Week 4: Heian and Koryŏ (Goryeo)

4.1 Heian Japan

The capital of Japan moved to Nara in 710 and again to Heian (Kyoto) in 794, thus beginning the Heian period (794–1185). Both capitals were based on Changan and followed yin-yang theories. To many, the Heian is considered a cultural high point, as leaders such as Emperor Kammu were instrumental in fostering the development of the arts and religion. Buddhism expanded its reach to both the aristocracy and the general population.

Two major sects gained new popularity, the Tendai (Heavenly Terrace) introduced by Saicho and Shingon (True Word), via Kukai; both were Mahayana schools of Buddhism that either imported the canon directly from China or drew influence from multiple sources in Korea, China, Tibet, and India. It is also the case that both forms of Buddhism were closely tied to the court and, despite being egalitarian in theory, were often shaped and conditioned by prevailing aristocratic views of court society.

Jodo (Pure Land) Buddhism also gained in popularity, as did many of the arts and crafts from China. Cultural elements we think of as Japanese were adopted from the Tang during this time, including Buddhist ideals, styles of painting and calligraphy, bonsai horticulture, and the tea ceremony. There was no facet of Japanese society untouched by Chinese influence.

It was also during this time that Japan wrote its first histories. The Kojiki (712, "Records of Ancient Matters") and the Nihon shoki (720, "Chronicles of Japan") were attempts by the court to give Japan a legitimate history separate from that of Korea and China. As such, both are full of myth and allegory. They connect the Japanese emperor with the sun goddess, Amaterasu, thus placing the emperor above any ruler on earth. Unlike in China, where the ruler was a mortal governing under the grace of heaven, the Japanese emperor was considered divine.

Nonreligious literature also found its place. Although Chinese remained the official language of the court, the introduction of kana, a Japanese method of writing Chinese characters, served as a catalyst for pent-up creativity among the Japanese literati. This resulted in the world's first novel, The Tale of Genji, written by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu.
Completed in the early eleventh century, Genji tells the story of the son of a Japanese emperor and his many amorous adventures. This novel has received high praise from scholars for its detailed, descriptive language. If nothing else, Genji is a masterpiece of the Heian period, illustrative of the advances and refinements Japan had made in its culture.

*The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon was another work that provided reflections on court life and the aesthetic proclivities of Heian aristocrats. Other examples of the refined Heian aesthetic include the exquisite scroll paintings of this period as well as the imperial collections of native poetry.

**Scene from the *Tale of Genji*, between 1500–1600**
Society had begun to organize around *uji*, tribes mostly connected through family lines, which gathered and controlled land ownership. These holdings grew vast, leading to the *shoen* system. *Shoen* were large private estates owned by families, clans, or even Buddhist monasteries. Landlords grew powerful and began to pay workers to till the fields and soldiers to serve in private armies to protect their holdings.

By the tenth century, *shoen* landlords had enough power even to disagree with and confront the emperor. So many were hiring warriors to do their bidding that some monasteries had their own private armies. These soldiers developed into a new social class, a class that was "to serve," and derived their name from that phrase: the *samurai*.

The *samurai* class that emerged from the *shoen* system caused large military administrations to form around members of the court aristocracy, with a few large families gaining most of the power. The *samurai* had their own philosophy of life, known as *Bushido*, which guided their actions both on the battlefield and in the government. *Bushido*, the "Way of the Warrior," was not so much a code as it was an ideal.

Equivalent in many ways to the Western notion of chivalry, *Bushido* promoted the principles of honor, courage, respect, loyalty, filial piety, honesty, and benevolence. The *samurai* code urged the individual to not fear death, but embrace its reality. It espoused both Daoist and Buddhist ideas of religion and philosophy. *Bushido* also allowed for the refinement of arts other than military pursuits, including philosophy, calligraphy, tea serving, and flower arranging.

Among the powerful families who controlled large numbers of *samurai* were the *Minamoto*, *Fujiwara*, and *Taira*. In the mid-eleventh century, population growth and competition for resources instigated violent conflicts between these clans. The result was a slow, steady drift into *warlordism*.

The situation in the capital changed as well. Between 1086 and 1156, the *Fujiwara* family fell into disrepute. The government was increasingly controlled by the *Incho*, or the Office of the Cloistered Emperor, which, just as its name implies, was filled with emperors who had voluntarily given up the throne to wield power behind the scenes. From 1086 to 1156, the supremacy of the *Incho* increased and the military class rose throughout the archipelago. By the twelfth century, military might rather than civil authority controlled Japan.
In 1158, a war over the succession of the new emperor pitted the Taira and Minamoto clans against the Fujiwara. During this war, the samurai class took control of court affairs. The Taira and Minamoto clans soon clashed as well, and Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199) led his samurai to defeat the Taira in the Genpei War of 1180–1185. His victory ushered in a new era in Japanese history, the Kamakura shogunate.

4.2 Koryǒ (Goryeo) Korea

Toward the end of the tenth century, the Silla began to weaken from internal rebellions. Due in part to the rigid bone-rank system, reform-minded intellects from mostly nonaristocratic ranks aligned with disgruntled regional magnates to foment rebellion against the royal house. Toward the end of the ninth century, regional struggles between three entities known as the Later Three Kingdoms (Later Paekche [Baekje], Unified Silla, and Later Koguryǒ [Goguryeo]) led to civil war for Silla.

Elements from within the dynasty moved to take control over political institutions, and Wang Kon (King Taejo), a former prime minister of Late Koryǒ, rose to victory during this period of strife (892–936) and established a new dynasty known as the Koryǒ. It is from the Koryǒ (Goryeo) (935–1236) that we get the name Korea.

Koryǒ (Goryeo) inherited Silla's legitimacy and traditions and enhanced this legacy until it was succeeded by the Chosǒn kingdom (1392–1910). The Koryǒ (Goryeo) dynasty also received from Silla a ruling structure featuring a governing body closely linked to aristocratic clans. This is likely because the men from Silla boasting aristocratic lineage served as primary architects of the newly-minted Koryǒ. At the same time, Koryǒ (Goryeo) was a more mobile society than Silla.

The Koryǒ (Goryeo) set about an ambitious plan of cultural Sinicization for their own dynasty. Koreans also adopted Chinese-style bureaucratic institutions such as the six ministries and civil service examinations (kwagǒ), which was an important means to select civil officials of diverse backgrounds.

Much as in Silla times, Confucianism and Buddhism coexisted side by side; Koryǒ (Goryeo) monarchs were typically well-versed in Confucian works and devoted to Buddhism. The creation of an 81,000 woodblock Buddhist canon, the Tripitaka Koreana, at Heinsa Temple signifies the commanding presence of
Buddhism at Koryŏ’s peak, particularly in connection to protection of the dynasty against Mongol invasions.

The refined nature of Koryŏ (Goryeo) aesthetics is evidenced by its celebrated celadon pottery—a distinct departure from the utilitarian gray stoneware of the unified Silla period—which was admired by the Chinese for its exquisite hue and technique. Korea’s oldest extant history, the History of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk sagi), was compiled by Kim Pu-sik (Busik) in 1145. Earlier official histories of the first seven Koryŏ kings were also written but no longer survive.

Koryŏ (Goryeo) also adopted many of China’s inventions and improved them. For example, the Koryŏ (Goryeo) took moveable type and invented moveable metal type in 1234, which they used to print copies of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. They also enjoyed trade and diplomatic relations with the Song while mostly keeping the menacing Northern Khitan and Jurchen tribes at bay.
In 1170, civilian rule in Koryŏ (Goryeo) came to an abrupt end when a group of disgruntled military officials revolted against the ruling house, replaced the king, and purged a number of aristocratic officials. This coup, led by a general named Chŏng Chung-bu (Jeong Jung-bu) would usher in a period of military rule that would last 100 years (1170–1270), of which 60 would be dominated by the Ch’oe family clan.

The Ch’oe ruling family was able to resist the Mongols for nearly 30 years. By 1258, however, Koryŏ (Goryeo) military leadership was overthrown and replaced by a civilian monarchy that would succumb to the Mongols by 1270.

The Mongols ruled Koryŏ (Goryeo) for nearly a century, but the Mongols controlled Koryŏ (Goryeo) as a northeast Asian khanate. This meant that Koryŏ (Goryeo) kings were married to Mongol princesses, resulting in seven half-Mongolian, half-Korean monarchs until the Mongols were finally expelled from the peninsula in 1368.
Mongol rule was oppressive and brutal; the Mongols used Korean manpower and technology to twice invade Japan, though both invasions were unsuccessful. Mongol control of Korea did not last forever; as the Mongols' hold on China weakened, so, too, did the Koreans rise up and reassert their independence.

Mongol rule did, however, provide Koryŏ (Goryeo) some cultural benefits. The cultivation of cotton and the use of gunpowder from Yuan China would revolutionize Korea. Most significantly, the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Zhu Xi would become the orthodox ideology of the subsequent Chosŏn (Joseon) dynasty.