

# The Four-Tiered Class System of Feudal Japan

Adapted from <http://asianhistory.about.com/>

*The first shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate →*

Between the 12th and 19th centuries, feudal Japan had an elaborate four-tier class system. Unlike European feudal society, in which the peasants (or serfs) were at the bottom, the Japanese structure placed merchants on the lowest rung. Confucian ideals emphasized the importance of productive members of society, so farmers and fishermen had higher status than shop-keepers in Japan. At the top was the samurai class.



## 1 Match up the sentence starts and ends.

- |   |                       |                       |  |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| a The social structure was...   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | ...represented a kind of hierarchy.                                  |
| b The four-tier class system...   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | ...complicated and sophisticated.                                    |
| c While the serfs constituted the lowest "rung" in European society,... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | ...was the Samurai class.  |
| d The most highly regarded class in feudal Japan...                     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | ...the shopkeepers were the lowest status group in Japanese society. |
| e The word "elaborate" means...   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | ...influenced by Confucian ideals.                                   |

## 2 Fill the blanks as you read the text.

bow ◆ daimyo ◆ dominated ◆ entitled ◆ feudal ◆ samurai ◆ wielded

### The Samurai Class – The First Tier

Feudal Japanese society was \_\_\_\_\_ by the samurai warrior class. Although they made up only about 10% of the population, samurai and their daimyo lords \_\_\_\_\_ enormous power. When a \_\_\_\_\_ passed by, members of the lower classes were required to \_\_\_\_\_ and show respect. If a farmer or artisan refused to abase himself, the samurai was legally \_\_\_\_\_ to chop off the recalcitrant person's head. The Samurai answered only to the daimyo for whom they worked. The \_\_\_\_\_, in turn, answered only to the shogun.

There were about 260 daimyo by the end of the \_\_\_\_\_ era. Each daimyo controlled a broad area of land and had an army of samurai.

## 3 Find the words that match these definitions as you read.

a worker in a skilled trade: \_\_\_\_\_

b a physical load or a hardship: \_\_\_\_\_

c values: \_\_\_\_\_

d above, of greater worth, skill: \_\_\_\_\_

e ranking, hierarchy: \_\_\_\_\_

f strictly speaking: \_\_\_\_\_

### Farmers/Peasants – The Second Tier

Just below the samurai on the social ladder were the farmers or peasants. According to Confucian ideals, farmers were superior to artisans and merchants because they produced the food that all the other classes depended upon. Although technically they were considered an honoured class, the farmers lived under a crushing tax burden for much of the feudal era.

During the reign of the third Tokugawa shogun, Lemitsu, farmers were not allowed to eat *any* of the rice they grew. They had to hand it all over to their daimyo, and then wait for him to give some back as charity.

## Artisans – The Third Tier

Although artisans produced many beautiful and necessary goods, such as clothes, cooking utensils, and woodblock prints, they were considered less important than the farmers. Even skilled samurai sword makers and boat-wrights belonged to this third tier of society in feudal Japan.

The **artisan** class lived in its own section of the major cities, **segregated** from the samurai (who usually lived in the daimyos' castles), and from the lower merchant class.

## Merchants – The Fourth Tier

The bottom **rung** of feudal Japanese society was occupied by merchants, both travelling traders and shop-keepers.

Merchants were **ostracized** as "**parasites**" who profited from the labour of the more productive peasant and artisan classes. Not only did merchants live in a separate section of each city, but the higher classes were forbidden to mix with them except on business.

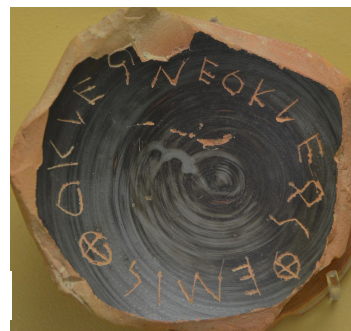
Nonetheless, many merchant families were able to **amass** large fortunes. As their economic power grew, so did their political influence, and the restrictions against them weakened.

4 Find words in the passages above that match the definitions below.

- |   |                      |  |
|---|----------------------|--|
| a | <input type="text"/> | accumulate over a period of time   |
| b | <input type="text"/> | isolated or set apart from others, separated along racial, social or religious lines                       |
| c | <input type="text"/> | excluded from a society or group   |
| d | <input type="text"/> | a worker in a skilled trade who often makes something by hand  |
| e | <input type="text"/> | an organism that lives on or in another organism and benefits by deriving nutrients at the other's expense |
| f | <input type="text"/> | the term that relates the hierarchy of the feudal system to a kind of ladder                               |

5 History Repeats Itself - Same Concept, Other Times and Places

Which concept in this worksheet is depicted in each picture below? For each picture, identify at least one key term and try to identify a likely historical time and place. You may use a search engine!



## People Above the Four-Tier System:

Although feudal Japan is said to have had a four-tier social system, some Japanese lived above the system, and some below.

At the very **pinnacle** of society was the shogun, the military ruler. He was generally the most powerful daimyo; when the Tokugawa family seized power in 1603, the **shogunate** became hereditary. The Tokugawas ruled for 15 generations, until 1868.

Although the shoguns were the most powerful group, they ruled in the name of the emperor. The emperor, his family and the court nobility had little power, but they were at least **nominally** above the shogun, and also above the four-tier system.

The emperor served as a **figurehead** for the shogun, and as the religious leader of Japan. Buddhist and Shinto priests and monks were above the four-tier system, as well.

## People below the Four-Tier System

Some unfortunate people also fell below the lowest rung of the four-tier ladder.

These people included the ethnic minority Ainu, the descendants of slaves, and those employed in taboo industries. Buddhist and Shinto tradition condemned people who worked as butchers, executioners, and tanners as unclean. They were called the eta.

Another class of social outcasts were the hinin, which included actors, wandering bards, and convicted criminals.

Prostitutes and courtesans, including oiran, tayu, and geisha, also lived outside of the four-tier system. They were ranked against one another by beauty and accomplishment.

Today, the people who lived below the four-tiers are collectively called "burakumin". Officially, families descended from the burakumin are just ordinary people, but they can still face **discrimination** from other Japanese in hiring and marriage.

## Extra Information

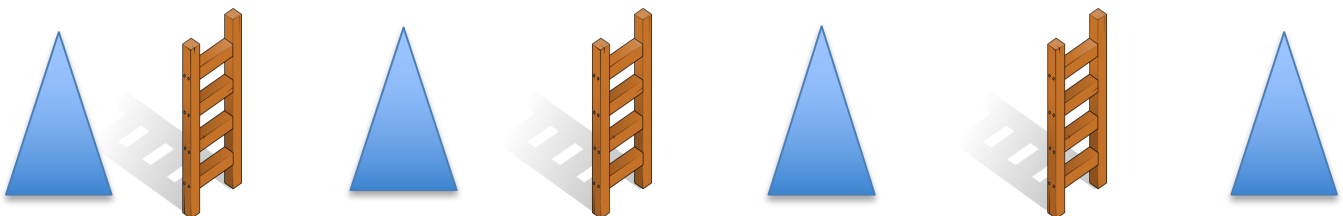
In its basic outline, this system seems very **rigid** and absolute. However, the system was in some ways more **fluid**. Here are some examples of how the feudal Japanese social system actually functioned in people's daily lives.

- If a woman from a common family got engaged to a samurai, she could be officially adopted by a second samurai family. This **circumvented** the ban on commoners and samurai intermarrying.
- When a horse, ox or other large farm animal died, it became the property of the local outcasts. It did not matter if the animal had been the personal property of a farmer, or if its body was on a daimyo's land; once it was dead, only the *eta* had any right to it.
- For more than 200 years, from 1600 to 1868, the entire Japanese social structure revolved around support of the samurai military establishment. During that time period, though, there were no major wars. Most samurai served as **bureaucrats**.
- The samurai class basically lived on a form of social security. They were paid a set stipend, in rice, and did not get raises for cost-of-living increases. As a result, some samurai families had to turn to the manufacture of small goods like umbrellas or toothpicks to make a living. They would secretly pass these items on to **peddlers** to sell.
- Although there were separate laws for the samurai class, most laws applied to all three types of **commoners** equally.
- Commoners who tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide because of love were considered criminals, but they could not be executed. They became outcast non-persons, or *hinin*, instead.
- Being an outcast wasn't necessarily a grinding existence. One headman of the Edo (Tokyo) outcasts wore two swords like a samurai, and enjoyed the privileges normally associated with a minor daimyo.

- To maintain the distinction between samurai and commoners, the government conducted raids called "sword hunts" or *katanagari*. Commoners discovered with swords, daggers or firearms would be put to death. This also discouraged peasant **uprisings**.
- Commoners were not allowed to have family names, unless they had been awarded one for special service to their daimyo.
- Although the *eta* class of outcasts was associated with the disposal of animal carcasses and the execution of criminals, most actually made their living by farming. Their unclean duties were just a side-line. Still, they could not be considered in the same class as commoner farmers, because they were outcasts.
- People with leprosy were **segregated**. However, on the Lunar New Year and Midsummer's Eve, they would go out into the city to perform a celebration ritual in front of people's homes. The townspeople then rewarded them with food or cash.
- Blind Japanese remained in the class to which they were born - samurai, farmer, etc. - so long as they stayed in the family home. If they ventured out to work as story-tellers, masseurs, or beggars, then they had to join the blind persons' guild, which was a self-governing social group outside of the four-tier system.
- Some commoners, called *gomune*, took on the role of wandering performers and beggars who would normally have been outcasts. As soon as the gomune stopped begging and settled down to farming or craft-work, however, they regained their status as commoners. They were not condemned to remain as outcasts.

### Quick Check – Search among the words in bold...

- a** Can you find a pair of adjectives with opposite meanings? One means **fixed**, the other **flowing and easily changed**?
- b** Find the word describing the **exclusion** of lepers from everyday society.
- c** Sword hunts were intended to reduce rebellions. Find a synonym for **rebellions** in the text.
- d** Samurai were not supposed to marry commoners, but they managed **to get around** this problem by arranging the adoption of commoner women by another samurai family. Find a verb for the phrase "to get around" or "avoid".
- e** The emperor was **actually not very powerful**. Which word denotes his position as a mere ceremonial figure (with some religious duties)?
- f** Despite their high status, many samurai never fought in a war. Instead, they worked as **officials in government departments**. What is the word for this role?
- g** Which word refers to the **prejudiced and unjust treatment** of some groups, such as the people below the four-tier system?



Design a hierarchy diagram with the help of the information on this handout and the previous one. You can also refer to pages 358-360 of your text. Use a set of symbols and diagrams (a ladder, a hierarchical triangle, a pagoda or any other diagrammatic device that comes to your fertile minds) to represent each part of the society.

Add information boxes with details to show how the hierarchy, though quite rigid in theory, was sometimes softened in everyday existence. Don't forget to mention the people who did not really fit into the four tiers.