set up landholding, tax systems, law codes, and a military organization based on the Chinese system.

After the death of Shōtoku, a group of Taiki reformers revolted and began a program of change known as the “Great Reforms.” The aim of the program was to set up a unified kingdom under one ruler. Although the program was never fully carried out, it brought about lasting changes in Japanese government, society and life. Most important, it established for all time the claim of the Yamato ruler to the throne of Japan.

To make his claim clear, the Emperor ordered an official history of Japan to be written. One book was called the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters), and a second was called the Nihonji (Chronicles of Japan). The Kojiki and the Nihonji are the “bibles” of Japan. They record the earliest history of the Japanese people, telling about the sun goddess and her descendants, the rulers of Yamato. They claim that the emperors were of divine origin (born of gods) and were superior to all other chiefs. No one since has challenged the right of the imperial family to “rule” Japan, if only as puppets.

As we have noted, the Great Reforms never were fully carried out. One idea that was never put into effect was that of national military service. With no national army ruled by the emperor, the emperors of Japan faced many problems up until the Meiji Restoration in 1867.

Law and order and the defense of the kingdom was left to the large landowners. Supporters of these powerful landowners called themselves samurai. The word samurai can be roughly translated as “those who serve.” This original meaning, it seems, had little to do with warfare and the military. However, the definition changed a great deal through Japanese history. The samurai as a living institution and as a group died out in the 19th century. However, it is impossible to understand Japanese society and culture today without understanding the samurai and their values.

The samurai were supposed to live by a code of conduct known as Bushido, the way of the warrior. Bushido was an unwritten code and many samurai did not follow all its rules. However, it served as a guide for a soldier’s behavior. It was in many ways like the code of chivalry for knights in Europe during Europe’s feudal period.

According to Bushido, a samurai must be brave, a man of honor, loyal to the Emperor and his daimyo (lord), and must not show emotion. To get back lost honor, a samurai must commit seppuku (hara-kiri). Seppuku is a ritual form of suicide in which the samurai must kill himself by ripping the belly with a special short sword.

Anyone could recognize a samurai. He shaved the crown of his head except for a “top knot” which was “pulled so tight and plastered so firmly with grease that it could not be undone without much difficulty.” The samurai wore two swords at his waist. The long one was used in hand to hand combat. The short one could silence an unprepared enemy or could be used if necessary to commit seppuku.

The samurai were devout Buddhists. But it was a different sort of Buddhism than that brought from China and Korea. The samurai were Zen Buddhists. Zen emphasized the ideas of meditation, simplicity, and closeness to nature. It also emphasized a rigid physical and spiritual self-discipline. This type of life produced men of action with strong character and self control. These were useful qualities in a warrior society.

We can learn a great deal about the Code of Bushido and how samurai acted from a famous Japanese story, “The Tale of the Forty-seven Ronin.” Ronin are samurai who have lost their daimyo.
Every year, the emperor would send a message of peace to the Shogun. The Shogun chose a daimyo to greet the emperor’s messenger. In 1701 the Shogun chose a daimyo named Takumi to greet the messengers. Takumi did not know the proper way to greet them. The Shogun’s secretary, Lord Kotsuke, was chosen to teach Takumi how it was to be done. Kotsuke was a greedy, mean, and jealous man. He would not give instruction without pay. Takumi refused to pay. He felt that it was Kotsuke’s duty to honor the order of the Shogun and teach him without a reward.

Kotsuke became very angry. He refused to teach Takumi anything and took every opportunity to insult him. One day Kotsuke ordered Takumi to tie the laces on Kotsuke’s sandal. Takumi resisted the order but he bent down and tied the laces. Then Kotsuke turned to the other nobles who were present and, with a sneer and a laugh, said, “Look at that. This serf can’t even tie a sandal correctly.”

At this insult, Takumi lost his temper and self-control. He drew his sword and attacked Kotsuke. Kotsuke was not seriously injured but Takumi had committed two crimes: he had drawn his sword in the palace of the Shogun, and he had wounded an official of the Shogun. In addition, he had violated Bushido by showing emotion and losing his temper. For these crimes, Takumi knew he must die. That night, in a shrine in a moonlit garden, he committed Seppuku. All of his loyal Samurai watched the ritual.

Takumi’s land and all that he had owned was taken away. Some of his possessions were given to Kotsuke in payment for the wound he had suffered. Takumi’s loyal Samurai now became Ronin.

Among the Samurai of the dead Takumi was his councillor, a man named Kuransuske. He and forty-six other loyal Samurai formed a league, The League of Loyal Warriors, to avenge the death of their lord. These Ronin felt that Kotsuke was at fault because he had insulted their lord. They believed that Kotsuke had murdered Takumi just as if he had actually stabbed him. The League vowed to seek revenge.

Kotsuke suspected that these Ronin would plot against him. He sent spies to watch the Ronin and he hired more Samurai to guard his home and family.

Kuransuske, however, was determined to fool the enemy into a false sense of security. So, for almost two years, the Ronin led wild and drunken lives. They seemed to have forgotten their dead lord. When Kotsuke’s spies reported this to him, he was very relieved and he began to relax his guard. Then the Ronin struck. Dressed in the black silk costume of the ninja, they slipped over the walls of Kotsuke’s palace. After a bloody battle, the Ronin killed all of Kotsuke’s guards. They found Kotsuke hiding in a shed behind some bags of charcoal and firewood. With great respect, they offered to allow Kotsuke to commit Seppuku and die as a true Samurai. But Kotsuke was a coward. He begged them to spare his life and promised that he would give them large rewards.

Kuransuske, seeing that it was useless to urge Kotsuke to die the death of a daimyo, forced him down and cut off his head with the same sword with which Lord Takumi had killed himself. The Ronin then placed the head of the dead Kotsuke in a bucket to be taken to the tomb of Takumi.

The forty-seven Ronin had proved themselves loyal to their lord and master. Everyone praised their courage and faithfulness. Even so, they knew what they must do now. They had killed one of the Shogun’s high officials. They had shown that they were not completely loyal to him. For that crime they must die. Every one of the forty-seven Ronin committed Seppuku as Lord Takumi had done. Their bodies were buried in front of his tomb. When news of their deeds spread, people from all over the kingdom of Japan came to pray at the graves of these faithful and brave men.

The Japanese still continue the samurai ideal of personal loyalty and responsibility to an employer. This is found in Japanese industry and trade today. The paternal feeling that managers and owners of the great Japanese industries have toward their workers is based on the relationship of the great landlords to their samurai followers. In recent years, the
Japanese have enthusiastically responded to television serials, movies, and comic books telling of the heroic and swashbuckling exploits of the samurai.

**The Taiho Code**

The Taika program produced revolutionary changes in Japan and it firmly established the Yamotos as the ruling family of Japan. In addition, upper-class Japanese adapted a great deal of Chinese culture. However, many parts of the program were never put into practice and the basic Japanese culture and common law remained unchanged.

In 702 A.D., the Japanese government issued the *Taiho Code*. This Code described the basic structure of the government and set up the main rules by which the Empire was to be run. The Taiho Code was truly a legal and political document, or in other words, a constitution. The Code set up a highly centralized government with the Emperor at the center of power. The Code reflected the increased strength of the Emperor as well as the influence of the Chinese. However, the Japanese, as has often happened, only borrowed what was useful to them. For example, they never adopted the Chinese system of censors to evaluate government policy and actions. Japanese tradition could not allow a heaven-sent ruler and his selected advisors to be criticized by people of inferior birth. In addition, the Japanese never accepted the Chinese examination system, which would have made it possible for poor but intelligent people to become members of the ruling group. In Japan, government was based on an aristocracy of birth, rather than on learning, as it was in China.

**The Nara Period**

In 710 A.D., the Japanese emperors moved to a magnificent new capital called Heijo. (Nara is the modern name for the ancient city of Heijo.) Before that time, the emperors had been so afraid of death and disease that they changed the location of the capital had been changed every time a new emperor took the throne. With the increase of money in the royal treasury due to the Taika Reform and the Taiho Code, the emperors decided to live in a new capital that would be safe and permanent.

The Nara period extended from about 710 to 784 A.D. During this time, Japanese art and architecture flourished. Nara artists excelled in sculpture. In much of their work, they used lacquer. The use of lacquer was borrowed from the Chinese, but the Japanese developed it to its highest levels. The lacquer figures of the Nara period were remarkably lifelike.

The Nara period also marked the growth of Buddhist power and influence. Frequent clashes took place between followers of Buddhism and Shintoism.

**The Heian Period—The Fujiwara Clan**

In 794, the capital was moved to Heian. (Kyoto is the modern name for Heian.) The reason for the move is not entirely clear, but some historians think that it was an attempt to escape Buddhist influence in Nara. Heian was the political center of Japan between 794 and 1185, a period of almost 400 years now known as the Heian Period.

The Heian Period was dominated by the Fujiwara family. The Fujiwaras rose to power by persuading the princes of the imperial family to marry the daughters of their clan. Usually, the Fujiwara father-in-law was also the Emperor’s closest adviser. Through Fujiwara pressure, many of the emperors were persuaded to retire at an early age to a life of ease, leaving real power in the hands of a Fujiwara, who took the title of sessho (regent) or *Kōshaku* (dictator). Under the control of the Fujiwara clan, the central government extended its
control over the islands of Shikoku and Kyushu, and the Ainu were pushed farther north on the island of Honshu.

Despite their power, the Fujiwaras never tried to get rid of the imperial Yamato Dynasty. In fact, the right of the imperial family to reign has never really been challenged, even in modern times. The emperors of Japan were stripped of power for centuries, but there never was an attempt to oust the imperial family from the throne. The Japanese rightly boast that theirs is the oldest ruling dynasty.

As its power grew, the Heian court became more and more corrupt. The Fujiwaras were granted the right to own estates and to be free from paying taxes. A large amount of imperial land came under the ownership of the Fujiwaras. These moves violated the Taika program and Taiha Code. Thus both the Emperor’s power and his sources of wealth were slowly taken away.

As the court nobility and the warrior families like the Minamoto family gained control of more and more of the imperial land, power began to shift. Central government control became weaker. Violence and disorder increased; the imperial government became weaker; military families grew in power, and feudalism began to be a part of Japanese life.

The Heian Period saw the development of a native Japanese literature. Chinese characters introduced to Japanese sounds became a new form of writing—hiragana. Hiragana used abbreviated Chinese characters to represent Japanese sounds, an innovation which made for greater ease in writing. Poetry flourished; Manyoshu and the Kokinshu are two famous anthologies of poems.

Heian literature reached its peak with romantic tales called monogatori. These stories presented a complete picture of court life and Kyoto. The Tale of Genji is a well-known monogatori.

Literature

Osaka Castle is in the traditional Japanese architectural style.
Heian art was highlighted for the beauty of its calligraphy. In calligraphy the Japanese artist entered a world of pure and abstract design. Lines were set in a pleasing relationship to other lines. By using a varying range of color tones, ranging from the faintest grays to the deepest blacks, Heian calligraphers produced charming and subtle effects.

During the Heian period, the art of making makimono (colored picture scrolls) developed. Makimono feature the application of gold paint to the surface of scrolls. Many makimono were used to illustrate scenes from the Tale of Genji and other mongatoris.

Japanese Feudalism

Feudal Japan was in many ways like Europe in the Middle Ages. The Japanese feudal system, like that of Europe, depended on ties of personal loyalty. However, loyalty was the weakest link in both the Japanese and European systems. The medieval history of both Western Europe and Japan is full of cases of treachery, disloyalty, and betrayal.

Loyalty to the ruler was important in the Confucian system brought to Japan. However, the Japanese adaptation made loyalty to the family of greater importance. The fact that three of the five Confucian relationships dealt with loyalty to the family made this adaptation easy.

In Europe, with its background of Roman law, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as mutual and contractual (agreed on by both parties)—in other words, a legal relationship. In Japan, based on the Chinese system, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as one of unlimited and absolute loyalty on the part of the vassal. This was based on the lord’s superior wisdom and morality. It was not a legal situation or any form of “contract.” As a result there was no room for the development of the idea of political rights as in the Magna Carta or of individual liberties for the samurai.

Japanese feudal society differed from the European in other ways. Although the Japanese had a Code of Bushido (Bushi is Japanese for warrior), which in some ways was similar to the European Code of Chivalry, it was also very different. Women were not treated as fragile, inferior beings to be sheltered and protected. The Japanese samurai expected their women to be as tough as they were and to accept the rules of Bushido and total loyalty to the daimyo or family. Japanese women were also considered to be samurai.

Moreover, Japanese samurai and daimyo, though warriors like Western knights, did not have the contempt for learning, poetry, and painting found in Western feudalism. Sons of daimyo and samurai, as well as daughters, were taught the Japanese way in writing and in the arts. In fact, the greater daimyo and samurai prided themselves on their fine calligraphy and the ability to paint and write fine poetry.

The political and social organization of Japan today owes much to the feudal period. The warrior spirit and the Code of Bushido were easily taken into the modern Japanese army. The strong spirit of loyalty, duty, and self-discipline still remain from feudal days. These traditions shape the contemporary Japanese character and personality.

Kamakura Shogunate

In 1185, Yoritomo, leader of the Minamoto family, gained military control of all of Japan. The Emperor gave Yoritomo the power to pick his own vassals (warriors or agents who pledged their loyalty to the lord) as shugo (local high lord-barons) and jito (stewards or sheriffs) responsible for maintaining law and order on the local level. This development led to the eventual formation of the Japanese feudal system.
The daimyo discovered the central government did not have enough power to keep law and order. The strongest of the daimyo built castles for their defense and collected taxes from the peasants who needed their protection (taxes were usually in the form of produce or in work-time). The daimyo organized private armies of samurai to protect their holdings and to expand their control over weaker daimyo. As a result, between the 10th and the 17th centuries a feudal system was created. During this period, the Emperors of Japan “reigned but did not rule.”

Minamoto Yoritomo established a military government at Kamakura, which ruled most of Japan. He took for himself the title Shogun, with the privilege of giving it to his sons. The Emperors of Japan, without control of the army, became powerless puppets. Japan was ruled under a Bakufu, or Shogunate, until 1868.

During the Kamakura period (1192–1333), feudalism, which also existed in Europe at this time, spread throughout Japan. Feudalism is a system of landholding and service to a lord. Allies of the shogun, the highest lord, were appointed police officers, tax collectors, and commanders of the army, and were given grants of land. In return, they performed military service for the government.

Feudalism usually had three features:
1. Lords held the land and offered protection to the peasant farmers who worked the land as serfs.
2. People promised to be loyal to their superiors.
3. Local governments took the place of central governments.

All three features appeared in Japan. Slowly, more and more land came under the control of great families or of important temples and shrines. At the same time, small farmers who could not pay high taxes to the Emperor turned over their lands to the great lords (daimyos). In return for protection, the farmers agreed to work the land, to pay rent to the lord, and to be loyal to the lords.

By the 12th century, much of the farmland of Japan was divided into tax-free private estates. As a result of this situation, the power of the Emperor grew weaker and he became poorer. The Emperor continued to be the ruler of the country but the powerful and rich daimyos actually ruled Japan.

In the early days of feudalism, lords divided their land among all their children, so both men and women owned land. However, over the years, the farms became smaller and smaller. Where there had once been one large estate or farm, there were now several smaller ones. Families with more than one child became less powerful. In time, people began to pass on their wealth differently. All the land owned by a family was given to the oldest son. Women were badly hurt by this change. They had once run great estates, had been recognized among Japan’s finest writers and artists, and some had even earned fame as samurai. Under feudalism, women lost almost all their power and almost all their legal rights. The only roles open to them were as wives and mothers.

Younger sons were also hurt as feudalism continued: they were left without land or power. Some became samurai who served powerful lords. Others became Buddhist monks. In many cases these monks were not religious men. They lived as soldiers and fought to win land. Buddhism taught people to live in peace, but the Buddhist religion had changed greatly in Japan. Its temples became rich and powerful, and its monks were greatly feared. These monks opposed any effort to unite Japan.

**Mongol Invasions**

In the 19th century, the feudal samurai met a real test. Japan was invaded twice by the undefeated and seemingly unbeatable Mongols, who had already conquered China. But