

Abstract

Modernization in Edo Japan and Qajar Iran (Structural and Cultural Preconditions)

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In the mid nineteenth century and early twentieth century two pre-modern societies, Edo Japan and Qajar Iran transitioned into modern societies with two very distinct outcomes. Despite having relatively similar pre-modern structures, Japan became a developed society while Iran remained underdeveloped. By focusing on issues of development and by applying a comparative-historical method, this paper answers the question, “*why did social change in these two societies lead to development in modern Japan and underdevelopment in modern Iran?*”

This extensive research is based on the most recent theoretical developments within the Modernization School and focuses on the organizational structure and some of its practices and institutions in each society as the unit of analysis. The original hypothesis that the organizational structures and the consequent cultural factors have an important role in development and underdevelopment of these two societies is supported. While the organizational structures often appeared to be similar at first glance, indeed there were distinct differences which created divergent cultures.

The study focuses on the pre-modern periods of Edo Japan (1603-1868) and Qajar Iran (1785-1925) in general and the reigns of the eighth shogun of Tokugawa, Yoshimune Tokugawa and the fourth king of Qajar, Nâsir al-Din Shâh. These periods preceded the formation of modern states in Japan (Meiji 1868) and Iran (Reza Shah 1925).

This study is comprised of three sections:

1. Methodology and theories
2. Organizational structure and sale of offices
3. Functions and cultural impact of the petition box

In the second section, the organizational structures of Japanese and Iranian societies are studied. Japanese clan (*uji*) and household (*ie*) societies and Iranian tribal society as the dominant structure are reviewed throughout their respective histories. The main focus is on comparing social units that placed importance on blood relations (*uji*) and those units that emphasized goals of preserving and continuing the family business as a way to serve the emperor, which allowed for the recruitment and adoption of people outside the kinship network (*ie*). Japanese *uji* society, which was based on blood relations, had more similarities with Iranian tribal societies.

The main organizational characteristics of *ie* included family related unilineal descent, and direct succession and inheritance to preserve and transfer the family wealth as well as the corporate related emphasis on maintaining the family business in service to others. Breaking the blood relation by adoption of a non-kin member to preserve the organization (*ie*) was the most distinctive feature because of its ability to adapt, which led to the development of a meritocracy based structure and culture that fostered modernization and development. This occurred both in the private business world as well as in the public bureaucratic sphere, although to a lesser extent in the latter after the Meiji Restoration. This unique socio-political structure differentiated *ie* from societies characterized by horizontal relations and complex family systems based on kinship such as *uji* and tribal systems. These systems often promoted and rewarded nepotism at the expense of service to others and led to weak bureaucracies. Nepotism thrived under the socio-political structures of Iranian tribal society, and developed a

culture that proved to be a formidable obstacle against modernization and development. At first glance, both pre-modern Japan and Iran had strict hierarchical societies with limited social mobility. Qajar Iran with a more patrimonial society was assumed to have a somewhat higher degree of social mobility, however Edo Japan instituted several reforms that actually opened up social mobility routes including: the ability to adopt talented non-blood relations into the family unit even when there was an existing heir; the supplemental salary (*tashidaka*) system which funded the promotion of talented people; and the sale of status (*gokenin kabu*). These three reforms contributed to Japan's development as it transitioned into the modern era and will be studied in depth. Of the three reforms, only a version of the sale of status was implemented in Iran and thus can be compared in order to study its affect on development in Iran.

In addition to the three reforms, other measures in Edo Japan were implemented, including *oshikome* ("forced retirement" or "house arrest") which gave authority to the lower domain elders to control the higher lord's behaviour; and *ringi* (circulation of documents) which allowed lower-ranking samurai in the government's administration to take part in decisions and show their abilities through a bottom-up system of decision-making. This suggests a certain level of individual autonomy and structural accountability within Japanese pre-modern society and are important to study their contribution to Japan's development. None of these measures had an equivalent in Qajar Iran.

The last section of this study focuses on the petition box system which was an indigenous and traditional institution which was established, albeit not coincidentally in Edo Japan and Qajar Iran, for functional reasons that included establishing direct contact with the public during periods of crises. While both had similar functional goals,

their actual practice was radically different and produced divergent functional outcomes. The actual adoption of the suggestion and critiques in *meyasubako* was its distinctive characteristic which differentiated it from Iranian *sandūq-i adâlat* (Justice Box).

Many factors contributed to the divergent functioning of the petition boxes in Japan and Iran and will be studied. In Japan, petitioners usually had higher literacy rates, rulers had different structures of legitimacy, officials had different problem solving approaches and developed a different approach to receiving and responding to suggestions and critiques than in Iran. In Japan, these differences led to more social mobility as people were rewarded and promoted for their talent and ideas. More importantly the system developed a public civic identity and sense of responsibility where commoners were incorporated into decision-making and problem solving. This created a public political arena for discussion that eventually would be the foundation for its modern version of representative (parliamentary) government. The absence of similar performance of this system in Iran became an obstacle to the importation of parliamentary institutions.

One simple pre-modern practice illustrates very well why Iran and Japan have had two very different outcomes with their transition to a modern society. While both countries instituted the petition box for similar reasons, it was in their functioning that we see the distinct socio-political structures and resulting cultures' influence that created two separate histories: Japan today is a developed country while Iran remains underdeveloped.