

Women in Agriculture – Peasant Women

Japanese women were a significant force in traditional agriculture in Japan for centuries, from ancient times to the modern era, doing heavy manual labor in rice paddies, crop fields, and rural households.

Core Agricultural Roles

- **Rice Cultivation:** Peasant women—who made up the vast majority of the female population—customarily performed the hardest stoop-labor (bended back) tasks, including planting, weeding, and transplanting rice seedlings. Traditionally, men did most of the field preparation work, such as clearing ground, moving soil, and digging irrigation paths.
- **Sericulture & Tea:** Women managed silk production (feeding silkworms and harvesting cocoons) as well as the delicate, skilled labor of picking tea leaves.
- **Dual Workload:** Beyond field labor, women handled domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and home-based manufacturing or side jobs to support the family economy.

Social and Status Dynamics

- **Peasant Independence:** During periods like the Tokugawa (Edo) era, peasant women who worked side-by-side with their husbands often held more active outdoor and social roles than upper-class urban women, who were often confined to strict domestic expectations. In the modern era after 1868, as more women left the farms and moved into urban areas to seek jobs, these women also took on more domestic expectations in pursuit of husbands and children in an urban life.
- **Unequal Land Ownership:** Despite outnumbering or matching men in active farm labor throughout history, Japanese women eventually lost their rights to land titles, equipment ownership, and formal leadership positions, which became completely concentrated in male hands by Japan's early Middle Ages (after about year 1100). Despite performing just as much and often more work than their husbands, peasant women were eventually treated as the unpaid servants of their husbands and were entitled to no independent holding of wealth—all wealth, money, and property became the exclusive right of husbands only.

Female Freedom and Sexuality throughout Japanese History

In ancient and early premodern Japan (in the Kofun era and early periods like Nara and Heian), women enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, social status, and sexual freedom compared to later eras. This freedom declined significantly with the rise of Confucian ideals, Chinese-style bureaucratic systems, Buddhist education and bureaucracy, and eventually warrior (samurai) patriarchy.

Key Aspects of Ancient Female Sexual and Social Freedom

- **Matriarchal & Dual-Rule Influences:** During early eras like the Kofun period (c. 250-600), society featured strong matriarchal elements. Women frequently served as clan leaders and sovereign empresses. The native Shinto religion of Japan was often led by female shamans or priests. In peasant farming families, wives and husbands shared duties, with women often in charge of a farm's finances.
- **Visiting Marriage System (*Tsumadoikon*):** Under this system, marriage was not a rigid, single-partner institution. A woman often lived in her own family's home, and men would visit her at night (often initiated by exchanging poetry). Lineage or inheritance could also pass through the female line rather than from the husband. This gave some women a stable home base rather than forcing them to live in their husband's household.
- **Acceptance of Dating and Promiscuity:** Premarital relationships, youthful experimentation, and practices like *yobai* (night-crawling visits) were a normal and accepted part of courtship. A young woman, even a peasant woman, might have as many as four or five lovers before marriage. Elite women could have multiple visiting lovers or husbands over time, or transition between partners. However, while polygamy (multiple relationships) was common for men and men frequently maintained multiple wives or secondary attachments, a woman managing many simultaneous husbands later became less socially acceptable.
- **Property and Financial Control:** Women historically held the right to own and inherit property, keep their own earnings from work or businesses, initiate divorce, and manage household finances or loans. This ability was reduced over time.

Historical Shift Toward Constraint

- **Heian to Kamakura Transition:** While noblewomen in the Heian period (794-1185) retained land rights and considerable social presence (reflected in classical literature by authors like Murasaki Shikibu), the transition to the samurai-led Kamakura period (1185-1333) and its Buddhist bureaucracy brought a strict patriarchal order. Sexuality became tightly bound to clan loyalty, political alliances, and family demands, meaning that a woman's individual choices in personal and public life became more limited.

The Samurai Eras and into the Edo (Tokugawa) Period of 1603–1867

- **Strict Control for Elites:** As Japan transitioned into a strict, patriarchal samurai society, a woman's personal freedoms and romantic autonomy in the upper classes were heavily restricted. Aristocratic and samurai women were expected to be strictly monogamous (loyal only to their husbands) to ensure clear lineage for heirs. Extramarital affairs (outside lovers) could result in severe punishment or divorce for a wife.

"Good Wife, Wise Mother": the Modern Propaganda: Western-derived legal codes and Meiji-era (1868–1912) state ideologies further limited the legal and property rights of women, by promoting a rigid model of modern female chastity, obedience, and social and national servitude. The slogan *fukoku kyohei* ("enrich the country, strengthen the army") viewed women's bodies as instruments for producing soldiers and workers. Contraception was outlawed.

Confucianism 儒教, Patriarchy 家父長制, and Gender Inequality

Confucianism 儒教: Confucianism is an ancient Chinese system of thought, ethics, and social philosophy founded by Confucius and his students in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Rather than an organized religion with a single church or deity, Confucianism functions as a human-centered, all-encompassing way of living that guides personal behavior, family life, and public governance. It has served as the core ethical principle for human interaction across China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan for centuries. It has also historically reinforced patriarchal structures and gender inequality.

Neo-Confucianism 宋明理学 (which translates literally as Song-Ming dynasty science): Neo-Confucianism was a revival and transformation of classical Confucian philosophy and first emerged during China's Song dynasty (960-1279). It began as a way to incorporate multiple belief systems, especially Buddhism and Daoism, into a single Confucian framework of behavior and governance. Neo-Confucianism became the dominant system for intellectual life, ethical behavior, and public governance in China's Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and also in Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392-1897). Japan's Tokugawa/Edo shogunate adopted it rigidly for organizing society in the Edo period (1603-1867). Neo-Confucianism is closely connected with the kind of nationalism that arose in China, Korea, and Japan during those periods. In modern comparison, neo-Confucianism would be similar to a kind of political and cultural ultranationalism. It remains an underlying and influential system of thought in East Asia today.

For instance, although modern socialist China has laws that guarantee the individual rights and health of Chinese women, many if not most local health clinics in China refuse to follow some of these laws. For certain medical treatments, these clinics demand that a woman receives written permission from her husband or she cannot receive certain treatments. These clinics cite neo-Confucian family values, which say that husbands have the right to control their wives' bodies.

Historical and Philosophical Roots

- **The "Nei-Wai" (Inner-Outer) Sphere:** Traditional Confucianism divides society and space into the inner domestic domain (*nei*, associated with women) and the outer public or literary domain (*wai*, associated with men), establishing functional separation (*bie*) rather than outright equality. In Japan, one result is that women should stay home and attend to their families whereas men eventually took over all major art forms such as literature, Noh theater, and Kabuki theater (women are still not allowed to perform in traditional Noh and Kabuki theater today).
- **The Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*SancongSide*):** Later developments in imperial China codified female dependency, requiring a woman to obey her father, then her husband, and then her son.
- **Early Texts and Interpretations:** Classic texts like the *Analects* feature gendered language and rigid social stratification, though some scholars note that passages regarding women were tied to specific behavioral or ritual contexts rather than specific gender restrictions.
- **Extreme Practices:** Practices such as foot-binding (deforming the feet so women could not walk by themselves), strict widow chastity (no sex for women even after their husbands had died), and patrilineal son preference (a mother becomes the servant and property of her son) developed over the centuries under Neo-Confucian and imperial governance, though historians emphasize these did not originate directly in the earliest teachings of Confucius or Mencius.

In Edo/Tokugawa Japan, neo-Confucianism was the core principle behind most laws and codes regarding women, children, and families. Women became fully secondary to the rights and needs of men. Despite modern reforms during the Meiji era (1868-1912), modern Japan still based many of its laws and customs on Edo era neo-Confucian values. As late as 1947, women were still considered the property of their fathers and then their husbands. Today, women are still officially listed beneath their fathers and then their husbands in the *koseki* (family structure) legal system. Despite being a citizen of Japan in year 2026, women remain legally bound and classified to their husband's *koseki* and existence.

A **koseki** (戸籍) is Japan's official family registration system that records and certifies the vital statistics, nationality, and family relationships of Japanese citizens and long-term residents.

Confucianism and Japanese Women

Confucianism (social organization from China) introduced a rigid, patriarchal social hierarchy to Japan, which shifted women from relatively independent or complementary roles in ancient times to the status of modern servants. In farm families (which were 85-90% of people in Japan), men eventually became the sole owners of land while their wives were listed as non-paid servants, even though these women did as much or more work than their husbands. In many cases, such women almost never saw their husbands except when providing farm or family labor—husbands with some wealth often visited prostitutes or kept other younger women as lovers.

Historical Changes Over Time

- **Ancient Japan (Pre-Confucian/Kofun Period):** Until about the year 750, early Japanese society featured high status for women, including female shamans, clan leaders, and empresses, with flexible marriage and inheritance customs. Like many pagan religions around the world, early Shinto was tied to the fertility of women and of farm land. This type of shamanistic faith made women and matriarchy important.
- **Adoption and Integration:** As Chinese political and philosophical systems (including Confucianism and Buddhism) entered Japan via cultural exchanges with China and Korea (after about the year 600), traditional structures began to align with male-dominated hierarchies. Matriarchal Shinto and concern for fertility were eventually replaced by social and gender hierarchies governed by men with male power ambitions.
- **Tokugawa/Edo Period (1603-1867) (Neo-Confucianism):** Neo-Confucianism (a more modern and rigid social class structure in Ming China [1368-1644]) became the official state ideology of the Edo era, strictly codifying loyalty, filial piety, and the subordination of women to their fathers, their husbands, and even to their sons.

Key Influences of Confucianism on Gender Roles

- **The "Inner-Outer" Dynamic (*Nei-Wai*):** Women were increasingly confined to domestic and child-rearing spheres while men controlled public, political, and economic life. Eventually, in the modern era, *ryōsai kenbo* or "good wife, wise mother" became the dominant ideology for governing women.
- **Role-Based Hierarchy:** Confucianism emphasized relational duties as a top-down chain of authority (such as husband-to-wife). Women were NOT partners in a marriage but servants, making individual autonomy difficult for women to assert.
- **Institutional Reinforcement:** Confucian family norms merged with local Shinto and Buddhist practices to entrench patriarchal family registries (*ie* system), where women were positioned primarily as caretakers of the household and bearers of male heirs. A wife was even expected to take care of her husband's parents while ignoring the health and other needs of her own parents.

Today: Several of the issues and situations listed above still affect discussions and legal matters about women in Japan today. Despite progressive legislation in Japan since the New Constitution of 1947, much of Japanese society still believes that women should lead subservient roles dedicated to producing children and caring for her husband's family. A woman's duty remains "Good Wife, Wise Mother." For instance, birth control, though legal in Japan, is almost exclusively limited to condoms. Oral contraception (pills) are rarely prescribed by doctors. And a married woman, even if she has a dangerous health condition, must receive written consent from her husband before she can request voluntary sterilization (tubal ligation), otherwise it is a felony offense and the woman could face one year in prison. (In contrast, in countries like the USA, UK, and Germany, tubal ligation has always been a legal medical procedure and requires only the patient's (woman's) consent).