

Elijah Kelly

Dr. Hailstork

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Asia 461: Capstone Seminar

Yasuke's presence in Japanese history and its relation to social mobility

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peasants to become feared and powerful samurai, especially under the command of Oda Nobunaga (Edwards 2015). Though he would be considered *mōn* and also

remold Japanese history. However,

before I get into the bulk of this paper, I would

samurai to commit acts such as patricide, matricide, or killing their siblings and children in order to gain power. As extremely gruesome and violent as this time period was, the main goal of many samurai during this period was to achieve the unification of Japan. Though the goal of a unified Japan seemed honorable, the number of dead bodies accumulated from the countless number of wars that arose from this goal is truly haunting (Cartwright 2019).

The main characters that participated in these bitter wars to control Japan were warlords known as “daimyo”, or by the term “samurai” which many identify them as (Cartwright 2019). Though originally used to refer to “aristocratic warriors” or “Bushi”, the term samurai eventually became a blanket term that applied to anyone represent by the warrior class in the twelfth century CE (Britannica 2020). Though they were mostly recognized for their ability on the battlefield and knowledge of military tactics, there is also mention of how the disciplined culture of the samurai gave birth to many Japanese arts such as the tea ceremony, or Ikebana (flower arrangement) (Britannica 2020). Though the samurai valued many things, it would be an understatement to just say that the samurai valued honor. Even going to extremes such as ritual suicide (seppuku), or killing one’s own flesh and blood, honor in the eyes of a samurai was akin to life itself and should someone taint their own honor or insult someone else’s, it would not be uncommon for grave consequences to arise from these actions (Britannica 2020). In fact, there is even mention of how someone bringing dishonor upon themselves does not only affect the individual in question but also affects their family, causing them to receive unfavorable treatment and being put at a disadvantage until someone does an action to restore that honor, which could range from killing someone or themselves (Britannica 2020).

Of these samurai, one famous and equally infamous samurai known as Oda Nobunaga played a major role in Japan’s Sengoku period. Also known as the “demon king”, Oda Nobunaga





When talking about Yasuke's rise to becoming a samurai and his life as one, there is











This is because of how Nobunaga made sure that his peasant fighting force was trained in a way to actually be viable on the battlefield (Edwards 2015). Considering how Hideyoshi was originally Oda Nobunaga's sandal bearer, it could be speculated that after proving his worth to Nobunaga, he would have been trained in the art of war under the direct tutelage of Oda Nobunaga, and some of his high-ranking officials. Should this be the case, it would make sense why Hideyoshi was not only able to accompany Oda Nobunaga on the battlefield and survive, but also why he was able to successfully pick up where Nobunaga left off and unite Japan.

Overall, when talking about Japanese history and discussing the topic of Social mobility during this time period, it becomes clear that opportunity for class growth has existed in many parts throughout Japanese history. With this being said, it could also be argued that no other period in Japanese history benefited from fluid social mobility more than Japan's Sengoku period. During this period, it was not uncommon for a peasant to become a warrior to live a better albeit more dangerous life. While there are many stories depicting exponential class growth, I would say that peasants who join Oda Nobunaga's army benefited from the most social growth, which could possibly be due to how Nobunaga's army won many wars. It could also be argued that Oda Nobunaga delegating resources to train his men, allowed those under him to become more successful as warriors and make names for themselves, due to how their training and combat experience would have been very valuable to daimyo looking for mercenaries to assist in small skirmishes. We can also speculate that after Nobunaga's death at Honnou-ji temple, some of his foot soldiers went to join the armies of other Daimyo instead of becoming mercenaries.

When looking at Nobunaga's subordinates, two people benefited from exponential class growth under his command: one being a former slave and the other being a peasant. Of these two subordinates, the story of Yasuke seems to be the most unique. The reason why is because



was measured by how much wealth they amassed during this time period, this wealth would also allow them to be able to gain political influence. Like artisans, merchants also resided in segregated sections of major city, however, the other classes were forbidden from mixing with this class, with conducting business being the only exception that allowed other classes to interact with merchants (Szczepanski 2019).

In conclusion, even though I may have gone on a few rants within this paper, the main goal I intended to achieve with this research paper was to shed light on how Japan's Sengoku period was truly a time of social mobility and opportunities. Although extremely violent and gruesome, the Sengoku period offered those from various background the chance of becoming either wealthy or becoming a warrior. We are also able to learn that these opportunities were not just exclusive to Japanese natives, as we can see with the story of Yasuke, that even foreigners were given opportunities to move up the social ladder in Japan. Personally, I would say that I have benefited from conducting research on this topic, due to how I was able to learn more about Japan's history and also about how social mobility during the Sengoku period seemed to be fluid for both foreigners and Japanese natives. I also found it interesting to learn about how merchants were considered to be the lowest in class, even though they had the potential to become one of the most powerful.

