

Decline of feudalism essay sample



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In what ways and why was feudalism in Japan declining before the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853? Japan was a feudal society in the time that the Tokugawa Shogunate was ruling. Like the Qing period in China, the Tokugawa period was a long, stable rule because it was very closed, hermetically sealed even. However, little did the Tokugawa know, Japan's stability of feudalism would lead to its own decline. There was, at the time before the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853, the key factor that would bring any society down to its knees. There was discontent amongst the people of Japan.

A major factor that keeps a feudal society functioning is the willingness of the citizens to play their roles. Because people of all classes rely on and are responsible for each other in a feudal society, even a small group that refuses to play their role in the society can make the system collapse. That was exactly what was happening in Japan, as the people of all classes were discontent and thus, unwilling to do their jobs. The daimyo were the highest of class amongst the Japanese besides the Shogun and emperor. So, it's only fair that they're respected and given a significant part in the shogunal government. However, the Bakufu who demanded that they practice the ritual of sankin kotai treated them almost degradingly. First off, the sankin kotai was something that daimyos had to do to keep their positions. It involved walking to Edo on a yearly basis. This, of course, kept them in debt because of the expenses needed to travel long distances like food, shelter and clothes. It was also a major waste of time that they could have instead used to train the armies of their domains.

When the daimyo were in debt, whether it was because of the sankin kotai or the fact that they had to pay for samurais; rice, they had to turn to the merchants to borrow money. Because money making was seen as the lowest of the low in their beliefs, borrowing from people who do so was even more shameful. The mean, strong, destined-to-be-warriors samurai were unhappy as well. They no longer played their part in the society, which was a sign that the feudalism was declining. I think the quote, “They are mean spirited, and behave like shopkeepers” made by Sugita Gempaku, a Japanese scholar of the late 18th century, best describes the building tension that the samurai must have had knowing that they weren't doing what they trained all their lives to do – fight. The samurai also had considerably low incomes. Their allowances were worth almost nothing when the economy raised the price of rice without raising the value of their money. They too had to borrow money from merchants.

Eventually, these pillars (the samurai) of the feudal system created a small movement of anti-shogun. The daimyo and samurai were not the only ones who were discontented. The chonin, a strong and wealthy middle class, also wanted improvements to the feudal system. They simply wanted to be known as honorable, and not filthy just because of their part in the economy and trading system. There was also the problem of discontent peasantry. It was not only the shortage of food and land that gradually lead to peasant revolts which was a sign that the feudal society was declining, it was the immensely high taxes of 40-50% of rice production. There were also other factors that made the peasants' lives miserable such as poverty, loss of land, and natural disasters.

As with any other country, there was a growth of the desire to preserve tradition and religion. That was a major problem for the Tokugawa shogunate because it went against what they were trying to achieve - stability. Because a group of scholars decided that the emperor should be in power because of his divinity, there was a spread in the feeling that the shogun should be overthrown. Here, I see the disagreement within the system. Shinto was also revived. Shinto, Japan's native religion, emphasized the need for teachings of Japanese history and worship of ancestors more than what was already being taught. These signs of growing nationalism symbolized the want for change amongst the patriots of Japan, or in other words, the want to overthrow the shogun. An example of some of the changes was wishes for Western learning.

All the hints that feudalism was declining were not only in the people that the shogun ruled over; there were several internal problems with the government itself. For instance, most of the Japanese officials were corrupt and they did not spend time thinking of ways to improve the country. Instead, they enjoyed their power, which ultimately would not last. Foreign trade did not provide the government with much income so most of the time the government was nearly bankrupt. They depended on increasing taxes and as I have mentioned earlier, that would not have made the peasants happy. The feudal system was collapsing before Japan's eyes.

Factors like the discontent amongst the Japanese, the growth of nationalism and the corruption within shogunal rule proved that the decline of the feudal society was long awaited. The coming of the foreigners, symbolized by the

Perry expedition, merely provided the final impulse towards a collapse that was unavoidable.