

# 近世

## Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868)

### **Japan: Life in Tokugawa Japan**

Life in Tokugawa Japan was strictly hierarchical with the population divided among four distinct classes: samurai, farmers, craftspeople, and traders. Prior to the Tokugawa period there was some movement among these classes, but the Tokugawa shoguns, intent upon maintaining their power and privilege, restricted this movement. In particular they tried to protect the samurai, making upward mobility from the farming class to the samurai impossible. The shogun Hideyoshi decreed in 1586 that farmers must stay on their land. In 1587 he decreed that only samurai would be allowed to carry the long sword, which would later define them as a class. As economic conditions changed, the shoguns were less successful, however, in maintaining the rigid boundaries separating the other classes.

### **Samurai**

The samurai were the warrior class. At the top was the shogun himself. Beneath him were the daimyo, local lords who controlled large amounts of land. The daimyo had their own collection of samurai, who would serve them in various ways. Some were advisors, some guards for his castle, and some comprised his private army. In addition, samurai in the large cities such as Edo might fulfill a variety of functions--as officials in the Shogun's government or as policemen, for example. Finally, there were the ronin, who were "masterless" samurai, without a lord to answer to, but also without any definite means of support. The ronin might settle down in a particular location to teach or perform other duties, though many of them wandered the countryside, looking for gainful employment. Some sold their services as hired warriors to the highest daimyo bidder. Of the approximately 30 million Japanese during the Tokugawa period, about 2 million were samurai.

### **Farmers**

The glue that bonded the social hierarchy was rice, produced of course by the farmers. The standard of measurement for rice was the koku, equivalent to approximately 5 bushels. One koku could feed one person for a year. The estimated annual production of rice in Japan at this time was 25 million koku. The shogun was responsible for the distribution of this national crop. He took 20% off the top for himself. In addition, he distributed significant amounts to the local lords, the daimyo. According to Charles J. Dunn, the most powerful daimyo (the Kaga in northern Japan) received 1,300,000 koku. There were over 270 daimyo in Tokugawa Japan who received at least 10,000 koku.

What was left for the farmers? That depended on the weather. Often farmers gave up over half of their rice crop to the system. In bad years the shogun and the daimyo did not reduce their demands, so the farmers were forced to live on even less. Famine in the countryside was not uncommon during this period. Thus, though farmers held a privileged position in society--just below the status of the samurai--their lives were often hard. Rice requires a great deal of hard physical labor, and even today much of the work is done by hand. In difficult times, farmers were tempted to defy the prohibition of the shogun and move to the cities to engage in trade. Many younger sons did just that when their father's land was inherited by the eldest son.

### **Craftspeople**

The dividing line separating craftspeople from merchants was difficult to determine because their economic activities often overlapped. A clothmaker, for example, would likely engage in the selling of his products and the enterprise might also extend in other directions, to moneylending perhaps. Those crafts that were most in demand by the samurai, such as swordmaking, were highly prized in Tokugawa society, so sword makers had a great deal of status. Common crafts in Tokugawa Japan included carpentry, stonemasonry, sake-brewing, and lacquering.

### **Merchants**

Merchants, especially those in the cities, were in a position to become wealthy, but they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This was due to the Confucian belief that merchants did not produce anything, like farmers or craftspeople did. Instead they made their money off the productive labor of others. Nevertheless, there was money to be made, and those in the other class positions--even the lower ranking samurai--were sometimes tempted to accept this lower status. Furthermore, as the Tokugawa period progressed and the economy gradually shifted from a feudal to a commercial one, merchants as a whole were able to improve their social standing. Trade was generally a slow and cumbersome enterprise in Tokugawa Japan. Though the road system was extensive and well-maintained, the shogun prohibited wheeled traffic on roads for his own military protection. Thus, most goods moved overland on the backs of horses or humans.

### **Other Groups**

Several other groups of people existed outside this class system, including actors and entertainers, priests, and the eta. In some respects, this outsider status allowed members of these groups a relative degree of freedom, since it was the class system that organized Japanese society in rigid patterns. However, living outside the system also brought its disadvantages because the system also afforded protection of life and livelihood.

The eta were outcastes, forced to live in their own communities and avoided by other members of Japanese society. They held this low status due to their occupations, which were associated with death: disposing of animal carcasses and tanning animal hides, for example. The eta faced a double religious whammy. Japanese were generally vegetarians as a result of Buddhist influences which prohibited the taking of life. And Shinto required purification following any contact with death. Discrimination against the eta persists even in modern Japan, where lists of eta families secretly circulate in the society. Conservative Japanese families consult such lists to prevent the marriage of a son or daughter to someone with eta ancestry.

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Much of this discussion was adapted from Charles J. Dunn, *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969.



Japanese  
Neo-Confucianism

