SOCIETY AND ECONOMY
Charting Japanese society and economy throughout the medieval and early modern periods represents a complex task. First, as in any culture over time, a variety of social and economic changes—both major and minor—occurred that reshaped the broad contours of social and economic development. In this survey of medieval and early modern Japan, space prevents a detailed explication of all the nuances of social and economic phenomena. Second, the dearth of sources from the medieval era in particular requires that characterization of feudal socioeconomic conditions in Japan be tenuous at times. Even extant sources offer only a singular perspective due to the generally high social and economic status of the record keepers themselves. Surviving sources typically represent the perspective of elite members of medieval and early modern Japanese society—warriors, aristocrats, and monastics. By the middle and later years of the Edo period, however, significantly more information survives, representing a wider range of sources and social groups than during the medieval period.

This inquiry begins with the structures of Japanese society in the medieval and early modern periods and then considers major economic arrangements. In this time period, social class and occupational group were generally interdependent. The terms for the various social groups—such as warriors, farmers, and merchants—are also indicators of the economic function and social status of members of these groups. By the Edo period, an ideal social hierarchy had been fully articulated by the Tokugawa shogunate. This system transformed long-established connections between economic contributions and social rank into a formal social hierarchy that had both behavioral and material implications. For instance, farmers were considered socially superior to merchants. The government-mandated social system placed greater value on farming and agriculture than on commercial ventures. Yet this was the ideal—the reality was that actual social influence and economic wealth often worked in ways contrary to this social scheme. Thus, for instance, farmers often experienced poverty and social isolation, especially as Edo economic conditions shifted toward an urban, consumer-oriented culture. In this environment, merchants became increasingly wealthy despite their officially inferior status.

SOCIETY

Prior to the start of the medieval period, aristocrats were the center of Japanese society. As the ruling class, as well as the landowners, the aristocracy determined most social and cultural norms. Other social classes—such as farmers and warriors—were dominated by aristocratic influence to the extent that records detailing their activities are almost entirely nonexistent or have survived as peripheral information in the background of aristocratic sources. With the rise of the warrior class in the medieval period, this situation shifts dramatically. Along with more information about warriors, farmers and merchants with whom the military class interacted—sometimes closely—also become more visible in records by the end of the medieval period.

Despite the selective nature of available historical sources, the evidence suggests that at least some conditions remained relatively constant throughout the medieval and early modern periods. For instance, the warrior class maintained political control and enforced a strict system of social stratification for this span of nearly 700 years. Yet, change is inevitable and certain elements of Japanese society and economic structure remained beyond the full control of samurai rulers, particularly as the Tokugawa shogunate inadvertently fostered an inversion of the idealized social order they formally required. Merchants, for example, were at the bottom of the Edo-period four-tiered social structure. However, as samurai families patronized merchants while serving required periods of attendance upon the shogun in the capital, Edo, these flourishing entrepreneurs gained respectability as their fortunes outgrew their traditionally low social rank.

Further, besides the social hierarchies that existed between classes, there were also significant hierarchies that existed within particular social classes. For example, warriors of the Edo period were hierarchically superior to all other social classes, but within the warrior class itself there was also a status hierarchy. Distinctions were made between such warriors as foot soldiers whose power and authority differed greatly from that of warriors who served as regional agents of the shogunate.
Aside from temporal and regional variations in both arrangement and nomenclature, feudal Japanese social structure incorporated the following basic class distinctions in ever-changing relationships: warriors, aristocrats, Shinto and Buddhist clergy, farmers and peasants, artisans, merchants, and outcasts. Notably, membership in one class did not necessarily preclude associations with another class. For instance, Buddhist monastics could have either aristocratic or peasant origins. As with other aspects of feudal experience, identifying such individuals with a particular social group—and that group’s related behaviors and values—could prove problematic. In the following sections, medieval and early modern Japanese society is addressed in terms of its overall structure, the status of women, and forms of social protest.

Medieval Society

Medieval society was shaped largely by the emerging power and status of warriors who resided in the provinces. The Kamakura military government, first established by Minamoto no Yoritomo, set this social transformation in motion. While warriors did not supplant the role and social position of the emperor and aristocrats, upper-echelon warriors accumulated significant prestige and authority, with the effect that warrior interests and values became central to Japanese social structure. Medieval aristocrats, residing in Kyoto, maintained their privileged status and connections to the imperial family, but for the most part real power had passed to the warrior class. Aristocrats continued to pursue the arts, such as literature, and were purveyors of aesthetic taste. By the end of the Kamakura period, as aristocratic estates (shoen) were incorporated into the landholdings of regional warriors, aristocrats lost their economic base. Without a source of tax revenues and other tribute, some aristocrats were forced to earn a living by teaching aristocratic aesthetics and etiquette to warriors who were stationed in Kyoto.

One key feature of warrior-dominated society that remained figural until the end of the Edo period was the system of vassalage and vertical relationships between lords and retainers. As in other feudal cultures, the relationship and reciprocal obligations of the lord and retainer (also called vassal) had a powerful effect on Kamakura social ideals and norms. (For more information on the lord-retainer relationship especially as it affected warriors, see chapter 5: Warriors and Warfare.)

Warriors were caught up in a network of lord-retainer relationships. This hierarchy was characteristic of warrior society throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Warrior values took on increasing importance for the larger society as the centuries progressed. The periods of intense civil war that marked much of the medieval period also had a significant impact on social arrangements and the often fleeting alliances between lords, their vassals, and the farmers and peasants who worked the land.

One of the problems with trying to describe medieval society is that there was not a rigid nomenclature used to describe the different social strata. Similarly, the rights and relationships between different social classes, as for instance between landowners and peasants who worked the fields, was not fixed, so there could be a great deal of difference between domains. The nature of social interactions was as much a product of the particular relationships forged between individual landowners and peasants as it was a product of a legal recognition of social classes. Finally, there were also local variations in social organization that preclude the possibility of describing medieval society in singular terms.

WARRIORS

The most significant aspect of medieval and early modern Japanese society was its domination by the warrior class. In general, warriors were referred to by the terms bushi ("warrior men") or samurai. Although warriors began to emerge as a significant social power in the late Heian period, it was not until the Kamakura period and the establishment of military rule that samurai rapidly ascended to the top of the social hierarchy in terms of rights and political authority.

The warrior class included people from a range of both aristocratic and commoner social-class origins. For instance, while many of Minamoto no Yoritomo’s followers were commoners from provincial areas of eastern Japan—far removed from the
aristocratic culture of Kyoto—Yoritomo was himself descended from the imperial family. Leadership in the warrior hierarchy typically fell upon those descended from Kyoto families with at least a mid-level rank in the political or military bureaucracy, for instance those who served in the provinces as estate (shoen) managers and provincial governors (shugo). The strictly observed hierarchy of the Kamakura-period warrior class consisted of three main classes: gokenin (literally, “housemen”), samurai, and zusa.

**Gokenin** At the top of the warrior-class hierarchy were the gokenin, or shogunal vassals (also frequently termed “retainers” in English), the highest ranked and most loyal of the Kamakura shogunate’s supporters. These were the direct vassals to the shogun in both the medieval and early modern periods. There were relatively few people situated at the gokenin level—around 2,000 warriors—but vassals themselves also were served by subvassals loyal to their lord, and by extension, to the shogun. The gokenin were expected to provide military and financial support to the shogunate. Not surprisingly, gokenin enjoyed special privileges in return, such as land ownership and bureaucratic appointments, granted by the shogunate. For instance, the shogunate chose estate stewards (jito) and military governors (shugo) from among the gokenin. In the Muromachi period, besides direct vassals to the shogun, there arose vassals who also served the military governors.

**Samurai** Below gokenin was the samurai class. Although we tend now to think of the term samurai (literally, “one who serves”) as a generic term for warrior, during the Kamakura period samurai referred to a specific social ranking. Samurai, though less powerful than gokenin, also commanded subvassals who were loyal to them. Like gokenin, samurai were cavalry soldiers.

**Zusa** Foot soldiers, or zusa, constituted the lowest of the three levels of the Kamakura warrior class. They became increasingly important during the transition from the Kamakura to the Muromachi period when warfare became more and more common in the struggle for political power between competing warrior factions.

The majority of warriors resided in villages and tended to their landholdings. They also trained and otherwise stayed prepared for the eventuality of being called into battle by their lords.

The warfare and civil strife that began during the Muromachi period also reflected the breakdown in lord-vassal relations. The loyalty that vassals displayed toward their lord was not infrequently discarded in favor of new alliances based on the shifting fortunes of local warriors. In short, loyalty was sometimes jettisoned for opportunities to enhance personal power and wealth. It was partly a result of this shift in social relations that the warrior class known as daimyo developed in the Muromachi period. Daimyo, or feudal lords, were able to establish regional centers of power on territories they came to control through warfare and strategic alliances. It was from among the ranks of the daimyo that Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged to unify Japan in the latter half of the 16th century.

**FARMERS AND PEASANTS**

In the medieval period, farmers and peasants (known collectively as byakusho) were free to work on either public land or on estates. In either arrangement, they paid land tax to the government or to estate authorities. As a social class, farmers and peasants were situated between warriors and aristocrats and lower-class peasants (genin). The living conditions and social freedoms of farmers and peasants varied depending on the particular land or estate they were associated with and the quality of the relationship they had to landowners or their proprietors.

In the medieval period, it was typically the case that peasants and farmers worked the land of their samurai lord and paid rent in the form of some percentage of their yearly harvest. In some areas of Japan—in the area of Kyoto, for instance—peasants and farmers sometimes attained at least some degree of local autonomy. This was particularly the case as the agricultural and crafts products produced by peasants and farmers became an increasingly important part of the Japanese economy. Such commerce resulted in the increased status of farmers and peasants. This increased status was further heightened...
on occasions when farmers and peasants created federations to protect their local villages and communities from warfare and in order to deal with communal issues such as field irrigation. Such federations usually came into being as the result of uprisings against absentee control of land. These federations were structured so that a village head was chosen to oversee federation issues, including rules for the maintenance of community harmony. Control over farmers and peasants was further weakened during the Warring States period when the resources for local control by lords were diverted to matters of civil war.

**Myoshu** Within the class of farmers and peasants, there also existed status differences. The most powerful farmers and peasants were known as *myoshu*. They were local landholders who usually lived on estates (*shoen*). The proprietor of the estate collected tax from the *myoshu*. These powerful independent peasants were chosen by the estate proprietor to serve in this capacity. Besides paying tax, these peasants were given the right to income from the lands they controlled.

**Genin** Subordinate farmers (genin; literally, “inferior people”) worked land for the independent farmers or for other domain officials and had neither rights to independent land management nor freedom of movement. They could also be bought and sold, and were usually included in matters of estate inheritance. Despite this very lowly status, subordinate farmers were usually treated as members of the extended family that controlled or owned the land. The social status of subordinate farmers began to change in the late Muromachi period when they gained land rights as tenant farmers.

**Warrior-Farmers** Another distinction within the peasant-farmer class was the warrior-farmer. Socially, warrior-farmers occupied a position between independent farmers and lesser peasants. One indicator of the heightened position of warrior-farmers over other peasants was that the former were allowed to use surnames.

In the medieval period, it was possible in certain instances for farmers and peasants to ascend the social hierarchy. The opportunity to do this was usually occasioned by the chaotic social conditions produced by the century of civil war that marked the Warring States period. During this time, farmers and peasants were sometimes used by lords as foot soldiers in their armies. Those who were particularly adept at the martial arts were able to become samurai. The exemplar of this medieval social mobility was Toyotomi Hideyoshi who went from peasant to military ruler of Japan. Once the Tokugawa shogunate established and enforced the rigid social structure that characterized society in the Edo period, opportunities for social mobility were much more limited.

**OUTCASTES**

In the medieval period, there was a social class below that of peasant. These were the outcasts, usually known by the term *eta* (hereditary outcaste) or *hinin* (literally, “nonhuman;” outcaste by occupation or social status). These terms were used without clear distinction between them during the medieval period—it was only in the Edo period that a sharp differentiation was asserted by the shogunate (see the subheading “Outcastes” under “Early Modern Society” below). *Eta* were especially associated with tasks requiring the disposal or treatment of animals and animal hides, such as butchering or tanning. Further, the religious impurity and defilement associated with *eta* by virtue of their occupation was considered to be contagious to those who might come in contact with them. Thus, strict segregation from *eta* was often practiced. References to *eta* date back to Kamakura-period records. By contrast, *hinin* were usually outcasts as a result of some social transgression, such as committing a crime, or who were engaged in activities deemed outside of proper social roles, such as actors and performers.

**Early Modern Society**

Unlike medieval society, early modern social structure was, at least in the ideal, far more rigidly drawn. The ideal of a fourfold hierarchical social class—in descending order, warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants—was a social vision borrowed from Con-
fucian philosophy. This perspective was set in motion in Japan in 1591 when Toyotomi Hideyoshi issued a decree prohibiting movement between these four social classes. This social class division remained in effect throughout the Edo period, but the regulation of these social classes in practice was always somewhat different than the ideal would suggest.

From the perspective of the ideal society, the Tokugawa shogunate articulated a rigid fourfold social hierarchy based on notions derived from Neo-Confucian moral philosophy. This was intended, in part, to organize society in accord with the productive value of each social class to the larger society. The so-called shi-no-ko-sho structure—warrior (shi), farmer (no), artisan (ko), and merchant (sho)—was viewed as the ideal arrangement of society that produced order and harmony. The warrior class was the head of the hierarchy because of the warriors’ role as government administrators. Farmers followed next because of the importance of their work in nourishing and sustaining the nation. Artisans comprised the next most valuable group because they were responsible for manufacturing items of utilitarian worth. Merchants followed last. They were little esteemed by the Neo-Confucian value system that animated the social hierarchy because they were viewed as producing nothing yet making a profit off the labor of others. Finally, there were groups of people who were not placed within this system, including aristocrats, monastics, and outcastes.

This system remained in place until the beginning of the Meiji period when it was abolished. According to estimates, the population at the end of the Edo period was approximately 30 million people. Of these, the samurai class made up about 6.5 percent, farmers, artisans, and merchants collectively accounted for 90.5 percent, outcastes groups numbered 1.75 percent, and some 1.25 percent constituted of such people as aristocrats and monastics. Throughout the Edo period, each social group was subject to different legal, political, criminal, and other rules and regulations.

The ideal configuration of early modern Japanese society, however, constantly, and in a variety of ways, bumped up against the actual social lives of people. For instance, from the perspective of the samurai class, one was either a samurai or a non-samurai. The term chonin, “townsperson,” was often used to collectively describe artisans and merchants residing in cities. Moreover, the four-class-system did not account for aristocrats, monastics, and outcastes. In these and other ways, the ideal division of four social classes was breached both conceptually and in practice throughout the early modern period.

In many ways, then, Edo-period society functioned as a three-class social system: warriors, farmers, and townspeople. It was according to these three divisions that early modern government usually operated. Thus, for instance, the warrior class was governed according to relationships between lord and vassal. Townspeople were governed by a system of neighborhood officials appointed by the particular city’s ruling lord. Farmers were controlled by village officials who were in turn accountable to regional officials appointed by a more powerful lord.

Whether one approaches early modern society from a three- or four-tiered class structure, it was still further complicated than just a multitiered class structure. Like the medieval period, there were hierarchies existing within each class in addition to the hierarchy between classes. There could be very wide discrepancies within a particular class. For instance, while warriors occupied the highest social class, within this class there were lords who enjoyed favor with the shogunate and lesser samurai for whom social and economic security were not guaranteed. In similar fashion, “farmers” encompassed both village heads who resided in large and well-appointed homes, and tenant farmers and those without any ownership of land who might live in quite austere, and even squalid, conditions. Artisans might produce their goods through the patronage of a wealthy client, or they might be poor, making a living by producing simple goods such as baskets or bamboo utensils. Merchants might have significant wealth, operating a large storefront, or they might be street vendors selling cheap goods or food from their carts.

WARRIORS

In several important ways, warriors were not just the highest class, but they were a class apart. They dressed differently from the rest of Edo-period society, sporting stiff-shouldered jackets and split-skirt pants. They wore their hair in a special warrior’s
The national peace established by the Tokugawa shogunate significantly affected the warrior class. During the previous Warring States period, warriors had been actively involved in the civil wars waged for control of Japan. With the Tokugawa peace, warriors were displaced from their usual role. While all warriors were the recipients of hereditary stipends and titles, there was a wide discrepancy between their actual situations in life. Some warriors became government administrators earning significant incomes. Many others, however, worked in bureaucratic or other routine positions—often menial—for which they were poorly compensated.

Warriors were at the ready if needed in battle, but because warfare was basically non-existent in this period, they had little opportunity to hone their skills. The famous warrior code—Bushido, or the Way of the Warrior, formulated in the early modern period—provided warriors with an explicit and idealized value system and a reminder to stay prepared for war (see also chapter 5: Warriors and Warfare). The Way of the Warrior also created the image of the self-cultivated and moral warrior, dedicated to serving his lord and willing to die in the process if necessary.

Studying these idealized warrior values and trying to apply them to their lives, along with the study of other subjects intended for self-cultivation, were among the ways that warriors spent their leisure time. Warrior wives were expected to maintain the household. In their free time, these women might cultivate their interest in the arts or partake of the burgeoning popular culture of literature and theater.

FARMERS

Following warriors, farmers constituted the second-ranked social class during the early modern period. They were ranked above artisans and merchants because their labor in producing the nation’s food supply was clearly indispensable to the functioning of Edo-period society. As a social class, farmers made up approximately 80 to 85 percent of the entire population situated in some 63,000 villages spread throughout the country. It has already been observed that this was a diverse group, encompassing both a wealthy and literate few and a much larger number of farmers and farm laborers. Some lived quite comfortable, if not wealthy, lives. Others, however, barely made a living working the land of others. Village heads oversaw the communal aspects of the farm community. In turn, village heads reported to domain administrators who collected the rice tax and served as regional peacekeepers. Farm women maintained the household and provided seasonal farming assistance as needed.
ARTISANS AND MERCHANTS

Artisans and merchants who resided in towns and cities made up the third and fourth tiers of early modern society. They were often referred to collectively as “townspeople” (chonin) by the warrior class. Despite this apparent erasure of class difference, official Neo-Confucian orthodoxy made a clear distinction between artisans and merchants. The official view of artisans was positive: They contributed to society because they built the infrastructure and produced the goods and products required for society to function. Artisans, though important to the functioning of early modern society, rarely accumulated the kind of wealth associated with merchants. These skilled professionals either worked independently to produce their goods or they were employed by merchants.

By contrast, the official view of merchants was negative: they were selfish and self-interested because they accumulated wealth by dealing in goods they had not produced through their own hard work. Here again the ideal view of Edo-period society bumped up against the reality that outside of the most senior warrior authorities, merchants were the wealthiest class and enjoyed the power that wealth afforded them.

OUTCASTES

Like medieval society, early modern society included groups considered to be outcasts and therefore outside the mainstream social structure articulated by the Neo-Confucian vision of the ideal society. By the end of the early modern period, it is estimated that 380,000 people were characterized as outcasts.

There were two predominant groups of outcasts: eta (called burakumin—“people of the village”—in contemporary Japan) and hinin (literally, “nonhuman”). In the medieval period, these two groups were not strictly demarcated. In the early modern period, however, government authorities drew a specific distinction between them: eta referred to those who were outcasts by birth, and hinin were outcasts as a result of their occupation.

The eta engaged in such occupations as butchering animals and tanning animal hides that were considered defiled and thus religiously polluting. As a result, the eta suffered from much discrimination even when they engaged in livelihoods that were not in and of themselves considered ritually impure. The eta often lived in cities where they were forced to live in segregated communities. They were also restricted in where they could travel and who they could socialize with, and they were permitted to marry only other eta.

The hinin worked in occupations that were considered outside of the fourfold social class officially recognized by the shogunate. Such occupations were thought to contribute little if any value to society, and included those who were beggars, itinerant and street entertainers, prostitutes, and criminals. Hinin status was not hereditary as eta status was. It was rather a status that one fell into as a result of economic hardship or moral failing. Ironically, the warrior elites who dictated proper social values were also among those who frequented the pleasure quar-
ters and enjoyed the various entertainments to be found there.

OTHER GROUPS

Early modern Japanese society also included groups who fell outside the fourfold social ideal. Among these other groups were lesser Buddhist and Shinto clerics who often were responsible for maintaining and administering local temples and shrines. Such clerics were usually married and also farmed and engaged in other village activities, dealing with religious matters as necessary. Household servants and shop hands were another group, usually found in urban centers like Edo and Osaka. By some estimates, this group comprised approximately 10 percent of Edo's population. Day laborers were another group who worked in cities but often came from villages. When they could not make a livelihood in the countryside, day laborers would leave home to work at menial tasks in the city, residing in the least desirable neighborhoods and housing. There were yet other groups too numerous to detail here. The significant point is that these other social classes did not fit the formal criteria of the four social classes, yet they were important to the structure and functioning of early modern society.

WOMEN

Japanese women's history is difficult to chart. On the one hand, it is easy to assume that Edo-period official pronouncements about the social status of women were the norm throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Although, in general, we might observe that women were subservient to men and had significantly less access to positions of power and authority, there were certainly exceptions to this rule through the eras covered in this book.

A study of the social status of women in Japan's medieval and early modern periods underscores the fact that social structure was not just a matter of social class but also of gender roles, both between and within specific social classes. Just as the Edo-period ideal social structure was far from many actual class experiences, so too the official status of women does not fully convey the actual lives many women lived. In short, the social status of women was dynamic and changed over the course of the medieval and early modern periods. Over the centuries that comprise the medieval and early modern periods, the duties and rights of women changed, due both to the particular time period in which they lived and to the social class to which they belonged. The wife of a warrior, for instance, would have different duties and rights than the wife of a peasant living in the same time period. Such things as the rights to inherit property, freedom of movement—for instance, rules against women traveling alone—and divorce rights also fluctuated.

Historical sources for studying women's social lives are spotty at best. There are more sources from the early modern period than from the medieval, but the shortage of information to create a sustained narrative of women's lives extends throughout the medieval period and especially into the first half of the early modern period. Documents written by women are sparse compared to those written by men. Those written by men that include comments and observations about women invariably bear the particular bias of the author toward women. For these reasons, the following overview of women in medieval and early modern Japanese society is necessarily incomplete, providing only snapshots of the kinds of lives women might have led in the medieval and early modern periods.

Medieval Period

In the medieval period, a tradition that antedated the period continued to be exercised, reflecting the social value that women had in a predominantly patriarchal society. This tradition was for a lesser family to marry daughters into other more influential families to secure ties to these families. This practice was meant to establish strategic relationships between families. While this practice was particularly effective when it involved social and political elites, it reportedly also occurred at regional and village levels, as well.
Prior to the medieval period, the aristocratic Fujiwara family would marry daughters into the imperial family in order that the Fujiwara would gain additional power and access to ruling authority. Not only was there the direct connection to the daughter, but children born of the daughter’s marriage created ongoing Fujiwara connections. Thus, for instance, if an aristocratic family married a daughter to an emperor, sons of that union would become emperors and have grandparents in the aristocratic family.

Using daughters as a commodity to buy political power and economic advantage continued in the medieval and early modern periods. In this time period, however, key alliances were created through marriage by the warrior class. This was especially the case in the latter half of the 16th century when various lords vied with one another for military control of the country. Daughters were married into other warrior families as a means to certify military agreements and arrangements between warrior groups. A further strategy was to give a daughter or other woman of one family to another family to serve as hostages for some political or military end.

This view of women in the medieval period, however, is tempered in part by the fact that there were instances of women as warriors. Warrior wives, especially, were sometimes trained in the martial arts, such as the use of different kinds of weapons, with which they would be expected to defend their homes and domains if their husbands were off fighting elsewhere.

### Early Modern Period

The relative social and political stability that characterized the early modern period also produced changes in women’s lives. Most notably, Neo-Confucian values and ethical pronouncements about the proper role for women in society dictated a rigid patriarchal system in which women were subservient to fathers, husbands, and in old age, to their sons. It should be stressed, though, that the Neo-Confucian ideal and the reality of women’s lives could be quite different. There were always exceptions to the official status women were expected to occupy. Nevertheless, the official Neo-Confucian perspective was quite telling in its attitude toward women and women’s place in Edo-period society.

One of the most important Neo-Confucian texts, and arguably the most famous, which makes specific moral pronouncements about women and how they should lead their lives, was *Higher Learning for Women* (*Onna daigaku*; early 18th century), attributed to Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714), a Neo-Confucian scholar. This text set the tone for attitudes about women for the remainder of the early modern period. According to this text, a woman should always be obedient, first to her parents, then to her husband and his family, and finally, in her old age, to her sons. Further, a woman should exhibit such qualities as working hard without complaint, frugality, and humility. This text also explains that a married woman could be justifiably divorced if her husband found her to be disobedient, unable to bear children, or in bad health.

We must keep in mind that *Higher Education for Women* was a moral guide for women and not a historical description of women’s actual lives. There is ample evidence to suggest that women did not merely—or only—live a life of subservience to men and that the Neo-Confucian ideal may have been breached as often as it was met. This is certainly true for at least some classes of women in the early modern period. Older women whose children were grown had more freedom of movement than young wives. There were also occasions when a woman married a man who was adopted into the woman’s family, often because that family had no male heir. The man in this case would assume the name of the wife’s family. There is evidence that women living under this kind of marital arrangement had at least somewhat more control over the household than women who married outside of their own family. Lower-class women often worked in the homes of the wealthy and only later married. Although marriage was often arranged for women by the males in their families, in some instances, rural girls had more personal choice in selecting husbands than did urban girls. Finally, the literacy rate for women in the early modern period was approximately 15 percent, a figure higher than in other cultures at a similar point in economic development. Literacy afforded women opportunities for working in a fami-
ily business or teaching at a private school, activities not prized in texts like the Higher Education for Women.

The idea of strategic marriages intended to create alliances between families has already been mentioned. This practice continued in the early modern period. Persisting also was the use of women as hostages to control the political machinations of potential rivals. This phenomenon was particularly conspicuous in the practice of alternate attendance at Edo required of lords (daimyo) by the shogunate (see chapter 1). In years when the lord returned to his domain, the lord’s wife had to remain behind in Edo. Women were used, in this instance, to keep the lords loyal to shogunal authorities.

Although prostitution certainly existed in the medieval period, it became institutionalized and supervised by the shogunate in the Edo period. Licensed brothels, known as pleasure quarters, existed in major cities, but the Yoshiwara district in the city of Edo was the most famous of the period. The status of prostitutes was mixed. On the one hand, high-ranking courtesans might enjoy great fame for their beauty and musical skills. On the other hand, the life of most prostitutes was grim. They were controlled by the brothel owner and had typically been forced into prostitution as a result of poverty. It is from the pleasure quarters that women refined in the arts—the geisha—came into prominence. Geisha were not necessarily prostitutes, though they often had lovers and applied their skills to pleasing men.

Many medieval and early modern social protest movements are described by the term ikki. Ikki originally had other meanings—such as warrior leagues—but in the Muromachi period the term was used to refer especially to a local uprising led by regional warriors, peasants, and farmers who organized themselves into protest leagues. In the early modern period, ikki referred generally to any peasant revolt.

Social Protest in the Medieval Period

As warrior control over the country became decentralized due to the civil wars fought during the Warring States period, social protests became more frequent as the mechanisms of social control became weaker and weaker, one of the side effects of constant warfare. In the 14th century, disgruntled farmers and peasants in central Japan in the region of Kyoto banded together in “land protest leagues” (tsuchi ikki or do ikki). Their concerns over such matters as taxation and unfair treatment by estate officials were addressed to estate (shoen) proprietors who were the administrators of these lands. In the 15th century, some of the protests were directed to the shogunate to seek cancellation of debts (tokusei). Some 100 debt cancellation uprisings occurred during the 15th century. Only sometimes were these uprisings successful in getting debts excused. Of note, however, was the size of some of these protests. Although they usually began as a local matter, they sometimes spread across regions and came to include several thousand protesters. Regardless of their success, such large-scale protests became a cause of significant concern for both regional and national authorities.

Another form of regional uprising in the medieval period was carried out by leagues known as “provincial protest leagues” (kuni ikki). These started in the 15th century and were usually led by local landowners and provincial warriors (kokujin). While some of these protests were fueled in part by financial conditions, they were more typically political in nature, directed against the power and authority of
provincial military governors (*shugo*), and often larger in scale than other kinds of social protest movements. The goal of provincial warriors was to oust the local military governor and take control of a region themselves. Provincial warriors created protest leagues to rally support and resources to enable them to overthrow a military governor. Peasants joined these leagues in hopes of gaining reprieve from heavy taxation. Peasants likely also hoped for favor in return for supporting provincial warriors who, if successful, would become the new regional authorities. One of the effects of these provincial uprisings was that they helped to create the system of regional lords known as the *sengoku daimyō* (see chapter 1: *Historical Context*, for additional information on *sengoku daimyō*).

Some social protests were based, in part, on religious activism and persecution, though these too had important political implications. Both the Jodo-shinshu and Nichiren schools formed leagues of followers that defended these sects from outside interests and influence. During the Warring States period, when these leagues were active, both Jodo-shinshu and Nichiren organized their own military forces to defend their interests. This usually meant fighting against local warlords for regional control. The success of these schools in attracting followers also provided them with a base for political activism by organizing followers into protest leagues. In some instances, these religio-political leagues wielded more power than the local lords, especially as civil war eroded the influence of warrior lords. Not only did such Buddhist schools seek to maintain or assert their interests against those of warrior authorities, but they also fought against each other as well as with the older, established Buddhist schools such as Tendai.

Jodo-shinshu Buddhists were organized into leagues known as Ikko ikki. The term *Ikko ikki* refers to leagues established by members of Jodo-shinshu, also referred to by the name *ikka*, meaning “single-minded” faith in Amida Buddha. These “League of the Single-Minded” uprisings began in the late 15th century and usually involved large numbers of militant protesters derived from the peasant class seeking self-governance. In the largest and one of the most significant Ikko ikki actions, protesters battled with the lord of Kaga province. The victorious protesters forced the lord to commit suicide. These events inaugurated a nearly 100-year rule by Jodo-shinshu adherents in the Kaga region. Ikko ikki protests continued in various parts of Japan until 1580 when Oda Nobunaga destroyed the military capabilities of the League of the Single-Minded.

Hokke ikki was the name for protest leagues among followers of Nichiren Buddhism, a school that was also called the Hokke (Lotus) school because of the importance of the Lotus Sutra to its doctrines and practices. Unlike the Ikko ikki, which appealed especially to peasants, the Hokke ikki was championed particularly by members of the Kyoto merchant and artisan classes who saw these leagues as a way to protect their interests and communities. The Nichiren school had been particularly successful in attracting followers among the nonaristocratic classes in Kyoto. Conflicts arose with the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei, which had in former times been dominant in the capital. Armed conflicts erupted between these two schools in the Muromachi period and it was the Hokke ikki who rose up to defend Nichiren-school interests, both religious and commercial. In the first half of the 16th century, the Hokke protests were finally suppressed by superior forces from Mt. Hiei.

### Social Protest in the Early Modern Period

Social protest in the early modern period was usually the result of heavy taxation or the high price of rice that precipitated poverty and starvation especially among farmers, peasants, and the urban poor. Such conditions led to both farmer-peasant uprisings in the countryside and urban riots. Farmer-peasant uprisings (Hyakusho ikki; “farmer protest leagues”) occurred to protest the treatment of farmers and peasants by the Tokugawa shogunate and domain lords. During the Edo period, some 2,500 such farmer league uprisings occurred throughout the country to protest excessive taxation and the hardships it fostered.

During the first half of the Edo period, farmer protests varied in their level of militancy. Sometimes
farmers would simply abandon the lands they worked in order to avoid taxation. Other times, farmers would submit appeals to the authorities protesting the conditions they were forced to endure. Later in the Edo period, farmer protests often involved leagues of protesters drawn from much wider areas and constituting a much larger number of participants, sometimes numbering in the thousands. Such protests were both more violent and more widespread than those that occurred earlier in the period; they took on greater national urgency because they involved farmers from more than one region. If the shogunate could ignore the more limited protests, they could not afford to ignore these larger uprisings. One other change in the development of these more militant protests was that besides targeting the government, the protesters sometimes directed their anger against regional merchants and others they perceived were getting wealthy at the farmers’ expense.

The urban counterpart of farmer uprisings were known as *uchikowashi* (literally, “smashing”). These rice riots, as they are sometimes called, were held to protest the very high cost of rice. Mobs of irate—and often starving—urban poor rampaged through a city destroying rice storehouses and other merchant establishments that they deemed the source of their misery. Urban riots occurred in many cities, including Edo, Osaka, and Nagasaki. By the end of the Edo period, the severity of these riots was also connected to the waning political influence of the Tokugawa shogunate, which by this time appeared mostly helpless to either aid the poor or to suppress their protests.

**ECONOMY**

Like most other aspects of Japanese culture and society, Japan’s economy was significantly impacted by the warrior class during the medieval and early modern periods. Although warriors were formally the social elite, this high standing in society did not necessarily mean that warriors held the most economic wealth. By the latter half of the early modern period, wealth increasingly resided with the merchant class, formally the lowest on the social hierarchy.

In the Heian period, control of economic resources was centered at Kyoto. By the end of the Kamakura period, however, the economy had become more and more decentralized. What this meant in practical terms was that at least some regions of Japan, now ruled by local warriors, had become independent and self-sustaining. Such regions did not have to rely on Kyoto or, for that matter, Kamakura, to maintain a functioning economy. Local markets developed around castle towns and other growing urban centers. In the early modern period, markets and commerce became more and more centered on the larger urban areas, such as Edo and Osaka.

**Medieval Economy**

The medieval period witnessed economic changes, including the development of markets and domestic commerce, increased agricultural production as a result of new technologies, the marketing of artisans’ goods, the use of money as a means of exchange, and overseas trade. Merchants and artisans became increasingly central to these economic developments, but other classes also contributed to the medieval economy. Buddhist monks, particularly...
Zen monks, who had studied in China, provided a link between Japan and China not only from a religious perspective, but also in contacts useful for those conducting trade with China. The warrior class, too, contributed to the economy as consumers of a variety of goods, both domestic and imported. The many warrior-bureaucrats dispatched by the shogunate to oversee cities and provinces also created markets for the needs of this social class. The use of coins was also associated with this phenomenon.

The development of daimyo domains in various parts of the country during the 14th and 15th centuries also impacted the economy. Regional lords wanted goods to reflect their status, and required markets and other commercial ventures to support the samurai and farmers who worked their land. Itinerant merchants traveled from domain to domain setting up markets and trading centers once or twice a month. These markets evolved into permanent market sites as the ongoing demand for goods increased. Artisans also settled in such locations to sell the goods they produced. The development of market towns was a direct result of this kind of commercial activity.

**AGRICULTURE**

The medieval period witnessed increased agricultural productivity. This, in part, was a result of technological advances, including the increased diffusion and use of iron tools, and the development of double cropping. One important transformation that accompanied increased agricultural production was the rise in the importance of self-ruled and self-supporting villages to medieval economic life. During the medieval period, aristocratic estates as centers of economic activity fell into decline. As a result, villages increasingly took on the role of centers of agricultural production. Such villages were ruled by the farmers who settled there. The village head served as the liaison between the farmers and the regional lord and was responsible for assessing the taxes owed by each farmer. Over time, village heads often came to be employed by the regional lord.

The village agricultural economy was in all aspects a community effort. Wet rice farming in paddy fields was a labor-intensive enterprise requiring a group effort to construct level fields and a water system for flooding the paddies. Similarly, rice planting was an arduous process of placing seedlings one by one into the field and required everyone’s cooperation. Finally, the village banded together to take care of other tasks, such as constructing houses and rice storage facilities, which were necessary for the community’s economic prosperity.

**MARKETS AND COMMERCE**

The growth in agricultural output required new markets for these products. The development of commerce and a commercial infrastructure began to take shape in the medieval period. As aristocratic estates declined, village markets and markets promoted by warrior domains came to be the center of commercial activity. Domain authorities took several steps to promote flourishing markets: Weights and measures were standardized, currency was introduced as a medium of exchange, and tax-free trading for commercial agents was established.

Feudal lords encouraged economic development within their domains because it was one way they could raise the funds crucial to waging war. During the Warring States period, warlords utilized agents to procure the weapons and other supplies needed to field an army. Agents engaged in trade with other, nonhostile regions. This economic activity promoted trade across different regions. It also contributed to the use of gold and other money as a method of payment that was both more convenient and more efficient than barter.

Trade, however, was conducted not only between feudal domains, but also between towns and villages. Local markets, operating several days a month, were established to sell both agricultural products and artisans’ crafts and daily-use items. Nonagricultural products sold at these markets might include pottery, cooking utensils, farm tools, and other household items. Although coins were sometimes used as a medium of exchange, a barter system in which farm products were traded for handicrafts made by artisans was more typical at local markets in the medieval period.

Traveling merchants were important to the growth of commerce. They brought goods to market, transporting village agricultural products to various local markets. By the Muromachi period,
merchants and artisans were organized into trade guilds (za) to try to control the flow of goods and to gain monopoly rights over the goods they made and sold. In effect, guilds were a means to cut out the competition. Well-placed patrons—such as regional lords, temples and shrines, and the shogunate—were paid by merchants and artisans in return for these protections against others entering the marketplace selling similar goods. Membership in guilds was restricted to guarantee the ongoing monopoly benefits that guild members enjoyed. Salt, oil, silk, wood, and iron utensils were among the goods protected by guild arrangements. The influence of guilds declined in the latter half of the 16th century when regional lords began to abolish these organizations in favor of free markets.

**TAXATION**

Taxation in the medieval period was often a very heavy burden, especially to farmers and peasants. During the Muromachi period, for instance, taxes were constantly being increased to the point where an estimated 70 percent of everything produced by farmers and peasants was collected as tax by the Ashikaga shogunate. Under such adverse financial conditions, it did not take much else to occur for the life of a peasant to be ruined. Crop failure, for one, quickly brought about conditions of famine and starvation. Families were sometimes left with no recourse but to beg for food. Such heavy taxation also sometimes led to social protest (see “Social Protest” above).

During the medieval period, taxes were collected both on land use and production, and on households. One such tax, known as *nengu* (“annual tribute”), was an annual land tax. This represented the dues paid in rice (and sometimes barley) by farmers to estate proprietors in the first half of the medieval period and, after the decline of estates, to domain lords. This form of tax continued into the early modern period and came sometimes to be paid in currency.

Farmers and peasants were also irregularly subject to special land taxes in addition to the annual land tax. These special land taxes were collected by the social elite—including aristocrats, the shogunate, and temples and shrines—when they needed additional resources for special events, rituals, and projects. These special taxes were paid either in rice (called *tammai*) or in currency (called *tansen*). These special taxes were levied more and more frequently in the 15th and 16th centuries by regional lords.

Besides land taxes, there was a household tax (*munabetsusen*) levied on all households during the medieval period. This kind of tax, like the special land taxes, was originally and infrequently imposed by aristocrats or a religious institution to finance a special court or religious event. In the Muromachi period, it became a regular tax, used by the shogunate to collect additional funds once regional domains became free of shogunal authority—and could no longer be forced to pay taxes to the shogunate—during the long period of civil war.

**Early Modern Economy**

The local and fragmented nature of the medieval economy underwent a process of unification at the outset of the early modern period. This process was a by-product of the political and social unification of Japan effected by Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu in the late 16th century. Hideyoshi, for instance, as part of his efforts to regularize economic standards, had land surveys conducted throughout all of Japan to determine the amount of taxable income that might be realized. The consolidation of power at the beginning of the early modern period also focused economic interests on the great castles of the unifiers. Thus, Osaka Castle, for one, became the center of a vibrant market that hosted large numbers of artisans and merchants.

Once the Tokugawa shogunate established control of the country and based its ruling ideology on Chinese Neo-Confucian ideas, the market economy that had grown so rapidly as a result, in part, of military conflict was now regulated and conceptualized in such a way as to decelerate the pace of growth. Neo-Confucianism, with its emphasis on a four-class social structure that placed merchants at the lowest tier, was, in effect, an economic perspective that advocated a premarket economy. The Neo-Confucian view was that merchants were essentially
parasites on the hard work of farmers and artisans, obtaining their wealth at the expense of the labor of others. As such, merchants were seen as having no positive social value.

The suppression of the market economy also had a significant impact on farmers. According to Neo-Confucian philosophy, farmers were supposed to live austere lives, laboring in the fields only to produce what they personally needed to survive. To produce more than what was personally needed was to move beyond frugality—a positive Neo-Confucian value—toward a market system where agricultural surplus could be sold. In order to induce conformity to the official ideology, the shogunate issued regulations to control the farmers and to prevent them from easy access to markets where they could sell their products. These regulations required, for instance, that farmers not abandon their land, that they pay their taxes before they could sell their rice, that they wear simple clothes, and that they always work hard. These and similar regulations were all directed toward keeping farmers living at a subsistence level.

The Neo-Confucian value system also impacted warriors in quite specific ways. For one, warriors were supposed to only live off of their military stipends, paid to them in rice by their lords. If warrior families had additional needs, they were expected to produce what they needed or obtain it for themselves, usually by exchanging rice for goods. Further, warriors were supposed to transcend money and not use it at all. Money, a need of merchants, was considered beneath the dignity of samurai.

Despite the ideal society and economy envisaged by Neo-Confucian philosophy, the reality was that a market economy was needed in the early modern period. Ironically, it was the warrior elite who demeaned the notion of monetary wealth but simultaneously drove a market in luxury and other items that they desired. At the same time that the warrior elite admonished farmers to live a frugal lifestyle, they took rice obtained through land taxes and converted it into currency to purchase the items they required at markets and at urban stores. The net result of this economic activity was the development of wholesale and retail markets, and a banking and credit system to handle the increasing use of currency to buy and sell goods.

Another policy of the Tokugawa shogunate that inadvertently supported the expansion of a market economy was the sankin kotai system whereby domain lords were required to reside in Edo in service to the shogun in alternate years. As a result, Edo became an economic center dealing in the goods and services that domain lords and their retainers required. Merchants and artisans especially profited. Edo's commercial needs were fed, in turn, by other areas of Japan, which supplied the goods sold at the capital. Osaka, for instance, with its trade in regional commodities and its proximity to water transportation networks, became one of the key supply points for the Edo market.

By the end of the Edo period, despite the formal ideology, Japan had a well-developed market system covering agricultural, industrial, and other products. The infrastructure needed to support thriving markets—including a transportation system to bring goods to market and a banking system—also developed. Even in the face of these economic realities and the shogunate's complicity in advancing a market system, taxes were still primarily levied on land and not on the wealth accumulated by merchants. This was ineffective because wealth had shifted away from the countryside into the urban markets. At the end of the early modern period, this was but one problem among many that eventually led to the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate.

**AGRICULTURE**

Despite the shogunate's restrictions on what farmers could produce and the emphasis on growing rice, other crops were also cultivated. In dry fields, such items as grains, hemp, and soy beans were grown. Where the local climate was favorable to cultivation, crops such as cotton and indigo were grown. Urbanization also brought with it a market for new crops not indigenous to Japan. Among these were plants that were imported from the West as a result of contact with European traders. Such crops as potatoes and tobacco became luxury items that fetched significant profits. Although the shogunate, and by extension domain authorities, officially disdained the cultivation of luxury crops, they were themselves
among those whose desire for these items helped fuel their sale at market. Some domain lords had regulations against growing these kinds of crops, but even they capitulated and allowed these crops to be cultivated on domain lands in recognition of the financial loss of importing such items from other domains. In the end, economic realities often trumped official ideology.

MARKETS AND COMMERCE

Although merchants were looked down upon by the shogunate, they played a central role in the development of the early modern Japanese economy. It was domain merchants, for instance, who urged domain authorities to grow financially lucrative crops—despite the prevailing premarket ideology—rather than buy them from another domain and lose out on the profits to be made by producing these crops and bringing them to market.

As in the medieval period, merchants organized themselves into trade organizations. One such association was the 10 Wholesaler Group (tokumi doiya; the term doiya—“wholesale dealer”—is sometimes pronounced don’ya) based in the city of Edo. This was an organization of wholesale merchants that originally consisted of 10 wholesale houses each trading in different kinds of products and commodities. At the height of its influence, the 10 Wholesaler Group grew to include nearly 100 wholesale houses. Organized in 1694, the 10 Wholesaler Group banded together to better protect their collective interests, especially when it came to disputes with other wholesalers, merchants, and shippers over goods that had been lost or damaged in transit. The Edo wholesalers group bought goods to sell in Edo from wholesalers in Osaka, known as the 24 Wholesaler Group (nijushikumi doiya). The Osaka association provided goods and served as shippers to the Edo group. Together, the two wholesale houses operated nearly a monopoly transportation system of cargo ships (bigaki kaisen) that ran between the two urban centers.

The medieval merchant and artisan guilds (za) were slowly dismantled by regional lords starting in the middle of the 16th century on the grounds that such trade associations unnecessarily hindered economic growth. By the start of the Edo period, most of these guilds had ceased to exist. In their place, the Tokugawa government and domain lords authorized the creation of official merchant guilds (kabunakama;
literally, “association of shareholders”). These trade associations were first promoted by the government in the late 1600s as a way to regulate trade. These associations included merchants who were allowed to limit trade in certain commodities and to set the prices of these goods. These official merchant guilds were monopolistic by design. The shogunate and domain lords benefited from this arrangement because monopoly rights were bought by merchants by paying what amounted to a tax to the government in exchange for permitting these trade practices. At one point in the 1840s these merchant guilds were abolished only to be reinstated a few years later when high inflation was blamed on their absence from the marketplace. The 24 Wholesaler Group became an official merchant guild in the late 18th century.

Another important function played by wealthy merchants was as financiers and moneylenders. Their main clients were domain lords who were often financially overextended as a result of the requirement that they reside in Edo in alternate years. It was extremely costly for domain lords to keep two residences and to transport their households and belongings back and forth to Edo. To make matters worse, the shogunate sometimes required domain lords (daimyo) to pay for additional expenses incurred by the government for a variety of projects. As a result, financial problems were not uncommon among domain lords. Merchants charged high interest rates on these loans to protect themselves from nonpayment which sometimes occurred. Interest was typically paid in rice.

TAXATION

Taxation during the early modern period was similar to the medieval period with taxes collected on land and households. Additionally, however, taxes in the Edo period were also collected on goods and services produced by artisans, merchants, craftspeople, hunters and fishers, and others who did not pay land taxes on a regular basis.

The primary land tax during the early modern period was based on estimates of the annual yield of unpolished rice that a particular tract of land would produce. These estimates were based on land surveys conducted by Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the end of the 16th century. Farmland yield was measured in koku—one koku equaled approximately five bushels or 180 liters. Landholders were taxed on this estimate of rice yield, known as kokudaka. The size and importance of a particular domain can be determined in part by the amount of rice tax paid annually as measured in kokudaka, or the total of rice productivity. In the case of domain lands, rice productivity also determined the number of troops a domain lord was expected to maintain as a part of his responsibility to the shogunate.

Another tax, known as kuramai (“granary rice”), was a rice tax that peasants paid to the shogunate or to a domain lord. The rice (mai) collected was stored in granaries (kura) and was subsequently used to pay stipends to retainers of the shogunate and domain lords. Peasants and farmers were also subject to a tax that was calculated on the basis of village rice yield. This tax, known as bonto mononari, was meant to be paid in rice but it was also sometimes paid in currency.

Besides land taxes, there were taxes levied by the government on merchants, artisans, and others who did not hold farmlands and thus were not subject to land taxes. Payment of this tax was typically made in currency, but sometimes payment was made in commercial products or in physical labor. These taxes, called myogakin, were assessed both on individuals and on merchant associations.

4.6 Model of a scene in front of an Edo shop (Edo-Tokyo Museum exhibit; Photo William E. Deal)
Currency

The growth of markets beginning in the medieval period accelerated the use of currency as a medium of exchange. Barter was not replaced, but currency became an additional means by which goods could be bought and sold at market. Coins were first used by wealthy warriors, but as trade expanded, currency use came into vogue even at village markets. The use of coins had become widespread enough by the 15th century that counterfeiting became a lucrative activity and attracted sufficient concern from authorities to make it into the historical record.

In the medieval period, different kinds of coins were utilized for trade. Although the Japanese had minted coins during the Heian period, they used Chinese-minted coins during the medieval period. For instance, the sosan was a copper coin minted in Song-dynasty China (960–1279). It came into wide circulation in Japan by the 13th century due to trade between Japan and China. Another Chinese copper coin, the kobusen, was minted during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in five different denominations. These coins were used in Japan starting in the Muromachi period and continuing until the Edo period. The eirakusen was a copper coin minted in early 15th-century China. In Japan, this coin was used especially in land tax transactions. In an attempt to regulate the currency system, the Tokugawa shogunate issued an edict at the beginning of the Edo period prohibiting the use of this coin. However, it remained in use until the middle of the 17th century.

These three kinds of coins—sosan, kobusen, and eirakusen—were those primarily in use in the medieval period. However, there was one Japanese-minted coin also in use, the bitasen. This was a copper coin that was not minted by the government but rather was privately produced. In circulation from the 16th century, the bitasen contained not only copper but significant amounts of lead. The value of the bitasen fluctuated depending on how it was valued relative to the Chinese coins. Each market region made its own determination of the bitasen’s value. At the beginning of the early modern period, the shogunate established a uniform valuation for bitasen that was used in all regions of Japan.

A new monetary development occurred at the end of the Warring States period that was largely a result of the resources needed to support an army in the field. In order to purchase weapons and other supplies, the need for more valuable coins arose as a way to more easily pay off the large amounts of money such military supplies cost. To meet this need, regional lords started mining for gold and silver. Takeda Koshu, lord of the Kai region, was the first to issue gold coins, known as koshukin.

Just prior to the start of the early modern period, Toyotomi Hideyoshi placed all the gold and silver mines under his control and began the process of minting gold and silver coins. Under the subsequent Tokugawa shogunate, a nationwide monetary system was instituted. This system included coins minted in gold, silver, and copper. Gold coins were used extensively in Edo, while silver coins were primarily used in Osaka and Kyoto. Copper coins were in general use throughout the country.

As part of the Tokugawa government’s attempt to control the monetary system and commercial markets, the shogunate maintained direct control over the mints (za) that produced Edo-period coins. These mints were run by families who had the hereditary right to do so. At the beginning of the 19th century, these mints, which had originally been

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situated in different parts of Japan, were all moved to Edo as a way for the government to further control them.

The gold mints (kinza)—located until 1800 at Edo, Kyoto, and Sado—produced gold coins, such as the koban. The koban was first minted in 1601 and had a value of one ryo (the other standard monetary unit of value was termed bu). This coin was used nationally throughout the Edo period. Another gold coin was the oban. Although only in very limited circulation prior to the Edo period, the oban was used more widely in the early modern period. These gold coins, with a valuation of 10 ryo, were therefore many times more valuable than the koban. They were not, however, considered general-use coins. Rather, they were used for such special purposes as, among other things, gifts and rewards.

Silver mints (ginza) were located in Kyoto, Sumpu, and Edo (the famous Ginza district of modern-day Tokyo was the location of the Edo silver mint). Besides their use in the marketplace, silver coins were sometimes used by the shogunate to pay off budget deficits. Like gold coins, silver coins were often utilized in large financial transactions because of their high value.

Copper mints (zeniza) produced not only copper coins, but also coins made of iron and brass. The first government-sponsored copper mints date from 1636 and were located at Edo and Sakamoto. Copper coins were in general circulation in the early modern period and were used to purchase goods at market and to enact other daily business. There was a hole in the middle of these coins and they were often carried by stringing coins together in 100- and 1,000-coin units.

Paper currency was used only on a limited basis in the early modern period. When paper money was issued, it was done by individual domains for use only within that region, despite the fact that the value of this paper money was pegged to the shogunate's national currency system. The Fukui domain was the first to issue paper currency, doing so in 1661, and other domains followed this practice.

The use of currency, especially in the Edo period, was extremely important to the growth of commerce and to how the merchant class functioned. One of the challenges of the early modern currency system was the issue of how to value the different kinds of coins and what exchange rate to use when these coins were used at market. A shopkeeper, for instance, would need to exchange copper coins used every day for gold or silver coins that were used to pay off debts and other financial obligations. Because Edo used gold coins and Osaka used silver coins, commerce between these two regions invariably also involved currency exchange. Further complicating this matter was the fact that among specific kinds of coins, there were different levels of purity in the metals used and variation in the percentage of, for example, gold actually used in a gold coin. Government authorities tried to establish fixed rates of exchange, but fluctuating values were the norm. This matter was dealt with at the local market level by merchants known as ryogaesho. Often translated as “money changers,” this term referred to merchants who specialized in currency exchange and other kinds of financial transactions, including the extension of credit. Some famous names in the contemporary Japanese banking world, such as Sumitomo and Mitsui, trace their origins back to the Edo-period business of currency exchange.
Foreign Trade

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, foreign trade went through periods of great activity and periods when contact with foreign traders was forbidden or otherwise made difficult by the governing authorities. Sometimes there were official trade relations between Japan and other countries; at other times trade was conducted by enterprising private merchants or even, on occasion, Buddhist temples. This was the case, for instance, in the Muromachi period when both official and private trade was conducted with China. Foreign trade not only occurred with the Asian mainland in the medieval period, but also with Southeast Asian countries.

In the middle of the 16th century, trade began with Europe, especially Portugal and Spain, and lasted into the first half of the 17th century. At that time, Japan embarked on its more than 200-year national isolation period, in which contacts with the outside world were severely curtailed, and Japanese were forbidden from traveling overseas. Contacts with China, Korea, and Holland continued, but on a limited basis and under tight restrictions imposed by the shogunate, which closely controlled the trade activity that did exist. Any foreign trade allowed was supposed to be transacted in Nagasaki. Dutch and Chinese ships, for instance, docked at Nagasaki ports but were limited in the number of ships permitted entry into Japanese waters each year. One exception, and there were few, was trade between the Tsushima domain and Korea.

Restricted foreign-trade policy continued into the 19th century, but there were increasing numbers of encroachments, especially by European and Russian ships, seeking trade relations with Japan. These requests were always denied. It was not until the 1850s, when Commodore Matthew Perry was dispatched to Japan by the president of the United States to obtain trade relations, that this situation formally changed. In the late 1850s, trade treaties were signed between Japan and the United States. Treaties with European nations quickly followed, thus ending Japan’s period of national seclusion.

TRADE WITH CHINA

During the Kamakura period, the Hojo regents strongly supported trade with the Chinese Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). The Japanese traded gold and swords for Chinese silk and copper coins (known as sosen). After the Mongols took control of China, trade relations ended. In the Muromachi period, trade relations with China were once again established. Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third Ashikaga shogun, promoted Japanese trade with the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Trade with China at this time, known as the “tally trade,” lasted until the middle of the 16th century. The tally trade commenced in the early years of the 15th century and by the time it ended in the mid-16th century, 17 trade voyages had been conducted in fleets that numbered up to nine ships each. Among the items exported from Japan were swords, horses, copper, and lacquerware. Among the items imported from China were porcelain and silk. Much of this trade was conducted using Chinese copper and silver coins.

Formally, the Ming government did not permit Chinese ships to trade with foreign countries. This restriction, however, did not apply to ships from countries that paid tribute to the Ming dynasty. Thus, the Japanese tally trade with Ming China was conducted under the fiction that the Japanese “king”—that is, the shogun—was not trading with China, but rather offering tribute to the Ming-dynasty emperors. In return for “tribute,” the Japanese received “gifts” from the Chinese emperor. Further adding to the complexity of this arrangement was the fact that it was not usually the shogunate that was conducting these trade voyages directly. Rather, trade was carried out by regional lords, such as the Hosokawa and Ouchi families, and the Sakai merchants.

The Sakai merchants were wealthy traders based in the port city of Sakai, near Osaka. They conducted foreign trade as part of the tally trade and also traded with Korea. But even after the tally trade ceased, the Sakai merchants continued their foreign trade, especially gaining prominence—and a monopoly—in the importation of raw silk. Sakai’s fortunes waned after the implementation of the national seclusion policy in 1639, which decreed that Nagasaki serve as the primary foreign trade port.

Society and Economy
The raw silk trade was operated under a system called *itōwappu* that was established in 1604 by the Tokugawa government, which sought greater control over commercial activities and especially foreign trade. It allowed for Japanese merchants a monopoly to purchase raw silk from Portuguese traders who had sole right of trade in Chinese silk. As part of the *itōwappu* system, a fixed price for silk was negotiated between Portuguese traders and Japanese merchants. The Sakai merchants, along with selected merchants in Nagasaki and Kyoto, were given official government approval to act as sole agents in the silk trade. As the Tokugawa shogunate moved to close down its ports and establish a national seclusion policy, it applied the monopolistic principles of the *itōwappu* system to trade with China, and later to the Dutch. This system existed, with the exception of a 30-year period in the 17th century, until the middle of the 19th century and the opening of Japanese trade with the West.

There were other trading arrangements that occurred during the early modern period. Of note was a merchant organization that came to be known as the Nagasaki Kaisho. This group took advantage of its location in Nagasaki, after the implementation of the national seclusion policy designated Nagasaki as the port from which foreign trade could be conducted. Originally constituted in 1604 as one of the merchant groups allowed to trade in raw silk under the *itōwappu* system, the Nagasaki Kaisho came to monopolize foreign trade in the early modern period. By the beginning of the 18th century, this merchant organization was in charge of dealing with all goods traded with Dutch and Chinese merchant ships harboring at Nagasaki. They also controlled the exchange of gold and silver that was used in trade deals with the Dutch and Chinese. As in other financial arrangements in which the Tokugawa shogunate granted monopoly rights to a merchant association, the Nagasaki Kaisho paid taxes to the shogunate.

**TRADE WITH EUROPE**

Japanese trade with Europe started in the 1540s when Portuguese traders and missionaries first arrived on Japanese shores. Subsequently, Spanish, English, and other Europeans commenced trade with Japan. Among the many goods introduced to Japan at this time were firearms and European luxury items. This trade, known as the Southern Barbarian (namban) trade, was at first conducted with few restrictions or regulations. As suspicions arose in the Japanese government about European intentions, missionary activities were curtailed or ended entirely by the shogunate, and trade was similarly restricted. Trade with Europe lasted until the commencement of the Japanese seclusion policy in the 1630s. After this time, the Dutch were the only Europeans, a small but legal presence, in Japan. It was not until the 1850s and the reopening of Japanese ports that trade with other European nations was once again permitted.

**TRADE WITH KOREA**

Despite Korea’s proximity to Japan, the 13th-century Mongol invasions of Korea—and the later attempt by the Mongols to extend their empire to Japan in the unsuccessful 1274 and 1281 attacks on the Japanese islands—wreaked havoc on any possibility of trade between Japan and Korea. By the early 15th century, however, conditions had changed, and Japan and Korea were able to establish diplomatic relations and a trading relationship. Trade was conducted not by the shogunate, but with the lords of the So domain in Kyushu.

Warfare once again brought trade relations to a halt. This time it was a result of Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s attempt to conquer both Korea and China. Invasions of Korea occurred during the 1590s. These invasions ultimately failed but in the process destroyed opportunities for trade. Tokugawa Ieyasu, who succeeded Hideyoshi, realized the potential economic benefits of a Korea trade. He revived relations with Korea and trade between the two countries was restarted. The Japanese traded items like silver and copper for Korean cotton and ginseng. This trade was conducted primarily with the So domain and continued through the rest of the Edo period.

**TRADE WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Trade between Japan and Southeast Asia was very active in the 16th century and into the first half of the 17th century. Trade thrived because the shogu-
nate encouraged a form of foreign trade with Southeast Asia known as the vermilion seal ship trade. The name derived from the fact that all ships had to carry a trading license that included the vermilion seal (shuin) of the shogun. The purpose of licensing these ships was to place foreign trade under Japanese government control.

Japanese merchants looked to Southeast Asia as a trading partner in part because, in the late 16th century, Japanese ships were forbidden from trading in China. Japanese merchants exported goods such as silver, copper, iron, and some items manufactured by Japanese artisans. They imported silk, medicine, and spices. To trade in these goods, vermilion seal ships traveled to locations that included areas of what is now the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Macao. The vermilion seal ship trade lasted until 1639, when the Japanese national seclusion policy effectively ended trade with these regions.

One important result of trading in such geographically distant locales was that Japanese settlements, called Nihonmachi (“Japan Town”), were founded in many of these places. In addition to housing traders, these communities also attracted Japanese who fled Japan to avoid the shogunate’s persecution of Christians and the many edicts issued that severely restricted the activities associated with this religion. The largest of these settlements was reportedly an enclave in the Philippines that had a population of approximately 3,000 people. After the seclusion policies were enacted and trade with Southeast Asia was formally abolished, these communities, or what was left of them, became absorbed into the local communities.

TRADE WITH RUSSIA

Although there were sporadic interactions between Japan and Russia in the Edo period, it was not until the 1850s that any trade agreements were concluded. Prior to this time, Russian traders, often on behalf of the Russian government, requested permission to trade with Japan, but were always denied on the basis of Japan’s national seclusion policy. Several attempts to establish relations were made in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Finally, in 1855, on the heels of the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry, Japan and Russia signed the Russo-Japanese Treaty of Amity that opened three Japanese ports to Russian traders. This treaty also established formal diplomatic relations between the two nations. Three years later, Russia and Japan signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce that further expanded trade and diplomatic dealings.

TRADE WITH THE UNITED STATES

The possibility for trade with the United States occurred only at the end of the early modern period. Threatening military action against Japan, Commodore Matthew Perry convinced the Tokugawa shogunate to sign the Kanagawa Treaty in 1854. This treaty set in motion the final collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate as well as the opening of Japan to trade not only with the United States, but also with Russia, England, France, and other Western nations.

The Kanagawa Treaty, despite its far-reaching ramifications for Japan’s future, permitted American ships to dock at only two Japanese ports and did not formally establish trade relations. This occurred in 1858 when the United States and Japan signed the United States-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce, also known as the Harris Treaty, after Townsend Harris, the American consul general who negotiated the terms of the agreement. Besides establishing increased diplomatic relations, the treaty opened additional Japanese ports to American ships and guaranteed the United States the right to freely conduct trade with Japan. Other countries soon concluded similar trade and diplomatic arrangements with Japan.

READING

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