

JAPAN, INSIDE AND OUT: A CULTURAL STUDY OF JAPAN BY AN ETHNOGRAPHER

表裏日本：民俗學者の日本 文化掃描

Conservative but innovative; refined but hectic: does true harmony exist in the clash of cultural extremes?

If you want to understand Japan then this book is the ideal place to start.

Noodles, manga, movies, cars: it is virtually impossible to isolate ourselves from the Japanese products that have become a ubiquitous part of our world. But how did we get to this point? Tsai Yi-Chu draws on his decades of research into Japanese folklore to plot the trajectory of Japanese society against the axes of history, showing how the customs of crucial eras in history solidified into the traditions that still define contemporary life.

Japan, Inside and Out explores the way Japanese folklore has oscillated between embracing and resisting against outside influences. Take Shintoism, the religious system that revolves around nature for example. Traces of Buddhism are discernible in the architecture of its shrines and the names of its gods, and for a long time there was a syncretic relationship between the two religions.

And then there's Japan's renowned samurai culture. The samurai were once commoners, distinguished only by their martial prowess, before they rose to become a political ruling class in the reign of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. *Japan, Inside and Out* shows how, despite the decline of the samurai in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, the samurai spirit lives on amongst the ordinary people where it first originated.

Blending his personal experience and observations with a depth of scholarship, Tsai Yi-Chu concisely explains complex ideas about history and culture, quenching readers' desire for narrative while stimulating their curiosity towards Japan.

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The nobility and the samurai: Hereditary beliefs in Japan

Samurai are the symbol of Japanese culture. For many non-Japanese, the first thing they think of when they think of Japan is the samurai.

Samurai make up a class that only exists in Japan. Though they might be compared to the knights of medieval Europe or the warriors of China or Korea, they are different. From the moment they were created as a class until they took political power, they represented private armed forces in Japanese history. Though senior samurai leaders did, in later years, need to go to the Imperial court to gain the title of Shogun (seii taishōgun), their authority was completely distinct from that of the soldiers or national armed forces.

In later periods, especially during the Warring States period, the samurai formed armed and independent militaries, ruling as warlords in the various domains into which Japan was divided. However, it is important to remember that samurai were not leaders of regional militias serving the government (as they would have been in China). Even though samurai were the most powerful local military force, they never received payment or grants of land from the central government.

During the Warring States period, the land owned by samurai was typically won by battle.

During the Taika Reforms, Japan adopted the *ritsuryō* system, which was largely based on China's legal system. The *ritsu* defined the criminal code for people who broke the law. The *ryō* included the rules regarding the people who were obligated to supply labor, as well as administrative orders issued by the central government. In a country like China, where power was centralized, this system was extremely practical. However, when the system was used in Japan, it quickly morphed into something that was not as effective. Rather than using a rational bureaucratic system, the Japanese government let the *ritsuryō* system combine with the

succession system used by the nobility, meaning power was passed on from generation to generation. Emperor Kammu established the Japanese capital at Heian-kyō (present day Kyoto) and formally removed the central conscription for the state army. After the system wherein all the land and all the people in Japan were owned by the Emperor collapsed, many peasants fled the place they called home and looked for new land. Although they got a chance to cultivate new land, they also faced lawlessness and a lack of government in an environment similar to the Wild West in the United States. They began to arm themselves to protect their property.

The phenomenon was not just limited to samurai – more and more people were arming themselves. Public security was so unreliable that even the rich Buddhist temples started contracting people to protect the temples. Eventually Buddhist temples were maintaining standing armies of warrior monks (*sōhei*). Merchants needed to travel to different places for work and bring money with them, making them a perfect target for thieves and bandits. As a result, individual merchants and trade guilds started to employ warriors to accompany them. In reality, these warriors were just armed peasants that used their own farmland as their stronghold. They weren't very different from the above groups.

In this hostile environment, with public security deteriorating, the samurai had nothing to rely on but their own hard work. They gradually changed wastelands into fertile farmland. They had to sacrifice their profits and their dignity by serving the nobility; otherwise, their right to own land and keep the fruits of their labor would be taken away. Yet ultimately their sacrifices only allowed them to temporarily farm on a bit of land. The true owners of the land were the nobles, who sat around doing nothing in Kyoto.

This seemingly irrational system became the norm because the *ritsuryō* system persisted in Japan, despite not being a particularly effective system. The people who were breaking their backs to plow the land risked having everything taken away from them if they remained in the public-land domain system. Even though the national army was abolished, the nobility and the officials still had private armies and could take away hard-earned harvests and declare them to be state assets. In other words, the nobility and the officials could take control of any assets they wanted. So the peasants had no choice but to grit their teeth and give up their land to the nobility. They took up the role of land managers and shared a portion of the harvest with the nobles. Under the *ritsuryō* system, all land was technically owned by the state, but exceptions were made for temples, shrines and private land owned by nobles. The fields of their estates were not taxed. This was how the nobles were able to enrich themselves. Ironically, samurai had no choice but to help the nobles in order to not be taxed by the state. Thus, the nobles happily accepted the harvests from the land that they did not till, and then sat and waited for the profits to roll in, like traders collecting premiums.

In the Kantō Plain, the people who were working hard to cultivate the barren land were all low-born locals who would take anyone with a hint of nobility for an important person and an unquestionable leader – even if it was a person of little or no influence back in the capital. Thus those male members of the Minamoto and Taira clans who were not in the line of succession had little choice but to leave Kyoto and go to the countryside to make a living for themselves.

After all, once they reached the frontier, they would immediately become respected noblemen and could easily establish a group of cronies. As was mentioned earlier, there was no

national army and the only half of a working government during the Heian period, so they would still employ samurai to protect their property even though their main job was to work the land. As these low-level nobles were widely respected by the locals, they naturally spent little time cultivating the land and spent more time on developing their martial arts skills. Eventually they became professional leaders of their armed forces. There was only one problem: if these low-level nobles did become successful in the frontiers, they would have to go back to Kyoto to work as bodyguards or even laborers for the imperial household or a member of the Fujiwara clan. That was the only way they could ensure that the land they were developing would be considered part of the estate of a high-level nobleman and not be taxed by the state. However, they had an incentive to do the grunt work for high-born nobles because it gave them an opportunity to use contacts with important people to negotiate a trivial government position, which they could then give to one of their subordinates in the countryside or people from the same hometown, and give them an opportunity to make a name of themselves. Over time, they became the head of a group of petty officials, and eventually were known as senior-ranking samurai leaders (*tōryō*).

No matter how hard the samurai worked, they were always at the whim of the high-level nobles – they had no guarantees when it came to the ownership of their land. Nothing in the world was more unfair than this. The samurai gradually became more and more dissatisfied. Why did the land not belong to the people who worked so hard to cultivate it, they wondered? How could the nobles take the fruits of their labor, without even lifting a finger?

This conflict led to a struggle between the samurai and the nobility. Taira no Masakado, a fifth-generation descendant of Emperor Kammu, staged a rebellion in the Kantō Plain and claimed the title of New Emperor. He aimed to found an independent Kantō Kingdom, and to break out of the unfair political system and let the samurai own the land that they worked so hard to cultivate. But though Taira no Masakado ultimately failed and was beheaded, the rebellion highlighted the absurdities of the political system in Japan and the unfair treatment of samurai, becoming an important issue of that era. During the late Heian period, Taira no Kiyomori, a samurai of the Taira clan, used his wealth and his military strength to become the second-in-command in the *ritsuryō* system. He was appointed Chancellor of the Realm, the chief minister of government. After his appointment, the Taira clan claimed administrative authority over more than half of Japan. For the first time, the samurai ruled the land. But when Kiyomori finally gained power, he decided to imitate the noble Fujiwara clan by marrying off his daughter to the Emperor so that her son would become the next emperor. As the maternal grandfather of the emperor, he was able to manipulate politics.

On the surface, it looked like the samurai had finally succeeded. But Kiyomori was no longer interested in the samurai cause. His clan was from western Japan, which meant that they were involved in shipping and trade and did not have strong ties to agriculture like other samurai. Most importantly, once Kiyomori held power, he did not want to take action to benefit the samurai. He simply wanted to rise above the samurai class and become a nobleman. This clearly made the samurai of the Kantō region, who were primarily farmers and whose main goal was to force the imperial court to recognize their land rights, feel like they had been betrayed by the Taira clan.

At the exact moment when the Kantō region was disenchanted with the Taira clan, Minamoto no Yoritomo of the Minamoto clan, who supported the failed attempt to resist the Taira clan, called for a war to overthrow the Taira. The resulting war was called the Genpei War and remains one of the most famous wars in Japanese history.

As you can probably imagine, the Minamoto clan had the support of the samurai who actually kept Japan running and had production capacity. Although the Minamoto clan was at a distinct disadvantage at the start of the war, they ultimately triumphed over the Taira. Minamoto no Yoritomo was the leading force behind the shogunate whose power was concentrated in east Japan. Since the main governmental agencies of the shogunate were located in Kamakura in the Kantō region, the government was called the Kamakura shogunate.

The word *bakufu* (shogunate) was actually used much later, in the Edo period. *Bakufu* literally means “tent government.” The word originally referred to the tent that served as the temporary headquarters where a military commander gave orders during a war campaign. During the Edo period, the other name for *bakufu* was *ryûei* (willow camp). The words “willow camp” and “tent government” actually come from Chinese classical texts. The shogunate was essentially a negotiating group who elected the most powerful samurai with the best family background to act as their representative: the shogun. Even though the shogun had a tremendous amount of power, he was unable to yell at his subordinates or do whatever he pleased, unlike the emperors living in China. Yes, the shogun was the most powerful samurai, but he was the chairman of a group that made decisions collectively. If the shogun disregarded the opinions of others, he would ultimately fail when his ideas were presented to the other samurai.

The shogunate was formed in order to resist the senseless system of the nobility. Although at first the shogunate was the strongest military force in Japan, it did not belong to any national system. Moreover, this organization had a leader who at the time had no status and no position in government. It would be like a country having a group of roughly 20,000 people who were not the national army or the police, even though they had weapons and tanks. To top it all off, the leader of the group of 20,000 was not a member of the civil service!

This is what makes the samurai unique.

After the samurai were established as a social class, the shogunate was formed as a political entity that protected the interests of the samurai. This bears no resemblance to Chinese history, where the military interfered in existing political affairs. For example, if the shogunate decided to dispatch troops, the samurai of every locality would obey the shogunate’s order and the local samurai would obey the command of the local samurai leader to go to war. For nearly a thousand years, Japan did not have any national army. For nearly seven hundred of those thousand years, the samurai controlled the government. The *ritsuryō* system failed, which led to the rise of the “illegitimate children” as leaders. When the imperial court lost the ability to actually rule Japan, the samurai not only seized political power but also became the representative of Japanese culture.