many rural women were not married until their early twenties. Most of the girls in mid teens entered girls groups which often allowed them to live separately from their parents and to have some part in the choice of marriage partners.

The influx of many men without their families to the cities prompted the Tokugawa Shogunate to license and to supervise brothel districts as part of its system of rigid social control. In fact, there were also many unlicensed prostitutes outside such districts. The mobility of these women was restricted and often tragic since most of them have been indentured there because of poverty. Sometimes customer paid

large sums to free women permanently from the brothels and then married them. Also there was a separate group of women dancers and musicians, now commonly known as Giesha. Some women continued to write notable poetry from 17th to the early 19th century, they included Inoue Tsujō (1660-1738), Arakida Reijō, Kaga NoChiyō and Ōta Gani Rengetan. In the 19th Century Ike No Gyōm Kuran earned a good reputation as a painter. Also during this period, folk songs were spread and developed by wandering blind women musicians called Goze.²²

Finally, women still maintained a major role in Shinto and Shamanistic folk religion. One-woman Nakayama Miki founded a new religion called 'Tenrikyō' shortly before Japan became open to contact with Western nations in the mid nineteenth century.²³

Women and Modernization

The vast social changes sweeping Japan during its modernization from the 1860s to the 1940s affected women's lives with regard to their education, their work and in general ways of living. However the 1898 Meiji Civil Code generally reflected traditional family law and ideology. As in the West women were granted only limited rights to divorce or to own property and a wife required her husband's consent in certain legal actions. Although the traditional ideal of women as 'good wives and wise mothers' remained strong, some Japanese absorbed liberal ideals from the West and campaigned for women's suffrage and other rights until the militarists' suppression of the late 1930s. Legal controls and socio-economic conditions continued to restrict women's activities even more than those of men throughout Japan's modernization, but the groundwork for post war reforms was laid by prewar movements.²⁴

In the Meiji period (1868-1912) some leaders like MORI ARINORI and FUKUZAWA YUKUCHI criticized the traditional concept of women, but the government based its educational policy on the

principle that girls should be educated as homemakers, at whatever level of schooling. Education for girls was generally separate from that for men and at all levels lagged behind that provided for boys, although the introduction of universal primary education in 1873 meant that increasing number of girls were educated at least through the primary grades. In 1899 the Higher Girls School Order (Koto Jogaki Rei) stipulated that there should be at least one higher school for girls in each prefecture, where girls would be taught primary domestic science and literature.²⁵

Christian missions established many schools for girls in the 1870s and the 1880s. A movement for social and political equality for women also occurred in the same period. However, the Japanese women could not throw off the centuries old tradition but with the coming of the Second World War, they made significant gains in raising their status and increasing their freedom.²⁶

After the Second World War, the Japanese new constitution, which became effective on May 3, 1947 guaranteed women the right to vote, hold political office and legal equality with men. A Japanese woman can now vote, pursue a career, and can become the legal guardian of her children. Legally, divorce is no more difficult for her to obtain.²⁷

The participation of women in labour force contributed to the success and spread of Japan's industrial revolution. The textile industry played a significant role in the transformation of the economy, both because of its traditional origins and its importance in foreign trade. It thrived in large part because it hired cheap female labour, housed in dormitories and required to work long hours. In the 1890s women factory workers far outnumbered men in similar jobs.

During the early phase of the industrial revolution the tradition of employing young unmarried women in the lowest paid position or part time basis became popular, which kept young women workers away from managing positions and cadres. The tradition has

continued, making it difficult even today for women to take entrance in examinations of the sort that channel male college graduates into lifetime positions in large corporations.²⁸

In Japan's major cities, more new employment opportunities were created as modernization precedes. Some women began to work in the newly established departmental stores and telephone exchanges, while others in milk bars and beer halls. A few began to advance into such fields as secretarial work, journalism, and a growing number were employed as teachers. A less publicized feature of Japan's economic development has been the role of women in family businesses, where they have been counted as unpaid family labour, omitted from employment statistics. Especially in small and medium size businesses and cottage industries, women have often made major contributions. It is noteworthy that women in small family businesses sometime function as accountants. In agriculture, as in family business, the work of farm wives counts as unpaid family labor, but it has been essential in the maintenance of rural productivity.²⁹

Conclusion

Going through the Japanese history of various ruling periods it is obviously clear that women were enjoying with their freedom and dignity as compared to women of other old civilizations or neighboring societies like Chinese and Indian. In early Japan there was a matriarchal family system and a woman played a central role in family as well as outside. Some sects of Buddhism, Confucian, Samurai ethic which supported feudal lords and the frequent occurrence of civil wars paved the path for men's dominancy and subjection of women. The Taiho Code abolished the matriarchal system and thus the woman's central role and woman centered family pattern has been established.

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