

The Effects of Cultural Transmission and Diffusion of Belief Systems on Japanese Women

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Historically, the position of Japanese women in society has been characterized by restraint and oppression. Modern feminists seek to attain the ideal egalitarian society in which gender roles are less rigid and restricting of females. However, history has proven that established belief systems conflict with ideals of gender equality. Belief systems and their teachings become embedded in the ideology of a culture. Thus, these teachings become an obstacle as oppressed individuals seek alternate routes of freedom. Society becomes transformed through the cultural transmission of these belief systems and the adoption of these philosophies to a culture. Buddhism and Confucianism in Japan demonstrate this pattern, in which the arrival of these belief systems immensely impacted the role of women in Japanese society.

Initially, the uniquely Japanese religion Shintoism empowered women in many respects. “Mikos” were priestesses with significant roles in performing in ceremonial dances and tended to sacred shrines.¹ They were highly regarded, and their gender did not hinder or dictate the paths that women could take. However, even during the era of Organized Shinto,² though religion did not necessarily restrict women, the political structure of Japan certainly did. The shift from the

¹ [1] “Gender Difference in History; Women in China and Japan” *Women in World History Curriculum* 1996-2016 <http://womeninworldhistory.com/essay-04.html>.

² Organized Shinto refers to the era in the Shinto religion from the Taika reforms in 645 to the Meiji Restoration in 1867. “Gender Difference in History; Women in China and Japan” *Women in World History Curriculum* 1996-2016 <http://womeninworldhistory.com/essay-04.html>.

clan-based, imperial structure of the Yamato Period (250-750 CE) to the Chinese model of bureaucracy would also play its part in the changing role of women. This was because Chinese bureaucracy limited the influence of religion, which was one of the few paths females could take to elevate their position in Japanese society. In 538 CE, delegates from Korea arrived in Japan with the intent to introduce Japan to Buddhism.³ The use of diplomats and representatives from China and Korea was a key method of cultural transmission in East Asia. However, the diffusion of Buddhism to Japanese culture differed significantly than in China and Korea because elements of Zen Buddhism were fused with existing Shinto beliefs. Japanese Zen Buddhism also breaks from the Pure Land sect, which dictates that women must be reborn as men before they can reach nirvana. Thus, the experience for Buddhist women in Japan was in some ways less restricting psychologically.

In many ways, Buddhism elevated the role of women. Heian Era Japan (794-1185 CE) is significant for its contributions to Japanese art and culture. The arrival of Buddhism and the Japanese court's patronage of Buddhist art and architecture prospered during the Heian period. The development of Japan's vernacular influenced the rise of female writers.⁴ In 1008, Lady Murasaki Shikibu published "The Tale of Genji", a novel that's content revealed insight to Japanese court life. Japan's cultural elite preferred to focus on the "aesthetic" of life and beauty. Many of these practices projected themselves upon women and reaffirmed cross-cultural gender stereotypes of beautiful, poised, and honorable women.⁵ Although upper-class women enjoyed privileged

³ Joseph A. Adler. *Women in the Teachings of Chinese Religions*. (Department of Religious Studies, Kenyon College, Winter 2006). <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Women.htm>.

⁴ Brett L. Walker. *A Concise History of Japan*.(Cambridge University Press, 2015) [38].

⁵ Peter N. Stearns. *Ultracivilized: Court Life in the Heian Era*. (World Civilizations: The Global Experience, 2011) 298.

lifestyles, they still faced pressure within the court to live up to the social norms and expectations within their society.

In transition, the aristocratic elites of Japan became disempowered and devalued during the Kamakura Era (1185-1333). The male dominated warrior class became valued, as the political structure of Japan shifted from that of an imperial dynasty to the feudal model. Samurai culture promoted an active male role in society, though clear paths for women were not well defined. The Samurai believed that women should “look upon her husband as if he were heaven himself”.⁶

Whereas Heian Japan gave women an elevated position in the structure of sophisticated court life, the Kamakura Era would bring about a new social order. In both societies, upper-class women were more privileged than the lower classes. However, the diminishing Heian court took away much of the power that women had gained in publically enforcing societal expectations and in their contributions to the arts and patronage promoting Buddhist art and influence. The feudal model would also give more opportunity for Confucianism to grow, being that the militarism and superiority of male warriors could easily be legitimized by Confucian teachings. However, do not be fooled-- within the confines of the household, women exercised considerable power and agency in the nuclear family. Masako is an example of a female who challenged traditional beliefs and assumptions about female political rulers in Japan. In 1199, her husband died, and she seized power through her sons who succeeded their father as the Shogun.⁷ During their reign, she managed to control the military, landholdings, and the security of her two sons. Women also had the right to own property and head families.

⁶ Spiridon, Veronica Gabriela. "Women in Japanese society: constraint and fulfillment." *Economics, Management, and Financial Markets* 6.2 (2011).

⁷ James L.Huffman. *Japan: World History*. (Oxford University Press, 2010). 41.

On the contrary, Confucianism is the example of a belief system that was not particularly “adopted” or even formally claimed as a belief system. It would be more accurate to say that Confucianism was culturally diffused throughout East Asia, as it subtly weaved itself into the ideologies of individuals in Japanese society. Traditional Confucianism was not as popular in Japan. Instead, later rulers of the late Postclassical Era found themselves attracted to the principles of Neo-Confucianism.⁸ Neo-Confucianism is less centered around maintaining filial piety, but focuses more on ideals of balance, harmony, and investigation of moral principles.⁹ In effect, the subjugation of women that was seen in China did not repeat itself in Japan. Nonetheless, patriarchy was still maintained through the Neo-Confucian ideals of harmony. In this sense, one group would default and acknowledge another group’s dominance, even if they did not necessarily agree themselves, in favor of maintaining harmony.¹⁰ At least in the public sphere, women would be the group that defaults to men, but this is not always the case. There are many nuances involved in understanding the role of women in any given society.

It is no simple task to completely understand the position of women in Japanese society over the course of the entire Postclassical Era. Despite efforts to disempower females, there remain a select group of individuals that recognize their potential and challenge the idea of the stereotypical submissive woman and dedicated housewife. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism were blended together to create a unique Japanese identity. Behind every great ruler was

⁸ Neo-Confucianism originated in the 12th century from the beliefs of Zhu Xi which combined elements of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements.

⁹ Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 127.

¹⁰ Valutanu, Luciana Irina. "Confucius and feminism." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 2.1 (2012): 132+. Academic OneFile. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

a great mother, supportive sister, or wise wife. Unfortunately, history only focuses on the single achievement without questioning who was behind the scenes managing the production.