SOCIAL CHANGE AND CONTAINED TRANSFORMATIONS: WARRIORS AND MERCHANTS IN JAPAN, 1000-1300*

MIKAEL S. ADOLPHSON

ABSTRACT

Early eleventh century Japan was ruled by a group of aristocratic elites centered in and around Kyoto. Substantial social and economic changes took place during the subsequent three centuries as a result of the privatization of government that the Kyoto elites themselves had initiated. But these changes, which are most aptly represented by the rise of the warrior class and the mercantilization of the economy, were remarkably slow despite their internal forces. The elites' ability to coopt and contain these trends secured their survival for an extraordinarily long time, while delaying developments that in hindsight may seem inevitable. The warrior class only came to prominence in the mid-fourteenth century, and the merchant class was contained and controlled for even longer. In comparison to other cultures, the flexibility and the inclusiveness of the Japanese political system are particularly noteworthy.

In early eleventh century Japan, the prominent Fujiwara no Michinaga boldly proclaimed;

This world, I think,
Is indeed my world,
Like the full moon
I shine,
Uncovered by any cloud!!

To be sure, for the nobles of ancient Kyoto, there appears to have been few things troubling their way of life, for the early eleventh century is

* The diacritical mark for long vowels in Japanese is usually a long line over the vowel. Instead, a circumflex is used in this article (thus, û and ô).


© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2004 Medieval Encounters 10,1-3
Also available online – www.brill.nl
characterized by grand court ceremonies and religious rituals, a vibrant capital where the luxurious lifestyles of the nobility was on display, and a tremendous literary production by both noble men and women. In fact, even though the Northern Fujiwara’s domination of the imperial court and reigning emperors was not in accordance with the ideals of the bureaucratic state in the Tang-inspired law codes and the means by which the peripheries were controlled were becoming less dependent on political offices and edicts than private assets and ties, the capital elites had no reason to think that their dominance, based on their monopoly of social ranks and status, would change in the near future. However, before the century would end, this feeling of confidence began to dissipate over increasing instability and violence. For example, Buddhist monks, who spent their lives sanctifying the imperial state and supporting the leading nobles with religious services, had begun to stage protests in the capital against what they perceived to be unfair decisions contrary to their interests.2 Retired Emperor Shirakawa (1053-1129), Kyoto’s leading figure in the early twelfth century, is believed to have lamented: “There are three things I cannot control—the flow of the Kamo River, the roll of the dice and the monks from Mt. Hiei.”3

To contain such demonstrations, and to ensure their own positions within an increasingly competitive court, the noble elites began to employ mid-ranking aristocrats with warrior training. A trend of general militarization of society was in fact under way, and by the late twelfth century, the Kyoto elites could no longer effectively govern the provinces, or even settle disputes among themselves without the aid of the warrior class. As a result, a separate “warrior government” (bakufu) was founded in Kamakura in eastern Japan following the Genpei War (1180-85), and it came to co-exist with the imperial court with the explicit purpose of sustaining the status and privileges of the Kyoto elites by controlling the warrior class.4 By the fourteenth century, it was the warrior aristocrats, not the old noble elites, who were the de facto rulers,