Similarities between the Chinese scholar-official class and Japanese samurai

Raashna Chand

The Chinese scholar-official class were educated in Confucian classics, and the examination systems used to select them were the basis for modern exams around the world. The Japanese samurai turned to scholarship after they could no longer gain fame and honour in battle. At first glance, it seems that these two elite classes had a lot in common with each other. But did they have more in common with the ordinary citizens of their own respective societies? This essay will argue that the scholar-official class and samurai shared some similarities to their commoner counterparts with regards to scholarship, it was not as great as the similarities that they shared with each other. This essay will mainly compare Chinese society in the Song period, and Japanese society in the Edo period.

The scholar-official class had roots in the Sui and Tang periods, where the examination system was developed to select people for public service roles. During this time, very few people took and passed the examinations, numbering in the hundreds (Kuhn, 2009). The people that made diplomatic decision were not these scholars – it was aristocratic families with ties to the emperor and had regional power bases. The class flowered in the Song period, replacing the aristocracy with a ruling class that was better educated in the Confucian classics (Ebrey & Walthall, 2006). Dedicated schools for these exams were opened for people to study. People especially sought after achieving the *jinshi,* the highest possible grade from the examinations.

There were certain requirements as to who could take these examinations – no former Buddhist or Daoist priests were allowed, nor were artisans, merchants, and clerks (Roberts, 1996). Existing members of the scholar-official class could also nominate different family members to be part of the

class, by-passing the exams altogether, although most members chose to take the exams anyway. One from a poor background could still take the exam, however – roughly 50-60% of those who passed the examinations during the Song period did not have family connections to the scholar-official class (Kuhn, 2009).

Otherwise, an ordinary civilian would usually be an artisan, merchant, or farmer. Towns were growing and turning into cities during the Song period, and an economic boom through trade was occurring, so this did not mean all people were living in poverty. Farmers, particularly, benefitted from this – there was a surplus of produce from an agricultural revolution, and they sold off this extra produce through international trade (Ebrey & Walthall, 2006). Children of commoners could study in local schools as well, no matter if one was rich or poor. The only barrier to entry was one's gender – only boys were allowed to get an education (Kuhn, 2009). But it should not be mistaken that these classes were mostly focussed on getting their children an education – rather, they were more focussed on providing for themselves and their families.

The elite class of the Muromachi and Edo periods, the samurai, succeeded the *kuge,* the aristocratic families that had distant relations to the emperor. The Muromachi period was marked by lots of warfare (Hall, Jansen, Kanai, & Twitchett, 1990). The samurai became the elite class during this period, as they were warriors that took tradition and morality seriously. They gained fame and honour during warfare. The Edo period was a time of peace and stability for the Japanese. With no more wars to fight in, samurai were now simply administrators and bureaucrats. They now seemed like they lived parasitic lives (Henshall, 1999). Determined to not lose their status in society and be seen as useless, they turned to other pathways to prove their worth. One of these ways was through scholarship.

Some samurai turned to study Confucianism like the Song scholar-officials, albeit without the examinations. These studies, however, were more Japan-centric, and focussed on reconciling Confucian thought with the situation of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Hayashi Razan, for example,

suggested that social hierarchy of Japan reflected the natural order of society talked about in Neo-Confucian belief (Ebrey & Walthall, 2006). Ogyu Sorai suggested that one should look at ancient texts that pre-date Confucius to understand the Confucian way of life and order. The shogun was a sage-king with the Mandate of Heaven, installed in power to bring peace to Japan (Hall J. W., 1991). However, some samurai also thought that the shogun was a puppet – he had usurped the throne from the Emperor, the righteous ruler of Japan, but these opinions were not vocalized up until the Meiji restoration.

Despite all these efforts to show that they can be of use, samurai ended up being the poorest out of the four classes – the other three being artisans, merchants, and farmers – when they were supposed to be the elite class. Merchants, who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, ended up being the richest class, due to an economic boom. Japan also had an agricultural surplus during the Edo period, just like China in the Song. Farmers sold their produce to merchants who then sold them off to the public. Japan was also becoming increasingly urbanized during this period, and demand for non-agricultural commodities grew (Ebrey & Walthall, 2006). The richest merchants set up private schools for the children of samurai and nobles to attend and set up smaller schools in villages for the other classes. This contributed to a high literacy rate among the population of Japan (Henshall, 1999).

There are several similarities that can be seen between the Chinese scholar-official class and the Japanese samurai. Both succeeded an elite class that was mainly comprised of aristocratic families. Both had an interest in studying Confucianism, and they had similar reasons for studying it too – however, this interest did not necessarily stem from wanting to explore what the philosophy meant for society at the time. The scholar-officials mostly did so to pass the exams and hold a position of power. This did indeed result in a much better educated elite who could run things better than previous officials did. The samurai studied Confucianism, however, to regain their place in society. They also studied Confucianism to justify the power of the shogunate. It seems that these classes

were not really focussed on being scholarly for the pursuit of knowledge – they were well-educated simply because they needed some sort of purpose in life. Were these people really interested in knowing about what Confucianism had to say about life?

In addition to this, both elite classes replaced the former aristocracy that consisted of families with ties to the emperor. However, the shift in China was a result of a need for more educated rulers, while the shift in Japan was due to the shogun now having political power rather than the emperor (Hall, Jansen, Kanai, & Twitchett, 1990).

We can also infer that these elite classes didn't really have anything in common with the ordinary citizens of their own societies. A commoner could indeed attend a school, and possibly even share the same school as the son of a samurai or a scholar-official, and commoners could become literate but that is where the similarities end. Both the Song and Edo periods experienced an economic boom thanks to international and domestic trade, respectively. Samurai bore the worst brunt of this – many samurai now lived in poverty, while merchants reaped the rewards of their own work. The social hierarchy built by the shogunate was now flipped on its head, and the samurai were embarrassed. The commoners of China also profited from this boom, but this was not necessarily at the detriment to the scholar-officials, who still retained their societal and legal power.

Therefore, while there were some differences between the scholar-official class of China and the samurai of Japan, they were ultimately more like each other than when compared to ordinary civilians of their own respective societies. Focussing on the aspect of scholarship, both classes studied Confucianism for the same reason – a purpose in life. Civilians of lower social classes could get an education alongside the elite, but they led completely different lives. Their priority did not lie in being educated. It lay in making money to ensure their own and their families' survival. And they succeeded, due to economic booms occurring at the time when these classes pursued scholarship. The commoners benefited far more from money than the elite did. Perhaps the elite would have benefitted more had they not focussed too much on academics?

Word Count: 1395

References

Ebrey, P., & Walthall, A. (2006). *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History.* Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

Hall, J. W. (Ed.). (1991). *The Cambridge History of Japan; Early Modern Japan* (Vol. 4). Cambridge University Press.

Hall, J. W., Jansen, M. B., Kanai, M., & Twitchett, D. (Eds.). (1990). *The Cambridge History of Japan - Medieval Japan* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.

Henshall, K. G. (1999). *A History of Japan, From Stoneage to Superpower.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Kuhn, D. (2009). *The Age of Confucian Rule.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Roberts, J. (1996). *A History of China.* United Kingdom: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd.