Decline and Fall of the Silla and the Yamato Kingdom

FALL OF THE DYNASTIES

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APPEARANCE OF THE NEW RULING CLASS: SAMURAI

The overthrow of the Soga clan and the Taika Reforms in 645 were soon followed by the fall of Paekche in 663, the frantic efforts of the Yamato court to fortify the possible Tang invasion route on the Japanese islands, and the reinforcement of the Ritsuryō system for nationwide military mobilization.1 By issuing the Taihō law codes in 701, the entire populace came under the rule of Tang-style national statute law with a centralized bureaucratic government. On the basis of state ownership of land, peasants were allotted parcels of land, paying taxes and providing corvée service.

The Be people that had been controlled by the Kabane bearing Uji leaders were transformed into freemen (kōmin) under direct state control. Ruling clans were deprived of their traditional privileges, such as holding troops to be used by the Yamato sovereign as guards or in battle, but acquired a new status as high-ranking bureaucrats or local officials.2 The lower strata of the old elite (such as the Kami-no-miyatsuko) obtained positions as local district officials. Government officials received fief according to their rank, post, and merits. The Yamato kingdom had never adopted the Tang-style examination system. It was a hereditary aristocratic society.

The imported Ritsuryō system, however, did not fit the clan-based Japanese society. Especially when the Tang's
expansionist threat disappeared in the aftermath of the An Lu-shan rebellion (755-63), the Yamato rulers lost their zeal to enforce the Ritsuryō system. The diplomatic contact with the declining Tang dynasty was discontinued after 838. During the Heian period (794-1192), the Fujiwara clan, which had been prominent in the implementation of Taika Reforms, established close marital ties with the imperial family, established regency in 858 effectively exercising the powers of emperor, and occupied most of the high offices in the central government. Middle and lower level positions in the central and provincial government, on the other hand, became the hereditary monopoly of a small number of other aristocratic clans.

During the ninth century, the aristocratic clans (in the capital and in the provinces) and large temples started to create private manors (shōen), and by the tenth century, the public land-holding system as well as the authority of the central government collapsed completely. As owners of the private estates, powerful aristocrats and the monks of important temples had appointed major local families and peasants to function as local administrators.

The spread of private estates reduced the state revenues, forcing the imperial family to rely on income from its own estates, and leading to a nation-wide breakdown of law and order. Contemporary accounts give a picture of chaos and violence so widespread that the commoners had to arm in self-defense. By the early tenth century, small- and medium-sized farmers began to arm themselves for self-protection and gather around the wealthiest and most influential of their own standing.

Farmers preferred a local magnate who claimed noble descent than an aristocratic absentee landlord. Those who owned or administered the great estates, on the other hand, were forced to maintain private warriors to protect their lives and property. Friday (1992: 174-5, 139) notes that “By the end of the ninth century, most of the state’s military dirty work was being done by private forces directed by private warriors operating in the name of the government,” and also that by 914 the occupants of Kebiishi (provincial police officers) posts were “all peasants of the province in which they hold office.”

A court noble could give a local land-holder immunity from taxation and thereby receive a portion of the estate’s produce in return for his protective service. The Fujiwara clan owned the most extensive manorial rights. Family registers and the allocation of farming land were discontinued, and state-owned land was integrated into the private estates.

According to Tsunoda, et al. (1958: 109), “control of the so-called ‘provinces,’ tenuous even at the start, was in the ninth and tenth centuries almost entirely lost to great families who made a mockery of the land and tax system imported from Tang China.” The characteristic feudal institutions of medieval Japan (embracing the twelfth through sixteenth centuries) had their roots in the Heian Period (794-1192).

See Sansom (1963: 236). As early as 792, the Yamato court abandoned its policy of countrywide conscription of peasants and made district-level officials responsible for keeping peace in the provinces through the organization of local militia. The distressed people turned to religions for solace. The Buddhist leaders did their best to offer people consolation for the
miseries of the age that peaked by the tenth century.

According to Farris (1992: 150-2, 375), “Japanese peasants of the tenth century moved too freely to be reliant on the leaders’ economic and social functions and ‘warriors were free to come and go as they pleased.’ While the peasant soldiers farmed a bit of land, they basically relied on robbing and pillaging to sustain themselves.

Imperial offspring five or six generations removed from the ruler were cut off from the dynasty and given surnames like other nobles. The royal house had no surname. In 814, Saga (809-23) created, as dynastic shedding, the surname Minamoto (Gen) for 33 of his 50 children. In addition to the original Saga Genji, there were Minamoto lineages tracing their origins to Seiwa (858-76), Uda (887-97), etc. Minamoto Yoritomo, who established the Kamakura shogunate, and Ashikaga Takauji, who established the Muromachi shogunate, both could trace their descent from Seiwa Genji. In 825, Kanmu awarded the surname Taira (Hei) to his grandson. Thereafter, all members cut off from the imperial line were surnamed either Minamoto or Taira. Kanmu’s great grandson was also made Taira, and his descendants

Sansom (1963: 239) observes: “It may be taken for granted that, especially in the provinces remote from the capital, almost every farmer was a warrior.”

After being mobilized for fighting, the peasant soldiers used to return to their lands. As time passed, however, there evolved military specialists by natural selection who started to form a professional full-time warrior class called samurai. The samurai were destined to become the rulers of medieval Japan. There evolved a sort of meritocracy based on martial skills instead of the Confucian examination system. Whether of humble origin like Toyotomi Hideyoshi or of obscure origin like Tokugawa Ieyasu, every swordsman was placed on an equal footing. The only wonder is why it took such a long time for the peasant warriors to recognize their absolute power.

Powerful provincial clans that were unable to acquire high positions in the central government went out to the provinces, assuming leadership over the peasant warriors. They maintained their own cavalry, and enrolled peasants as their swordsmen and archers. The Minamoto clan (Genji) and the Taira clan (Heishi), both descended from the imperial family, came to serve as the two largest rallying points of peasant warriors. The leaders of the imperial line could legitimize the power of peasant warriors. Until the end of the twelfth century, however, the warriors were still the servants of the court and the state. “Samurai” literally means “one who serves.” The leaders of peasant warriors were politically naïve and remained outside the power structure for a long time. According to Farris (1992: 176), court nobles had own warriors to guard their mansions, and were “able to keep [provincial] warriors at heel by setting them against themselves.”

The Taira clan captured political power first (1156-60) and occupied the higher official positions of the central government, but was soon overthrown by the Minamoto clan in 1185. Minamoto Yoritomo commenced the Kamakura shogunate (1192-1333) at a seaside village in the east. There emerged a complicated feudal system with an imperial court still appointing provincial officials, owners of private estates appointing own administrators, and the shogun appointing his own vassals as provincial protectors and stewards.
A samurai leader named Ashikaga Takauji, who could also claim the imperial line, established the Muromachi shogunate (1333-1573) and let feudal daimyos rule over independent provincial areas. Samurai and peasants organized autonomous local organizations, and the regional leaders called daimyos tried to incorporate these various autonomous entities into their own political system, and to organize local warriors into armies on the basis of lord-vassal relationship.11

The Paekche people who had conquered the Japanese islands and set themselves up as a layer of overlords above the rice-growing Yayoi-Kofun period peasants lost power to the samurai class of peasant origin.

FALL OF THE SILLA DYNASTY

The Three Kingdoms in the Korean peninsula had evolved from pluralistic systems into centralized aristocratic states centered upon the kingship, giving former tribal or clan chieftains appropriate ranks in the hierarchic bureaucracy. Military forces were put under the authority of the king as commander-in-chief, who often led troops in person and fought in battle. The council of the high aristocracy made decisions on the most important matters of state. Fortresses were built in the regions, and the castle lords served both as governors and military commanders. Aristocratic holders of government office and military command were rewarded with large amounts of land and prisoner-slaves.

Silla had never adopted the Tang-style examination system. It was a hereditary aristocratic society. Members of the holy-bone and the true-bone classes monopolized the throne and occupied the high-ranking positions.12 Garrisons called Jeong or Bannermen 停幢 (differentiated with the color of the sleeves) were established in each province, commanded by true-bone generals. There were also Oath Bannermen 誓幢 who pledged their loyalty to their commanders.

By the mid-eighth century, the culture and arts of the Unified Silla society seemed at the height of their glory. Beneath the surface, however, power struggles between the leading aristocratic clans and ruling royal families set in motion the process of the nation's decline and fall.

When the Korea proper was divided into several

achieved notable reputations as warriors. The Hōjō family, who controlled the shogunate after the death of Minamoto Yoritomo, also claimed descent from the Taira. Tokugawa family tried to trace their ancestry to the Minamoto line.

10 Although the court nobles were still able to compete for power and influence with warriors, the establishment of military government in Kamakura effectively terminated the rule by the Yamato court. The collapse of the aristocratic Yamato court brought new leaders on the scene, and a greater participation by the locals in the national life. The military government, in one form or another, endured into the nineteenth century. See Tsunoda, et al. (1958: 181).

11 The Muromachi shogunate was destroyed in 1572 by a feudal lord, Oda Nobunaga, who was killed in 1582 by one of his vassals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The unification of the Japanese islands in 1590 was followed by the invasion of Chosun (1592-8). Building on the social system introduced by Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868), established by a daimyo based in Edo, was able to maintain a stable social order (of the ruling samurai above the farmer, the artisan, and
the merchant) on the Japanese islands for 264 years.

12 Head-rank six were just below the true-bone royal clans, and their advancement in public office was restricted by the members of the royal lineage. Aristocrats of the head-rank six through head-rank four lineages could occupy the lower positions. Head-ranks from one to three designated the common people. The bone rank system dictated what kind of clothes, carriages, daily utensils, and houses members could have. The Council of True-Bone Nobles made decisions on succession to the throne and the declaration of war.

13 They commanded their own private soldiery recruited from the local populace and landless wanderers, and exacted taxes and corvée labor service from the peasant. The non-royal aristocracy eventually seized political power. The beginning of this turbulent period coincided with the beginning of global drought around 800. Maya civilization reached a zenith around 750. Then their society imploded because of severe droughts between 760-910. See Peterson & Haug (2005: 322-7).

14 He and his immediate successors restructured the entire society and relieved the misery of common people by establishing a more equitable land-tax system kingdoms, ceaselessly fighting each other for conquest or mere survival, the rulers of each state had to maintain not only a strong autocratic rule for instant nation-wide mobilizations, but also a rational and fair institutional arrangement to consolidate the patriotic loyalty of peasants. When the unification was achieved, however, the centralized aristocratic system soon began to degenerate into a ruthless means to exploit peasants.

Ambitious nobles created private military forces, arming their slaves and recruiting the roaming peasants. There occurred open contests for the throne, producing twenty kings during Silla’s last 155 years (780-935). A contender for the throne often had to ally himself with local chiefs. In the countryside, the castle lords, some of them with a capital aristocratic background but most of them being indigenous local headmen in the final days, usurped the positions of the provincial magistrates who had been dispatched from the capital.

The first large scale peasant revolt broke out in 889, and then a succession of rebellions erupted all over the country. Two leaders, one from poor peasant stock and the other an outcast royal prince, eventually consolidated the peasant rebel forces (called the armed Grass Brigands), and established the Later Paekche in 892 and Later Koguryeo in 901, respectively. The Later Three Kingdom period in the Korean peninsula (892-936) roughly matches the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdom period (907-60) in mainland China.

Wang Keon had emerged from a powerful local clan in the Kae-seong area that had been engaged in extensive maritime commercial activities. He had at first served as a commander of the Later Koguryeo army, and then put forward by the generals for the kingship. He established the Koryeo dynasty (918-1392), winning surrender of the last ruler of Silla in 935 and destroying the Later Paekche in 936. The Koryeo created hereditary military households from among the young and vigorous peasants, granting land to soldiers and assigning two supporting households to cultivate the land of each military household.

Wang Keon broke the bone-rank order, and drew on hereditary aristocrats from many different clans. Koryeo
adopted the Confucian state examination system to select civil officials of varied backgrounds, and institutionalized an elaborate Chinese style government apparatus. Aristocratic lineages, however, still determined political power. They monopolized the highest offices in the government, married their daughters off to the monarchs, controlled extensive wealth, and dominated the educational institutions. It was essentially a hereditary society, though the officials recruited through the civil service examination became an active check on the entrenched power of the aristocratic establishment in the latter half of the dynasty.

Wang Keon regarded himself as the successor of the Koguryeo dynasty, and welcomed the ruling class and the last crown prince of the Parhae dynasty that was destroyed by the Qidan Liao (916-1125) in 926. More than fifty thousand Parhae aristocrats took refuge in Koryeo, and the crown prince was officially included in the Koryeo royal clan. The influx of Parhae refugees, including officials, artisans, and peasants, continued throughout the tenth century. Most Ruzhen tribes had been under Parhae rule, but when Parhae was destroyed by the Qidan, they looked upon Koryeo as the suzerain power.¹⁶

¹⁵ Wang Keon bestowed the royal surname on powerful castle lords, and formed matrimonial alliances with local clan leaders, taking six queens and 23 wives. He had concluded a marriage arrangement with the last Silla king, each marrying one of the other’s daughters.

¹⁶ See Henthorn (1971: 96). Some Mohe-Ruzhen tribes of Parhae moved into the Hamheung plain in the Korean northeast and also into the Yalu River area. According to Lee (1984: 126), “It was Koryeo that supplied their needs of grain, cloth, iron agricultural implements, and iron weapons, for which they exchanged horses and furs. There were many Ruzhen who remained in their original places of abode and yet put their trust in Koryeo, while still others migrated into the Koryeo domain. To these Koryeo gave land and dwellings, thus furnishing them with the means to maintain their livelihood.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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