

The People of Edo Japan

After 150 years of constant civil war, the government tried to maintain a stable society by enforcing a strict class system. During the Edo period (1615-1868), Japanese were born into certain classes, in which they remained their entire lives.

Samurai

The samurai made up the majority of the military that ruled the country. Although there was an emperor, the country was ruled by a military dictator called the shogun. The shogun was served by daimyo (feudal lords who were higher-ranking samurai), who in turn were served by other samurai.

Higher ranking samurai (daimyo) owned land, which was their source of income. They rented their fields to farmers who paid for rent in rice. Rice was the major form of wealth in Japan at this time.

The lives of the samurai were always controlled. Strict rules governed what vehicles they used, the color and style of their clothing, even the furnishings of their homes. In order to prevent civil war and rebellion, the shogun required daimyo to maintain extravagant homes in their provinces and in Edo, and to travel constantly in lavish processions between them every year. This travel impoverished the samurai, and made sure they could be closely watched by the shogun when they lived in Edo during the year.

Along with their service to the shogun and duties of war, samurai were expected to be well-versed in the arts. Samurai regularly practiced the tea ceremony, ikebana (flower arrangement), calligraphy, writing poetry. Knowledge and practice of the arts was considered necessary for members of this refined aristocratic class.



Farmers

Farmers were next in social rank behind the samurai. They were the producers of rice, which was the basis of the Japanese economy. They were the only citizens who had to pay taxes, since their income was the only type among the common people considered “honorable” enough to tax.

With heavy taxes, farmers’ lives were very difficult. At times, they would riot and protest, and the government would try to force them back onto their land. Some destitute peasants gave up their birthright as honorable farmer to become laborers, craftsmen, or merchants. Yet, some ambitious farmers were able to purchase fields from their poorer neighbors. Some became quite rich, educated themselves and their children, and became patrons of the arts. At times, the government issued laws to control the power of the farmers and other social classes, yet these attempts did not stop them from striving for a better life.



How did Edo Japan’s attitude towards taxation differ from that of the United States government today?

Craftsmen

Craftsmen made up the third class in society, and included such people as carpenters, tailors, tatami mat makers, construction workers, woodblock artists, etc. Because they produced actual goods that were of value to people, they were not the lowest of the social classes. Yet, both merchants and craftsmen supplied a demand of the samurai for luxurious goods of all kinds (silk, embroidery, porcelain, lacquer, painting, sculpture, prints, etc.), necessities in the lifestyles and ceremonies of the upper classes. Together, they were called chonin (literally "residents of the block" or townspeople).



Merchants

Because they did not produce anything of value for society, the merchants were at the bottom of the social ladder. They nevertheless accumulated great wealth that surpassed that of the military, and at times merchants lent money to samurai. Some merchants gained the power and influence to become art patrons and could afford luxuries and entertainment. For those who could afford it, merchants spent much of their money on Kabuki theater, restaurants, clothing, and sumo tournaments. Strict laws, however, prevented them from openly displaying their wealth. For instance, the government periodically issued edicts restricting their literature and art, and even specified clothing that could not be worn by them.



Towards the end of the Edo period, a blurring of class lines gradually developed. People switched roles, for instance samurai borrowed money from the lower classes, merchants could sometimes buy themselves the status as a samurai, and farmers gave up their status to become merchants. By the 1850s, there was widespread dissatisfaction at all levels of society. Farmers were overworked, the samurai were poor, the imperial family was alienated, and the merchant class were repressed. At the end of the Edo period, the Japanese wanted an end to feudalism, which led to the restoration of the Meiji emperor in 1868.

All photographs are taken in a late nineteenth century or early twentieth century studio setting.
Library Collection, Asian Art Museum.