Women of the Edo period and Labor

The Edo or, Tokugawa period is an interesting part of Japanese history were we see the emergence of systems and values that would be carried out into the generations to follow. Being a man during this time meant you ruled over your home and estate without question. Unfortunately, being a female meant almost the precise opposite for most women during this period of Japan’s history. This paper will explore the two main legal systems that attribute to the inequality of rights. In addition this paper will discuss how women might have rebelled against these inequalities and governments response to the so called deviants.

To better comprehend the social structure of the Tokugawa period one must first explore the ie system. The ie system during the Edo period was a legal system which gave the male head of house hold the rights to govern the family and property as they see fit. The ie, was the basic unit of Japanese society. The different roles and generations of the ie were characterized by Confucian principles of loyalty. Under this system the title of “head of House” could only be inherited by a male.

Japanese women’s roles under the Ie system, as either a mother-in-law or a daughter-in-law, focused on contributions to the paternal family’s survival and the family's reputation. Under the ie system biological ties were not as important as the new structural ties formed through marriage.

The ie was abolished as a legal unit during the Allied Occupation following World War II, as it was seen as a relic of the feudalism the Occupation was trying to stamp out.

The caste system is a system of social stratification that is predetermined by birth. It is seen time and time again throughout human history. In Japan this system reached its peak during the Edo period and created such a concrete class structure that it was nearly impossible for lower classes to move up in status. The upper classes were rigidly expected to follow the laws and regulations set by the government while rules for the lowest class, merchant class, were a bit more lax . The slight leeway given to the merchant class is one of the key factors that help the women of the merchant class.

The Japanese caste system starts with the upper class samurai families followed by the famer families and the Artisan families soon after, with the lowest ranking being the merchant families. The Merchant class was considered to be the lowest ranking of this system as they did not actively create something that contributes to society.

The Samurai class held the most regard for the customs and regulations of the time as they were on the cusp of society more closely tied to the government. The women from this class were expected to follow the ie system without fail. These women had the opportunity to become educated to some extent but were ultimately seen as lesser beings than their male counterparts. In this class the need for a male heir coupled with the women’s inability to hold titles and estate led to , unfortunately, the ideology of women being child bearing objects. This new role did not priorities motherhood in the slightest. Rather than motherhood, often times new wives found themselves in slave like positions for their new families. Any form of rebellion or any les then acceptable behavior could lead to the new family initiating a divorce and the new wife being dishonorably returned. Often abuse from a husband or mother–in-law was a common place occurrence, in only extreme cases could a wife initiate divorce and often times it required them to physically run away and trade labor to specialized temples I order for their freedom later.

The introduction of the Doctrine of Obedience and the Onna Daigaku were major driving forces in establishing their gender roles for women. The Doctrine of Obedience stated that a woman’s place was to first follow the orders of her father, once married she is expected to follow her husband’s law without question, finally she is expected to follow the rules set be her first born son as he would be the next head of house after her husband. The Onna Daigaku, a published guide on being a proper woman written by Kaibara Ekken in 1729, was another example of the roles and duties expected of a proper woman. Onna Daigaku outlined what was and was not acceptable for the time and often instructed women to not only bear mistreatment but to believe that the mistreatment was in fact her fault to begin with.

Both farming class and artisan class both followed the ie system but as they held a different position in society jobs and responsibilities were different. For example Farming women were expected to do just as much work as males while also taking on the responsibilities of the home. Again, being too lazy could easily result in the new wife being divorced and returned to her original family. During this period female artistic talent was not being cultivated and was overlooked

Merchant class women held more freedoms then the women of other classes, Merchant women had the opportunities to learn how to run the family business in the absence of a male heir. These merchant women ran business but it could still be seen as working under the ie umbrella this is due to the fact that the business was for the sake of the family. The woman, as stated, is working for the betterment of the family business while the head of house was incapable of doing so or had passed without heir, she would relinquish control when a new head of house hold could be found.

On the other hand, merchant women who work to sustain themselves were often portrayed in a negative light by the general public and the government.. Self-sustaining women were seen as opposition to the set ways of government and the confusion belief system. During this time in Japanese history it is obvious that a contradiction to Japanese policy by its people would not be tolerated. Often times female street venders and peddlers were ignored or over sexualized by artists depicting everyday life during the Edo period. The over sexualization of women was an indirect form of humiliation for hard working women, this embarrassment meant that more females stood clear from jobs as self-sustaining peddlers and merchants in order to preserve their name. Examples of over sexulization can be seen in art such as ukiyoe paintings when and if they include females whom do not work as courtesans in the pleasure district to begin with.

Although I have previously researched the ie system in accordance with women it was interesting to find more information on merchant class women in the work force. After reading Shiho Imai’s paper it is not difficult to see the disconnect between independent women and the sexualized themes in artist’s works. It shines light on an interesting perspective and is something that unfortunately continues today. It is a key factor in the need for the need of real female representation in media.

As stated earlier in this paper the caste and ie system combined to form a very rigged set of rules during the Edo period. The rise of courtesan culture was made possible by the ie system and its ties to both the merchant and samurai classes. The men of the upper classes often turned to other women if they could not produce a male heir. They would take in concubines and adopt the child she bore to take over the family name. Courtesan culture was seen as “A necessary evil.” by the government but bans and regulations were set on the pleasure district and on women. Laws passed that restricted a women's rights to her own body and solidified women's role as objects for years to come. At times the fathers or heads of house would sell daughters into the pleasure business. Other times they would use their daughters as means to further their own family’s social status.

Within the ranks of the courtesans women did have the opportunity to develop skills that would help them raise in rank within the pleasure business. These higher ranking women were called orians. Orians and other high ranking women held power as they were highly coveted by he men whom visited the pleasure district, so much so that at time they were thought to influence the way men thought or acted on particular political subjects. In addition, these women also played a key role in spreading trends in pop culture. Along with male kabuki actors that portray women on stage many common women wanted to emulate the fashionable icons of entertainment.

Apart from both Pleasure district workers and common peddlers a new type of female worker emerged a long side with the growing interest in kabuki and courtesan culture. The rise of trends and pop culture trends opened new opportunities for women in the form of hair dressing. The government enacted bans and regulations on these women but popular demand continued to bring them back.

The Edo government did it’s best to regulate anything that may sway the social structure of the land and cause people to deviate from the approved customs and roles set in place.

The Women of the Edo period were pigeonholed into gender roles that had such a lasting effect because of the government’s unforgiving nature and desire for traditional customs. In one case a women named Take was severely punished for theft while she dressed as a man, she continued to repeat this offence and was eventually relocated during a movement that relocated women the government found to be too deviant in nature to more rural areas. In her Publication Shiho Imai states.

“…This context makes it conceivable why Take, who not only disguised herself as a man but also assumed a male identity, was severely punished for such a petty offense as theft. In a period of change and fading distinctions between established categories, evinced by the notion of the yujo-ka, ideals of gender and sexual propriety were reinscribed in other ways - lauding the women who worked to support their households but condemning those who defied male authority by working independently of the ie.”

Under the ie system women were very much oppressed during the Edo period. Women from all classes were seen as property and in many cases were no more than servants. The women that had the opportunity to move away from the ie system faced persecution from government and a strenuous life in general.

Even so in the midst of inequality many women continued to work as diligently as they could. Women labored on through the crude over sexualization of their everyday life or after being sold like cattle. In my opinion this illustrates the true strength women have to endure. Today although ghosts of old ways still lurk beneath the surface of Japanese society it was progressed far past the misogynistic ways of the Edo period.

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