

Sinification of East Asia The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Japan

Introduction

Because of the remarkable durability of Chinese civilization as well as its marvelous technological and economic innovations, other cultures began to imitate China. Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were all drawn into China's cultural and political orbit in the postclassical period. Each of the three areas interacted with China differently. Of the three, Japan was able to retain its complete political independence, while Vietnam and Korea were subjected to varying degrees of Chinese imperialism. The latter two regions had less control over the nature of cultural borrowing than did Japan. In all of the areas, Buddhism played a significant role in cultural transformation. Eventually, adoption of Chinese culture caused Japan, Korea, and Vietnam to remain relatively isolated with the exception of their links to China.

Japan: The Imperial Age

Chinese cultural influence in Japan peaked during the seventh and eighth centuries. In 646 the Japanese emperor introduced administrative reforms, the Taika reforms, intended to realign the Japanese government along Chinese models. Chinese patterns of court etiquette, diplomacy, historical writing, and Confucian philosophy became mandatory aspects of the Japanese court. Buddhism swept into Japan. The attempted wholesale introduction of Chinese culture into Japan met with resistance from the aristocracy. The eventual failure of the Taika reforms implied the weakening of the imperial government and the passage of power to the aristocracy. In the long run, power passed from the imperial court to regional lords, who insisted on a return to Japanese ways.

Crisis at Nara and the Shift to Heian (Kyoto)

The Taika reforms were intended to create an emperor with absolute powers assisted by a Chinese-style bureaucracy and supported by an army of conscripted peasants. Opposition to the reforms came from aristocratic families and from Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks had become so powerful in Japan that one of their number actually conspired to take over the throne in the 760s. With the imperial government under constant threat of Buddhist disruption, the emperor moved the capital from Nara to Heian (Kyoto). The Buddhists who were forbidden to build monasteries within the new capital settled for constructing monasteries on the hills that surrounded the city.

To counterbalance the growing influence of the Buddhists, emperors restored the powers of the aristocratic families, reinforced their traditional control of the imperial government, and permitted them to build up their control of rural estates. Attempts to create a conscripted army were abandoned and military organization was left to members of the rural aristocracy.

Ultracivilized: Court Life in the Heian Era

Although attempts to expand imperial centralization were abandoned at Heian, the imperial court produced a refined culture that set standards for aristocratic life. The court established strict rules of social conduct and a hierarchy of status that defined social relationships. The elite in Heian lived in a complex of palaces and gardens. Poetry was the favorite literary expression at Heian.

Women participated in the production of poetry and other forms of literature. For instance, one of the most celebrated literary works of this era was *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki.

The Decline of Imperial Power

By the middle of the ninth century, the imperial court was dominated by the Fujiwara family. Aristocratic families competed with Buddhist monasteries for control of land around the capital. Both groups sought to frustrate imperial reforms and limit the power of the emperors. Gradually the secular elite within the imperial court at Heian and the Buddhist monasteries began to cooperate. Both groups came into conflict with the growing regional influence of local lords outside the region of Heian.

The Rise of the Provincial Warrior Elite

In the countryside, elite families also sought to monopolize land and labor. These families were able to carve out private precincts ruled by "house" governments. In each local precinct, the elite family in control constructed small fortresses to house the local lord and his military retainers. The warrior leaders, or bushi, exercised private jurisdiction within their lands and enforced their rule through private armies of mounted troops, or samurai.

As the imperial government became increasingly weak, it began to hire local lords and their armed troops to provide for law and order, even in the regions near the capital. Supported by peasants, who supplied the bushi and samurai with food, local warriors began to emerge as a separate and powerful class. Warfare between groups of samurai was often based on heroic combat between champions. The samurai developed a distinctive code of conduct based on honor in war and requiring ritual suicide for disgrace. The rise of the samurai frustrated any attempts for the emergence of a free peasantry in Japan.

Treated as property of the warrior class, peasants turned to salvationist strains of Buddhism notably the Pure Lands sect. Artisans were concentrated in the capital city and in the fortress towns of the more powerful bushi. Artisans, like peasants, had very little social status.

The Era of Warrior Dominance

As the power of the bushi grew, even the court aristocracy depended on alliances with powerful samurai to remain in power. By the twelfth century, the regional bushi were able to contest for imperial power. The first conflict was between the Taira and the Minamoto families. During the 1180s, the Minamoto and their allies defeated the Taira who continued to rely on alliances within the imperial court. As a result of the Gempei Wars, the Minamoto family was able to establish the bakufu, a separate military government at Kamakura. Although the emperor and his court were retained, real power resided in the bakufu with the Minamoto and their allies.

The Declining Influence of China

Chinese influence in Japan waned as the decline of power in the imperial court made maintenance of Chinese models useless. The emergence of a Japanese scholar-gentry was opposed by the attempts of the aristocracy to cling to power. When the Tang empire in China collapsed, Chinese models seemed even less appropriate. Official missions to the Chinese court halted in 838.

The Breakdown of Bakufu Dominance and the Age of the Warlords

The first shogun of the bakufu was Yoritomo Minamoto. He severely weakened the military government by eliminating any potential threats to his rule even from among his own family. At Yoritomo's death, there was no able heir to succeed him. The Hojo family rose to dominate the bakufu, although members of the Minamoto family continued to hold the title of shogun.

In the early fourteenth century, Ashikaga Takauji, a member of a collateral branch of the Minamoto family led a rebellion of bushi who overthrew the Kamakura shogunate and established the Ashikaga shogunate in its place. When the emperor refused to recognize the Ashikaga military government, the Ashikaga shoguns chased him from Kyoto and placed new, puppet emperors on the throne. Continued civil strife destroyed whatever power the emperors had been able to retain. Powers of the bushi grew at the expense of central government, whether imperial or bakufu.

With the full-scale civil war, 1467-1477, rival heirs of the Ashikaga family sought to create alliances with bushi leaders. The shogunate lost authority to regional lords. Warlord rulers divided Japan into nearly 300 private states under the jurisdiction of daimyos.

Toward Barbarism? Military Division and Social Change

Under the daimyos, warfare changed from heroic combat to more modern conflict. Daimyos relied on large, peasant armies. As the constant state of war destroyed the Japanese economy, some peasants engaged in futile rebellions against their military overlords. Despite constant conflict, some daimyos attempted to build up their estates and establish rural stability. Local rulers invested in irrigation systems, attempted to recruit new supplies of labor, fostered commercial production, and introduced merchants into local communities.

Women in merchant and artisan families may have benefited from daimyo attempts to improve economic conditions. Most women, however, lost status during the daimyo period.

Artistic Solace for a Troubled Age

Cultural development continued during the warring-houses era. Particularly important in cultural development was Zen Buddhist monasteries. On the cultural level, Zen monasteries provided for renewed contact with China. Painting, architecture, and garden design, in particular, were important in daimyo society.

Seeds of Unity and Japanese Nationhood

Economic and cultural growth, as well as administrative developments within daimyo estates, provided the foundation for national unification in Japan. Commercial and artisan classes would later participate in creation of a national economy.

Administrative reforms provided the bureaucratic infrastructure for local government within a national scheme.