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THE DECAY OF THE SAMURAI CLASS*

1. INTRODUCTION

The feudal system of the Tokugawa Regime consisted primarily of fief allegiance and landed relationship. Viewed from an economic standpoint, it was a system having land as its only means of production and farmers as its only productive class, the latter supporting a specially privileged class, the samurai. After the middle of the era, however, commerce and industry came into being, existing side by side with land; money began to be used extensively; cities were developed; and the commoner class emerged. In other words, land economy began to be replaced by money economy and commercial capital made its appearance. The samurai class, which had already been in a state of poverty, had to bow before the newly ascended economic power; the samurai class was supported by the provisions supplied by the commoners. Thus, the samurai class became unable to subsist on the productive power of the land which was under its control and had to depend upon the economic power outside of its own control, the feudal system thereby losing very foundation. It was natural that the commoner class should begin to replace the samurai class in holding the real power in the feudal society, just as the overturning of feudalism in a later time was inevitable.

In inquiring into the rise and fall of social classes, it is paramount, of course, to consider how the new power has come into social ascendancy, but a study of how the old order has come to decline and fall is also important. It is generally recognised that after the middle period of the

* Abridged translation of an essay in the *Economic Review*, (經濟論叢) January, 1927.

Tokugawa Regime, both the Shogunate and the daimyo were in serious financial distress. My study, however, is concerned with the decay of the samurai class in general, and only with that class.

2. THE CAUSES OF THE DECAY

In the very old days, there was no distinction between samurai and farmer. The samurai tilled the soil in the time of peace, and took up arms in the field of battle.¹⁾ The separation of the two was brought about because of the change in the method of warfare and in the consequent concentration of samurai in cities and town. Since the Ashikaga Regime, the individual method of fighting in which swords, bows and arrows played a conspicuous part, gradually ceased to be an important factor, infantrymen and foot soldiers who used spears and guns became the central factor of armies; the castle was built at a convenient place, not in a natural fastness. The old farmersoldier, in consequence, ceased to exist; and the samurai who had lived in the country were concentrated in castle-towns for the purpose of drill and to familiarise them with other measures for the defense of their lord's castles. When a samurai, after reaching a castle town of his feudal lord, began receiving the annual grants of rice for his military service, he was no longer a farmer-soldier; he ceased to till the soil; his sole task was that of a simple soldier; and he lived on the rice which his lord gave him in the form of annual grants. Formerly, the retainers of a samurai constituted a productive class—they tilled the soil. After the separation of samurai and farmer, those retainers also ceased to be producers; they became an unproductive class of people whose subsistence was maintained by the rice granted to them annually by their master. Later, some samurai dismiss-

¹⁾ *Bibliotheca Japonica Oeconomiae Politicæque*, Vol. VI, p. 208. (日本經濟叢書第六卷)

ed their retainers and employed day workers as their servants—a fact bearing witness to the unproductivity of retainers.

Let us now study the significance of this separation of samurai and farmer and of the fact that the samurai class ceased to be a productive class, becoming a consumptive class.

At the time of the change under consideration, the economic system of our country was being developed from local to national and from natural economy to money economy. While rice was the foundation of the finance and economy of the time, the use of money made such a great advance as had never been seen in previous ages. Now, the samurai, by that time, had to convert the great portion of his grants of rice into money for his daily living (living in towns, as they did where no economic self-sufficiency was possible). Moreover, the amount of their annual revenue was fixed for all years regardless of the condition of the rice crops. In consequence, the samurai class suffered greatly because of the fluctuations of the price of rice.²⁾ In other words, the samurai tried to sit on the stool of rice economy and on the stool of money economy, and between the two he fell down. This indicates that they could not adapt themselves nor their method of living to the economic system of the time, hence their fortunes were ever exposed to extreme instability.

As was stated, the samurai assembled in cities, some of them going to Edo with their lords on an official duty known as the *sankin-kotai*; and the direct retainers of the Shogun lived permanently at Edo, the seat of the Shogunate Government. But the cities were the centre of money economy and were inhabited by the commoners who had become wealthy with the development of commerce and industry. It was only too natural that the living standard of

²⁾ Eijiro Honjo, *Regulation of the Price of Rice under the Tokugawa Regime*, (徳川幕府の米價調節) pp. 108-112.

the samurai in the cities should become higher and higher and their revenue, in consequence, inadequate. What an enormous amount of money was wastefully expended by those samurai who were in Edo either temporarily or permanently is evidenced by the following account given in Kumpei Gamo's writings:

"Those daimyo who lived in Edo built several houses in various parts of the city and employed many servants both men and women all of whom performed almost no real services. The number of those servants in Edo constituted one-fifth of the whole number of servants; while the sum of the living expenses in Edo amounted to seven-tenths of the total aggregate expended in the clan."

Lastly, the poverty of the daimyo involved that of the samurai. The feudal princes were confronted by a severe financial crux arising from the fact that while their revenue was usually fixed for all time, their expenses steadily increased; and this crux compelled them to adopt a practice known as the "hanchi-no-ho" by which a certain percentage of the annual grants of rice to the samurai was held back. The amount thus retained was nominally "borrowed" by daimyo from their followers but, since it was borrowed practically permanently, no term being specified it, in reality, amounted to a reduction of the samurai's grant of rice. There is no question that the samurai's poverty was greatly intensified because of this practice. The term "hanchi-no-ho" literally means "half-stipend law," but in actual practice, the reduction was not necessarily one half; it was sometime one third or one fourth. An old writing³⁾ on the economic condition of the Tokugawa Regime says: "Of recent times, the daimyo, both small and great are suffering because of their poverty. They are borrowing from samurai amounts anywhere between one-tenth and six-tenths of the samurai's annual grants of rice."

At any rate, the separation of samurai and farmer was

³⁾ *Bibliotheca Japonica Oeconomiae Politicaeque*, Vol. VI, p. 289.

the indirect cause of the poverty of the samurai class; but the extension of money economy, the development of the standard of living, and the reduction of its revenue, were the direct and proximate causes.

3. THE FACT OF THE POVERTY.

That samurai were after the middle of the Tokugawa Regime subjected to an extreme financial difficulty can be supported by many facts, but I shall here point out only a few of them. Such military equipment as swords and armour which were regarded as representing the spirit of the samurai were pawned and unredeemed, thereby falling into the hands of strangers. Perhaps such equipment were not needed in times of peace, of course, but such a procedure on the part of a samurai would have been unthinkable at any previous period, when samurai were comparatively wealthy and economically self-sufficient. Many samurai had to take their ceremonial dresses out of pawn whenever they had to attend some public affair in the castle; and would again return the dresses to the pawn shops on as soon as they got back from the castle. Some samurai were not wealthy enough to employ domestic servants, and in consequence the members of their families had to do the general housekeeping, and sometimes did some profitable work on the side at home.

But the poverty of the samurai could be only little alleviated by such things as private work or thrift. Many samurai fell deep into debt owing to the pressure of circumstances, borrowing money right and left. The following account is given by a writing on the condition of the time:

“Samurai had to borrow money from the feudal government and from commoners. In the case of the latter, the nominal creditor was often some high priest of imperial lineage, because suits over loans between samurai and commoners would sometimes not be accepted by the law courts

and, for this reason, commoners would not consent to extend loans to samurai unless in the name of some high priest. Samurai also borrowed from blind commoners who received special protection from the feudal government. In all cases, the rates of interest were very high, but samurai took pride in their ability to borrow money at all risks, sometimes even mortgaging their annual grants of rice."⁴⁾

Because of the extreme difficulty of living, the samurai of that time would do nothing which did not bring them economic returns, thinking that samurai ethics and honesty ought to be given the go by in these days. When they were asked to do a service for some one, they would agree in accordance with the nature of the gifts they received. They cared little whether they were fitted to do the work they were about to take up, and while serving one lord would seek another master who might give them a better material return. They would allow themselves to take bribes. When they bought provisions for their lord from commoners, they wangled commissions in various dishonest ways.

As was already stated, samurai replaced hereditary retainers with temporary ones, who were hired on the condition that they would loan money to their master, and to whom the master entrusted the whole task of managing his financial affairs. When it was necessary to adopt a son, the amount of property possessed by the family of the prospective heir formed the deciding factor, and even the rank of a samurai was bought and sold. This was practised even as early as the Hoei and Genroku Eras; the regulation regarding the general conduct of samurai promulgated in the seventh year of the Hoei Era (1710) has a reference to the samurai's love of money and of other worldly matters. Some samurai adopted the sons of wealthy commoners as their heirs. Sometimes even those who had sons of their

⁴⁾ "Sejikemmonroku" in the *Feudal Social and Economic Library*, Vol. I (近世社會經濟叢書第一卷所收世事見聞錄)

own specially adopted a boy from another family because this family possessed great wealth. In later periods, new regulations on inheritance were established under which the samurai who adopted a son had to surrender his substance and the headship of the family to the adopted son, himself drawing special grants of rice for his own living.

The samurai's practice of adopting the sons of others for their heirs and of selling the rank of samurai to some wealthy commoners—a practice having economic return as its main purpose—resulted in debasing the purity of the blood which the samurai had carefully preserved from generation to generation since the time of their remote ancestors; the practice also created an opportunity for the blood of commoners to find its way into the veins of samurai. Mr. Shojiro Kobayashi says:

“The commoners who purchased the positions of even such low class samurai as “ashigaru” (a kind of light-armed soldiers) or police officials, had an excellent chance of promotion, especially towards the end of the Tokugawa Regime, because there was no strict demarcation between the immediate vassals or retainers of the Shogun and other samurai; and some of those enterprising commoners became “hatamoto” or immediate retainers of the Shogun. Such a samurai as Sukeaki Kusu-Sadonokami, who was quite powerful during the time when Tadakuni Mizuno held the high office of “rochu,” was first a poor commoner in Shinano, but rose to fame and power through the purchase of the position of samurai and held the position of “kanjo bugyo.” His son also held a high office in the city of Osaka.”⁵⁾

4. REMEDIES FOR THE POVERTY

I shall now dwell on several remedies which were instituted by the Shogunate Government and the daimyo. As

⁵⁾ *History of the End of the Tokugawa Regime* (幕末史) p. 38.

I have already pointed out, the samurai suffered greatly because of the fluctuation of the price of rice which was their only revenue; this was due to the fact that, while rice formed the foundation of the social and economic organisations of the time, the use of money had become extensively popularised. Consequently, the Shogunate endeavoured to regulate the price of rice—to maintain it at a reasonable rate. This remedy was one way of meeting the poverty of the samurai. I have discussed this point more fully elsewhere. I shall here only mention that it did not prove a successful remedy.

Another remedy was thrift. This was a policy which was adopted by the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and various edicts were issued to urge samurai to exercise thrift; the law governing the conduct of samurai which was enacted in the early part of the Tokugawa Regime also had provisions regarding thrift. Edicts on thrift promulgated during the Eras of Kwanei, Kwansei, and Tempo are famous. Although these edicts were not intended for the samurai class alone, it was evident that its necessity in the case of the samurai was greater than that in any other class because of their failure to adapt themselves to the economic conditions of the time; limitation of their consumption was surely an important means of relieving their poverty. The successive shoguns urged samurai to observe two things: martial accomplishments and thrift; but it is doubtful whether they observed either of them to any appreciative extent.

The Shogunate also granted loans to its direct vassals and retainers in times of natural calamities and other emergencies. Although this cannot be placed in the same category as the regulation of the price of rice or with the edicts on thrift, it also can be regarded as a means of relieving the poverty of the samurai. In the first year of the Bunkyu Era (1861), loans were granted to samurai according to the amount of their annual revenue. A loan of 25 ryo was granted to a samurai whose annual revenue of rice was

300 koku; 20 ryo for 200 koku, 15 ryo for 100 koku; and from 5 to 10 ryo for revenues under 100 koku. The loans were redeemed in ten-year instalments.

By far the most drastic method adopted by the feudal government by way of relieving the poverty of the samurai was the repudiation of debts. The direct vassals of the Shogun who had rice fields of their own, could demand that the tenants make advance payments of their taxes, or force them to shoulder extraordinary expenditures. But some of those ordinary samurai who received annual revenues from daimyo borrowed money from commoners with the greater part of their revenues as security; and the feudal government had no other way than to cancel their debts in order to relieve them financially. The government also issued many orders for the purpose of placing limitations on the interest rate; and the order of repudiation of debts issued in the first year of the Kwansei Era (1789) was intended to eradicate all evils resulting from the debts of the hatamoto and other direct retainers of the Shogun who had mortgaged their annual revenue for a term of years according to the size of the debt. By this order all debts incurred prior to the end of the fourth year of the Temmei Era (1784) were entirely cancelled, while those incurred after the beginning of the fifth year of the same era were redeemed in instalments, regardless of the sum total of the loan, the rate of the instalments being one per cent for every 50 ryo per month. Three ryo in cash for every 100 sacks of rice was paid back in annual instalments. As a result of this order, the commoner-creditors lost old loans amounting to something like 1,187,800 ryo. Naturally after such a disaster, moneylenders became unwilling to extend loans to hatamoto, who were compelled to employ "rônin" or masterless samurai or others who had vim and vigour and eloquence, for the purpose of negotiating with the moneylenders. In some cases, these negotiators had to resort to force in order to secure loans. The repudiation of debts thus gave rise to those "negotiators" who were called

"kurayadoshi." The moneylenders also employed such negotiators in order to meet the hatamoto's demands. Fear of an order for the repudiation of debts caused great unrest in society in general. This is why at the time of the failure of the rice crop, the government promised that it would not issue any order for the repudiation of debts. When, some 50 years later, Tadakuni Mizuno, *rochu* of the time, carried out the reform of the Tempo Era, he attempted to grant public loans to the hatamoto, with the stipulation that they would not be required to pay back any principal, provided they paid an annual interest of seven per cent for a period of 25 years. The plan was intended to make the hatamoto pay back their debts to professional moneylenders, but it was never fully carried out. In December, next year, the fourteenth year of Tempo (1843), the feudal government issued an order making all debts, both old and new, redeemable in annual instalments, without interest; and all secured loans were to be paid back by the borrowers at the rate of five ryo annually in case of debts above 100 ryo and at the rate of five per cent in case of debts below 100 ryo. It is said that one-half of the money lenders closed their doors, indicating the drastic nature of the measure.

The practice of repudiating debts was also adopted by daimyo in their own territories. Some of those feudal princes encouraged samurai to carry on domestic industries. Of various such industries, the one most popularly adopted was the spinning industry, it was also the most successful of all industries. Various silk textiles, such as *gunnaiori*, *yonezawaori*, are products of this industry. The lord of Kumamoto encouraged his samurai to produce silk textiles; the lord of Shirakawa also gave similar encouragement. All this was intended to relieve the poverty of the samurai who were unable to adapt themselves to the existing economic conditions: it indicates that samurai were unable to make a decent living under the then prevailing economic organisation of society.

The foregoing measures were taken by the Shogunate

and daimyo to relieve the samurai from their extreme poverty. But there are moreover several measures of minor importance which had the same intention. But none of them had much success, as far as the relief of the financial difficulties of the samurai was concerned, due mainly to the fact that the very foundation of the life of the samurai class had become unsteady. We shall next consider this foundation.

5. THE FOUNDATION OF THE SAMURAI'S LIFE

The foundation of the samurai's life, in a word, was based upon the fact of allegiance, both in its spiritual and material phases. Spiritually, feudal princes, vassals, and retainers, trusted one another and formed a permanent tie of personal loyalty; materially, the life of the samurai was sustained by the annual grants of rice which were given to them by their respective lords, the feudal princes, or daimyo.

We shall first consider the spiritual side. The relation of loyalty, that is, of the samurai to his lord, was formed several generations prior to the foundation of the Shogunate. But in course of time, the tie seemed to have lost much of its vigour, it only existed as a historical relationship. Its outward expression was perfected through the Shogunate's effort at maintaining the military hierarchy. There were various classes within the same class and the distinction between them was strictly maintained by various outward forms, such as the different ceremonies and greetings required at entering the gates of a castle or residence, or the nature of the honorary addresses used in public documents, etc. But the spiritual tie based on personal loyalty was weakened as the outward form was perfected. The descendants of great ancestors often proved persons of weak characters or of meagre capacity, while successors to the samurai house were also in many cases inherited by adopted sons, who

would not dare to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of their lords. Especially, as samurai began to hire temporary paid retainers, this personal tie almost became extinct.

Temporary, paid retainers were wage workers. A master hired retainers for a fixed sum for a certain period of time. Their relations in consequence were simply a matter of contract; they were devoid of the personal sentiment of love and fidelity which marked the tie between a master and his hereditary retainers. Sorai Ogiu mentions in his treatise on politics,⁶⁾ written during the Kyoho Era, that the hereditary retainers had been entirely replaced by hired retainers and that even great farmers had very few hereditary servants. We may then suppose that there was a great number of temporary hired retainers by the middle of the Tokugawa Regime.

As I have already pointed out, the hereditary retainers became unproductive after the separation of samurai and farmer, as they no longer tilled the soil of their master. The samurai no longer became able to support their hereditary servants. Moreover, hired retainers were superior to those hereditary ones in that they knew more about Edo than the former as they were denizens of the capital. But the hiring of those paid retainers put an end to the personal tie which had existed between the samurai and his servants. On this point Sorai Ogiu says:⁷⁾

"In these times of peace, all samurai hire paid servants. As those servants are hired for the period of one year, their relations to the master are like those between men in the street. Whenever some trouble arose, the master would call the one who acted as go-between in hiring them, and discharge them in his presence. The master thought that this summarily ended his relation with such discharged servants. The servants, on the other hand, regarded all

⁶⁾ "Seidan" (政談) in the *Bibliotheca Japonica Oeconomiae Politicaeque*. Vol. III, p. 371.

⁷⁾ *ibid.* p. 374.

samurai in Edo as their masters. Thus the loyalty existed only in name.....

“The hereditary servants of samurai when the latter lived in the country where rice was produced, were a sort of farmers. Though rustic, they were true. But those paid servants whom samurai are employing in the castle-town do not usually stay long in any one place; and, in consequence, are irresponsible and reckless.....The replacing of hereditary retainers by hired ones has had a demoralising effect upon the ethical conduct of the samurai class in general.”

Great daimyo who held extensive territories did not employ paid retainers, but lesser daimyo, hatamoto and small samurai had to employ them in great numbers. The spiritual tie was thereby lost.

Let us now consider the material side of the question. After the separation of samurai and farmer, it seemed as though the samurai who moved to cities were a leisure class without definite means of subsistence, receiving annual stipends because of the military service of their ancestors. They, however, received those grants of rice for their loyalty to the princes; because of these grants, samurai would be ever ready to expose themselves to danger for the sake of their lords. They had no other source of income, and their patience was extremely tried when they pretended to be satisfied even though their revenue did not allow them to make a decent living. Nor was it an honourable thing for them to be satisfied with a revenue insufficient for their subsistence. Moreover, the poverty of the daimyo compelled them to reduce the fixed annual stipends of the samurai.

The following is extracted from the “Shohei Yawa” (昇平夜話):—

“The adoption of the system of annual grants of rice for the pay of samurai was the fundamental cause of the decline of their prestige. Reductions of the grants of rice came into being because of this very system. The reduction of a samurai’s revenue had no justifiable ground whatever..... There is absolutely no reason why the rightful

revenue of one who has committed no wrong should be cut by one half. There was no such custom in the ancient times. True, as samurai were expected to sacrifice their very lives for the sake of their lord they should be ready to give up their entire revenue for his sake, if only there were some great necessity for it. But if the lord himself should break promises, seek selfish ends and have no compassion for the sufferings of his subordinates, the latter cannot but entertain discontent. Discontent breeds disobedience. There is no guarantee that in times of great emergency, the samurai would not forsake their master and flee.⁸⁾

It was only too natural that the material relations between the feudal lord and his samurai could not remain pure and true as they had been before the separation of samurai and farmer. Under the new condition, samurai were expected to be ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their master, and they would often complain of their hard lot. This complaint indicates that their material relations with their master were not sufficient, and that the foundation of their economic life had become greatly weakened. After the middle of the Tokugawa Regime, this foundation became extremely unstable; samurai were exposed to great poverty; and the very existence of the samurai class was threatened with extinction.

EIJIRO HONJO

⁸⁾ *Bibliotheca Japonica Oeconomiae Politicaeque*, Continuation-volumes, Vol. II, p. 144.