Japan and Western Europe, IV*

A Comparative Presentation of Their Social Histories

By Franz Oppenheimer

IV. Feudalism in Japan

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The succeeding period in Japanese history follows the typical course: the landed property of the aristocracy, and therewith the class political power, grow beyond all limits, whereas that of the central authority decays. The free commoners sink, while the lower order rises in numbers and political influence until it merges with the descending freemen in an indistinguishable class of people who are politically powerless and are economically exploited in a rigorous fashion. A part of the lower class, however, attains the rank of the minor aristocracy. We are going to describe this process at somewhat fuller length.

The land reform was bound to miscarry because both those conditions were allowed to remain which universally preclude every reform, to wit: large landed property and slavery. The estates of the crown, of the ecclesiastical institutions, which were very important and especially that of the victorious group of noblemen, the Fujiwara and their allies, were not subjected to the law, were not distributed, and did not pay taxes: "those in possession of shrines and temples, those granted to officials by way of salary, and those cultivated by serfs on government account." It was the increase, legitimate and illegitimate, of these exempt fields which in the succeeding centuries brought down the whole system and, in combination with other tendencies, brought about a feudal regime. Members of the imperial family, officials from the eighth rank upwards, were exempt of taxes for their giant landed property just as doctors, scribes, soldiers and low officials were for their dwarf property.

Large property could only last and, more especially, could only increase, because slavery had not been abolished. Honjo reports that slavery grew strongly in this period. Therewith the condition was given which enabled the victors in the great battle of the aristocratic cliques to rise to ever

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184 Sansom, loc. cit., p. 214.

186 Ibid., p. 132.

185 Sansom, op. cit., p. 98.

186 Ibid., p. 99.
greater political might. The Fujiwara and their allies had shared between them the huge loot consisting of almost the sole wealth of the period: land and the slaves needed for its cultivation. These possessions, enormous as they were at the beginning, grew, following the "law of agglomeration about present kernels of fortune,"187 to unheard of measures. The Fujiwara "monopolisalient bientôt toutes les richesses, toutes les forces du pays. Ils eurent un grand nombre d'esclaves et posséderent d'immenses domaines. Grâce à ces esclaves, ils purent, soit défricher ou cultiver leurs terres, soit les affamer."188 They cleared new land in the old provinces, and acquired enormous property in the newly conquered ones. Originally all these possessions were only fiefs to usufruct for "three lives" at the most, but laws were enacted as early as 732 and 743, granting at first a temporarily restricted, and then a hereditary right on newly cultivated land or land improved by irrigation.189

These laws were intended to serve the interests of the then ruling group, the Fujiwara, and their retinue. But soon they proved to be dangerous to their power, because the Fujiwara also were now compelled—a regular system of taxes and money economy still being lacking—to confide or better to deliver to their officers and civil officials the taxes and services of the district or estate. Naturally these offices became hereditary in their turn and were lost to the central authority, which gradually had to bleed to death. The Kubunden-land shrank more and more, the more "Shoen" (the Japanese word for manor) came into being, until it was as good as vanished. Thus the principle became unavoidable also here: "Nulle terre sans seigneur";190 with the result that the whole country threatened to become shoemized.191 Sansom says this explained the fortune of the mightiest of feudal families, the lords of Satsuma who descended from a manager of the Fujiwara, and of the equally great family, also of ministerial origin, the Shimadzu.192

Highest winners in this game were the governors of the provinces, especially the more distant ones, the "Marches." They descended, as Hara says, mostly, from the lower nobility, i.e., very probably from families which had worked their way up as officers or civil officials.193 They "engrossed" (as Adam Smith called the monopolization of the soil) "par

188 Hara, op. cit., p. 122.
189 Honjo, op. cit., p. 27; Sansom, op. cit., p. 169.
190 System der Soziologie, IV, pp. 527 ff.
191 Honjo, op. cit., p. 12.
193 Hara, op. cit., p. 131.
They became gradually the feudal barons of their soldiers instead of remaining the salaried command-
ers, the soldiers becoming their vassals; and they attained at last—the power
of the central authority decreasing in the same proportion as their own
increased—the position of territorial princes and justiciary overlords of their
districts, which, henceforth, were their privy “house force.”

This development took place to the disadvantage of the free commoners
and of the central authority, represented here not by the Mikado but by
the Mayor of the Palace.

II

We mentioned, that, after the Taikwa-reform, the freemen on allodial
land and the hereditary tenants on Kubi-unde-land had to pay taxes, whereas
many of the grandees had discovered how to evade this burden for them-
selves and their serfs. The latter, moreover, were exempt from military
service, while the freemen had to equip and to sustain themselves out of
their private means. The saying went then: “When one man is called
up, a household perishes.” They fell into debts and many lost their
freedom through “commendation.” Honjo tells of numerous “people
who sought to evade public exactions under the protection of local magnates by
contributing their land to them.” Naturally it became un-
avoidable to overburden the still remaining freemen by taxes and services,
because, on the one hand, the requirements of the State for both court
and church kept growing incessantly, whereas, on the other hand, more
and more subjects became exempt.

The power of the central authority was bound to disappear with the
freemen. Honjo reports that, already in the midst of the Heian-period
(the period when the Fujiwara and the emperors held court in Kyoto,
794–1159), “the authority of the government gradually waned, while the
local magnates steadily gained influence.” The immense wealth of the
emperors shrank, so that, at the close of this era, only a few domains
remained to them. The crown had lost its financial and military power
with loss of the free population.

Sansom portrays the balance of the Heian-period as follows: “Halfway
through the eleventh century the imperial government had lost most of
its power and much of its prestige; the whole country was ravaged by

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294 Ibid., p. 132.
295 Ibid., p. 123.
296 Sansom, op. cit., p. 99.
297 Honjo, op. cit., pp. 11, 52.
298 Fara, op. cit., p. 123.
299 Honjo, op. cit., p. 103.
Longford ascribes the decay of the mighty clan to the effeminating effect of harem life, but this argument is rather suspect because it appears wherever a ruling family loses its power. The argument, although not without a certain weight, is too facile and gives an excuse to slide over the real, objective, more momentous causes of the decay.

The Fujiwara, according to Chinese usage and Buddhist custom, restricted themselves more and more to the civil offices, which they absolutely monopolized after the year 845, relinquishing the military positions to men of other aristocratic clans. This arrangement was like that in the late Roman empire, where the army, eventually, was completely abandoned to the "strong barbarian."

III

The army had been reorganized in the great reform of the State during the Nara period. The third part of the able-bodied men was destined as a military class from which were recruited the garrisons of the more distant provinces, where fighting continued till the twelfth century, especially in the northern Kwantou against the Ainu, who could only very slowly be subjugated. About half a century after this first law, at the end of the eighth century, a new law was proclaimed that "all those of the rich peasants who had capacity and were skilled in archery and horsemanship, should compose the military class, and that the remainder, the weak and the feeble, should continue to till the soil." At exactly the same time Charlemagne arranged the military concerns of the Frankish State in just the same spirit.

Sansom is of the opinion that "rich peasants" signifies the "district chiefs," officials subordinated to the governor of the province to which their district belonged. The governors were mostly high aristocrats, whereas the district chiefs were members of the gentry, the low aristocracy of the country. They were descended either from free commoners without court rank or from noble families whose landed property had become too small, through successive partitions among the heirs, to keep up their high rank (Japan knew no right of primogeniture). Japan numbered 66 provinces with 592 districts, each of the latter having their chiefs.

As is inescapable in the feudal order, these offices likewise became hereditary, and the fief of the official became private property. Thus a

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208 Ibid., pp. 85, 86.
207 Clement, op. cit., p. 29; Murray, op. cit., p. 128.
209 Gysen der Settologie, IV, p. 323.
210 Sansom, op. cit., p. 194.
or bailiff of such plots as parts of a shoen,” to the lord of the manor and lastly to the territorial overlord who is responsible for immunity and exemption from taxes. This was similar to the European arrangement whereby the territorial or justiciary lord had the right to the public taxes, the owner of the land to the rent, and under certain circumstances the bailiff and the lord of the commons to special dues, whereas the church received the tithes. All these rights could be sold and inherited, either whole or divided; and from this resulted an entanglement of rights and possessions which took place also in Japan. The different persons entitled to dues or services naturally took good care that “their” peasant was not, as it were, swallowed up by another of the crowd. This was the salvation of the western European peasant.

Supremacy within the nation was gradually shifted to the class of warriors in the same measure as it acquired growing economic and political power. At first this development was still under the leadership of some families of primal or high nobility. Eventually, however, some Samurai ascended into the high aristocracy; they became Daimyo, owners of large landed property with princely rights, in the same manner as this occurred in Europe. The sovereign princes of Reuss, for instance, descend from an unfree family of ministeriales, and not even from the more highly ranking “imperial ministeriales.” These upstarts very soon outshone the Kuge, the arrogant courtiers of imperial blood, if not in standing, yet certainly in wealth and influence.217

IV

Toward the middle of the twelfth century two families of imperial lineage were rivals for the supreme power: the Taira and the Minamoto. The former had engrossed landed property in such enormous masses that they were called “Land-thieves” by the impoverished courtiers.218 They are said to have owned at the zenith of their power no less than half the soil of Japan.219 The Minamoto had gained their giant landed property and their military house-forge as margraves in the unruly North, the Kwanto, where the famous general Yoshiye, “the son of the War-God,” who had conducted the last war against the Ainu, enjoyed divine worship.220

The final battle for the crown (here, for the mayordomate) of these powerful clans began on the occasion of one of the innumerable succession-

217 Longford, op. cit., p. 81.
218 Griffin, op. cit., p. 217.
219 Tauchiya, op. cit., p. 41; Longford, op. cit., p. 100.
220 Hara, op. cit., p. 110; Gowen, op. cit., p. 121.
well-to-do middle class, i.e., of those warrior-peasants and especially of the "mayors" (baillis), the managers of the aristocratic estates in the whole country. As in western Europe they had originally been unfree serfs who were trusted with the management of the manors and participated as ministeriales in the ascent of their class." And again, as in Europe, "The property vanished under the hand of the lords and came into the possession of the mayors and peasants." The masters were economically disinherited. These upstarts were the successors of the originally installed managers of the large estates, the owners of which lived at the court in Kyoto or in another of their numerous domains. These positions also had become hereditary, and these lands factual possessions; and now these undervassals were fighting for full independence.

Victory was first with the Taira, by the help of a part of the Minamoto who were cleft by discord. The latter were led by Yoshihito no Minamoto who had his own father and four of his brothers executed although not even one of them had fought against his party. The murderer himself was killed in a conflict about the booty. The same fate hit the Taira themselves in 1189. They were several times defeated and ultimately, in an embittered sea battle, almost completely exterminated according to the hard custom of Nippon. In contrast to the European custom of making prisoners in order to get ransom, the Japanese knight neither accepted nor gave pardon. The "Japanese Nibelungenlied," "Heike Monogatari," written about 1240, contemporaneously with the German epopee, narrates the death of these braves.

The Taira were hated not only for their arrogance, but also because they had promised certain agrarian reforms which they never intended to introduce: "Leur ambition n'avait pas été de jeter les basses classes de la société contre les aristocrates." Therefore they lost the best elements of their adherents, and hence the victory fell to Yorimoto as the leader of the serious reformers. The political constellation reminds us of the fight of the sturdy agrarian middle class of England, the "Ironside" of Cromwell, against the aristocratic "Cavaliers."

224 Ibid., IV, p. 901.
225 Ibid., p. 1066.
227 Hara, op. cit., p. 143.
228 This implacable practice lasted until the Tokugawa period (Hara, op. cit., p. 228-9).
229 Heike is the Chinese sign for Taira.
230 Samsom, op. cit., p. 263.
231 Hara, op. cit., p. 140.
YORIMITO ACCOMPLISHED the work the Taira had begun: the unification of the dismembered realm into one powerful organization according to the promised reform of the taxes and the agrarian concerns. His iron-sides received what they had been promised: "Le nouveau gouvernement se garda bien de négliger les intérêts de ses guerriers." More still, and in accord with the characteristic point of view of the warlord: "Il dut, a façon de pouvoir le cas échelant lever des armées, prendre grand soin, non seulement de ses fidèles, mais de toute la population." And thus Brinkley is right in speaking of "a revolution in a double sense," "because it was not only the substitution of a military democracy, but also the rehabilitation of a large section of the nation who had once been the serfs of Kyoto nobles."

Henceforth the last semblance of the ancient imperial might has vanished. The Mayors of the Palace no longer live in the same city together with the imperial court. Yorimoto wanted, as Gowen supposes, to avoid the neighbourhood of the entirely corrupted court. The Fujiwara, from a similar motive, had moved to Kyoto, leaving Nara with its unbearable holy terror, the monks, who had changed the beautiful city into a sort of mountain Athos.

More than by this consideration, however, Yorimoto was obviously moved by the wish to be near to his home-province, the Kwanto, when he transferred his residence to Kamakura near present-day Tokyo. From similar motives the Taira-chieftain had chosen Kobe instead of Kyoto as his residence after his initial victory over the Minamoto. He wanted, as Hara says, to avoid the priests and the bureaucracy. Later, after the Hōjo, another dynasty of Mayors of the Palace, had been deposed, the seat of the government was established first in Muromachi, a suburb of Kyoto, and finally, after a new revolution which abolished the rulership of the Ashikaga, in Yedo, the Tokyo of today.

The ruling lord is, henceforth, called Shoegūn, after Yorimoto, in 1192, had acquired the title of "Sei-i-Tai-Shogūn" which is in Chinese "Taikun," English "tycoon." The title signifies "Barbarian repressing great general." What is new is merely the addition of the word "Tai" (great): without this it is the traditional title of every general. The full new title may be translated by "regent of the empire." It means the essence

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224 Quoted by Clement, op. cit., p. 44.
225 Gowen, op. cit., p. 142.
226 Hara, op. cit., p. 131; Sansom, op. cit., p. 183.
227 Hara, op. cit., p. 136.
of the privileges and rights the patrician had in late Rome, and the Mayor of the Palace in the reign of the Merovingians. For, in sharp contrast to the Fujiwara, the new Shogun has also the military power.

Yorimoto, who, as Sansom charmingly says, "thought in terms of fiefs and manors, not of peoples and government," enjoyed the advice of the best officials of the Kyoto government who hastened to join his court. He would have been unable to build the government in Kamakura, if he had had at his disposal only his warlike but almost illiterate followers, and not men like Oe, the wise ancestor of the later famous princely family of Mori. With their help he adjusted taxes more equitably, abolishing at least partially the exemption of the privileged estates. Henceforth all of them had to pay the war-tax in rice, "a revolutionary measure, provoking the greatest consternation" among the affected. He promoted arts and trade, and "he gave Japan for the first time in many centuries a semblance of peace."

The empire was unified, but only to break asunder once more. However huge its power, the new dynasty had to move in the magic circle described, this fatal process dispossessing the central government and raising the local magnates to overpowering might.

The giant possessions of the Taira were the prize of the victory. Yorimoto installed members of his family as governors in no less than five provinces, and appointed in all the others civil governors (Jito); to each of whom, however, he enjoined a "military protector" (Shiugu) "to advise him in all military concerns." The office of the Jito could be declared hereditary from the beginning, whereas that of the Shiugu was not, at first, heritable, but, naturally, became so very soon. The Shiugu played at first the part of the British "Residents" at Indian princely courts: eventually, having disposal over the military force of the district, they brought the Jito into dependency as their vassals. In the succeeding period of the Ashikaga there is no longer any direct connection between the Shogunate and the Jito. The Shiugu is the overlord of his district, no longer as a liege but by his own right. Many of them knew how to aggrandize their domination far beyond the original bounds.
wars which devastated the country, and through the crushing burden of the taxes. The country was contaminated with vagabonds, "Ronin," whom poverty made into robbers; the sea was infested by pirates. The whole period teems with rebellions of the peasants and the Gokenin, the lowest stratum of the Samurai, who demanded nullification of their debts with the natural result that they lost all possibility of obtaining credit any more, as was proved by an attempt made in 1297 to enforce the nonsensical measure. The movement was at first directed against the pawnbrokers, under the leadership of heavily debt-burdened court aristocrats and Samurai, whose promissory notes were burned together with the others on occasion of these pogroms. Exactly at the same time pogroms against the Jews occurred in western Europe with just the same motives, participants and methods. Genuine peasant wars exploded a little later, aimed mainly against the aristocracy of the Samurai, as for example 1429 and, on a grand scale, 1485–6, when "articles" were formulated and submitted to the government.

It is again remarkable that the great peasant wars of western Europe occurred at the same time: Belgium in 1324; France (Jacquerie) in 1352; England (Wat Tyler) in 1381; Spain in 1455; Germany (Bundeshüh and Armer Conrad), 1513–4; and the big peasants' war in 1524–5.

VII

The Ashikaga period is usually characterized as "anarchy" in opposition to the "tyranny" of the Hōjō. The term is well deserved. Indeed: the war of all against all was raging, conducted with every means of violence and treason, even against the nearest relatives. The fighting parties changed sides so often, that these feuds are called the "war of the turncoats." The ecclesiastical grandees, i.e., the conflicting sects, did not fail to take part in these conflicts. The orders intermingled: all officials of the court, not only physicians and painters, but also dancers, actors, and the like were ennobled by raising them to Samurai. Plebeian upstarts procured the rank through purchase or adoption by an indigent nobleman. Persons of efficiency had the chance to rise: "Every warrior,

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256 Murray, op. cit., p. 166.
257 Honjo, op. cit., p. 117.
258 ibid., p. 17.
259 ibid., pp. 45–6.
260 System der Soziologie, IV, pp. 845 f.
261 Honjo, op. cit., p. 48.
262 Hara, op. cit., p. 208.
263 ibid., p. 109.
264 Saimon, op. cit., p. 319.
265 Hara, op. cit., p. 256.
head of a family became a Daimyo. A blue-blooded abbot complained: "Even an outcast can aspire to the rule of a province." More and more frequently rose condottieri of low origin to the position of Daimyo and large landholders. The leaders of the expedition which Hideyoshi sent to Korea (1592) were two generals, one of whom was the son of a pharmacist, the other of a blacksmith. The all-powerful Hideyoshi himself was the son of a poor peasant: he had to be adopted by the entirely impoverished Fujiwara to provide an adequate rank.

The Ashikaga period is "Junkers' time," dominated by Junkers' psychology in all its characteristics. Its first trait is to despise work and working people and especially trade, "the most degrading of all occupations"; the second trait is the tendency to squander, including its finer form as open-handedness; the third and most laudable is the loyalty towards the liegelord and the death-spurning bravoure, which, again, has its contrast and caricature in the tendency to brawling and the exaggerated point of honor which sometimes attained insanity. The civilian is less than nothing: The testament of the first Tokugawa, Jeyasu, ordains in Paragraph 45 that the Samurai has the privilege of killing without further ado the civilian who "does not behave as was expected." In practice, however, it was not quite so bad. Hara reports that attack or serious provocation had to be proved, in default of which the killer had to expect heavy punishment.

There were fourteen Shoguns in the Ashikaga period: two were murdered by their own vassals, one was forced to commit suicide, and five died in exile. The terrible disorder and the awful brutalization of this time show in these facts.

There were, however, some laudable traits as well. Art was flourishing at the many princes' courts, just as at those of the "principini" of Italy, the Este, Medici, Gonzaga, Sforza, etc., who, being usurpers, had to provide a nimbus for their dynasty. The national drama, "No," arose in this time or at least attained its definitive form; the monk Mincho, called the "Fra Angelico of Japan" (he died in 1431) painted; religious painting emancipated itself from the art of portraiture, and it was no longer

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266 Gowe, op. cit., p. 196.
267 Same, op. cit., p. 354.
268 Longford, op. cit., p. 93.
269 System der Soziologie, II, p. 341.
270 Same, op. cit., p. 325.
272 Gowe, op. cit., p. 178.
275 Hara, op. cit., p. 201.
the formal draftmanship of the past, but a new individualistic art, representing the personality which here, just as in Italy's rinascimento, was awakening. It is again remarkable that the renaissances of both the extreme East and West took place in the same fifteenth century, and here as well the Cinquecento is considered "the purest, the most classical, period of Japanese art." Nor is the succeeding baroque of the Secento missing here: the great sculptor who built Jeyasu's mausoleum in Nikko is called the Michelangelo of Japan."

And it sounds like a quotation from Burckhardt's "History of the Renaissance" when we read: "Il arrivait fréquemment que les personnages les plus dépravés, tels que destrairets et des meurtriers, étaient très cultivés." The men who committed treason against the Ashikaga were mostly well educated, many of them even high-spirited poets and great Maecenas.

Towards the end of the period the old magnates, the nobles of the court and the ecclesiastical grandees, were dispossessed. Their own managers and military adventurers had seized their landed property, and there was nowhere a power strong enough to eject them. The smaller junkers had been subjugated or even radically swallowed up by the big ones, and thus originated "vériables principautés, formées le plus souvent de plusieurs domaines, ayant échoué à sa tête un chef militaire dont les droits étaient sans limites." In exactly the same manner the great territorial principalities of western Europe were shaped. Pierre splendidly described the process in his "History of Belgium."

VIII

It is permissible, therefore, to consider as the equivalent of the European State of Estates the second half of the Ashikaga period, in which "la formation des petits états compacts et virtuellement indépendants" had widely progressed. "The State of Estates in its extremest development, when princes and Estates have their particular courts, officials, treasuries, even armies and embassies." By the term "prince" must be understood not the powerless emperor, but the Shogun or Shikken. The Daimyo are the Estates.

270 Gowen, op. cit., p. 194.
271 Ib., op. cit., p. 211.
272 Ibid., p. 205.
273 Jellinek, Allgemeine Staatslehre, p. 320.
274 Cf. Sanroman, op. cit., p. 374: Here also people turned backward in romantic yearning, towards the splendor and glamour of the Nara time. The Genji-Monogatari of the Fujiwara period became as favored as the Vergiliius in Italy.
had become entirely impossible. He secured "the ultimate unification of the empire now split up into numerous petty kingdoms" which, all of them, recognized the sovereignty of the Mikado in theory, only to deny it in practice.\textsuperscript{290} He defeated the ruling Shōgun in a civil war in which the ecclesiastical powers again took part. The huge fortified monastery of Hieizan was destroyed by the most agnostic condottiere who was not in the least awed by the sanctity of the location. The same fate hit the still more imposing cloister-fortress of the Shin-sect in Osaka. Nobunaga and his two generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Jeyasu Tokugawa, are genuine figures of the renaissance, quite like the great contemporaneous condottieri of western Europe, the Pescara, Colleoni, Frundsberg, Wallenstein, Rohan, etc. They are distinguished like them through military genius, diplomatic astuteness, inflexible will—and a conscience that was not to be disquieted.

Nobunaga perished by the treason of one of his generals, whom he had rendered, so we are informed, his mortal enemy by a "practical joke." The question is permissible whether it was not an ecclesiastical intrigue which brought about the end of this enemy of the clergy. Hideyoshi defeated and killed the traitor and took over, first as regent, later as "Taiko" (great prince), the government of the State which he quickly united through decisive victories over the great territorial princes. He ruled with wisdom and moderation, the first soldier in Japan's history who was at the same time a statesman. He knew how to spare the vanquished adversaries instead of slaughtering them. After his death in 1598, Jeyasu took over the government, defeated a coalition and had himself nominated Shogūn (1603). He was the founder of the Tokugawa dynasty.

It is nearly superfluous to mention that Hideyoshi had the children "eliminated,"\textsuperscript{291} and that Jeyasu did the same in regard to the progeny of Hideyoshi.\textsuperscript{292}

\textsuperscript{290} Longford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{291} Cowen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 209 ff.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid., p. 242.

(Continued)