

# THE POLITICAL POWER STRUCTURES IN EAST ASIA: DECENTRALIZATION AND CENTRALIZATION — A CASE STUDY OF ANCIENT JAPAN AND CHINA

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**Abstract:** This study compares the historical development of centralized imperial power in China and decentralized governance in Japan, focusing on the Kamakura Shogunate's shukurō system. It examines how geographical, ideological, and cultural factors—such as China's unified Confucian-Legalist traditions and vast arable terrain versus Japan's clan-based structure and mountainous geography—shaped distinct political systems. China's centralized model enabled efficient decision-making and stability but risked autocracy, while Japan's polycentric approach fostered adaptability yet incurred fragmentation. The analysis highlights trade-offs between efficiency and flexibility, offering insights into balancing centralization and decentralization in modern governance.

**Keywords:** Centralized governance; Decentralized systems; East Asian political civilization; Historical comparative analysis

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the course of history, East Asia developed diverse and distinctive political civilizations. As two representative countries, China and Japan exhibited markedly different power structures. Since the unification of the Qin Dynasty, China gradually established a centralized system of imperial power with the emperor at its core, where authority was highly concentrated and exclusive. By contrast, in ancient and medieval Japan, the political structure was relatively decentralized. For instance, during the Kamakura Shogunate, the system of collective decision-making by senior councilors (shukurō) embodied a polycentric and consultative form of power. These differences are not merely variations in institutional forms but also reflect deeper influences stemming from divergent historical trajectories, geographical environments, and cultural conceptions[1-5].

## 2 CAUSES OF DIVERGENT DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 China: The Ideology of Unification and the Role of Geography in Fostering Centralized Imperial Power

#### 2.1.1 Ideological and cultural factors

Ancient China was deeply influenced by Confucian thought, in which the ideology of “Great Unification” permeated the political and cultural tradition. Confucianism emphasized social order and hierarchical harmony, asserting that a sage ruler should govern the realm to maintain stability and ensure the continuity of morality. For example, Dong Zhongshu's doctrine of “Great Unification of the Spring and Autumn Annals” provided a theoretical foundation for centralized imperial power, legitimizing the emperor as the divinely ordained supreme ruler with absolute authority. Meanwhile, Legalist thought, particularly during the Qin Dynasty, reinforced the construction of a centralized system. Advocating autocracy and centralization, Legalism emphasized strict laws and strong state power to control both the populace and the bureaucracy. On this basis, the Qin Dynasty established a highly organized administrative system. Although later dynasties made adjustments to specific institutions, the core principle of centralization remained a consistent feature throughout imperial China.

#### 2.1.2 Geographical factors

China's vast territory, relatively flat terrain, and close internal connectivity facilitated the formation of large-scale agricultural settlements. Effective management of agriculture, massive hydraulic projects, and defense against invasions all required strong central authority. For example, controlling the flooding of the Yellow River and other major rivers necessitated mobilization of enormous resources—something only a centralized monarchy could achieve. Thus, the need to integrate and manage nationwide resources continuously reinforced centralized imperial power.

### 2.2 Japan: Clan Tradition, Geographic Conditions, and External Influences Leading to Decentralization

#### 2.2.1 Domestic political and cultural factors

In ancient Japan, society was structured around clans (*uji*), each controlling its own territory, military force, and economic interests, and enjoying significant autonomy. Although the Taika Reform attempted to imitate China's centralized bureaucracy, the entrenched power of clans limited the emperor's authority. Aristocrats, temples, and shrines retained substantial political influence, resulting in a multi-centered system. Japanese culture emphasized harmony and

consensus, favoring decision-making through consultation rather than unilateral rule. This cultural tradition provided fertile ground for the existence of decentralized power structures such as the *shukurō deliberative system*, enabling different political forces to participate in state governance within a certain framework. Beginning with the Muromachi Shogunate, the promulgation of the *Hanzei* decree allowed local samurai to gradually break away from the manorial economy that had originally been dominated by aristocratic politics. They began to consolidate as *kokujin-shū* (provincial samurai groups) and assumed de facto control over grassroots administrative units. The lack of effective power distribution at the local level facilitated a steady downward shift of authority. This process ultimately intensified with the outbreak of the Ōnin War, which deepened local conflicts and pushed the trend of downward power transfer to its peak, culminating in the unique phenomenon of *gekokujo* (“the low overthrowing the high”) in Japan’s political transformation.

### 2.2.2 Geography and external influences

Japan’s mountainous and fragmented terrain fostered regional power bases, making excessive centralization difficult. As an island nation, Japan also faced constant external influences through maritime trade, cultural exchange, and political contact with China and Korea. Such pressures required a flexible political structure. Decentralized governance allowed Japan to better adapt to these changing external conditions.

## 3 STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

### 3.1 Characteristics of China’s Centralized Imperial System

#### 3.1.1 A single, supreme power core

The emperor held ultimate authority over politics, economy, military, and culture. From central to local levels, officials were appointed and controlled directly or indirectly by the emperor. All major decisions required imperial approval, ensuring that authority penetrated every level of governance.

#### 3.1.2 A centralized bureaucratic system

At the central level, institutions such as the *Three Departments and Six Ministries* maintained division of labor and checks and balances while serving imperial rule. Over time, prime ministerial authority was weakened under the emperor’s supremacy—for instance, the Ming dynasty abolished the office of the chancellor, further strengthening direct imperial control.

At the local level, the *commandery-county system* ensured that officials were appointed by and reported to the central government, handling administration, taxation, and justice under central supervision. This system secured effective control over local affairs and maintained national unity.

### 3.2 Characteristics of Japan’s Council System of the Kamakura Shogunate

#### 3.2.1 Coexistence of multiple power centers

During the Kamakura shogunate, power was distributed among the emperor, the shogun, and senior councilors (*shukuro*). The emperor, though symbolically supreme, wielded little real authority, which was largely cultural and religious. The shogun held practical political and military power but was subject to the councilors’ oversight. Senior councilors, as veteran statesmen with strong clan bases, played decisive roles in policymaking, with major issues requiring collective deliberation.

#### 3.2.3 Checks and balances through division of power

The shogunate created offices such as the *shikken* (regent), *samurai-dokoro* (military board), and *monchūjo* (judicial board), distributing administrative, military, and judicial powers to different officials. These institutions both cooperated and supervised one another, preventing excessive power concentration.

At the local level, the manorial system gave landowners considerable autonomy in administration, justice, and economy. While the shogunate exercised some control—such as appointments, taxation, and security enforcement—it never achieved the absolute dominance over local power that China did. Thus, decentralized forces remained strong in Japan’s political structure.

## 4 STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Decision-Making Efficiency and Executive Capacity

#### 4.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses of China’s centralized imperial system

Under China’s centralized imperial system, the decision-making process was relatively straightforward and efficient. The emperor could swiftly issue commands, mobilizing national manpower, material, and financial resources to respond to emergencies and major affairs. For example, in times of natural disasters or frontier conflicts, the emperor was able to immediately allocate resources and organize relief or military campaigns, thereby ensuring national stability and security. Moreover, a unified bureaucratic system and administrative directives ensured effective policy implementation, reduced local resistance and bureaucratic shirking, and facilitated the smooth enforcement of policies at the grassroots level, contributing to social-economic development and national unity.

However, such a highly centralized power structure also had evident drawbacks. Local officials often became overly reliant on central directives, lacking flexibility to adapt policies to local conditions. This not only weakened policy

effectiveness but also dampened local development vitality. Furthermore, the excessive concentration of power created fertile ground for corruption and instability. Ministers, eunuchs, or close courtiers around the emperor could exploit imperial authority for personal gain, forming corrupt cliques that misled the throne and induced poor decisions, sometimes shaking the very foundations of state governance.

#### **4.1.2 Characteristics of Japan's *shukurō* deliberative system**

Japan's *shukurō* deliberative system involved a more complex and lengthy decision-making process that required negotiation and consensus among multiple factions. While this often led to disagreements and delays, it also carried unique advantages. It allowed for the pooling of diverse wisdom and accommodated the interests of different groups, making decisions more inclusive and viable. In terms of execution, local lords, possessing a degree of autonomy, were more proactive in implementing policies that aligned with their own interests. Conversely, they might resist or neglect policies that conflicted with their local priorities, resulting in uneven implementation. From another perspective, however, this autonomy enabled local authorities to flexibly adapt policies to regional realities, better addressing local needs and avoiding rigid "one-size-fits-all" enforcement. In this sense, the system enhanced local adaptability and flexibility.

### **4.2 Political Stability and Social Order**

#### **4.2.1 Stability of China's centralized imperial system**

Within China's centralized imperial framework, the emperor held absolute authority, enabling effective coordination of interests and maintaining political stability and social order. For most of China's history, relatively long periods of unity and stable development were sustained. Centralized governance allowed the state to repel invasions, suppress rebellions, and resolve social conflicts and crises, thereby creating favorable conditions for economic prosperity and cultural continuity. For example, during the powerful Han and Tang dynasties, strong imperial authority and centralized institutions ensured national unification, territorial expansion, and cultural flourishing.

Nevertheless, this stability was not indestructible. The high concentration of power made the emperor's personal competence pivotal to the fate of the state. If the emperor was immature, ignorant, or indulgent, state affairs could fall under the control of corrupt officials or powerful relatives, resulting in corruption and turmoil. For instance, during the Tianqi reign of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Zhu Youjiao indulged in carpentry, while political authority was usurped by the eunuch Wei Zhongxian and his clique, notorious as the "Eunuch Party." Their abuse of power, persecution of dissenters, and rampant exploitation of the populace exacerbated social tensions, leading to large-scale peasant uprisings that hastened the dynasty's collapse. This illustrates that while centralized imperial rule could achieve strength and stability under a capable ruler, it was equally susceptible to crisis under weak or manipulated leadership.

#### **4.1.3 Stability of Japan's *shukurō* deliberative system**

Japan's decentralized power structure often led to frequent political struggles and internal conflicts. Rival power centers regularly clashed in pursuit of authority and interests. Factional rivalries within the shogunate and confrontations between local lords and central authority contributed to frequent regime changes and relative social instability in Japanese history. During the Sengoku period, Japan was engulfed in prolonged fragmentation and warfare, as competing *daimyō* fought for territory and supremacy for over a century, inflicting severe devastation on the economy and populace.

On the other hand, this decentralized structure provided Japanese society with greater resilience and adaptability. Local powers were able to independently handle regional affairs and respond to external changes, fostering diversified economic and cultural development. Furthermore, the *shukurō* deliberative system emphasized negotiation and consensus among factions, which helped balance interests and prevented any single force from dominating the state. This consultative decision-making model, to some degree, mitigated the risks of despotism and policy errors inherent in overly centralized systems.

## **5 LESSONS AND INSIGHTS**

### **5.1 Balancing Centralization and Decentralization**

The comparison between ancient China and Japan demonstrates that centralization and decentralization are not inherently superior or inferior. The key lies in finding a balance that aligns with national conditions and societal needs. Excessive centralization risks authoritarianism, abuse of power, and suppression of social dynamism, while excessive decentralization may lead to fragmentation, inefficiency, and disorder. In modern governance, states should, under the principles of democracy and rule of law, reasonably allocate power between central and local governments as well as between state institutions and civil society. Central governments should retain authority in macroeconomic regulation, strategic planning, and resource distribution, while granting sufficient autonomy and flexibility to local governments and social organizations to stimulate creativity and meet diverse regional and social needs.

### **5.2 Geopolitical Factors and Institutional Adaptability**

Geopolitical environments profoundly shape the formation and development of political institutions. Countries in different geographic contexts must construct power structures suited to their circumstances. China, with its vast territory and unevenly distributed resources, required strong central authority to integrate and allocate resources, promote

regional balance, and preserve unity and stability. By contrast, Japan, as an island nation with fragmented and complex geography, emphasized institutional flexibility and adaptability to cope with external uncertainties and the diversity of local powers. Hence, in designing political systems, countries should fully consider their geographical characteristics and cultural traditions. Instead of mechanically imitating foreign models, they must explore developmental paths consistent with their own national contexts.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The centralized imperial system of ancient China and the decentralized *shukurō* deliberative system of ancient Japan developed under the combined influence of distinct historical, geographical, and cultural conditions. By comparing their causes, structural differences, and impacts, we gain deeper insights into two representative political models of East Asian civilization. More importantly, such comparative analysis offers valuable lessons for the modernization of governance today—specifically, how to achieve rational power distribution, establish effective political order, and promote harmonious and stable social development[6-8].

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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