JAPANESE AND EUROPEAN FEUDALISM

Read the selection below comparing and contrasting feudalism in Japan and Europe, and use it in completing your comparison chart.

Japan's feudal culture was in many basic ways more like that of feudal Europe than China. The warriors, who were known by the generic term of samurai “servitors,” placed great emphasis on the military virtues of bravery, honor, self-discipline, and the stoical acceptance of death. Lacking any religious injunctions against suicide, they commonly took their own lives in defeat, rather than accept torture and possible humiliation in capture. Suicide by the gruesome and extremely painful means of cutting open one's own abdomen became a sort of ritual used to demonstrate will power and maintain one's honor. Vulgarly called harikiri, or “belly-slitting,” but more properly known as seppuku, this form of honorable suicide has survived on occasion into modern times, and suicide by less difficult means is still considered an acceptable and basically honorable way to die.

The prime virtue in the Japanese feudal system, as in that of Europe, was loyalty, because the whole system depended on bonds of personal loyalty. Of course, loyalty was in actuality the weakest link in both systems, and the medieval stories of both Japan and Europe are full of cases of turncoats and traitorous betrayals. In Europe, with its background of Roman law, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as mutual and contractual – in other words, as legalistic. In Japan, the Chinese system has placed less emphasis on law and more on morality – that is, on the subordination of law to the moral sense of the ruler, since his right to rule was theoretically based on his superior wisdom and morality. Hence, the lord-vassal relationship was seen as one of unlimited and absolute loyalty on the part of the vassal, not merely one of legal contract between the two. There was no room for the development of the concept of political rights, as happened in the West.

Still, family lineage and honor were of great importance in medieval Japanese society, because inheritance determined power and prestige as well as the ownership of property. Family continuity was naturally a matter of vital concern. The Japanese avoided many of the problems of Western hereditary systems, by permitting a man to select among his sons the one most suitable to inherit his position and also by using adoption when there was no male heir by birth. The husband of a daughter, a young relative, or even some entirely unrelated person could be adopted as a completely acceptable heir. While inheritance is no longer a keystone of Japanese society, these types of adoptions are still common.

Japanese feudal society differed from that of Europe in two other revealing ways. In Japan there was no cult of chivalry which put women on a romantic pedestal, as though they were fragile, inferior beings. The Japanese warriors expected their women to be as tough as they were and accept self-destruction out of loyalty or family. Also Japanese warriors, though men of the sword like their Western counterparts, had none of the contempt that the Western feudal aristocracy often showed for learning and the gentler arts. They prided themselves on their fine calligraphy or poetic skills. Perhaps the long coexistence of the culture of the imperial court with the rising warrior society of the provinces had permitted a fuller transfer of the arts and attitudes of the one to the other.¹

“Comparing Feudalisms,”


…Both [Japan and Europe] used feudal relationships in situations where they could not sustain more centralized forms of political organization. The West had the example of Rome’s empire, but the medieval leaders simply could not reconstruct the elements that had allowed the empire to exist and flourish. They could not organize or afford the necessary armies, and they could not agree on standardized laws. Most critically, they lacked the means to support an independent bureaucracy that could cut across regional societies and language groups, except through the important but somewhat specialized mechanism of the church. The Japanese had the example of the Chinese imperial system available to them, and the briefly attempted a comparable kind of bureaucratic development, using Confucianism to promote the proper political attitudes, But, as in western Europe, a system of centralized administration could not be established in Japan.

…In both western Europe and Japan, feudalism was highly militaristic, Both the medieval West and Japan went through long centuries of unusually frequent and bitter internal warfare, based in large part on feudal loyalties and rivalries. Although this warfare was more confined to the warrior-landlord class in Europe than in Japan, in both instances feudalism summed up a host of elite military virtues that long impeded the development of more stable centralized government. These values included physical courage, personal or family alliances, loyalty, ritualized combat, and often contempt for non-warrior groups such as peasants and merchants.

The military aura of feudalism survived the feudal era in both cases. It left Japan with serious problems in controlling its samurai class after the worst periods of internal conflict has passed in the early 17th century. In the West, the warrior ethic of feudalism persisted in the prominent belief that a central purpose of the state was to make war, thereby providing opportunities for military leaders to demonstrate prowess. But the legacy of feudalism was not simply military. For example, the idea of personal ties between leaders or among elite groups as a foundation for political activity continued to affect political life and institutions in both the West and Japan long after the feudal period ended.

Furthermore, the characteristics of feudalism in Japan and in the West were not identical. Western feudalism emphasized contractual ideas more strongly than did Japanese. Although mutual ties were acknowledged by members of the European warrior elite, feudal loyalties were sealed by negotiated contracts in which the parties involved obtained explicit assurances of the advantages each would receive from the alliance. Japanese feudalism relied more heavily on group and individual loyalties, which were not confirmed by contractual agreements. Probably for this reason, the clearest ongoing legacy of feudalism in the West proved to be parliamentary institutions where individual aristocrats (as well as townsmen and clergy) could join to defend their explicitly defined legal interests against the central monarch. In Japan the legacy of feudalism involved a less institutionalized group consciousness. This approach encouraged individuals to function as part of collective decision making teams that ultimately could be linked to the state. Although in both cases feudalism helped shape distinctive political styles and values that would be combined with later centralizing tendencies, the styles and values themselves were not the same.

[Stearns goes on to speculate about industrialization and economic dynamism in the 19th and 20th century, a far more tenuous thread – although given Japan’s early industrialization, one might speculate on the parallels between European and Japanese imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.]
Feudalism - Japan and Europe

Similarities

- Both knights and samurai wore armor and rode horses into battle
- Both spent their entire lives preparing for war
  - Started as boys to learn the arts of war
    - First learned the strategy of war, basic swordplay, and the code of honor
    - Second, acted as the personal servant of the knight or samurai, and would accompany them to war
    - Last, would be considered fully trained and able to take on trainees of their own
- Followed strict ethical codes
  - Bushido for the samurai, chivalry for the knight
- Loyalty to their lord was held as a very high virtue
  - Practiced a religion, expected to be a model of virtue to the lower classes
- Members of a special warrior class
- Great landowners were dependent on the knights and samurai for military service
- Lords and daimyos build castles for protection, with rounded walls to make the attack harder and the castles less prone to earthquakes in Japan

Differences

- Feudalism in Europe lasted from 800 to 1400, while in Japan it started in 1192 and lasted till 1868
  - Japan was isolated from the west from the 17th century to the 19th century, and preserved the feudal society 400 years later
- Military technology advanced more in Europe with the invention of the longbow and cannon, making knights less effective and necessary
- Knights were not as well educated as the samurai, who were usually literate and sometimes worked as government officials
- A knight's loyalty was based on a legal contract, rather than moral obligations
- Samurai used lighter armor
  - Made of tiny iron strips and plates sewn together with leather which covered the body, head, neck, and shoulders
  - More flexible than plate armor
  - Wore helmet usually in the form of an animal
  - Most important possession was two handed sword known as a katana, which was called the "soul of the samurai"
- Samurai practiced Buddhism or Shintoism, while the knights practiced Christianity
- Samurai would commit suicide rather than face defeat or capture, while knights were often captured and traded back for ransom, only to fight again
- Samurai would not fight with their inferiors, and so peasants were safe. Knights often attacked peasants and destroyed farms
- Common practice while on the Crusades to ransack farms for provisions
Feudalism may vaguely refer to the form of government made up of a decentralized socio-political system where a weak monarchy tries to take control of territories under it, but not physically part of its kingdom, using reciprocal agreements with the territorial leaders.

A classic definition of feudalism refers to the European political system of the middle ages, which comprised of a set of reciprocal military, as well as legal duties they were obliged to do among the nobles who were warriors. This centered around three concepts of lords, vassals and fiefs.

Although feudalism is largely considered a European invention, a type of feudalism was invented by the Japanese, at about the same period that European feudalism was at its peak, which was completely independent of the European system. It’s important to note that the two feudalistic societies exhibited some shared practices and principles, but nonetheless differed in many important aspects.

The defining feature of a feudalistic society was land ownership, and both the Japanese and Europeans had land owning castes, as well as those that didn’t own land during the medieval time. Unlike European feudalism, Japanese feudalism had no true pyramid form, with a hierarchy of ‘inferior’ nobles being presided over by the monarch. This was mainly due to two facts: Firstly, Japanese authority was as centralized as the case was in the European nation states. Even though the majority of local aristocrats paid the emperor lip-service, Japan’s rugged terrain made it hard for the emperor to have full control of the local aristocracy, making local aristocrats in Japan much more powerful than their European counterparts. Secondly, although Japan’s inferior nobility (samurai) were religiously loyal to their local lords, the lords didn’t give them land to own, while the European nobility got land in exchange for their time in the military. The samurai instead received an income from their local lords, depending on the produce from the lord’s land.

While the samurai may have had servants, they did not work on the lands in the same way as they did in Europe. Knights in Europe had serfs who would tend to their land that they had received from the lords. The legal structures in the European and Japanese feudalistic governments were obviously radically different. The European system was based on Roman and Germanic law, as well as the Catholic Church, while the Japanese system was based on Chinese Confucian law and Buddhism. Due to these differences, the feudal systems in Europe and Japan developed at different times.

Feudalism was to a large extent established throughout Europe by the 9th century, but it wasn’t until the 12th century that it started to filter into Japanese territory. Notably, one important similarity between the two systems, was that they were both hereditary caste feudal systems, where peasants had no chance at all of becoming part of the ‘ruling clan’.

**Summary:**

European feudalism was quite older than the Japanese system, having been established in the 9th and 12th centuries respectively.

The European system was more centralized than the Japanese system, because the Japanese emperor had no full control of the local aristocracy.

European feudalism was based on Germanic law, while Japanese feudalism was based on Chinese Confucian law. Japanese samurais’ servants didn’t tend to their land like in the case of the serfs of European knights.
Feudalism

European Feudalism
About 500 CE, much of western Europe was left without a strong centralized government due to the breakdown of the Roman Empire. With little organized resistance, Germanic invaders raided western European cities and monasteries. Because kings were often too weak to repel the invaders, many city dwellers moved into the countryside in hopes of greater safety. As a result of the invasions, and a weak central government, a new social and political system known as feudalism developed. Strong local lords formed a strict code of behavior and allegiances which became the foundation of feudal life.

For example, the king controlled huge tracts of land. He would give his support and a large piece of land, called a fief, to a powerful lord in return for loyalty and military support. This meant the lord was now a vassal of the king. The Lord would then divide up that land among his supporters, usually less powerful lords, obtaining vassals of his own. The Lesser Lords would do the same, dividing up the increasingly smaller land holdings to their knights. Finally, the knights would be left in direct control of the land and the peasants or townsfolk who lived there. The peasants were expected to grow food, tend the land, and provide military support to the feudal lords. Under European feudalism, there was very little opportunity for social advancement.

The Feudal Economy
Feudal lords and knights lived in a manor house on a large estate. The economy that grew up around the lord's home is known as manorialism. Under this system, everyone had a well-defined place in the social structure.

Many nobles became knights, mounted warriors, who lived according to a code of conduct called chivalry. They were expected to be honest, brave, and loyal to their word. Most peasants were serfs, meaning they could not leave their lord's lands without permission. The serfs farmed and provided manual and military labor for the lord, and in return, he protected them and gave them a few acres to farm for themselves.
**Feudal Japan**

Japan's feudal period lasted from the 12th century until the 19th century. During this period, society was divided in different classes. At the top, was the **Emperor**, although he had little real power. Japan was ruled by the **Shogun**, who was a military leader with near absolute control. The most successful was the **Tokugawa Shogunate**, which ruled Japan from 1603 until 1868.

In Japan, the real political and military power was in the hands of the **shogun**. Much like in Europe, the shogun distributed lands to his loyal vassals, who were called **daimyo**. The daimyo then granted lands to their warriors, the **samurai**. Japanese warriors lived according to a code of conduct known as **bushido**, which was even stricter than that in Europe. A disgraced samurai was expected to perform **seppuku** (commit suicide) in order to maintain his family's honor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison of Feudalism in Europe and Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nobility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Warriors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code of conduct</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evolution</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the Tokugawa Shogunate, the power of the shogun was further consolidated through a series of measures including the *sankin-kotai* system, which required daimyo to spend alternate years in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), the capital. This had the effect of keeping the daimyo under closer supervision and ensuring their loyalty. Additionally, the Tokugawa Shogunate maintained a strong military establishment known as the *shinpan* system, which included the *han* (fortified domains) that controlled the vassals and the *hatamoto* (samurai) who were directly loyal to the shogun. These measures helped maintain the stability and control of the shogunate for nearly three centuries until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which marked the end of the feudal system in Japan.
There are similarities and differences between Japanese and European feudalism. Both seem to have developed from a blending of concepts of centralized imperial rule with traditional tribal organization and personal bonds of loyalty. In Europe these ingredients derived from the Roman Empire and the Germanic tribes. Japan's feudal tradition can be traced to T'ang China and the uji organization in early Japan.

Feudalism developed slightly later in Japan than in Europe (12th and 9th centuries, respectively). This delay could have been due to Japan's isolation and the lack of foreign invasions. However, both systems began with strong legalistic attitudes and stressed vassal-lord obligations, designed to ensure the allegiance of the former in periods of constant warfare. The legal foundations were, however, very different in the Japanese and European feudal systems: European feudalism was grounded in Roman legal structure while Japan feudalism had as its basis Chinese Confucian morality.
Japan in the 16th century emerged as a regional force, and clearly demonstrated the potential to play an important role in Asian relations and trade. However, before that potential was fully realized, before Japan could present a real challenge to European presence in Asia, this civilization consciously turned inward. As with Ming China, this is a decision that needs to be examined and understood.

**FEUDAL JAPAN**

Japan from the 12th century to the 16th century was a feudal based society. Feudalism refers to a situation where political and military power is divided into local, private hands. Admittedly, at first glance Japan does not appear to fit the definition of a feudal society since Japan had an emperor. Dating back to the 6th century, the Yamato family held imperial power; this family line was in fact viewed as semi-divine and untouchable. Traditional beliefs emphasized that this imperial family traced its lineage to the sun goddess, Amateratsu. However, the significance and power of the emperor was only symbolic and spiritual, not truly military or political. While the Japanese revered their emperor as a link to the gods and to the past, the reality was that real power over law, taxes and military power came from the swords of the military elite - the *daimyo*. Daimyo families (warlords) held local power based on extensive land holdings and their private military force made up of loyal samurai (warriors).

Japan was in fact a dyarchy - a two headed political system. The emperor was the spiritual head of the society; actual power was in the hands of the daimyo, the feudal leaders. Periodically, during this long period of military based rule, one clan was able to establish military dominance over other families and received from the emperor the title of *Shogun*. Recognize, however, even under Shogunates such as the Kamakura and Ashikaga, there still was not a true state. While the Shogun military leaders could demand taxes and limited military support from local leaders (daimyo), these Shogunates did NOT directly control the populace through a state military or through centralized legal and bureaucratic control. The local warlords, the daimyo, retained their private regional control.

For centuries, Japan was mired in this divided, feudal situation. Fragmented into dozens of private military-based entities, Japan suffered the costs of almost constant violence and limited economic growth. The lack of central unification hampered Japan's abilities to participate in broader Asian relations, preventing competition with Asian mainland powers Korea and China.

**PERIOD OF NATIONAL UNIFICATION**

This feudal situation changed in a dramatic and bloody fashion in the 16th century. A succession of ambitious and effective warlords undertook to bring the Japanese islands under the effective rule of one leader. This centralization was achieved through brutal warfare and suppression of local power known as the "Period of National Unification" - 1568 to 1600.
European Feudalism

Feudalism developed in Western Europe at around 800 C.E. from the remnants of the Western Roman Empire. As a result of central authority being unable to perform its functions and prevent the rise of local powers, this decentralized organization formed. It is believed by some historians that the system was first initiated in France by the Normans from the time they first settled there. Many remarkable things were still accomplished during this era. For example, Monk Missionaries converted the Europeans and united Europe into Christendom, giving the region a common religion. This allowed for the Pope to become a political power. Also, Charlemagne introduced the importance of education. This is significant because it provided Europe with a common language: Latin. Together, these two things began to re-civilize Europe.

The System of Feudalism

When the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 C.E., a state of chaos encompassed Western Europe for many centuries. Essentially, the people of Western Europe needed some form of a political system to defend themselves. Thus, feudalism developed. The system literally accounted for all aspects of a society, aside from religion. Firstly, the King was in complete control. He owned a large land mass and leased it to trustworthy men called Vassals. The catch was that they had to swear an oath to remain faithful to the King at all times. The Vassals were wealthy, powerful, and had complete control of their land, called a manor. They had to provide lodging and food for the King and his court when they traveled around the country. They established their own system of justice, minted their own money, and set their own taxes. However, the Vassals had to serve on the royal council, pay rent, and provide the King with military service when he demanded it. The Barons did this by leasing their land out to knights, who would fight for him, and thus, the king. Although not as rich as the Vassals, Knights were quite wealthy. The Knights kept as much of the land as they wished for their own personal use and distributed the rest to serfs. Serfs had to provide the Knight with free labor, food, and service whenever it was demanded. Serfs had no rights, were never allowed to leave the Manor, and had to ask their Lord's permission before they could marry. Serfs were the majority of people, and their lives were wretched. Feudalism was a social hierarchy, a political system, and an economic system, all in one. The beauty of the system is that it achieved self-sufficiency. It was the giving up of freedom in exchange for protection. However, there was absolutely no mobility, no time for learning, and no intellectual advancements. Because people constantly feared for their lives, there wasn’t any leisure time; society couldn’t grow.

Feudalism and the spread of Christianity

In 687 C.E., Pepin of Heristal, a Merovingian ruler, united the Frankish territories and centered his kingdom in Belgium and other Rhine regions. His son, Charles Martel, took over after he died and formed an alliance with the Church which helped the Merovingian Dynasty (and Christianity) to expand into Germany. Pepin the Short succeeded him and strengthened the alliance between Benedictine missionaries and Frankish expansion. Benedictine missionaries completed the conversion of England begun by St. Gregory the Great. Also, Irish monks established early-medieval art. The greatest surviving creation of these monks is the Book of Kells, a Gospel book of decorative art. It marks one of the lowest points in Europe’s history, leading all the way up until the Renaissance in the 14th century. Its demise was triggered by the Crusades because the Crusades called for people to leave their homes and fight. Since Feudalism was based on non-movement, it collapsed. Knights, soldiers, peasants, and pilgrims left their homes and migrated along European roads and trails, bringing back with them stories of differing cultures. They began to implement their architecture and advances in medicine.
Feudalism and the Catholic Church

The only force that was powerful enough to unite an extremely disorganized group of people was the Roman Catholic Church. For the time being, religion was very important. From birth to death, whether one was a peasant, a serf, a noble, a lord, or a King, life was all about church. Various religious institutions became important, rich, and powerful. This is because life sucked during the Middle Ages. Times were tough, and they looked toward God to make it better. Because of this, society basically attempted to structure itself politically on a religious basis. Often times, religion in government is effective, but if it’s the only thing, it won’t work well. The proof is in the Middle Ages. Religion in government is nice because it promotes morality. It, moreover, tells the people which is right and which is wrong. Religion is used as means for control. But when one begins to think for him/herself, all of the sudden, religion isn’t as effective. When people began to think about themselves and the amount of potential they had, society changed for the better. This idea, known as humanism, was the basis of the Renaissance. Moving back, after the Roman Empire dissipated, the idea of Europe as one large church-state arose, called Christendom. Christendom consisted of two distinct groups of representatives: the sacerdotium (ecclesiastical hierarchy) and the imperium (secular leaders). Supposedly, these two groups were complements of each other, attending to people's spiritual and temporal needs, respectively. The Pope was considered higher in status than the emperor in those two areas. But, the emperors often attempted to regulate the Church. The church, in turn, not only owned cities and armies but also attempted to regulate the matters of the government as well.