

Changing Marriage and Inheritance Patterns in Medieval Japan

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Japan's medieval period (1185-1573) gave rise to significant shifts in women's status, family structure, and inheritance practices. Among the most notable was a change in marital residence patterns as women increasingly married into their husband's households with a loss in status, autonomy, and ability to maintain independent land holdings. Another was the decline of parents bequeathing land to their daughters; families came instead to favor single male heirs and tried to find other ways to provide for their female children.

These changes have often been explained by the rise of samurai culture. Over the course of the medieval period, warriors (who practiced virilocal marriage) gradually appropriated power from the nobility (who favored uxorilocal, duolocal, or neolocal marriage). As samurai gained political power and violence became endemic (making it difficult for women to maintain their own holdings), nobles began to adopt warrior practices. This paper challenges that view by exploring specific cases from thirteenth-century Japan. Starting with a careful examination of the 1237 wedding between Konohe Kanetsune and Kujo Ninshi, the paper draws on folktales, diaries, and genealogical records to posit alternative factors that explain shifting medieval marital and inheritance practices.