

Feudalism

The absolute key to understanding early Japanese history is to understand the continual fight for fertile land. Since over 90% of the Japanese population lived on about 15% of the land, the period from 1200-1600 was almost exclusively a time of constant warfare. Imagine over 30,000,000 people living on an area 15% the size of the state of Montana! This would mean over 3000 people living on every square mile, a population density similar to the mall the day before Christmas! The bulk of the Japanese population was centered in the lush fertile valleys between the volcanic mountain peaks. Because fertile land was so important for rice production, feudal Japan was a history of one powerful clan trying to take fertile land away from another powerful clan. Clan warfare was constant, bloody and horribly violent.



Feudalism is a social, political and economic system based on mutual protection and mutual obligation. In other words, “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” Wealth in any feudal system is based on fertile land. Thus loyal service was rewarded by land. The most stable social structure in the history of the planet is the extended family: moms, dads, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, grandparents and grandchildren, all related by marriage and blood. The Japanese called these extended families *uji* or clans and since the members of the *uji* were all related to each other by blood, the *uji* were fanatically loyal to their own members. Each clan had their own unique *sashimōnō*, which was a colored banner worn on the back of the *samurai* in battle. On each *sashimōnō* was the distinct symbol of the *uji*, for example a white tiger on a blue background or a bright red lotus flower on a field of yellow. There were over 250 different *uji* in feudal Japan, each one competing and fighting with each other to seize more fertile land.

Each *uji* was led by the clan’s leader, called a *daimyō*. This was the clan’s eldest and most respected male. Another word for *daimyō* would be a warlord. Each *daimyō* was protected by his own loyal *samurai*, the professional warrior class of feudal Japan. The *samurai* was the noble aristocracy of feudal Japan. By definition to be *samurai*, you had to be born into the nobility. The dream of every Japanese *daimyō* was to become the supreme warlord of Japan, called the *Shōgun*. However the only way to become the *Shōgun* was to conquer and defeat the islands other *uji*. Thus *samurai* warfare was a constant characteristic of feudal Japan. The *samurai* trained their entire lives for combat and were perhaps the greatest warriors of history. The *samurai* were related to the *daimyō* through blood, though the relationship might be a distant connection, like a third for fourth cousin. The *samurai* would serve and protect their *daimyō*,

who in turn would reward their service with a fief (land payments) and *kōkū* (rice payments). Beneath the *samurai* warrior class (both men and women could be born into the *samurai* class!) was the *bē*. (Pronounced like bēē). The *bē* were the common people, the peasants that worked the land and grew the rice for the *uji*.

The *samurai* would protect the *bē*, while the *bē* would grow rice and produce food for the *samurai*. Thus the *daimyō* needed his *samurai* for protection and the *samurai* needed the *daimyō* for their fiefs and rice. The *bē* needed the *samurai* for protection, while the *samurai* needed the *bē* to grow food on the land given to them by the *daimyō*. When a *daimyō* decided to go to war, his *samurai* went to war too, since were obligated to serve and to protect their warlord. Every *samurai* had *bē* working his fief, so when the *samurai* went to war, he was accompanied into battle with his loyal men-at-arms, called *senshi*. Whereas the *samurai* were the professional warrior class of the nobility, the *senshi* were the common foot soldiers of the *bē*.

The entire *uji* was like a triangle, with the *daimyō* at the point, the *samurai* beneath the *daimyō* and the *bē* beneath the *samurai*. Each member of the *uji* felt an enormous sense of *ōn* to the person or persons above them and it was this terribly strong sense of *on* that cemented the clan together, year after year, decade after decade. Remember, *ōn* is defined as limitless obligation and devotion to those above you. Therefore, the *samurai* had boundless respect for their *daimyō*, while the *bē* held limitless respect for their *samurai*, so on and so forth.

Each of the 250 *daimyō* swore to serve and protect the Emperor, who was considered to be the son of the sun goddess, *Amaterasu*. However, in feudal Japan the Emperor was more of a figurehead, a person with little political power or central authority. Because the *uji* were constantly at war with each other for over 400 years, it was impossible to politically unify the country. (Remember: Classical Greece, 800-300 BC!) To place Japan under a central government would require the destruction of the powerful *daimyō* warlords. This is the central theme of *The Last Samurai* (2003.) The Emperor wants to modernize Japan. The last *samurai daimyō* to oppose him is Kasūmōtō who is fighting for the “old ways.”