

# The Nobility: A Global Perspective

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## Preliminary Remark

Permit me to make a preliminary remark on my procedure: It is a generally accepted rule that in a lecture or a paper one should proceed from things that are well known to those that are less well known. As a European, I would like to begin by describing the European nobility and its characteristics, then turn towards the east, and finally, at the apex of the paper, so to speak, end up with Japan. (Regarding the Japanese nobility, I must confess, however, that almost all I know I have learned from Professor Schwentker of Osaka University). Thus, I will first describe the special traits of the European nobility. I will then look at the noble classes in other parts of the world, including those in Japan, compare them with the European nobility, and point out differences and common characteristics in the end.

## 1. The European Nobility

Every historian who deals with European history will come across the nobility. "European" in this sense refers to the geographical area in the west of the Eurasian continent, an area that has had fluctuating boundaries and broad transitional zones: In the East, Russia; in the Southeast, the Byzantine Empire, later on the Ottoman Empire and today Turkey. This geographical space has been characterized by common political, social, economic and cultural traits and interconnections that have developed since the Middle Ages. Among these common social traits and interrelations are the "European nobility".<sup>1</sup> Of course, in the following sections I can outline the characteristics of this nobility only in the form of an ideal type.

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<sup>1</sup> The following article was published originally in a German version in <http://www.dipp.zeitenblicke.de/2005/3/Demel/index.html>. For general descriptions of the European nobility, see: Michael L. Bush, *The European Nobility*, 2 vols. (New York and Manchester / New York, 1983/88); Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, 1996); Otto Gerhard Oexle and Werner Paravicini (eds.), *Nobilitas. Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa* (Göttingen, 1997); Jonathan Powis, *Der Adel* (Paderborn and München, 1986; English ed. 1984); Hans-Ulrich Wehler (ed.), *Europäischer Adel 1750–1950* (Göttingen, 1990); Walter Demel, *Der europäische Adel. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (München, 2005); the latter book contains additional bibliographical information; its contents are summed up in the sections below up to p. 7.

### **Belief in the Inheritance of Outstanding Human Qualities**

The ideas on which European nobility is based are reflected in the terms that are commonly used when we refer to this social phenomenon in the Romance and Germanic languages. The terms are "Adel", "nobility", "aristocracy". In German, Dutch, Danish and Swedish, the word "Adel" is related to "edel", which means "noble", as compared to "ordinary" people. In French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, the term "nobility" and similar words are derived from "noble", which has its origin in the Latin word "nobilis" / "notabilis" = "well-known". "Aristocracy" and similar expressions in other European languages mean that its members make up a community of the "best" – "aristoi" in Greek – with respect to their excellent human talents and virtues.<sup>2</sup>

"Nobility" as a concept is based on the assumption that outstanding personal qualities are inherited.<sup>3</sup> Some advocates of the theory of nobility therefore spoke of a special race, e.g. a "blue-blooded" one. As a result, the members of the elite themselves believed that they had a special right to their privileges, and that they should be inherited, as well.<sup>4</sup>

### **Warfare and a Multi-functional Elite**

In social reality, the European nobility developed from Roman and Germanic roots, and from an ethnic perspective, partly from Slavic roots, as well. In the Roman tradition, the nobleman was a representative of the "public authority"; he was always oriented towards the "first man" in the "state". In the Germanic kingdoms, however, "service for the king" primarily meant military service. Accordingly, the nobility that was formed in the Early Middle Ages was actually a community of warriors. But it was also more than that: The nobility was a multi-functional elite.<sup>5</sup> Politically and militarily, it dominated because it held offices and power; economically it dominated in the manorial system; socially it dominated through its superior prestige; and even culturally, it

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<sup>2</sup> See Werner Conze and Christian Meier, "Adel, Aristokratie", in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1970), 1–48, 1, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Gerhard Oexle, "Aspekte der Geschichte des Adels im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit", in Wehler (ed.), *Adel* (fn. 1), 19–56, 21; Monique de Saint Martin, *Der Adel. Soziologie eines Standes* (Konstanz, 2003; French original ed., 1993), 22, 275.

<sup>4</sup> On the Hungarian and Polish "noble nations", see: Peter Schimert, "The Hungarian Nobility in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", and Robert I. Frost, "The Nobility of Poland-Lithuania, 1569–1795", in Hamish M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1995), vol. 2, 144–182 (esp. 146) and 183–222 (esp. 185). For the idea of a noble race, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Une histoire des élites 1700–1848* (Paris and La Haye, 1975), 24. For the notion of an "elite", see: Thomas Burton Bottomore, *Elite und Gesellschaft* (München, 1966); Günter Endruweit, *Elite und Entwicklung. Theorie und Empirie zum Einfluß von Eliten auf Entwicklungsprozesse* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern and New York, 1986), 22–33. Endruweit differentiates elites according to different categories (values, achievements, power, etc.), and defines them as minorities with a positive connotation, gained through a selection process.

<sup>5</sup> Karl-Ferdinand Werner, *Naissance de la Noblesse. L'essor des élites politiques en Europe*, (2nd ed., Paris, 1998), II, 19, 89, 122f., 150f., 325f., 508; id., "Adel – 'Mehrzweck-Elite' vor der Moderne?", in id. (ed.), *Einheit der Geschichte* (Sigmaringen, 1999), 120–135; Friedrich Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg im frühen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1971); id., *Europäische Grundlagen deutscher Geschichte (4. –8. Jahrhundert)* (Gebhardt Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte, vol. I, sec. II, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., Stuttgart, 2004), 470–477; Werner Hechberger, *Adel, Ministerialität und Rittertum im Mittelalter* (Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte, vol. 72, München, 2004), 5–15, 63–72.

dominated through its way of life and its patronage of the arts. The nobility dominated the Roman Catholic Church in particular, and at least in the Catholic countries, an overwhelming majority of the ecclesiastical dignitaries were noblemen. That was generally true until about 1800; in the papacy, it was true even longer.<sup>6</sup>

### **The "Noble Elite" as a Ruling Class**

Whatever higher positions noblemen occupied, they were born to be rulers. While the uniform authority they formerly held in the High Middle Ages was later on divided into several different types of rule (manorial, judicial, etc.), if anyone who was not a nobleman exercised these rights, they were usually subject to certain restrictions.<sup>7</sup> In the beginning, the rule of the nobles was – at least in reality – autonomous, not derived from any higher authority, and thus hereditary. The elite that exercises this kind of rule is what I will call a "noble elite".

Additionally, European noblemen (including the noble-born bureaucrats of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) also always exercised a "derived", "delegated" or "awarded" rule in the service of kings, princes, churches, or corporations. It was not until 1789 that the states began to acquire a monopoly of power. With this development, the European nobility lost the right to rule "in its own right", from which it had derived a part of its self-confidence. As the nobility saw itself, its vocation was to rule, or else to serve a higher lord. Manual labour, however, was despised and proscribed, and the same applied to business activities, with the exception of marketing goods produced on one's own land. For a long time, even commerce was regarded as not befitting noble rank, at least outside of Italy.<sup>8</sup>

### **The European "Noble estate"**

Beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the European nobility was formed as an "estate" in the juridical and social sense that I want to call the "noble estate".<sup>9</sup> That is, the nobility became socially separate from the rest of the population by practising a special way of life. (I will come back to this point later on.) And juridically, it became separate by gaining customary and legally established hereditary privileges, although it must be said that not all members of the nobility possessed the privileges at all times, or possessed them exclusively. The hereditary legal privileges included:

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<sup>6</sup> Noble control of the Church in the Holy Roman Empire: Johannes Rogalla v. Bieberstein *Adelsherrschaft und Adelskultur in Deutschland* (Limburg an der Lahn, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1998), 130–163.

<sup>7</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, if a burgher bought a Bavarian manor (Hofmark), he was not entitled to exercise the juridical rights normally associated with it, and if he bought a Saxon manor, he did not get the right to attend the provincial diet. Hans Rall, *Kurbayern in der letzten Epoche der alten Reichsverfassung 1745–1801* (Schriftenreihe zur bayerischen Landesgeschichte, vol. 45, München, 1952), 353; Axel Flügel, *Bürgerliche Rittergüter. Sozialer Wandel und politische Reform in Kursachsen (1680–1844)* (Bürgertum, vol. 16, Göttingen, 2000), 76, 81, 197–209.

<sup>8</sup> For Germany and France, see: Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, "Handelsgeist und Adelsethos. Zur Diskussion um das Handelsverbot für den deutschen Adel vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert", in *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 15 (1988), 272–309.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Aurell, *La noblesse en Occident (V<sup>e</sup> – XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris, 1996), 94–132; for France: Philippe Contamine, *La Noblesse au royaume de France de Philippe le Bel à Louis XII* (Paris, 1997), 21–45.

- (1) Honours, e.g. titles, special forms of address, special seats in the church, coats-of-arms, etc.
- (2) Judicial privileges, i.e. special courts of justice, no torture or "dishonourable" punishments.
- (3) A monopoly on certain rights of rule, not least as a judge, and on most of the higher offices in the service of a prince or the Church; moreover, only nobles were entitled to certain types of landholdings (like fiefs or manors), including extensive hunting rights.
- (4) Legal privileges: Noble inheritance laws favoured the first-born in particular, and they entailed property rights, so that in many European countries, the estates of noble families were preserved over long periods of time.
- (5) Fiscal privileges: Noblemen were freed from many burdens such as state taxes, the *corvée*, personal military service, and the billeting of troops.<sup>10</sup>

### **Noble Honour and the Noble Family**

Since the High Middle Ages, the basic social structure of the nobility was no longer the kinship group or clan, but rather, the "noble house" or "family" in a direct patrimonial line of succession. The European nobility did not consist of individuals but of "families", or more exactly "lineages" or "houses". These expressions referred to a real or fictional noble ancestor or to the ancestral seat of a noble family.<sup>11</sup> Having such an ancestry, however, was no longer the only way of being considered noble. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century monarchs began the practise of ennobling persons as an award for certain achievements. In both cases, the collective remembrance of a great ancestor or of great ancestors established in the succeeding generations a consciousness of being better than other people, or at least the awareness that one should be better than others, and to conduct oneself accordingly.<sup>12</sup>

This pretension was supported by an external appearance intended to inspire awe: precious jewels, luxurious clothes (in accordance with early modern dress regulations), wigs, etc. Noble people preferred riding to walking; they did not eat but dined (sumptuous dishes like game or fine fish, if possible); they did not use wooden plates but precious tableware. Conspicuous consumption was also expressed in the architecture and furniture of their houses, and in their participation in certain urbane and courtly entertainments.<sup>13</sup> The nobleman's duty was not just to preserve his own rank; rather, it was to achieve an elevation in rank, if possible.

A noble family's age was decisive for its rank and precedence. To speak with Pierre Bourdieu, a

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bush, *Nobility*, (fn. 1), vol. 1, who mentions somewhat different categories for these privileges. In borderline cases, like the English gentry or the Hungarian Székely, some groups had only a few of the above-mentioned privileges, at least in a legally fixed form.

<sup>11</sup> Oexle, *Aspekte*, (fn. 3), 27–30; Werner, *Naissance*, (fn. 5), 458.

<sup>12</sup> Contamine, *Noblesse*, (fn. 9), 65–84; Saint Martin, *Adel*, (fn. 3), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Werner Paravicini, *Die ritterlich-höfische Kultur des Mittelalters* (Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte, vol. 32, München, 1994), 8–10; Timothy Reuter, "Nobles and Others: The Social and Cultural Expression of Power Relations in the Middle Ages", in Anne J. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe. Concepts, Origins and Transformations* (Woodbridge, 2000), 85–98, esp. 89–93.

family's age was being regarded in former times as the "symbolic capital of honour" accumulated by the ancestors. And every succeeding generation had to add to this capital as much as possible. What "honourable conduct" meant could originally be learned from the knights' code of honour, a product of the lay culture of the medieval courts.<sup>14</sup> There, the education of a noble scion was dedicated entirely to conveying these noble values. For the same purpose, special and more or less exclusive educational institutions were being founded since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, mainly for the male offspring.<sup>15</sup> Over time there were certainly some changes in the ideal conduct that was expected of a "real courtier", but what did not alter was the general principle that a nobleman had to defend his honour, and even more so, the honour of his family, if necessary even by force.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, noble men and women had to subordinate their own interests to those of the family, especially regarding family property and the inheritance of noble qualities. This was particularly important with respect to marriage.<sup>17</sup> The European nobility was basically endogenous.

### **The "Noble Corporation"**

Since the High Middle Ages, the European nobility also developed into an Estate in the political sense, and in this function, it may be called a "noble corporation". Nearly everywhere in Europe, corporations came into being which participated more or less often and more or less successfully in the political decision-making at imperial or provincial diets.<sup>18</sup> This development almost always included a chamber of noblemen from late medieval times on,<sup>19</sup> and in some cases (such as in Poland and Venice), the nobility more or less exclusively dominated even within a "republic". Still the constitutional monarchies of the "long" 19<sup>th</sup> century had their "Houses of Lords" endowed with legislative powers and mostly composed of highborn members.

### **Structures and Interrelationships in the World of the European Nobility**

The European nobility can be called truly "European" due to its structures and interrelationships. In terms of structure, the European nobility was divided into higher and lower nobility ever since the Middle Ages, though in special cases it may be difficult to draw a boundary line between the two

<sup>14</sup> Paravicini, *Kultur* (fn. 13), 6–8; Werner, *Naissance* (fn. 5), 485–488; Maurice Keen, *Das Rittertum* (German ed., München and Zürich, 1987, English ed., 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Noble education: Norbert Conrads, *Ritterakademien der frühen Neuzeit. Bildung als Standesprivileg im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Schriftenreihe der Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 21, Göttingen, 1982), esp. 28, 40–43, 80, 243–246; Rudolf Stichweh, *Der frühmoderne Staat und die europäische Universität* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 261–284; Rogalla v. Bieberstein, *Adelsherrschaft* (fn. 6), 283–311.

<sup>16</sup> Consider the long-lasting importance of the duel, whose relics influenced the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Ute Frevert, *Ehrenmänner. Das Duell in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (München, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> On the general situation: Dewald, *Nobility* (fn. 1), 168–176; a meticulous case study is: Heinz Reif, *Westfälischer Adel 1770–1860* (Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft, vol. 35), Göttingen 1979, 78–122, 240–315.

<sup>18</sup> A case study is: Karl Bosl, *Die Geschichte der Repräsentation in Bayern: Landständische Bewegung, Landständische Verfassung, Landesausschuß und altständische Gesellschaft* (München, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> For early modern exceptions like Württemberg and Castile, see: Volker Press, *Kaiser Karl V., König Ferdinand und die Entstehung der Reichsritterschaft* (Institut für europäische Geschichte Mainz, Vorträge, Nr. 60, Wiesbaden 1976), 16–20; Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *El Antiguo Régimen: Los Reyes Católicos y los Austrias* (Historia de España Alfaguara, vol. 3, Madrid 1973, 9<sup>th</sup> reprint, 1986), 214.

kinds.<sup>20</sup> Since that time, a hierarchy of titles spread out over the entire continent (though reaching northern and eastern Europe with a certain delay): dukes, marquesses, earls, barons, etc. Only in Poland did the nobility largely retain an outward juridical equality with regard to titles, despite the fact that in Poland, just as in Hungary and Spain, the differences in property holdings between a handful of magnates and the large mass of the lower nobility were particularly great.<sup>21</sup>

Partly independent of the question of ranks, the European aristocracy was characterized by a high degree of geographical mobility. Already in the Middle Ages, many knights travelled to far-away lands during the Crusades. And in the Early Modern Age, many young noblemen made a Grand Tour through Europe.<sup>22</sup> Noblemen frequently served as military or civil officers at the courts of foreign princes, not just when they were forced to emigrate from their homelands for political reasons.

Since in principle noblemen had access to other noblemen, numerous contacts were developed, and these could lead to marriages. In the high aristocracy and especially in the royal dynasties it was quite normal to look for marriage partners outside one's own country or region, since special care was taken to maintain social equality. Thus, a Europe-wide network of marriage relations was established, which seems to have lost a little of its strength only during the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>23</sup> Some ruling families can even be described as truly "European" dynasties. For example: At some point in their history, most European countries had at least one male or female offspring of the Habsburg dynasty on their thrones.

### Characteristics of the European Nobility

To sum up we can say that the "European nobility" was a ruling "noble elite" with numerous

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<sup>20</sup> Hechberger, *Adel* (fn. 5), 22, 32; Paravicini, *Kultur* (fn. 13), 22, 36; Michael Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> See the relevant articles in: Scott, *Nobilities* (fn. 4); also I. A. A. Thompson, "The Nobility in Spain, 1600–1800", in *ibid.*, vol. I, 174–236; Jean-Stanislas Myciński, *La noblesse polonaise de l'Ancien Régime et son évolution* (Lille, 1992); Edward Opalinski, "Die Freiheit des Adels. Ideal und Wirklichkeit in Polen-Litauen im 17. Jahrhundert", in Ronald G. Asch (ed.), *Der europäische Adel im Ancien Régime. Von der Krise der ständischen Monarchien bis zur Revolution (1600–1789)* (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2001), 77–104; Robert J. W. Evans, "Der Adel Ungarns in der Habsburgermonarchie im 18. Jahrhundert", in *ibid.*, 345–362; David García Hernán, *La Nobleza en la España moderna* (Madrid, 1992), 20, 29–38, and *ibid.*, 59, fn. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Werner Paravicini, *Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*, 2 vols. (Francia suppl. 17, Sigmaringen 1989/95), vol. I, 24–29; id., "Von der Heidenfahrt zur Kavaliertour. Über Motive und Formen adeligen Reisens im späten Mittelalter", in Horst Brunner and Norbert Richard Wolf (ed.), *Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Bedingungen, Typen, Publikationen, Sprache* (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter, vol. 13, Wiesbaden, 1993), 91–130; Peter Thorau, *Die Kreuzzüge* (München, 2004), 49–55; Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Geschichte der Kreuzzüge*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., Stuttgart, 1995), 23–28, 39–42. For case studies of cavalier tours, see: Katrin Keller, "Der sächsische Adel auf Reisen. Die Kavaliertour als Institution adeliger Standesbildung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert", in ead. and Josef Matzerath (eds.), *Geschichte des sächsischen Adels* (Weimar, 1997), 257–274.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Demel, "'European nobility' oder 'European nobilities'? Betrachtungen anhand genealogischer Verflechtungen innerhalb des europäischen Hochadels (ca. 1650–1800)", in Wolf Dieter Gruner and Marcus Völkel (eds.), *Region – Territorium – Nationalstaat – Europa* (Rostock, 1998), 81–104.

functions. It formed political "noble corporations" and was a hierarchical social "estate" with specific notions of honour, codes of conduct, ideals (especially regarding education), family norms, and relative wealth and a corresponding lifestyle. Geographically, it was comparatively mobile, and thus there were marriage interrelationships over large distances across the European continent.

## 2. The Russian Nobility

### The Russian Boyars

Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia (the Muscovite Empire) was not integrated into these dynastic interrelationships, nor did its nobility display any European traits. It appears that since its early beginnings, Russia had only a "service nobility" led by boyars, who were summoned to advise the tsar, either as individuals or as a group. (Note that the "Boyar Duma" is a modern term.) And as long as the boyars were able to change about in the service of different princes and still retained their inherited landed property, their position was relatively strong, though not as strong as it was in Kiev or Novgorod. However, as a result of internal rivalry, frequent transfers from one region to another, the custom of partible inheritances and the expansion of the Muscovite Empire, their forces were diminished.

The Muscovite boyars were descended partly from members of the tsars' retinues and partly from distinguished higher-ranking servicemen from the principalities that had been integrated into the Muscovite empire since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. They were therefore "international" in descent. They ruled over their peasant communities without a central government authority being able to control them effectively until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were thus a hierarchical multi-functional "noble elite" that ruled at the local level, but they did not form a recognized "noble estate".

While the boyar rank was usually transferred to another member of that same boyar family after a certain length of time in service, the rank itself was not directly hereditary; however, in these social circles, service for the tsar was required by both family tradition and the ruler's intent. In 1681, this quasi-hereditary "service elite" made up nearly 0.6 percent of the Russian population, but this elite enjoyed only few privileges, and these were customary rather than legally secured. The boyars received both their positions and their properties exclusively from the autocratic tsars, at the latest since Ivan IV, who realigned the heritable lands with the allotted estates. Even in times of insecurity, after 1610 and again in 1648–49, they did not succeed in establishing a permanent corporative participation in the government of the country. The last boyar died in 1750.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Harmut Rüss, *Adel und Adelsopposition im Moskauer Staat* (Wiesbaden, 1975); Robert O. Crummey, "Die Staatsbedingte Gesellschaft revisited", in id., Holm Sundhaussen and Ricarda Vulpius (eds.), *Russische und Ukrainische Geschichte vom 16.–18. Jahrhundert* (Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte, vol. 58, Wiesbaden, 2001), 21–27; Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 34, 67–70, 86–96, 112, 121–124; 138–141; Klaus Heller, *Russische Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, vol. I: Die Kiever und die Moskauer Periode (9.–17. Jahrhundert)* (Darmstadt, 1987), 84–99; Edgar Hösch, *Geschichte Rußlands. Vom Kiever Reich bis zum Zerfall des Sowjetimperiums* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, 1996), 87–91; Andreas Kappeler, *Russische Geschichte* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., München, 2003), 17, 20, 49; Isabel de Madariaga, "The Russian Nobility in the Seventeenth and

### **A "European" Elite for Russia: Tsar Peter's Nobility**

In 1722, tsar Peter I promulgated a new Table of Ranks by which all higher civil ranks and all military ranks, from sergeant upward, secured the hereditary nobility, and all lower civil ranks, from staff registrar upward, secured the personal nobility. Rank was now decisive for receiving privileges. Moreover, Peter also introduced a "European" hierarchy of noble titles. Thus, for the first time, a person could be ennobled with a title like "count". But the State service initially did not require many personnel, and more than 80 percent of the military officers continued to be recruited from the hereditary nobility, a powerful yet relatively permeable "ruling class". Therefore, at least in the beginning, the reforms of Peter I strengthened the position of the traditional boyar families.

In 1762, the nobility were relieved of their service obligation, but only a minority preferred not to serve in State offices. Since that year, they were also equipped with official privileges, like a monopoly on the ownership of land and peasants, who were now definitely made serfs. This was the beginning of the Russian "noble estate", but its privileges were not codified until the 1830s.

Nobles members formed large parts of the Legislative Commission of 1766–68 and of the corporative assemblies established "from above" in 1785, which were given certain political rights at the provincial and district level. This was the beginning of the political corporations that were created on the western model, an instrument, however, of which the Russian nobility made little use during the first decades. Participation rights were improved after 1864, but now property qualifications were required for elections.

Due to the expansion of the government service, about 1 percent of the Russian population were now hereditary nobility, and about 0.5 percent were personal nobility. After the abolition of the servitude of peasants in 1861, however, many nobles sold their landholdings. While this did not result in their automatic economic and social decline, the self-awareness of the noble estate as a whole dwindled.

In 1906, the State Duma was established as a national parliament, and now the ruling classes, including many noblemen *as landlords*, were for the first time given a formal participation in the affairs of the central government, after previous attempts had failed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, this participation was more formal than real, because the Duma was dissolved several times, not least because the landlords had strongly opposed all steps towards democracy. In a certain sense, there was now a "European nobility" in Russia, but this nobility was internally divided – until it was finally abolished in 1917 by Lenin, the scion of an ennobled family of bureaucrats.<sup>25</sup>

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Eighteenth Centuries", in Scott (ed.), *Nobilities* (fn. 4), 223–273. For the following section, see: Hans-Joachim Torke, "Adel", in id. (ed.), *Lexikon der Geschichte Rußlands* (München, 1985), 11–16.

<sup>25</sup> Jurij M. Lotman, *Rußlands Adel. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Peter I. bis Nikolaus I.* (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 1997; Russian ed., 1994), 19–43; Marc Raeff, "The Russian Nobility in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Trends

### 3. Nobility in Southeastern Europe

From the perspective of a history of the nobility, the southeast portion of the European continent did not really become a part of Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the Bulgarians and Serbs did have "noble elites" in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, comparable to those in other European countries, these structures were destroyed during the Ottoman conquests during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The landholdings that had been the economic basis of the Christian noble families were mostly transferred to the Ottoman provincial cavalry in the form of prebends. The Serbs and Bulgarians – but not the Bosnians, who converted to Islam – therefore had practically no ruling classes of their own any more until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these countries, the "European nobility" was thus only a modern creation of the newly founded southeast European kingdoms, and it had only a few members.<sup>26</sup>

### 4. Elites of the Ottoman Empire

#### The Ottoman Empire in its Hey-day: an Empire without Nobility

This kind of nobility did not exist in the entire Ottoman Empire. It could not arise or maintain itself because for a long time, neither inheritance nor estate privileges were part of the Ottoman "timar system". Certainly, in the early history of the Turks, there was a ruling class with its own particular funeral rites,<sup>27</sup> and the Seldjuks did have a landholding elite below the level of their "princes". But at the time when the Ottoman emirate was expanded from a small principality into a powerful sultanate, only parts of the conquered land properties were given to the members of the ruling dynasty, its military, and later on also to its civil officers. Moreover, land was exclusively allotted in the form of prebends, which differed in size according to the receiver's rank. (Initially, "timar" meant the prebend of a cuirassier). The owners of these prebends did not have to pay any taxes and received a fixed rent from the peasants, but they had no other rights.

Finally, Mehmet the Conqueror carried out a "land reform" and reduced the percentage of inheritable private lands to little more than 5 to 10 percent of the productive land in his empire. Prebends, however, could not be sold, given away or bequeathed; instead, they could be recovered by the sultan at any time, and normally they were allotted to meritorious dignitaries, who were largely without property and completely dependent on the sultan. The dignitaries often originated from the child levy (in Turkish: *devşirme*) and had attended the Serail School. Accordingly, they

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and Comparisons", in Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch (eds.), *The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe* (New Haven, 1983), 99–121; Hosking, *Russia* (fn. 24), 202, 205, 374–378; Kappeler, *Geschichte* (fn. 24), 24–26, 54f.; Hösch, *Geschichte* (fn. 24), 160–162, 190–193, 209–214, 276, 315; John P. LeDonne, *Absolutism and Ruling Class. The Formation of the Russian Political Order 1700–1825* (New York and Oxford, 1991), VIII–XIII, 3–9, 22–28, 297–309; Seymour Becker, *Nobility and privilege in late imperial Russia* (Dekalb, Ill., 1985), 16–29, 140–143, 158–166, 171–178.

<sup>26</sup> Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch, "The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe", in *ibid.* (eds.), *Nobility* (fn. 25), 1–16 (esp. 6). The (Muslim) nobility of Bosnia was not only largely integrated into the Ottoman elite, but at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was already allowed to bequeath prebends in exceptional cases.

<sup>27</sup> Bruno Öhrig, *Bestattungsriten alttürkischer Aristokraten im Lichte der Inschriften* (München, 1988), 22, 76–80, 85, 335–343.

were "international", but mostly they were not of noble descent. Some of them constituted the *divan*, an imperial council, but this institution only had the role of advising the sultan, who continued to be an absolute ruler. Thus, during the hey-day of the Ottoman Empire, there was no nobility in the sense of a legally or politically privileged estate; at most, the nobility only existed as an "unofficial" estate. Not even the many descendants of the Prophet Mohammed could be considered as a "noble elite".<sup>28</sup>

### **Initial Signs of the Formation of a Nobility in the Late Ottoman Empire**

By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the timar system slowly began to disintegrate, despite various reorganization efforts; however, it was not abolished until 1831. The high-ranking dignitaries increasingly behaved like owners and extended their land possessions even at the expense of the timars, which were frequently divided up and depreciated by inflation. The practice of *devşirme* fell into disuse, there was widespread corruption, and offices could be bought. Now native Turks normally held the highest positions, but the central government lost influence and authority.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, power passed on to the greater and lesser hereditary feudal lords, who forced their peasants – serfs, now bound to the soil – to do labour service. Finally, the government even summoned this "noble elite" to an Imperial Assembly that was formed from these notables. In 1808, a document was signed by which the sultan guaranteed that in return for a rather limited subordination the notables could keep their social position; however, a palace revolt put an end to these attempts to form a "noble estate" and a "noble corporation". In 1818, however, compulsory labour service was abolished, and in the 1820s, the notables were subjugated by force. The subsequent "reorganization" (*tanzimat*) was to a certain extent oriented on European models.

The Parliament that was established by the Constitution of 1876 not only contained a House of Commons but also a "Council of Notables" (or "Senate"), but its members were selected entirely by the sultan. Moreover, the Parliament as a whole was dissolved only two years later, in 1878, which shows that in fact there was no noble estate that the sultan would have had to take into account.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ferenc Majoros and Bernd Rill, *Das Osmanische Reich 1300–1922* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 114, 180; Klaus Kreiser, *Der Osmanische Staat 1300–1922* (Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte, vol. 30, München, 2001), 20, 24, 145; Josef Matuz, *Das Osmanische Reich. Grundlinien seiner Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 1985), 20–23, 31, 39, 68–71, 81 (fn. 58), 86–89, 100, 104, 110; Stanford J. Shaw, "Das Osmanische Reich und die moderne Türkei", in Gustave Edmund v. Grunebaum (ed.), *Der Islam II: Die islamischen Reiche nach dem Fall Konstantinopels* (Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol. 15, Frankfurt am Main, 1971), 24–159, esp. 41–61; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., München, 2004), 21, 29; ead., "Crisis and Change 1590–1699", in Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert (ed.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, 1994), 411–636 (esp. 549–552); Halil Inalcik, "L'Empire ottoman", in id., *Studies in Ottoman Social and Economic History*, London 1985, vol. II, 75–103 (esp. 81–86); id., "The Nature of Traditional Society: Turkey", in id., *The Ottoman Empire. Conquest, Organization and Economy* (London, 1978), XV, 42–63 (esp. 43).

<sup>29</sup> Matuz, *Das Osmanische Reich*, 146, 152–155, 177–183, 190, 197, 204, 215f., 222–224, 236, 240; Shaw, *Osmanisches Reich*, 100, 106, 131; Majoros and Rill, *Das Osmanische Reich* (fn. 28), 259, 351; Kreiser, *Staat* (fn. 28), 35; Inalcik, "L'Empire" (fn. 28), 99–103; id., "Nature" (fn. 28), 45–63; Faroqhi, *Geschichte* (fn. 28), 63, 87, 94–97; Bruce McGowan, "The Age of the Ayans, 1699–1812", in Inalcik and Quataert (eds.), *History* (fn. 28),

## 5. Nobility in India

### The Indian Kshatriyas: a "Noble Elite" with a Limited Reputation

The picture is much more complex when we look at India. According to Louis Dumont's theory – which, however, has been contested – the four varnas of early times were social estates. They included the estate of the kshatriyas (knights, literally: "men of the realm"), which was split into a royal aristocracy and the subordinate lower nobility. This estate ruled by imposing taxes on the villages, but it may have disintegrated into rivalling clans already at an early period. Afterwards, the caste system in the narrow sense was superimposed on the varna system. This jāti system, which varied considerably from one region to another, was built on the idea of different grades of religious purity. The fact that the Brahmins (i.e. priests) stood at the top of both hierarchies led Dumont to assume that in India, the distribution of power differed very much from the social reputation. Of course, in Europe, as well, the clergy was traditionally the "first estate", but here, ever since the Middle Ages, the highest ecclesiastical positions were filled with nobles.

In India, the castes and sub-castes were strictly separated from one another (though not without exceptions) by endogenous practices and diverse bans on contacts, especially in the context of eating and drinking. Status and power, spiritual and secular authority, were only connected by the fact that the power of the kshatriyas was subordinate to, and legitimated by, the Brahmins (although in reality things may have been the other way round). The kshatriyas, who ate meat and were polygamous, and were thus relatively "impure", were a "noble elite", but their social function was much more limited than that of their medieval European counterparts.<sup>30</sup>

### Nobility Structures in the Early Hindu Empires

In the Maurya Empire, the first major empire in the history of India, the kshatriyas seem to have been largely dependent on royal power. The same was also true in the central regions of the Gupta Empire; however, on its borders there were princes who were committed to paying tribute and to appearing personally at the court of the emperor. Later on, they became rulers or vassals of the diverse succeeding states, since there had been no effective central government since the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

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637–758 (esp. 658–679).

<sup>30</sup> Louis M. Dumont, *Gesellschaft in Indien. Die Soziologie des Kastenwesens* (German ed., Wien, 1976; French ed., 1966), 35, 39, 90–98, 139–143, 188–205; Hermann Kuhlke and Dietmar Rothermund, *Geschichte Indiens* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, Mainz, 1982), 45–47; Michael Witzel, *Das Alte Indien* (München, 2003), 38, 42, 64. For a detailed criticism of Dumont, see: Gordon Johnson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of India [NCHI]*, 31 vols. (forthcoming), Cambridge and New York [etc.] 1987– (esp. vol. IV/3: Susan Bayly, "Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age", *ibid.*, 1999, 14–24; Bayly describes varna und jāti as regionally and historically varying "composites of ideals and practices", and believes that "Kshatriya-centred manifestations of caste value" had spread only during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*, 27), but that they exercise influence until today; 30, 50–52, 59–63, 327–331). Ram Nath Sharma, *Society and Culture in India* (Meerut, 1975), 9–12, 20–22, thinks that the varna system (as opposed to the jāti system) was originally based more on the idea of personal characteristics and achievements than on principles of inheritance; therefore, social mobility and marriage between different estates were possible. According to Siva Banerji, Horst Nusser and Usha Roti, *Die politische, soziale und wirtschaftliche Geschichte Indiens in der Neuzeit* (München, 1990), chapter C 5, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas each comprised 10 % of the population during the last census of the castes held in 1901; but "castes" are, by the way, a purely European notion.

Until that time, the high officials had been rewarded with fixed salaries, but now they received tax revenues from villages or entire districts, just as the "border princes" did who, endowed with offices and dignities, surrounded the Gupta Emperor. Thus, the empire fell apart into loosely connected principalities that were often at war with each other, and besides the new regional kings, there developed a feudal nobility that did not have uniform titles or a hierarchy, but an hereditary status. These nobles administered justice, protected the people with their own troops, and raised taxes. They were obligated to pay regular tribute to their kings, and eventually to provide troops and to visit the royal court on certain occasions. On the other hand, they had a right to take part in decisions about the royal succession, and they were usually entitled to hand down their fiefs to their heirs. Even if one of them lost his fief, due to high treason, for example, in most cases it was transferred to another member of his family. Thus, Indian society displayed some traits that can well be compared to the formation of estates in medieval Europe. Some of the kshatriyas, the Rajputs of Rajasthan, even developed a culture of chivalry that radiated out into the whole of northern India.<sup>31</sup>

### **Nobles in the Muslim Empires of India**

This development in India was abruptly ended by a Muslim invasion, similar to the situation in the Balkans. In the Turko-Afghan sultanate of Delhi (1206–1525), the Hindu elites maintained their position only in rural areas. The ruling class at the central and regional level was formed by a Muslim "sword nobility" whose members had very different roots, though most of them were of Turkish origin. They had a decisive part in expanding the empire, in repelling the Mongol invasions, in subduing rebellions, and also in resolving questions of succession to the throne. Practically all sultans came from these circles; some had originally even been slaves who had risen to high offices and finally to the sultanate.

This "sword nobility", however, was basically no more than a service-nobility, though a very powerful one. It was the creation of single dynasties or sultans whose personnel varied with almost every change on the throne. Due to its patronage of the arts and its land ownership, it played an important role in cultural and economic affairs. But the individual noble did not have a legally guaranteed status but only an office, and he possessed his prebends only for a certain amount of time, at least theoretically. In reality, however, under the rule of weak sultans, the prebends tended to be inheritable, similar to the situation under the late Ottomans.<sup>32</sup>

After Babur (or Baber) had conquered India, these structures did not change much. Of course, under the reign of the first two Mughal emperors, the nobility overwhelmingly consisted of Turanis.

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<sup>31</sup> Witzel, *Indien*, 83, 110; Kuhlke and Rothermund, *Geschichte* (both fn. 30), 46, 66, 94, 129, 142–152; Direndra Nath Ojha, *Aristocracy in Medieval India* (Delhi, 1993), 9–18.

<sup>32</sup> Ojha, *Aristocracy* (fn. 31), 15–47; Kuhlke and Rothermund, *Geschichte* (fn. 30), 187–202, which also deals with the unsuccessful attempt of Sultan Ala-du-din (1296–1316) to build up a loyal bureaucracy from the local to the central level of government.

But most of these nobles insisted on their own Timurid descent, they had hereditary privileges, and showed little loyalty. Therefore, Akbar the Great increasingly enlisted other groups to govern: emigrated Shiite Persians, Uzbeks, Indian Sunnites, and even noble or princely Hindu Rajputs. For the first time, the Indian local nobility of the Zamindars was partly integrated, but partly it was also annihilated. Akbar recovered the prebends temporarily and had them surveyed and re-allotted. All offices were classified according to a sophisticated number system that indicated the status, the income group, and the size of the cavalry regiment that had to be deployed. But this basically meritocratic system could not prevent that later on there was a growing self-recruitment within this service-nobility and an increasing frequency in the inheritance of prebends.

At the same time, the nobility developed from a military retinue to a cultivated court aristocracy. Thereby it generally strengthened its position, because in succession quarrels the defeated party usually won fast access to the ruler. Thus, there were some steps to forming a "noble estate" but not a "noble corporation", since the ethnic and religious differences were too great. The system lost its balance when Shah Jahan and his son Aurangzeb multiplied the number of prebended office-holders within the context of their conquests, and integrated new men from southern India. Moreover, with the advance of firearms, the organization of the Mughal troops proved to be out-dated. The orthodox Islamic emperor Aurangzeb increasingly lost control of the divided factions of his nobility. After his death in 1707, the Mughal Empire began to dissolve.<sup>33</sup>

### **Elite Transformation under British Colonial Rule**

Eventually, the relatively independent regional princes, the maharajas, came under more or less indirect British rule. After the rebellion of 1857, however, the British rewarded them and some big landowners for their loyalty or at least strengthened their position and tried to establish a sort of vassalage between them and the new empress Victoria. At the same time, the British stripped the Zamindars, who had in the meantime become stronger, of a part of their authority. On the other hand, at least in Bengal, the former landlords were acknowledged as tax-paying owners of leasehold properties. Thus, since that time there existed, at least on this level, a noble elite that could perhaps be characterized as an Indian "gentry".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kuhlke and Rothermund, *Geschichte* (fn. 30), 224–231; Afsal Husain, *The Nobility under Akbar and Jahāngīr* (Manohar, 1999), 1–10, 182–192; Firdor Anwar, *Nobility under the Mughals (1628–1658)* (Manohar, 2001), 190–194; Barbara N. Ramusack, "The Indian Princes and Their States", in *NCHI* (fn. 30), vol. III/6 (2004), 111–114, 185; John F. Richards, "The Mughal Empire", in *NCHI* (fn. 30), vol. I/5 (1993), 19–25, 59–68, 80–88, 143–150, 163, 172, 191–193, 242–246, 294–296; Muhammad Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (new ed., Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Mumbai, 1997), XIX, 12–37, 171–174, maintains that only holders of higher ranks were considered to be members of the nobility ("umara") (*ibid.*, XV, 39).

<sup>34</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, "Indian society and the making of the British Empire", in *NCHI* (fn. 30), vol. II/1 (1988), 9–11, 65, 147–153, 197; Kuhlke and Rothermund, *Geschichte*, (fn. 30), 268, 271, 290.

## 6. The Feudal Nobility and "Gentry" in China

### The Feudal Nobility in Early China

As in India, in early China there existed a feudal system that began in the Shang period and that persisted in a distinct form under the Zhou. Thus, there was an upper class structured by a series of titles, in which lower lords were obligated to support and pay tribute to higher lords. On the other hand, the lower lords often had a practically autonomous right to rule their own fiefs. Thus, early China had a "noble elite".

It appears that originally, the "servants of a prince", "lords" or "knights" with a clan name (shi) were those who fought on a chariot. But during the period of the "Warring States" (*chan-kuo*, 403–221 B.C.) – these were vassal principalities that had become independent "states" – a major part of the noble families who traced their origins back to divine ancestors fell into decay. But already in those times, the ruling classes used the services of a new social group, the "scholars", i.e. ritual specialists like Confucius. The word "shi" was eventually transferred to these scholars.<sup>35</sup>

### The Chinese "Gentry"

The "scholars" of the Confucian tradition (who were also influenced by Legalism, however) shared common values and a knowledge of the Chinese characters and the "official" language. They were to become the bearers of the bureaucratic and cultural traditions of the centralized empire that the autocratic "First Emperor" had created in 221 B.C. The Confucian doctrine, which was further evolving, propagated certain moral and meritocratic principles and a universal and patriarchal hierarchical order. It therefore met the needs of the bigger landlords, who were dominant at the local level ever since the decay of feudalism. For similar reasons this was also congenial with the interests of the rulers, who made use of the scholar-bureaucrats to govern the empire. If an emperor violated the Confucian principles, however, he risked his own legitimacy.

There were intimate contacts between the (central) bureaucracy and the "local gentry", which did not exclude the possibility that the interests of the bureaucratic and local elites were different in some respects. While a part of the extended family lived on the ancestral land, the clan took care that talented sons received a good education so that they could enter the civil service, which was normally a prestigious but less than lucrative job. Not all who tried were successful, of course, but if they were, filial piety obligated them to attend to the interests of their families. Thus, the

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<sup>35</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *Geschichte Chinas* (Stuttgart, 1971), 24f., 30, 35, 43; Hsiao-tung [Xiaotong] Fei, *China's Gentry*, ed. by M. P. Redfield (Chicago, 1953), 17f., fn. 1; Herbert Franke and Rolf Trauzettel, *Das Chinesische Kaiserreich* (Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol. 19, Frankfurt am Main, 1968), 34, 39, 42, 44, 50f., 55f.; Dieter Kuhn, *Status und Ritus. Das China der Aristokraten von den Anfängen bis zum 10. Jahrhundert nach Chr.* (Heidelberg, 1991), 186f. Kuhn observes that Confucius himself originated from a family of "shi", the lower noble class (*ibid.*, 238f.). See also Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Das alte China: von den Anfängen bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (München, 2002), 24–27; id., *China. Vielvölkerreich und Einheitsstaat* (München, 1997), 64. The following discussion on China has benefited greatly from the friendly comments of Professor Dr. Schmidt-Glintzer (Göttingen / Wolfenbüttel), to whom I want to express my gratitude.

characteristic feature of the Chinese "gentry" was the connection between formal rank (earned through education), on the one hand, and property (normally in the form of landholding), on the other. The main lines of such "gentry" families maintained their leading positions for hundreds of years, not only during the Han era. Thus, despite many changes, the "gentry system" continued to exist until the Literary Revolution of 1917–19, when the administrative and literary monopoly of the classical written language that was associated with the Confucian examination system was abolished, or until the Communist "land reform" that began in 1950 finally put a definite end to it.<sup>36</sup>

However, one can speak of a "noble elite" only with major qualifications. The "local gentry" mainly lived from the rents they received, but they had no hereditary privileges, although their members could often expect to get privileged treatment, such as in taxation or punishment. They mostly had no real power (except perhaps during the Song period), but due to their wealth and prestige, they controlled the local self-government institutions. These local institutions had to fulfil many tasks, such as organizing irrigation works, religious activities and self-defence, and mediating in disputes. The local gentry's prestige was consolidated by "social services" like patronage of the temples. But jurisdiction and tax collecting normally were in the hands of state bureaucrats, who were often moved from one place to another. After the old feudal nobility had lost its influence, however, special schools were being founded already since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. There examinations were conducted for future officials, although such examinations were not yet compulsory for all imperial officials.

The decay of the Han Empire had to do with the fact that the regional interests of the "gentry" now came to the fore. Due to the invasions of the northern "barbarians", many rich families emigrated to the south, where the "gentry" culture reached its peak during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. For a few centuries, one can even speak of a "noble estate" in the south, rather than a "gentry" in the above sense. Power was in the hands of an oligarchy of several hundred extended families that were defined by their genealogies and a code of conduct of their own. Obviously, the contrast between the immigrated meritocratic officials and the indigenous big landowners diminished over time.

In northern China, however, non-Chinese half-nomadic elites ruled after the fall of the Han, such as the Tuoba-Wei, a Turkish tribe, which even declared many offices to be hereditary in 496 A.D. But the northern Chinese "gentry" soon began to establish marriage relations with these new elites.

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<sup>36</sup> Eberhard, *Geschichte* (fn. 35), 45–48, 56–59, 64, 72–75, 81–85, 89–99, 107, 203–206, 237, 339, 374–381, 409; Fei, *Gentry* (fn. 35), 17, 23f., 26–58; Kuhn, *Status* (fn. 35), 310, 337–339, 385. Kuhn, however, rejects Eberhard's thesis of a continuity of the gentry during the entire history of the Chinese empire (*ibid.*, 481). Franke and Trauzettel, *Kaiserreich*, 51, 65–68, 74–76, 82f., 88–96, 122, also take a certain distance to the "gentry" theory of Eberhard and others. Schmidt-Glintzer, *China* (fn. 35), 17f., *passim*, prefers to use the term "elite". For questions of terminology: Albert Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China: The Ch'ing Empire and Its Glory* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1976), 108–115, who proposes the term "intelligentry" and estimates that the gentry portion of the Chinese population in Qing times was approx. 2 %, about the same percentage as was reached on average by the nobility in the European societies.

After the reunification of the empire, the half-Chinese dynasties of the Sui and Tang tried to gain the loyalty of the networks of these regional nobles, whose self-confidence and prestige as leading groups (including in a moral sense) had never been broken.

The creation of new educational institutions and the perfection of the examination system from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries made it possible to rely increasingly on non-hereditary "national" officials with certain qualifications. Certainly, a major part of the bureaucracy continued to be recruited from the "gentry", due to the high cost of an education. Nevertheless, competition for posts was intense, not only because of the abundance of children in the "gentry" class. There were many from other classes, as well, who managed a social rise, especially under the southern Song and the later Ming.

Since Tang times, the imperial officials, who were always limited in numbers, had been furnished with their own "service land", with lots that differed according to rank. Under the Song, the bureaucracy already dominated the empire. It was even freed from all duties such as taxes and conscription. Officially, however, it never had any decision-making powers, because theoretically, it was the emperor alone who decided. Informally, of course, the "gentry" had great influence, due to family members or friends in provincial or even central government offices. Yet since Song times, China was far from having a "noble estate" or even a "noble corporation". Moreover, power was at times partly in the hands of the eunuchs at the imperial court.<sup>37</sup>

### **The "Chinese Gentry" versus "Noble Foreign Rule"**

Even at times when "foreigners" ruled, this situation did not change much. The conquerors that came from Central Asia, such as the Jurchens, had their hereditary nobles who took over the highest positions, especially in the military sector. After a conquest, also feudal structures were usually revived. But in the longer run, two factors were decisive:

- (1) The numerical weakness and the cultural inferiority of the conquerors, who were dispersed over the huge empire and were thus in danger of becoming merged with the large mass of the Chinese population, or who were at least quickly "sinicized" (sometimes only even further); and
- (2) the lack of administrative experience of the conquerors, which made them dependent on the

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<sup>37</sup> Franke and Trauzettel, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 35), 95f., 102, 111f., 131f., 151, 158–161, 168f., 195–197, 201, 252, 267; Eberhard, *Geschichte* (fn. 35), 93, 167, 238, 255–259, 308–310, 338; Fei, *Gentry* (fn. 35), 75–90; Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *China* (fn. 35), 18, 30–34, 64, 112, 134f.; id., *Geschichte Chinas bis zur mongolischen Eroberung 250 v. Chr. – 1279 n. Chr.* (Oldenbourg Grundriß der Geschichte, vol. 26, München, 1999), 123f., 143–145; id., *Das alte China* (fn. 34), 37, 54, 65f., 72f., 61, 85, 89f., 97–101; Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China [CHC]*, 16 vols. (forthcoming), Cambridge, London, New York, La Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney, 1978 – , especially: Patricia Ebrey, "The economic and social history of Later Han", in *ibid.*, vol. I, 1986, 608–648, esp. 630–646; Denis Twitchett, "Introduction", in *ibid.*, vol. III/1 (1979), 1–47, esp. 3f., 8–11, 28; Harold A. Wechsler, "T'ai-tsung (reign 626–49) the consolidator", in *ibid.*, vol. III/1, 188–241, 212f.; Richard W. L. Guisso, "The reigns of empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684–712)", in *ibid.*, vol. III/1, 290–332, esp. 299, 306, 329–331; Denis Twitchett, "Hsüan-tsung (reign 712–56)", in *ibid.*, vol. III/1, 333–463, esp. 382–384, 420–426; Robert M. Somers, "The end of the T'ang", in *ibid.*, vol. III/1, 682–789, esp. 706, 709f., 718–720. Kuhn, *Status*, (fn. 35), 416–427, 431, 480–488, 536–538, 594–599, stresses that there was a break in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the "China of the aristocrats" came to an end and was replaced by the "China of the scholar-bureaucrats" (*ibid.*, 17, 46f., 612).

Chinese officials. In other words: their rule could only be stable if they had the cooperation of the old Chinese elite. The "gentry", for their part, were always prepared to collaborate if the conquerors left them at least their economic power, even if they no longer had any political authority.<sup>38</sup>

The Mongols, however, did not give this much consideration. They dispossessed many Chinese landowners in northern China. For the administration of the empire they preferred to use members of the "auxiliary nations" from central and western Asia, and conferred privileges on them. At least in high offices, they left only few Chinese, especially from the South.

No wonder, then, that under the existing conditions, many *literati* avoided the civil service, and this weakened the gentry. But there were also positive measures, such as a temporary revival of literary examinations, so that distinguished Chinese did not initially take part in the rebellions that arose at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and sometimes they even opposed them. For these rebellions were at first generally directed against the upper class as a whole. However, in the end, the future first Ming emperor succeeded in forging a sort of "united national front" to expel the foreigners, and although he himself was of low descent, he was able to integrate the partly revived Chinese elite into his rather absolutistic regime. And this system even survived the Manchu conquest of China in 1644 and was reconsolidated afterwards by the Kangxi emperor.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Beginning of the Dissolution of Noble Structures in Late Qing China**

It is interesting to note that the Europeans who lived at the Chinese imperial court at that time, especially the Jesuits, some of whom even reached a high mandarin rank, did not consider the Manchu nobility and the numerous imperial princes to be very important. For the Europeans in China, the only nobility that really counted in the Middle Kingdom was the meritocratic and non-hereditary "nobility" of the Chinese scholar-bureaucrats. From this we can infer that in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, social mobility clearly seems to have been much greater in China than it was in Europe.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Eberhard, *Geschichte* (fn. 35), 129, 153, 160, 168f., 172, 175–178, 186f., 246f.; Franke and Trauzettel, *Kaiserreich*, 120–124, 131–133, 187; Schmidt-Glintzer, *China* (fn. 35), 34–36, 160f., 178–181; Herbert Franke, 'The Chin dynasty', in *CHC* (fn. 37), vol. VI, 215–320, esp. 269–273, 283–285, 319f.

<sup>39</sup> Franke and Trauzettel, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 35), 223f., 228–231, 239–243, 249–254, 275, 278–283, 298–301, 316, 319–322, 330, 335; Eberhard, *Geschichte* (fn. 35), 277f., 283–291, 331–333, 340; Schmidt-Glintzer, *China* (fn. 35), 112–114; Morris Rossabi, "The reign of Khubilai Khan", in *CHC* (fn. 37), VI, 414–489, esp. 418, 452; Ch'i-Ch'ing Hsiao, "Mid-Yüan politics", in *ibid.*, 490–560, 491f., 520–522, 526f., 560; John Dardess, "Shun-ti and the end of Yüan rule in China", in *ibid.*, 561–586, esp. 564, 569; Elizabeth Endicott-West, "The Yüan government and society", in *ibid.*, 587–615, esp. 610–613; Frederick W. Mote, "Chinese society under Mongol rule, 1215–1368", in *ibid.*, 616–664, esp. 624–635, 645f.; Charles O. Hucker, "Ming government", in *CHC* VIII (fn. 37), 9–105, esp. 24f., 28–32; Martin Heijdra, "The socio-economic development of rural China during the Ming", in *ibid.*, 417–578, esp. 552–564; Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power. Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge, Mass. / London, 1993), 2, 12–14, 18–24, 322f.

<sup>40</sup> This is the topic of a forthcoming article. For the present, see Walter Demel, "China in the Political Thought of Western and Central Europe, 1570–1750", in Thomas H. C. Lee (ed.), *China and Europe. Images and Influences in*

The Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64 diminished the status of the Manchu aristocracy even further. Already before this rebellion, the imperial despotism was probably only moderated by the social and moral homogeneity of the bureaucracy, as was the case during the Song period. It was only China's defeat in the war with Japan (1895) and the influence of the European and American models that brought about the creation of short-lived institutions of self-government, especially provincial diets and a kind of "preliminary parliament", in 1909–10, just before the end of the Qing dynasty. Thus, for the first time, the princes, Manchu nobles and members of the "gentry" (who had by now grown to about 1.9 percent of the population, not least by the purchase of titles), were given a certain institutionalised right to participate in political matters. This old elite, however, was increasingly fragmented politically and regionally, and was diversified by the rise of a new military caste, Western-orientated intellectuals, and the politicised "gentry merchants". But despite of the final dissolution of this old elite, it is still possible to draw some connecting lines from the old Chinese "gentry" to the elites of the People's Republic of China.<sup>41</sup>

## 7. Japan: A Country with Two Different Noble Societies

### The Old Japanese Court Aristocracy

Japan followed the Chinese pattern only to a limited extent.<sup>42</sup> Since ancient times, Japan was a country with two separate noble societies. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a network of patriarchal clans was established in the Yamato region, with an "imperial dynasty" at the top, which expanded its political and religious power by integrating the originally autonomous clan leaders of central and western Japan. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the power of the imperial dynasty grew, as landed property was officially "nationalized" and the old family clans were excluded from the court. However, some aristocratic clan leaders were still able to control the emperors from time to time and to exercise actual power. Moreover, members of what was now a court aristocracy and the provincial elites continued to occupy the high civil and military positions that were furnished with rice land.

The most important innovation was the introduction of a hierarchy of positions established along the lines of the Chinese model. Within the circles that had access to the *tennō*, magnates in their hereditary functions as holders of the highest ranks were called "*ki*" (= "noble"; compare "*kizoku*" = "*ki*"-lineage). Office holders in the middle ranks appeared as "*tsuki*" (quasi- or half-noble); these served the emperors directly (e.g. as prefects), or indirectly within the framework of the huge manorial "houses" of the "*ki*", which had a public character, similar to prefectures. But despite the fact that there were many other Chinese influences, the Chinese examination system for officials,

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*the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Hong Kong, 1991), 45–64, esp. 55–58.

<sup>41</sup> Eberhard, *Geschichte* (fn. 35), 255, 372; Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Das neue China: von den Opiumkriegen bis heute* (München, 1999), 29f.; id., *China* (fn. 35), 198–206, 218, 222–225; Jürgen Osterhammel, "China: Reichsverfall und gesellschaftliche Neubildung von 1800 bis 1916", in Sepp Linhart and Erich Pilz (eds.), *Ostasien. Geschichte und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Wien, 1999), 29–46; Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry. Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle, Wash., 1955), esp. 137–141.

<sup>42</sup> The following discussion on Japan is strongly indebted to Wolfgang Schwentker, *Die Samurai* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., München, 2004).

which would have (at least potentially) extended the social basis for the recruitment of future high officials, was never introduced into Japan.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, during the Heian period (794–1185), Japan was dominated by a small court aristocracy vested with hereditary titles. This nobility ruled the country in cooperation and confrontation with the imperial dynasty. They acquired landed estates, especially in the environs of Kyōto, filled many high positions, performed ceremonial court duties, and lived a highly cultivated life (especially the female members of the aristocracy). Politically, they kept things well under control, until the 12<sup>th</sup> century for still being able to defend themselves with their own troops against the rebellions fomented by regional warrior groups. Since the Gempei War (1180–85), however, and increasingly during the Muromachi era (1338–1573), the court aristocracy slowly began to lose its wealth. While it still shaped Japanese culture and enjoyed great prestige, its political influence steadily declined, until it hardly exercised any power of its own. And even the emperors, after a failed attempt to regain exclusive power in 1333–36, almost merely played a religious and ritual role, until the Meiji Restoration of 1868. They were only needed from time to time to legitimise the distribution of political power, especially when a new shōgun was installed. Thus, the court aristocracy was a "noble elite" at most until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and even after that it continued to be a "noble estate" with strict rules of endogamy, but it was certainly not a "noble corporation" – if a formal influence of the court aristocracy as an Estate may ever have existed in Japan.<sup>44</sup>

### The Rise of a "Second Nobility": the Samurai

The decline of the court aristocracy was bound up with the rise of another formation of nobles. Mounted warriors who were at the same time landowners who worked their own land had already existed in the Yamato period, in which there was universal conscription, for a time. In the Heian era, however, the government increasingly preferred to make use of professional elite troops recruited

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<sup>43</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai*, (fn. 42), 22–27; John W. Hall, *Das Japanische Kaiserreich* (Fischer Weltgeschichte, vol. 20, Frankfurt am Main, 1968), 34–43, 50–60; id., Marius B. Janson, Madoka Kanai and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Japan [CHJ]*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, New York, etc., 1988/99), esp. Delmer M. Brown, "The Yamato kingdom", in *ibid.*, vol. I, 108–162, esp. 124f., 137f.; for a Marxist view, see Kiyoshi Inoue, *Geschichte Japans* (3<sup>rd</sup> German ed., Frankfurt am Main, New York, Köln, 2003), 36–40, 47, 52, 71, 75, 78; further: George B. Sansom, *A History of Japan*, 3 vols. (Rutland, Vermont / Tokyo, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1979), esp. vol. I, 43, 53, 169–171; id., *Japan. Von der Frühgeschichte bis zum Ende des Feudalsystems* (German ed., Essen, 1975), 47–50, 96–99, 118–142; Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Rutland, Vermont / Tokyo, 13<sup>th</sup> ed., 1979), 42, 45f.; Shiro Ishii, "Zur Kriegerterminologie des mittelalterlichen Japans. Samurai, Kenin, Kerai und Bushi", in *The Hokkaido Law Review*, vol. XLI, No. 5–6, 1991, 645–660, esp. 657–660. I wish to express my deeply felt gratitude to my old friend, Professor Takuro Wada of the City University of Osaka, for giving me his comments on this paper, and to my dear colleague, Professor Dr. Toru Takenaka of the University of Osaka, for giving me the opportunity to present my research at his University.

<sup>44</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai*, (fn. 42), 19–22, 29f., 42, 50; Margret Neuss-Kaneko, *Familie und Gesellschaft in Japan* (München, 1990), 16f.; Reischauer, *Japanese*, 45, 49f.; Donald H. Shively and William McCullough, "Einleitung", in *CHJ* (fn. 43), vol. II, 1–19, esp. 3–5; Harold Bolitho, "The Tempō crisis", in *ibid.*, vol. V, 116–167, esp. 128–133; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 68–79, 82, 91f., 108–110, 178; Sansom, *Japan* (fn. 43), 255f., 300, 333f., 433; id., *History* (fn. 43), vol. I, 196; II, 22–58, 127–143. Sansom, *ibid.*, vol. I, 317f., 324, mentions that the imperial council consisting of ten leading noblemen, which was created in 1185 due to Yoritomo's initiative, was merely an ephemeral step on the way to the shōgunate.

from the sons and brothers of court officials and other respected persons. These warriors developed into real landlords by forcing peasants to perform labour service. Like the court nobles, they thus benefited from the policy of returning "nationalized" landed property to private hands. Moreover, as big landowners, they organized clearing activities to cultivate new land, which became their private property since 743 and was finally freed from taxes.

Recruited from these warrior peasants but also from various other groups, a new military and socio-economic class can be discerned since about 950 A.D.: the *bushi* ("warrior-scholars", "gentlemen-knights", or "*samurai*", literally: servants). Mostly led by descendants of the old elites, they were organized into special units with their own hierarchy and code of honour. Originally, they may have roamed about as members of robber bands, tax collectors with more and more hereditary positions in the service of high officials, or private soldiers for powerful landowners. At last, they increasingly intervened in the power struggles conducted at court.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Samurai as a "Noble Elite" from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

During the Gempei War, Minamoto Yoritomo obtained from the emperor the right to appoint officials and to confer fiefs. After having succeeded against his rivals, the Taira family, he became the official civil and military ruler of Japan actually besides the emperor, though formally subordinate to him. As shōgun, he created the *bakufu* as a sort of military government, with an office which was responsible for the affairs of his vassals. This was the beginning of the juridical distinction between the *samurai* and the ordinary people. The *bushi* began to form a "national" power elite: mounted warriors of noble descent, with an income from landed estates.

This rising "noble estate" developed its own warrior ethics, and a hierarchy of main and rear vassals. In place of the older clans, there were now samurai "houses" under patriarchal rule, that is, smaller family units with status-oriented marriage strategies and with names of their own, usually derived from their ancestral seats. All of this can remind us of the formation of European knighthood at approximately the same time. The samurai had their religious values, as well: not in the sense of Christian knights fighting against the heathens, of course, nor singing courtly love songs, etc.; instead, they were imbued with Zen Buddhism, the ideal of strength of mind, asceticism, and a "Stoic" contempt of death.

The defence of Japan against the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 proved the value of these virtues. But the many sacrifices tended to renew the decentralization of power, which reached its peak after 1467 in the *sengoku* era, the period of the "warring states", which lasted about one hundred years. Hereditary military governors and successful military commanders now established themselves as *daimyō* ("great name"). With the support of old and newly subjugated vassals and in

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<sup>45</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai*, (fn. 42), 12f., 18–22, 25–37; Sansom, *History* (fn. 43), vol. I, 234–263, 339–369; id., *Japan* (fn. 43), 288f., 296–298; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 12, 79–86 (both also treat Japanese feudalism); Inoue, *Geschichte* (fn. 43), 79f., 88–95.

changing alliances, they made efforts to expand their autocratically ruled territories at the expense of their neighbours. In these wars, kinship and fidelity were of little value; the power of the sword decided everything. The sword was not only the most important weapon, highly valuable and most precious; it was also "a status symbol and the material expression of the spiritual disposition of an elite", the "soul of the samurai" (as Wolfgang Schwentker explained). During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, the samurai lost their autonomy and became subordinated to their daimyō in a hierarchical order. But the same time, they definitely turned into a "noble estate".<sup>46</sup>

### **The Samurai during the Edo Period: From Military to Bureaucratic Elite**

The second of the three great "unifiers" of Japan, Hideyoshi, laid the foundations of a new order. During the "sword hunt" of 1588–90, all ordinary people (*heimin*) were deprived of their swords, lances, and muskets. The privilege of wearing "two swords" now became the exclusive right of the samurai. The same happened a little later with the privilege of bearing a family name, and, with subtle nuances, of wearing a bun and certain clothes. During the Edo period (1603–1868), the samurai used to live near the castle of their daimyō, separate from the other estates (peasants, craftsmen, and, according to the Confucian tradition, at the lowest rank: merchants). The size, shape and location of the houses were proportionate to the status of their respective owners.

Hideyoshi redistributed the land, and the size of the fiefs that the daimyō received depended on their fidelity. The daimyō, for their part, gave fiefs to their samurai vassals, in accordance with their ranks. In Tokugawa Japan, the shōgunate controlled about a quarter of the rice-producing land directly, by means of small vassals. Nearly the entire rest was distributed in a hierarchy of about 240 to 300 larger fiefs (*han*), so that a nobleman who possessed at least 10,000 *koku* of productive land (1 *koku* = approx. 180 l of rice) was considered to be a *daimyō*. Within his fief, the daimyō largely ruled autonomously, but only if he remained loyal to the shōgun. And as a guarantee for this, the daimyō and his retinue regularly had to take residence in Edo, the "capital" of the shōgun. This obligation as well as the seclusion of Japan (*sakoku*), which secured the shōgunate a lucrative monopoly on foreign trade after 1639, weakened the daimyō also economically. But both the shōgun and the daimyō found it difficult to bear the burden of paying the salaries of their samurai.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai* (fn. 42), 37–58; for samurai family life, *ibid.*, 62–73, quotation 53; Sansom, *Japan* (fn. 43), 294–319, 331–333, 345–355, 385f.; id., *History* (fn. 43), vol. I, 310–467; II, 249–260; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 90–93, 96–99, 110–114, 130–136; Jeffrey Mass, "The Kamakura bakufu", in *CHJ* (fn. 43), vol. III, 46–88, esp. 46–49; Reischauer, *Japanese* (fn. 43), 52–58; Neuss-Kaneko, *Familie* (fn. 44), 11–30. According to Ishii, "Kriegerterminologie" (fn. 43), 645–657, the samurai were originally lower servants beneath the rank of "tsuki" (perhaps they might be compared to the early European "ministeriales"). Yoritomo's rise to a "ki" started a process in which all warriors were pressed into the shōgun's household (and thus formally into military service for the tennō).

<sup>47</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai*, (fn. 42), 60f., 73–76, 81–90; Sansom, *Japan*, 410–416, 445–451; id., *History*, vol. III, 29, 49f., 91; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 155, 162–184; id., "Introduction", in *CHJ* (fn. 43), vol. IV, 1–39, esp. 12–15; id., 'The bakufu System', in *ibid.*, 128–182, esp. 180f.; Reischauer, *Japanese* (fn. 43), 68–74; Sepp Linhart, 'Die vormoderne japanische Gesellschaft', in Linhart / Pilz (eds.), *Ostasien* (fn. 41), 17–27.

This was so because no less than 5 to 7 percent of the entire population belonged to the samurai class. Around 1850, this included about 1.5 or even 2 million persons, who were neither allowed to farm their lands themselves, nor to pursue a trade. They merely received grants of rice, which differed in size according to their ranks, i.e. their fiefs (which consisted of either land or an office only). For most samurai, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century that was not sufficient for a decent life, one befitting the status of a samurai, especially in view of the at times drastically rising prices and the temptations of urban life.

As warriors, the samurai could now at best distinguish themselves in the subjugation of local farmer rebellions. Many samurai, however, were under-employed, and even if they received the modest salaries of police officers or government officials, their life was more parasitical than productive. Only a very small number of the numerous samurai were able to develop new sources of income. Thus, the samurai estate increasingly lost its economic homogeneity. But the biggest problem of the samurai was that most of them could not compete with the prosperous merchants. In theory, every samurai had the right to flog or even to kill an ordinary person who did not show sufficient respect for him and his status. But now it even happened that a desperate samurai would kill his own children and bow to a merchant to whom he was hopelessly indebted. The social boundaries thus became more permeable. Some samurai gave up their status, and merchants paid money to be adopted into a samurai family.<sup>48</sup>

### **The "Opening" of Japan and the End of the Samurai Estate**

In this crisis of the social order, some scholarly works showed different ways toward a solution. The samurai was often depicted as a "gentleman" in the sense of a social educator and protector of the public order, but also (in a more conservative sense) as a warrior fighting until death for his lord and his country. Therefore, the "opening" of Japan that was forced on the country from the outside after 1853, but for which the *bakufu* had to accept the responsibility, provoked various reactions. The politics of the day were mostly dominated by low-ranking young samurai who were socially on the downgrade, but this occurred in different ways. Some tried to achieve their nationalistic aims by assassinating foreigners and killing themselves afterwards. They thereby followed the old tradition of *seppuku*, the highly ritualised self-immolation which probably first arose in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and which had become a form of privileged punishment for higher-ranking samurai during the Edo period. Others wanted to defeat the West with its own weapons and called for the modernization of Japan.

Following some initiatives that emanated from two reformist daimyates in western Japan, all this led to a brief civil war, the end of the shōgunate and to the Meiji "Restoration". Step by step, a new

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<sup>48</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai* (fn. 42), 88–92, 95–98; Sansom, *Japan* (fn. 43), 451–458, 508–515; id., *History* (fn. 43), vol. III, 128, 160–164, 187f., 211–218; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 188–212, 230f.; Marius B. Jansen, "Japan in the early nineteenth century", in *CHJ* (fn. 43), vol. V, 50–115, esp. 74, 79; Gilbert Rozman, "Social change", in *ibid.*, 499–568, esp. 528–531; Bolitho, "Tempō crisis" (fn. 44), 126f.

order was established in the Japanese state and society. The daimyō returned their fief registers to the emperor and were temporarily appointed as governors instead. Together with the old court aristocracy and some socially rising samurai they now formed a new noble estate, the *kazoku* (or *kizoku*), that consisted of less than 3,000 families. This new nobility was mostly engaged in big business rather than in big landholding, and after 1890, it was represented in the newly created Upper House.

Meanwhile, the government divided up the samurai estate into different groups. Members with hereditary property rights and authority were forming the "warrior families" (*shizoku*); the others were at last counted with the ordinary people. As compensation, they were permitted to engage in commerce, skilled trades, and agriculture. The rice grants were taxed at first, but later changed into government bonds.

Although administrative posts were no longer filled according to birth but based on ability, the better-educated samurai continued to have good chances in government service. In 1872, however, a universal obligation for military service was proclaimed and so the old samurai monopoly on the right to bear arms came to an end. The last privilege of the samurai finally fell when the right to wear two swords was also abolished. Many samurai resented these drastic measures and considered them to be humiliating. This led to violent revolts in 1874–77, but these were not successful, as only about 6 percent of the former samurai were involved. The dissolution of the samurai class as a ruling feudal estate and their integration into modern Japanese society was generally managed quite successfully, aided by relief programmes such as colonization projects in Hokkaidō. But it was not until 1900 that the share of *shizoku* members in leading positions began to decline, and in 1969, it was still a sizable 21 percent. In 1947, the *shizoku* class was formally abolished, but its ethos is still alive today and has left its mark on Japanese life.<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusion: Specific Traits of the European Nobility in a Global Perspective**

In the early part of this paper, the following characteristics were described as typical for the European nobility:

- (1) They were a "noble elite" in the sense that they were practically a hereditary ruling class.
- (2) They formed a "noble estate" separate from the rest of the population, based on special rules of conduct and legally established hereditary privileges.
- (3) They participated, to a greater or lesser extent, in the political decision-making processes as political Estates, and thus they formed "noble corporations".

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<sup>49</sup> Schwentker, *Samurai* (fn. 42), 77–81, 92–95, 99–116; Rozman, *Social change* (fn. 48), 530–533; W. G. Beasley, *Meiji political institutions*, in: CHJ (fn. 43), vol. V, 618–673, here 630–641, 646f.; Hall, *Kaiserreich* (fn. 43), 247–266, 271–277; Sansom, *Japan* (fn. 43), 476–500. For the lasting importance of hierarchic principles: Reischauer, *Japanese* (fn. 43), 157–166.

In the following, I will now discuss how far these traits can be found in the empires that were located at the boundaries or outside of Europe.<sup>50</sup> In conclusion, I can state the following theses:

#### "Noble Elite"

From the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire had no "noble elite", while Russia from Ivan IV to Peter I, the Muslim empires of India and the early British India had such ruling "noble elites" (boyars and zamindars, respectively), but mainly at the local level, not so much at the level of the empire as a whole. Of course, in all of these empires there appeared from time to time men – and sometimes even women – who lived in luxury, who exercised great power next to the tsars or sultans, and who sometimes even dominated the rulers. However, their status was that of "noble servants", and thus it was always precarious and was not automatically hereditary. Even if the kshatriyas of India sometimes exercised more or less extended power, at least on the local level, they were surpassed in social prestige by the Brahmins. In China, during the Han and since the Song periods, there was a "gentry" that dominated at the local level, but it had no real rights to rule, and to the extent that it exerted influence at a higher level, it did so informally by way of those members of the gentry who belonged to the imperial bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, "noble elites" can easily be found also outside of Europe. The Japanese court nobility of the early period was such an elite, before the samurai began to take their place as a ruling class from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries; however, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the exercise of rule was increasingly limited to the shōgun and the daimyō, while ordinary samurai were degraded to "officials". We also find "noble elites" in the "feudal" periods of the early Ottoman, Indian and Chinese empires, just as we do in the Russian and late Ottoman empires. In China and in northern India, noble elites appeared regularly when invaders from central Asia seized power in these countries.

#### "Noble Estate"

"Noble estates", however, are not as often found in history as "noble elites". No doubt, the Japanese court aristocracy was such an estate, as were also the samurai, who constituted themselves as a second "noble estate" in a long process that came to an end about 1600. Both of these estates were abolished as such after 1868, but in their place, the newly created "higher nobility" and the "warrior nobility" appeared, even if the latter soon lost all of its privileges. In the case of China, a "noble estate" can be found at best in the South during the Han and Song periods. Such structures were repeatedly imported into the Middle Kingdom by foreign invaders; however, eventually they were regularly replaced by the bureaucratic structures of the Chinese scholar-officials, or they were at least relegated into the background. It is only in India from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and again during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in the Ottoman Empire since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that there was a tendency to develop a "noble estate". In Russia, the tsars since Peter I had some successes in their attempts to create such an estate along the European model; however, the Russian nobility only partly lost their

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<sup>50</sup> Due to space limitations, I cannot compare the noble societies of the Aztecs and Incas. Their kingdoms, however, were far from being as durable as the empires treated here.

"service nobility" characteristics.

#### "Noble Corporation"

But a "noble corporation" can hardly be found in history outside of the European core countries. It cannot be found at all in the Indian empires. In the Ottoman Empire, even during its late period, we can only detect rudimentary efforts in this direction. In Russia, such structures were created only since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and most distinctly only around 1900, after some of the earlier experiments in this direction had failed. In both cases, the "European model" evidently was the force behind these efforts, as it also was in China when it took first steps toward parliamentary forms of government shortly before it experienced its ruin at the end of the Qing era.

Even in Japan, whose two noble estates undoubtedly show the most remarkable parallels to the European development, it was not until 1890 that the interests of the nobility entered the political decision-making process of the country in an institutionalised form through the Upper House. In previous periods, there was no such representation of noble interests, neither at the *bakufu* nor at the *han* level. Of course, the shōguns and the daimyō always sought to gain the advice of their most important vassals.<sup>51</sup> But in the end, they were the only ones to decide. Even when they made decisions against the will of the majority of their vassals, they did not have to expect a principally legitimate or even a legal opposition, at least not since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Europe, however, ever since the High Middle Ages the rule was: "what concerns all must be approved by all." At latest since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there abounded diverse resistance doctrines in Europe on which the legitimacy of an opposition could be based. In Japan, however, the idea that a vassal has a subjective right to resist his lord was completely missing before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It may be only a little exaggerated to say that in Europe, the relationship between a lord and his vassal was a two-sided one, while in Japan it was a one-sided relationship in the sense that it was only the vassal who owed something to the lord, and that was absolute obedience.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, if we look for the specific traits of the European nobility in a global perspective, we find them only in part in its role as a ruling class. More characteristic of the European nobility is its long existence as a juridical and social estate, but certainly specific is its political role as a recognized "co-regent" of a country or an empire.

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<sup>51</sup> Linhart, *Gesellschaft* (fn. 47), 18, mentions that the Tokugawa shōguns had a "council of seniors" consisting of 4 to 5 daimyōs from families that were old friends of the Tokugawa.

<sup>52</sup> Bosl, *Geschichte* (fn. 18), 26, cites the formulation: "Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus comprobetur". Junichi Murakami, *Einführung in die Grundlagen des japanischen Rechts* (Darmstadt, 1974), 2, emphasizes that the concept of a "subjective right" cannot be found in the traditional Japanese judicial culture ("daß man keinen Begriff des *Rechts im subjektiven Sinne* in der traditionellen japanischen Rechtskultur finden kann"). Cf. Sansom, *Japan* (fn. 43), 311; id., *History* (fn. 43), vol. I, 360f.; Reischauer, *Japanese* (fn. 43), 57.