

Social Classes of Japan





Emperor



Emperor – The chief of several clans or family groups became the Emperor when one of his class took political power. The **emperor** and the imperial family had the highest social status in feudal Japan. He was a figurehead, or a leader in name only and had little political power. In reality, the emperor was under control of the shogun's clan and received support from the shogun and the people.

Shogun



Shogun – The shogun was part of the warrior class, and considered to be a noble. The **shogun** was the military leader of Japan. Leaders of the different clans often fought to acquire the title of shogun because it was the shogun who ruled over Japan. He was a high ranking member of society and the other classes provided for his needs in return for protection and privileges (e.g. a small portion of land, some of the products grown on the land).

Daimyo



Daimyo – The daimyo were part of the warrior class. They were nobles at the top of the samurai class. **Daimyo** were the shogun's representatives in the countryside. They ruled over their territories according to laws issued by the shogun. Their swords were their most valuable possessions because they were required to use them often (e.g. in battle) to demonstrate their loyalty to the shogun. They had high social status as members of the warrior class, lived in huge castles surrounded by moats, and ruled over samurai and peasants.

Samurai



Samurai – The samurai were members of the warrior class. **Samurai** were professional warriors who served the shogun and their daimyo in exchange for food, shelter, and riches. Their position gave them fairly high social status, but little political power. Like the shogun and daimyo whom they served, they relied on the peasants' labor and taxes to survive.

Ronin



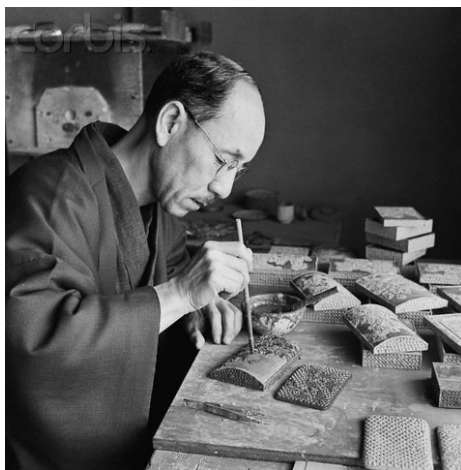
Ronin – The ronin were paid soldiers whose loyalty was with the leader they defended at the time. **Ronin** were wandering samurai who did not serve a daimyo. To earn a living, they worked as bodyguards and mercenaries and would also resort to theft and violence if work could not be found. They had little social status, tended to be poor, and didn't have a steady income.

Peasants



Peasants – The peasants were the largest class, constituting 90% of the population. **Peasants** included farmers and fishermen. They had very low social status, no political power, and were very poor. Despite this, they were seen as being important to society because they grew food for everyone else. Peasants paid taxes to the daimyos and shogun in the form of rice and labor, oftentimes starving when they had to give up more than two-thirds of their crops to the upper classes in return for being able to stay on the land.

Artisans



Artisans – The artisans were the craftspeople who made a variety of wood and metal products to meet the needs and wants of the other classes. **Artisans** crafted a variety of products including art, cooking pots, nets, farm tools, utensils, ship anchors and swords. The sword smiths, who were well-known for their exceptional swords, were highly respected. However, on the whole, this class was not as respected as peasants in Japanese society because they did not produce food (which was seen as absolutely vital to society).

Merchants



Merchants – The merchants sold goods and produce made by others. **Merchants** were of very low social status and seen as unimportant because they produced nothing of value and lived off the efforts of others' work. So low was the respect for these people that, often, they were made to live in separate locations and not allowed to mix with other classes except to do business.