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Power in Japanese History

Japan is a country with a long and storied past. It has a unique and interesting history, but like all other countries there are many significant power shifts and struggles. Power is a driving force for many individuals throughout history, and obtaining power is absolutely necessary in order to lead a country. Obtaining power is not as easy as simply demanding obedience from the people. The key to establishing dominance is legitimacy, having a compelling reason for people to follow.

One such way was the establishment of the Emperor System. The original idea of an emperor actually originated in China, but eventually found its way to Japan. With the creation of the emperor came reason for people to follow a central figure. An emperor was supposed to be the closest person to god, without actually being a god himself. In a way, this was very similar to how kings functioned in Europe. At its core, early Japan's government was a monarchy.

However, emperors did not simply claim their right to the throne (usually), but were dictated by powerful families. One such family was the Soga clan. This clan was powerful due to its heavy influence in the political court, mainly by way of arranged marriages. The first empress of Japan, Empress Suiko, was actually a part of the Soga clan. Eventually, the rival Fujiwara clan would overthrow the then-dominant Soga clan. They would help Emperor Tenjin become the new emperor, who was then a prince. I although it was a significant change in power, I don't personally feel this change in power accomplished too much in particular. Important steps were made, this is undeniable, but I believe that power simply shifted to another family without really changing how things worked. It was simply a different family "pulling the strings" so to speak.

Nevertheless, it wasn't too long until there were others who challenged the emperor's power, whoever he may be. To respond to the insurgencies, the emperor sent out armies of samurai to fight battles for him. Upon returning, the leaders of these armies were given the title of Shogun. This began a new form of control in Japan, where the Shogun of different armies controlled smaller pieces of land, rather than one emperor controlling everything, Feudalism. This is the beginning of what is commonly known as Feudal Japan.

It was at this time in Japanese history that powerful families (daimyo) and military warlords (shogun) ruled Japan. The government lost influence over the wealthy landowners, and daimyo eventually started to attack each other to gain land and wealth. It was during this time that Oda Nobunaga rose to power. Through decisive military battles he was able to gain legitimacy and acquire swaths of land in a relatively short amount of time. Some see Oda Nobunaga as a bit ruthless, but I feel his ways were the most effective towards achieving a unified Japan. While politics are a significant cause of change in a country, war seems to make a larger immediate impact, in my opinion. Especially when you're good at it.

I feel this was a perfect time for change in power because Japan lacked a clear-cut ruler. There was ruling families and the most prominent person was the head of that family, but this didn't necessarily mean they were great, or even significant. The emperor was a great figurehead, but lacked any real power. Oda Nobunaga changed that by being able to control central Japan, and lay the foundation for what would eventually become a unified Japan with the continued help of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu.