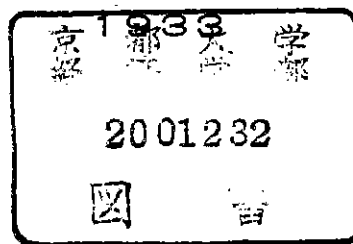


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## THE COMMONER CLASS OF THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD

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### 1. THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE COMMONERS

Of the four social classes that constituted the social fabric of the feudal period of Tokugawa, namely, the samurai, farmers, artisans, and traders, the last two made up what was generally termed "chonin" or commoners, in contradistinction to the higher social class of samurai. In the eye of the authorities of the Feudal Government, the social status of commoners was much inferior to that of both the samurai whose ancestors had rendered very meritorious services to the State and the farmers who were engaged in the ceaseless toil of producing the main foodstuff of the nation. The commoners were viewed as a class of people who indulged in the despicable enjoyment of life; who were shamelessly devoted to a life of profit-making through exchange of goods; and who would resort to any dubious method in order to coax others to buy high-priced goods, thereby stimulating a habit of luxury, the demoralizing effects of which were greatly feared by the authorities. The commoners, in short, were considered a good-for-nothing and unproductive class of people. In the opinion of the samurai, the commoners should be grateful for their being allowed to engage in their vocation, and were expected to make monetary contributions as *myoga* (冥加) and *unjo* (運上) to the ruling class. Thus, the feudal authorities never seriously thought of imposing any formal tax on the commoners.

The feudal authorities exercised much interference in the daily life of the commoners as in the case of farmers. The use of articles of daily necessity such as head and foot gear and even such things as umbrellas was strictly circums-

cribed by law. Both commoners and farmers were prohibited from using silk clothes. Strict control was also exercised regarding the consumption of various commodities: sale of articles of novelty was prohibited; sale of vegetables produced before their proper season of harvest was also prohibited; raise of labour wages as well as of commodity prices following some great natural calamity was barred. The manufacturers of *tôfu* (豆腐) would be scolded by the authorities for their failure to lower the prices of their product, when the price of beans, raw material used in the manufacturing of *tôfu*, dropped. Various intricate methods were also adopted by the feudal authorities in order to regulate the prices of commodities, especially rice.

Although commoners were subjected to various interferences by the feudal authorities in their daily life, their treatment was vastly better than that which was accorded to farmers, when the nature and degree of the interferences are taken into consideration. This may become clear when the following two sets of official notices issued in the 2nd year of Keian (1649), one for farmers and the other for commoners, are compared. The notice issued for commoners were directed to prevent them from indulging in extravagance and luxury and all insulting remarks were carefully avoided in its wording. Commoners were simply told "not to wear silk dress," "not to make gold lacquered furnitures," "not to use either gold or silver in house decorations," and "not to build any three-storied house for themselves." The notice for farmers, on the other hand, told them in no uncertain terms that "they had no discretion in their daily conduct nor any purpose in life." Moreover, their daily life was subjected to a stricter regulation than in the case of commoners. For instance, they were urged to cultivate a habit of early rising and were prohibited from drinking *sake* and tea as well as from smoking. They were ordered not to eat rice and to eat other cereals and urged to divorce lazy wives. Thus, the notice implied a recognition of farmers' mental and educational inferiority. However, in social rank

commoners were regarded as being inferior to farmers chiefly because the former were engaged in the despicable practice of profit-making for private ends (in the opinion of the feudal authorities); and, as has been already pointed out, the commoners often made monetary contributions to the authorities in token of their gratitude for their being allowed to engage in business. The fact is to be noted, however, that the superiority of their standard of living and of their economic power was unquestioned. Commoners were allowed to form industrial guilds among themselves for the purposes of their common solidarity and monopoly, and enjoyed self-government to a certain extent.

## 2. THE FINANCIAL POWER OF THE COMMONERS

I have dwelt on the social status of the merchants of the Tokugawa Period in its formal aspect. This period was marked by the wide prevalence of rice economy and the gradual development of money economy which finally came to replace the former in the course of time. Those who had financial and economic knowledge were in a position to amass wealth and to attain an economic power of great magnitude. The long reign of tranquillity in the land had brought changes in the life of the samurai who constituted the ruling class of the time. They had put away weapons of fighting, and wars and battles only remained in their memories. People had gradually acquired the habit of luxurious living and the samurai had no occasion to use the military power, which had been replaced by the power of money. Now, it was the commoners who had command over this new power. At first both the Feudal Government and local daimyos often exacted forced contributions called *goyōkin* (御用金) from wealthy commoners of Edo, Kyoto and Osaka, but later they had to bend their knees in order to borrow from them. It was with the financial help thus rendered by the wealthy merchants that the samurai could barely succeed in making both ends meet. Says *Keizai Roku* (經濟錄): "Present-day

daimyos, both big and small, bow before wealthy commoners in order to borrow money from them and depend on the merchants of Edo, Kyoto and Osaka, etc. for their continued living." The foregoing quotation is sufficient to indicate the great extent to which the samurai class depended on the financial assistance of wealthy commoners whose economic power over the entire realm had so greatly expanded. Another record of the time called "*Chônin Kôken Roku*" written by Takafusa Mitsui, an ancestor of the Mitsui Family, throws a flood of light on the financial relations between some 50 wealthy commoners of the time and the daimyos during a period of about 60 years in and around the Genroku Era (1688—1703). The book gives an account of the bankruptcy of these 50 families whose financial downfall was caused either by forced contributions or their own extravagant living. This record unmistakably proves the fact that the daimyos borrowed a vast amount of money from the wealthy commoners of Kyoto. The list of daimyo-debtors includes the Lords of the following provinces: Kaga, Satsuma, Sendai, Higo, Hiroshima, Tottori, Nanbu, Bishu, Kishu, Tsuyama, Choshu, Tosa, Saga, Yonezawa, Fukuoka, etc. These powerful daimyos managed to patch up their finances with the financial aid of wealthy merchants.

The majority of daimyos had their *kurayashiki* (蔵屋敷) or warehousing quarters at Osaka or Edo, in order to facilitate the sale of their rice and other products raised in their respective territories. The daimyos of Northern Japan had their *kurayashiki* mostly at Edo, while those of Central and Western Japan including the Kwanto had their warehouses at Osaka, where the products brought there were either sold or mortgaged.

The warehousing official called *kurayakunin* (蔵役人) was in charge of each *kurayashiki*. He was sent by the daimyo who was the owner of the warehouse and he represented his lord. At first he also acted as *kuramoto* (蔵元) or the keeper of the warehouse, but in the later period the *kuramoto* was assumed by a merchant of great wealth. He was in charge

of the receiving and delivery of warehouse goods. There was another official in the *kurayashiki* who was in charge of the accounting of the transactions of warehouse goods and who was known by the name of *kakeya* (掛屋). This position was also often assumed by the *kuramoto*. The *kakeya*, like the *fudasashi* (札差) at Edo, was a financial agent for daimyos and samurai in general. He was usually given an annual grant of rice and treatment similar to that which was given to the chief retainer of a daimyo. The foremost *kuramoto* at Osaka was called Zen-emon Konoike, who was in the service of the daimyos of many clans including the following: Kaga, Hiroshima, Awa, Okayama, Yanagawa. He was also in the special service for the Lords of Bishu and Kishu, and his total fief amounted to 10,000 koku. Some of the branches of his family received an annual grant of rice sufficient to support some 70 men. Thus, such wealthy merchants as Zen-emon Konoike, Gohei Hiranoya and Gohei Tennoji lived as extravagantly as the daimyos.

Naturally enough, the *kuramoto* possessed a powerful influence over the finance of the clan he served. For instance, Heiemon Masuya, an Osaka merchant, exercised an almost absolute power over the finance of the Sendai clan in the capacity of its *kuramoto*. He was described by Seiryō Kaihō, a noted writer of the period, as "having taken over unto himself the management of the household finance of the Lord of Sendai." The Sendai clan engaged several merchants acting as its *kuramoto* over a long period of time, but none of them was as powerful as Heiemon Masuya.

The settlement of loans advanced to daimyos by merchants would often drag for many years. With the passing of years, the former would find themselves in deeper waters, and they would frequently demand settlement by instalments or exemption of interest. Such a demand was usually accepted in case the merchants were in the capacity of *kuramoto*, because they were in a position to secure interest, receive annual grant of rice, and often received various gifts from the daimyos whom they served; so that the principal

could be returned in a period of ten years or so. On the other hand, the merchants harassed by the repressive measures of irresponsible daimyos knew how to deal with them. The merchants pledged among themselves not to make further advances to such daimyos in the future, and this refusal often had electric effect. For a defaulting daimyo would invariably make an apology to the creditor, to whom gifts would be presented and the promise made that the repayment of the debts would be made so that future advances would be made by the merchant. "Samurai were fired with anger (at the indignity of being hard pressed by merchants), but they forebore the insolence of merchants, and were even ready to give up *bushido* in their attempt to court the goodwill of the commoners, for the sake of their Lord (who had to borrow from the commoners)." A writer of the period called Ryotei Shingu wrote: "Shameless and regrettable is the flattery shown by the high retainers of daimyos to the commoner-creditors. They would proceed at the head of a suite of scores of attendants to offer respects to their commoner-creditors, as if the latter were their own princes, and would flatter the shop clerks in a most despicable manner."

Retaliatory measures against samurai who failed to settle debts were adopted by commoner-creditors as early as during the Kyôho Era (1716—1735). One of the common practices adopted by them was to place a paper flag or to paste a paper in front of the samurai's house in case the latter failed to repay his debts or make payment for some goods. In December, the 14th year of the Kyôho Era, a decree was issued by the Edo Government, providing that any commoner who committed such an act of misdemeanour against a samurai would be severely dealt with.

The commoners also extended their financial arm over to the farm districts where there was an unmistakable tendency of concentration in land. We may naturally conceive, therefore, that transactions in land and borrowing of money for other agricultural purposes were no longer limited

to farmers themselves, for merchants gradually came to participate in them to a great extent. Many merchants possessed concentrated lands and newly developed lands. Many commoners took an active part in the enterprise of developing new lands for agricultural purposes.

The samurai class, in short, was under the financial sway of the commoners. Says *Chônin Fukuro* (町人糞): "No one knows when the practice of using gold and silver originated, but it made its development steadily. As the commoners had sway over gold and silver, they would be allowed to be in the presence of nobles. Thus, they came to be superior to the farmers in point of personal appearance." Nay, they are superior not only to the farmers but also to the samurai class in respect of economic power. They hold in a firm grip the economic power of the realm and constitute a powerful force in feudal society.

### 3. THE PRIVATE LIFE OF THE COMMONERS

The commoner class attained full development during the Tokugawa Period. There lived many commoners who were as rich as Croesus and who would spend money like water. Some of them led lives which were more luxurious and extravagant than those of daimyos. At Edo, Bunzaemon Kinokuniya and Mozaemon Naraya amassed fabulous fortunes, and their life of unparalleled dissipation and extravagance in the gay quarters of the metropolis has become proverbial. Kuranosuke Nakamura and Juemon Naniwaya both at Kyoto and Tatsugoro Yodoya at Osaka astounded the people of their time by the grandeur of their residences, the splendours of their dress and their princely dinners. Their extraordinary life, indeed, represented the luxury and extravagance of the commoners of the period.

The following story of a foolish competition in extravagant display of women's dress presented by the wives of two wealthy merchants, one at Edo and the other at Kyoto, during the Empô Era (1673—1680) is truly illustrative of



the spirit of extravagance among the wealthy commoners of the Tokugawa Period. This curious competition developed on the occasion of a visit paid by one Rokubei Ishikawaya, a noted millionaire at Edo, to Kyoto. His wife who accompanied him was attired in such an expensive costume that the people of the ancient capital were greatly amazed. This provoked the competitive spirit of the wife of a Kyoto millionaire called Juemon Nambaya. In order to show that her husband was richer than Ishikawaya, she walked through the streets of Kyoto, wearing a *kimono* made of silk satin and on which were embroidered the scenic views of the ancient city. Not to be outdone by her dress, Ishikawaya's wife also walked through the streets of the capital, wearing a rich *kimono* made of black *habutae* (羽二重) silk with a design of the nandin. At first people thought that the Kyoto woman had a more expensive costume than the Edo woman, but they later found, to their great astonishment, that every red fruit of the nandin was made of expensive coral. Accustomed to expensive costumes as the populace of Kyoto had been, they could not but express their great surprise at the extravagant dress of the woman from Edo.

The following account of the extravagant life of Yodoya is contained in *Genshō Kanki* (元正間記): "Yodoya built a bridge in front of his shop and gave it the name of his family, Yodoya. His forty-eight warehouses were full of treasures collected at an enormous cost. He received the title of 'chōja' because of his great wealth. Yodoya is the name of his establishment and his family name is Okamoto. The Yodoya reached the zenith of its glory during the life time of Saburoemon Okamoto, who, after his retirement from an active business career, assumed the name of *Koan*. He built stages around his house which was magnificent beyond description. The parlours, large and small, are gilded with gold and the gold gilded screens bear the paintings of the flowers of all seasons drawn by two famous artists, Kitan Katsurada and Kino Katsurada. His garden has a splendid pond, bridges spanning it, as well as trees of all descriptions

gathered from all places in Japan and China. The so-called Summer Chamber has *shōji* (障子) made of glass. There were glass cases lining the upper part of the walls just below the ceiling which are filled with water in which gold fish can be seen swimming. No chamber even in the Imperial Palace can compare with Yodoya's magnificent dwelling. His tea room is decorated with gold and silver, while the *ramma* (欄間) of his reception chamber are engraved with the flowers of all seasons. The rails of the spacious hallway are lacquered red. All these are so magnificent and grand that no residence of any daimyo or other noble can be compared with the Yodoya residence. All the rooms and chambers — the vestibule, the clerks' room, and the kitchen — are very large and each of them is watched over by a superintendent. So many persons are found within the house that it rather resembles a market place, rather than a private house. It is the master of this very house that is in financial service for the daimyos of thirty-three provinces in Western Japan. No daimyo in the western part of the mainland of Japan and Kyushu is free from the financial assistance of Yodoya. His great money power forces the daimyos to make presents to him and their chief retainers bow before him. Nobles of high rank and daimyos with extensive feudalities must show the utmost respects to Yodoya."

Education had much advanced during the Tokugawa Period and learning was no longer a monopoly of the nobility and the clergy. Primary education was given through the medium of the so-called *terakoya* (寺小屋). The commoners were no longer satisfied with the sordid task of money-making: they also pursued learning to a great extent. The progressive and active commoners demanded a fresh and practical philosophy of life, and it was to meet this new requirement by a rising class that *shingaku* (心學) came to be popular among the merchants. It outlined the way of the merchant and was a philosophy for the commoner class in general. It was originally propounded by a scholar

at Kyoto named Baigan Ishida, and was later expounded by his pupils such as Toan Tejima, Gido Wakisaku, and Kyuo Shibata. Their head-quarters at Kyoto was called *Meirinsha* (明倫舍). There were established at Edo two lecture-halls called *Gorakusha* (五樂舍) and *Jishūsha* (時習舍) where *shingaku* was taught, but it never flourished at that city as it did at Kyoto and Osaka. Great was the influence which this particular line of learning exercised on the minds of the common people. Besides the scholars who taught *shingaku*, there were in the Kyoto-Osaka district many others who taught similar studies. For instance, Nobunaga Motoori, a great scholar of national classics, was born of a commoner at the town of Matsusaka, Ise Province. Jinsai Ito, a great exponent of the Confucian classics, was also born of a merchant at Kyoto. Baigan Ishida, the propounder of *shingaku*, also was a son of a merchant. Two noted Osaka scholars, Banto Yamakata and Naokata Kusama, were also commoners. Banto was the head-clerk of an exchange shop, namely, Heiemon Masuya. He is the author of a great work called *Yumeno-shiro* (夢の代). Naokata Kusama was first in the service of the Konoike Family and later opened an exchange shop of his own. He also wrote a book called *Sankwa-zui* (三貨圖彙). There was a lecture hall at Osaka which was called *Kwaitokudo* (懷德堂). It was founded by two scholars, namely, Sekian Miyake and Shuan Nakai. Here, lectures were given to commoners and artisans. Two Nakai brothers, namely, Chikuzan and Riken, outlined economic theories of considerable importance. Banto was also a pupil of these two brothers. The foregoing account shows some of the notable examples of the learning which was popularised among the commoners of the Kyoto-Osaka district.

To summarise: during the Tokugawa Period, especially in its later half, the commoner class not only had already come to control the financial power of the nation, but also had participated in the nation's culture and learning. The

commoners really shouldered the destiny of the land in its practical phases.

EIJIRO HONJO :