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Women in Japan

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Midterm Questions

1. Describe several unique characteristics of women's status in the family and the society during the ancient Japan. (up to 8th century)

Women in Japan leading up to the 8th century have a variety of roles that changed depending on what society required of the Japanese people. During the Jomon period the Japanese were hunters and gatherers, they did not readily settle in one place. Once rice agriculture was introduced to the Japanese, the development of large settlements began, the Yayoi period is actually when it is rumored that a queen existed named Himiko, though she exists mostly in Chinese historical records, Himiko was said to be a very respected ruler who carried on a rewarding relationship with the Chinese. This idea that a woman could not only rule over a country but maintain a healthy political relationship with the kingdoms around her is pretty radical compared to how later eras developed their governing systems. This elevation of a shamanic and sacred female individual is also present in the Kofun era's burial mounds having female figures mounted on top of them. While there were warriors and other attendants sculpted for the leaders buried in these mounds, they also had priestesses that were represented in the haniwa. Moving forward to the Nara period, a lot of Japanese learned how to read and write because of the strong

introduction of buddhism, this light literacy continued into Heian era where women of the high courts would spend their days writing poetry for their empress's delight. These court ladies also wrote in diaries and participated in love affairs by night. Heian era women enjoyed a variety of freedoms though they could not sit face to face with men during formal meetings, many Japanese took part in the court playboy like lifestyle. Women of lower classes generally enjoyed more freedoms over the course of these eras simply because a lower/working class women had more to worry about than just their appearances, usually there was a piece of land to work on and harvest. It's important to note that the most literate women were the women who were in the highest/most noble courts. Many marriages actually were just for economic or political purposes, to produce an heir or otherwise create a new generation to carry on life's work. Romantic or sexual relationships were more fluid and often numerous especially for the nobility. One notable fact is that divorce was a more relaxed situation though because of arranged marriages and the onset of neo-confucianism this lax point of view quickly disappeared.

2. The Heian period is characterized as the age when aristocratic culture flourished

. Describe what kind of roles women played at the Imperial Court in the Heian culture.

Give two examples~

In Heian era, the noble courts of the empress were a hot bed for literature and fresh poetry.

Though many people were writing poetry during Heian era, the ladies in waiting of the Imperial court were of the highest grade of poets and scholars. These women were tasked with writing as much as they could all day and entertaining the empress - two of the most

notable figures in this Imperial Court setting were Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu. Sei and Murasaki were each assigned to different empresses. Though they were thought to be the most competent in each of their respective courts, these two women were actually very different in their style of written art. Sei Shonagon wrote the Pillow Book during her time in the courts. This book was a very frank and playful collection of stories from inside the imperial court. Sei Shonagon often wrote exactly what she was thinking with a very playful and witty flavor. In contrast to Sei Shonagon, Murasaki Shikibu was more refined and elegant, though still just as clever. Murasaki Shikibu in her time in the imperial court, wrote the world's first work of fiction, The Tale of Genji. In this story, Murasaki tells the tale of the perfect man, Prince Hikaru Genji. Though troubled, he leads a life of luxury and indulges in the miyavi lifestyle that was so popular in Heian times. In addition to this long work Murasaki Shikibu has also had her diary published, though it is disputed if she actually intended for it to be published. Additionally during Heian era, the Fujiwara family began making their move to take power via their daughters. Through finishing their daughters into fine courtesans, the Fujiwara's managed to produce more than one notable heir to big family names. This in itself is deserving of a mention under this question header though it does not specifically address an individual lady.

3. Explain reasons why Japanese women gradually lost their relatively equal status with men after the Shogunate began in the end of the 12th century?

5. How did marriage take place in the warrior class during sengoku period? What were motives and factors determining the marital relationships?

Towards the end of the Heian era, Japan was coming under the influence of Confucianism. This style of thought was largely based in an idea of patriarchal dominion and strict gender roles. Though this style of thought helped to form and refine samurai into great military leaders and a ruling class, it meant that women saw a lot of their former freedoms taken away. Women were now almost exclusively used to be married off for political or economical reasons, these marriages served to strengthen family alliances and also even destroy family lineages. This change in view on marriage also brought a more strict view on divorce for upper class/samurai women - a divorce initiated by the women was absolutely not allowed, any divorce would be initiated by a man via a "three and a half line" notice, in which he could simply say he no longer wanted to be married to her. As mentioned before many peasant women were allowed more freedoms because of the necessity for them to work alongside their husbands. They also could own some property unlike samurai women. Samurai women were doomed to basically be owned by three individuals in their life; their father, their husband, and after widowhood, their son. Buddhism was in great abundance during this era so women were allowed to make pilgrimages to temples for the purpose of worship and also to join as nuns but their status was not elevated because they were living independently in a temple. In fact many Samurai families used this type of pilgrimage to refine their daughters into more viable options for marriage. The exposure to the outside world allowed time for them to receive a small education and also some awareness of their surroundings.

6. Describe and contrast the life of women in samurai class, peasant status and middle to upper middle class merchant family during Edo period.

During the Edo period there was a finite separation of classes. Samurai class families were very wealthy and powerful however coming after them peasants had more recognition than merchant classes. This was because there was a recognition of the fact that peasants worked the land with their hands in order to provide to the community around them and do good work. Merchants while they were most definitely more well off than the peasants, were below the peasants as they did not actually create any goods, simply moved and sold them. The differences in the women from these classes is not as stark but serve as a reminder that women were relegated to a very strict role in the home in the Edo period. I mentioned previously that samurai class women used pilgrimages as a type of finishing school for their training to become a wife. Though women did learn how to read and write it was not a an occasion for great recognition, the purpose of samurai women becoming literate was to give their children an education. Alternatively merchant women actually often used their literacy to help run the businesses that their husbands owned. Though this never proved to give more opportunity than become more exposed to the outside world it was not nearly as back breaking as being a peasant woman. Peasant women were allowed to work in the fields next to their husbands as they always had but their status was quickly becoming more marginal as men began to view women more as property rather than an individual human being. They were allowed to divorce and remarry in contrast to the harsh rules of the samurai class women who were married and never allowed to divorce, and

upon divorce were not allowed to remarry again. Merchant women in comparison to these two classes actually seem more like they are both working and also keeping face, assigned to the house as their dominion but also expected to share their expertise and time running the businesses that belonged to their family. The influence of neo-confucianism in Edo Japan is heavy handed and obvious throughout from the caste system to the repositioning of women in society from mostly equal partners with their husbands to someone who could not leave the house and was chained to rearing children and obeying their husband. The patriarchal focus of confucianism helped to streamline bushido and Samurai ethics but at the same time ruined any opportunities for women to advance in society.