

# “FEUDALISM”

USING THE CONCEPT  
TO COMPARE JAPAN WITH EUROPE

## WORDS OF CAUTION

By Diana Marston Wood

**W**ITH THE GROWTH OF THE WORLD HISTORY MOVEMENT, MANY ASIAN SPECIALISTS ARE CLEARLY FOCUSED ON THE INTEGRATION OF ASIAN MATERIAL INTO A WORLD HISTORY FRAMEWORK. THREE YEARS AGO A COLLEAGUE AND I DEVELOPED A UNIT USING JAPANESE “FEUDALISM” AS ITS CORE. OUR GOALS INCLUDED A FOCUS ON LITERATURE AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING ABOUT JAPAN’S HISTORY AS WELL AS A CLEARLY DEFINED CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD HISTORY STANDARDS. THE COMPLETE PROJECT, INCLUDING A CHART COMPARING EUROPEAN AND JAPANESE “FEUDALISM,” CAN BE VIEWED ON THE WEB.<sup>1</sup> MY MORE RECENT RESEARCH INTO DEFINITIONS OF “FEUDALISM” INDICATES THAT A WIDE GAP EXISTS BETWEEN THE PERSPECTIVES OF THOSE HISTORIANS WHO RESEARCH AND TEACH WORLD HISTORY AND THOSE WHO FOCUS MAINLY ON MEDIEVAL EUROPE. THESE VIEWPOINTS CHALLENGE SOME OF THE CONCLUSIONS FOUND IN THE EARLIER WEB-BASED PROJECT. WITHIN THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY AND SOME WORLD HISTORY TEXTS “FEUDALISM” IS BROADLY DEFINED WITH ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS. IT IS USUALLY DISCUSSED WITHIN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT, SOMETIMES FOCUSING ON ENGLAND AND FRANCE, BUT TYPICALLY SUGGESTING THAT “FEUDALISM” WAS WIDESPREAD.<sup>2</sup> SPECIALISTS APPEAR TO DISAGREE WITH SUCH GENERALIZATIONS. →

LEFT: Detail from the Hundred Years War, as depicted in *The Chronicles of Jean Froissart*.

Source: *Atlas of Medieval Europe* by Angus Konstam. Checkmark Books. © 2000, Thalamus Publishing.

RIGHT: Detail from the battle of Dannoura in May 1185, between the Taira and the Minamoto.

Woodblock print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1791–1861).

Source: *Samurai Warriors* by David Miller. St. Martin’s Press, New York. © 1999, Pegasus Publishing Ltd.



Among historians of medieval Europe, using the term “feudalism” and an appropriate definition of “feudalism” appear to be highly charged issues. In an influential 1974 article Elizabeth Brown challenges historians’ widespread use of the concept and argues that using “feudalism” allows historians to “pander to the human desire to grasp a subject known or suspected to be complex by applying to it a simple label simplistically defined.” She continues the attack by suggesting that historians, while debating the usefulness of the term, still appear unwilling to “jettison the word, ‘feudalism’.”<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-five years later, the debate rages on. In contrast to other historians who define the term more broadly, Susan Reynolds argues for a narrow definition where “feudalism” refers to relations between lords and vassals within the noble class. She does not include within “feudalism” the economic system and relations between lords and peasants.<sup>4</sup> Another issue related to the definition involves the areas of Europe where “feudalism” existed. Specialists in European medieval history argue that there were enormous differences between “feudalism” in France and England, both in terms of land ownership and the degree of central control exercised. Some sources consider “feudalism” in Italy and Germany, while others limit themselves to France and England and more specifically to discrete regions of those countries in varying time periods.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, some specialists believe that the base definition needs to be narrower and the “feudal” areas of Europe more limited than has often been recognized in the past. In addition to the views above, the teacher using “feudalism” should be aware of the Marxist argument that “feudalism is a universal historical stage through which all societies must pass before the emergence of capitalism [and the term] is equated with economic exploitation.”<sup>6</sup> Even if one immediately rejects the Marxist view as too extreme, the broader arguments of European historians raise serious questions about the advisability of applying “feudalism,” an essentially European term, to Japan.

While I will not, in this article, attempt to assess the validity of the various viewpoints concerning Europe, I will argue that teachers of world history should *very cautiously* use the concept “feudalism” when teaching about Japan. Based on my research thus far, I conclude that an acceptable European definition based on recent research differs from a Japanese definition in at least one significant way.<sup>7</sup> The military aspect of “feudalism” is not as essential when applying the concept to Europe. In contrast, for those wanting to use “feudalism” with regard to Japan, Peter Dues’s definition may provide us with a solid starting point.

“Feudalism” consisted of a network of political, legal and personal relationships binding together a class of military lords and their vassals/followers. Typically, land was used to pay for services rendered.<sup>8</sup>

How may this definition, significantly similar and yet different from that for Europe, be applied to Japan?

There are three distinct periods of Japanese history where the concept “feudalism” is often used to describe Japan. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333) the imperial institutions consisting of the emperor and his court were unable to provide peace and security throughout Japan. As a result, “family-centered warrior bands” grew increasingly effective in maintaining order. Gradually, the warrior bands were consolidated under the control of numerous regional warrior chiefs.<sup>9</sup>

During this period the first *shōgun* (supreme general) established a *bakufu* (tent government or fairly centralized military government) in Kamakura, located in the eastern part of Honshū. The Kamakura shōgun bound other warrior chiefs to him through a network of political and personal ties related to land control. Meanwhile, the emperor and his



Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199).  
Attributed to Fujiwara Takanobu (1142–1205).  
Collection of the Jingo-ji Temple, Kyōto, Japan.



Matsumoto castle of Matsumoto, Nagano prefecture, Japan. Built by Ishikawa Kazumasa and his son Yasunaga in 1590. Matsumoto-jo is designated a National Treasure.

Photo by Eric Obershaw  
Source: Eric Obershaw’s Web site: *A Guide to Japanese Castles*: [www.obershawonline.com/castle/](http://www.obershawonline.com/castle/)



A daimyō with his escort enters the outskirts of Edo.  
Collection of the Historiographical Institute, Tokyo University.

followers continued to maintain some control in Kyōto, located in the western part of Honshū. However, Duus has pointed out that “as ‘government by vassalage’ became hereditary, it gradually began to supplant the imperial government as the only effective government in most parts of the country.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, during the Kamakura period two governments existed independently, neither one willing or able to expunge the other. However, the bakufu became inexorably stronger. It is appropriate to use the term “feudalism” for this period because the political and personal relationships between military lords and vassals became stronger even though the Kyōto institutions continued to exist.

The term is even more applicable during the next historical period. As the Kamakura leader lost control of his vassals, a new bakufu was established in the Muromachi section of Kyōto. During the years 1338–1573 the Muromachi bakufu under the nominal leadership of a shōgun and the imperial institutions continued to exist in Kyōto. But effective power passed into the hands of regional military lords who fought constantly during this period and established their vassalage ties without any legal sanction from either the imperial institutions or bakufu located in Kyōto. During the Muromachi period the lords were called *daimyō*. Real power in Japan rested with the network of relationships based on the *daimyō*, lords of specific land units or domains, and the samurai or vassals residing within the domains and supporting the *daimyō*. By 1500 there were 200–300 *daimyō* in Japan.<sup>11</sup>

Probably the most controversial time period for applying “feudalism” to Japan is during the Tokugawa bakufu, 1600–1868, located in the eastern part of Honshū at Edo, present-day Tokyo. Reischauer considers it appropriate and calls the period “centralized feudalism,”<sup>12</sup> while Duus rejects the term, suggesting that it is “a contradiction in terms.”<sup>13</sup> During this period the bakufu was able to implement various techniques for controlling the *daimyō*. Land and loyalty were still the basis for the binding ties, but the rules governing the arrangements were strictly enforced, especially during the early years of the Tokugawa bakufu. Harold Bolitho examines the ties between the Shōgun and his most trusted lords/*daimyō* and argues that strict bureaucratized controls were necessary for the first fifty years. After that, effective power lay within the power arrangements of the individual domains.<sup>14</sup> Conrad Totman avoids using the term, “feudalism,” and instead characterizes the Tokugawa period as one of “integral bureaucracy” where the *daimyō* and their supporters were gradually transformed into bureaucrats.<sup>15</sup> While other analysts emphasize the way the shōgun controlled the *daimyō* in the early years, later losing control, Totman focuses on the ways that the stimulus of commercial activity transformed the network of relationships ordering society. I believe that “feudalism” appropriately describes the Tokugawa bakufu as long as one understands how it applies and how it has evolved. The shōgun used vassalage ties to bind the *daimyō* to him. The *daimyō* in turn used the same techniques to control their territories. Gradually, commercial developments and the mutation of military men into bureaucrats bound society more tightly together and the shōgun actually became less powerful.

The concept “feudalism” does provide a convenient label for analyzing some similarities between Japan and parts of Europe. It is true that during certain periods military rule and values predominated and that political power was decentralized. However, the differences between “feudalism” in Japan and Europe seem much more instructive. First of all, some Japanese historians apply the term to Japan over a much longer period of time (1185–1868) than do current medieval historians when analyzing Europe (c. 1000–1200). Secondly, during this entire period the institution of the emperor continued to exist in Kyōto. While often very weak, the emperors did provide a symbol of unity over a longer period of time than was true in any part of “feudal” Europe.

Thirdly, as stated earlier, the importance of the military class in understanding “feudalism” in Japan is more important than in Europe. Finally, the church played a larger role in Europe’s “feudalism” than did Buddhist institutions in Japan. All these differences provide the world history teacher with comparative data for debating the impact of “feudalism” on the cultures involved.

The concept “feudalism” provides valid insights into developments in parts of Europe as well as Japan and can thus serve as a useful focus in world history courses. However, it is important to remember that the meaning of “feudalism” and the advisability of its use at all is a debatable issue for European historians. Therefore, as we apply the concept to a very different culture, Japan, we must carefully assess its meaning within the Japanese context. ■

#### NOTES

1. My colleague was Patience Berkman, Chair of the History Department at Newton Country Day School of the Sacred Heart, Newton, Massachusetts. See the Berkman/Wood materials on the Japan Studies Leadership Program’s curriculum outlines Web site: <http://www.smith.edu/fceas/curriculum/berkwood.htm>.
2. See the *National Standards for World History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1994). See page 134 (Era 5, standard 1B); page 196 (Era 6, standard 5B); and page 140 (Era 5, standard 2A). See also, Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2000). For specific references to feudalism see page 349 (Medieval Japan); page 390 (Feudal Society); page 454–5 (Feudal monarchies in 3. France and England); and page 664 (Tokugawa Shogunate).
3. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *The American Historical Review*, October 1974, pages 1065–6.
4. Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
5. In addition to Reynolds cited above, see the following: R. C. Van Caenegem, *The Birth of the English Common Law* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1973); and Joseph R. Strayer, “Feudalism in Western Europe,” in Brian Tierney, *The Middle Ages: Readings in Medieval History*, volume II (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992).
6. Peter Duus, *Feudalism in Japan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), page 6.
7. My suggested European definition is the following: Feudalism consisted of a network of political and legal relationships binding together lords (high ranking men) and vassals (subservient to the lords). Typically, land was used to pay for services rendered. The author is indebted to Professor Janelle Greenberg, Department of History, University of Pittsburgh, for her help with issues of definition as well as the relative importance of military, administrative and judicial aspects of feudalism.
8. See Duus, chapter 1, and Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan: The Story of a Nation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), chapter 4.
9. Duus, pages 45, 46.
10. Duus, page 56.
11. Duus, page 73.
12. See Edwin O. Reischauer, “Japanese Feudalism” in Rushton Coulborn, ed., *Feudalism in History* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965), pages 26, 36–40.
13. Duus, page 86.
14. Harold Bolitho, *Treasures Among Men: The Fudai Daimyō in Tokugawa Japan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).
15. Conrad Totman, *Japan Before Perry: A Short History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).



Source: *The Japanese Experience: A Short History of Japan* by W. G. Beasley  
University of California Press.  
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