

A Study of Japanese Names from the Heian Period to the Edo Period

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Abstract: As a special cultural symbol, a name is not only an identifier of an individual's identity, but also carries the social structure, cultural traditions and values of a specific era. This study focuses on the evolution of names in Japan from the Heian period (794-1185) to the Edo period (1603-1868). By sorting out the composition of names, naming rules and cultural connotations of social classes in different historical periods, it analyzes the intrinsic connection between name changes and social and political changes, economic development and cultural trends. This evolution process not only reflects the mobility and reconfiguration of social classes in Japan, but also showcases the unique development trajectory of Japanese culture under the influence of both local traditions and foreign influences.

Keywords: The Heian Period; The Edo period; Japanese name; Social class; Cultural evolution

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Introduction:

Japanese name culture has a long history, its development is closely linked with the change of Japanese society. From the flourishing of noble culture in the Heian period to the rise of the common people's society in the Edo period, names have undergone significant changes in form, connotation and scope of use in different eras. At present, academic research on Japanese names mostly focuses on a specific era or group, while systematic sorting and comparative analysis of the evolution of names during the long historical period from the Heian period to the Edo period are still insufficient. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap and reveal the historical logic and social significance of Japanese name culture through the analysis of the characteristics of names in different eras.

1. Japanese Names in the Heian Period: A Symbol of the Aristocratic Class

The Heian period was the peak of the ancient Japanese aristocratic culture, and the social hierarchy was very strict. The name, as a symbol of identity, showed a complex and strict system. The names of this period mainly consisted of four parts: clan name (うじ), surname (ばね), courtesy name (みょうじ) and given name (な). However, there were significant differences in the use of names among different social classes. The noble class had a complete and complicated system of names, while the common people and slaves had almost no formal names.

The noble class of the Heian period, with the emperor at its core, included high-ranking nobles such as the public (high-ranking officials). Their name system was the most complete, with each part carrying specific political status and family honor. The "shi" is the root symbol of noble families, representing the bloodline and historical origins of the family, such as Genji, Hei, Fujiwara, etc. These shi were originally mostly derived from the surnames granted to the imperial princes and grandsons, and later gradually developed into a huge noble family. Surnames are titles or identity marks bestowed upon nobles by the emperor to distinguish their ranks, such as "Chen", "Ren", "Su Ni", "Ji Chun", etc. Among them, "Chen" and "Ren" are the highest surnames, and only a few prominent noble families can have them. The "Miao zi" is a branch identifier that differentiates from the "shi". As noble families continue to multiply, a large "shi" will differentiate into multiple branches, and each branch will have its own Miao Zi. For example, the Fujiwara clan has differentiated Miao Zi such as "Omi", "Jue", and "Nijo", which have become important marks to distinguish different family branch-

es under the same clan.”Name” is a specific title for an individual noble, usually carrying a beautiful literary atmosphere. It is often derived from Chinese classical literature or natural scenes. For instance, the protagonist “Genji” in “The Tale of Genji” has the name “Hikari”, which implies elegance and nobility.

In sharp contrast to the complex name system of the noble class, commoners and slaves in the Heian period had almost no formal names. The common people mainly included farmers, artisans and merchants. They were at the bottom of society and had no political status or family honor to speak of. Therefore, they did not need complex names to identify their identities. They are usually addressed by their occupation, place of residence or physical characteristics, such as “Tanashita Kotaro” (the country boy), “Tetsuko Kojiro” (the blacksmith Jirō), etc. These titles are not official names but merely simple identifiers and may change over time and with the changing environment. Slaves were at the bottom of society. They were regarded as the property of the nobility and had no personal freedom at all. They didn’t even have a simple title. Usually, they were casually addressed by their masters with words like “slave” or “servant”, or directly referred to by their numbers.

2. The names of Japanese people during the Kamakura to Muromachi periods: The reconstruction of identity after the rise of the samurai class

The Kamakura period (1185-1333) to the Muromachi period (1336-1573) was a crucial period for the transformation of Japanese society from aristocratic politics to samurai politics. With the rise of the samurai class and the establishment of the samurai regime, the Japanese name system also underwent significant changes. In this period, the name is no longer the core of the aristocracy’s “shi”, “xing”, “miao zi”, but gradually bound with the military identity, family honor and war achievements of the warriors, forming a concise and practical name system with “miao zi” and “ming” as the main, and the common people’s name also began to appear the initial sprout. The samurai class was initially a military force recruited by the nobility to maintain local rule. Over time, they gradually developed into an independent political force and established the first samurai regime, the Kamakura Shogunate, during the Kamakura period^[1].

The name system of the samurai class was significantly different from that of the noble class. They placed more emphasis on the practicality and military attributes of names. Names were usually composed of two parts: “miao zi” and “Ming”, while the importance of “shi” and “xing” gradually decreased. The initial names of samurai mostly originated from their residences, official positions or military strongholds, such as “Tokugawa” (derived from the residence of Tokugawa-go), “Oda” (derived from the official position of Oda Shoji), and “Takeda” (derived from the military stronghold of Takeda District). These names not only served as family symbols but were also closely related to the military activities and territorial management of samurai. The names of samurai usually carry the meanings of bravery and fortitude, often using characters like “kang” and “xing”, such as “Tokugawa Ieyasu” and “Sanada Yukimura”. These names reflect the martial spirit and military pursuit of the samurai class. In addition, the samurai class also had a “taboo name” system. That is, after reaching adulthood, samurai would take a formal name called “taboo”, which could only be used in formal occasions or when interacting with superiors and elders. In daily life, they would use nicknames or aliases.

During the Kamakura to Muromachi period, with the development of the commodity economy and the acceleration of urbanization, the social status of the common people gradually improved. Some wealthy farmers, artisans and merchants began to have simple and formal names. In this period, the common people’s names were usually composed of a “given name” and a “common name”. The “given name” was mostly a simple single or double character, such as “Taro”, “Jiro”, “Saburo”, etc. The “common name” was a form of address based on occupation, place of residence or family characteristics, such as “Youya Iyoshi” (The oil shop’s “Ji”), “machi Iyoshi” (The Six in the neighborhood), etc. The initial emergence of commoner names reflects the loosening of the social structure and the rise of the commoner class during this period. With the development of the commodity economy, the interaction among ordinary people has become increasingly frequent. Simple titles can no longer meet the needs of social interaction, so formal names are needed to identify one’s identity. At the same time, in order to strengthen its rule over local areas, the Samurai regime also began to register the household registrations of commoners and required them to have official names. To a certain extent, this promoted the popularization of commoner names. However, at this time, the use of common people’s names was still limited, mainly concentrated among the wealthy common people in cities and the landlord class in rural areas. Most poor farmers and handicraftsmen still did not have official names or only had simple titles.

3. The Japanese Names in Edo Period: Popularization and Diversification under the System of the Shogunate and the Feudal Domain

In the Edo period, Tokugawa shogunate established a strict household registration system to strengthen its control over the coun-

try, requiring all residents to have formal names and register. According to the regulations of the shogunate, the samurai class still retained the name system of “miao zi” and “Name”, and the use of miao Zi was strictly restricted. Only samurai families approved by the shogunate could own miao zi. Ordinary samurai were not allowed to use miao Zi without approval. The rule was to maintain the hierarchy of the samurai class and prevent the common people from impersonating the samurai^[2].

For the common people, the shogunate allowed them to freely choose their names, but the form of names was relatively simple, usually consisting of “miao zi” and “Ming”. However, the “miao zi” here was different from that of the samurai. It was more of a family symbol and had a wider range of sources, which could come from the place of residence, occupation, family characteristics, or the names of ancestors or auspicious words. For instance, some farmers use the names of the places where they live as their characters, such as “Yamada”, “Sato”, “Suzuki”, etc. Some handicraftsmen use their occupations as characters, such as “ironworker”, “carpenter”, “weaver”, etc. Some commoners also used the names of their ancestors as their characters. For instance, the descendants of “Taro Zuemon” might use “Taro” as their character. The common people’s names are more casual, mostly using “Ichiro”, “Narou”, “Sanro”, “Hana”, “Do” and so on. These names are simple and easy to remember, and they are in line with the common people’s cultural level and aesthetic concept^[3].

4. Conclusion

By sorting out and analyzing the evolution of Japanese names from the Heian period to the Edo period, it can be clearly seen that during this long historical period, Japanese names have undergone a process of evolution from exclusive hierarchical symbols for the nobility, to identity marks for the samurai class, and then to practical tools commonly owned by the common people. This evolution is not only a change in the form and scope of use of names. It is also a comprehensive reflection of Japan’s social structure, economic development, cultural trends and the influence of foreign cultures.

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