

LIFE AND CULTURE IN THE EDO PERIOD (1603-1867)

LIFE IN JAPAN IN THE EDO PERIOD

Edo (Tokyo) was made the capital of Japan by the Tokugawa shogunate. When the shogunate set up a fortress city there around 1600 it was a small village. By 1700, it was the largest city on the world, with a population of 1,200,000, compared to 800,000 in London and 500,000 in Paris at that time. Edo society was very urbanized. Urban fashion spread outwards from Edo and people came from the country to seek employment during the slack agricultural season or in difficult times.

Japan became affluent enough in the Edo Period that many Japanese were able to switch from eating two meals to three meals a day. Typical dishes included rice, fish and tofu. People began seasoning their food with sweet sake and soy sauce. Sweet potatoes and pumpkins were introduced from overseas. One cookbook contained more than 100 recipes for tofu that were graded into six levels: mediocre, standard, fine, novel, delicious and supreme. A recipe for boiled tofu went: "Put tofu into an open pot of boiling kudzu starch gruel. Wait until the tofu starts to move slightly and scoop it up just as it is about to float."

Life was difficult for the rural populations but not so difficult that they rose up in revolt. The worst hardships were disease, famine and earthquakes. The Great Meireki Fire in January 1657 destroyed Edo Castle. In 1732, nearly 1 million people starved to death in a famine caused by poor harvests. Hundreds of thousands more died of cholera.

Education in Japan in the Edo Period

In feudal Japan provincial lords set up special schools for samurai and rural communities operated schools for wealthier members of the merchant and farming class. In the Edo period, children from age 7 to 15 attended neighborhoods temple schools run by Buddhist sects. They were taught to read, write and use an abacus. Most were taught by priests or monks but samurai, doctors and people in other professions also served as teachers. Generally there was no set tuition. Students paid what they could. The schools were so widespread that by some estimates the literacy rate in Tokyo was 80 percent. In the countryside there were not so many schools but rural people were motivated to learn to read and write so they wouldn't be cheated by tax collectors.

Rather than follow the same curriculum as others in their grade, however, the students progressed at their own pace. They copied what the instructor wrote down, and practiced writing the same phrase over and over until they were able to approximate the teacher's handwriting. Most of the texts they read were Chinese and Japanese classics, which were repeatedly read aloud until they were practically memorized.

There was no fixed curriculum for each grade and subject. Each school operator adapted the subject matter to the skill and progress of each child. Instruction followed a general course order, however, with children first learning the syllabary and then the common kanji characters before studying more complex kanji and phrases. Many different textbooks were used, depending on the children's family background.

Economy in Japan in the Edo Period

The long period of peace, allowed economic growth to take place. The merchant class grew and prospered. An early consumer society took hold. There were lots of street vendors, selling all sorts of things. Craftsmen were able to find buyers for their products. Tea shops and restaurants opened as people began to eat out more.

As the merchant class grew richer their power grew. As the daimyo grew poorer they lost their power. By the 1800s, the revenues a once powerful daimyo made from selling rice was about that of a single kimono shop in Tokyo. The samurai under the daimyos became impoverished and had to seek other lines of work, such as working as policemen and craftsmen. Many were forced to beg or sell their swords to eat.

Cheaper varieties of lamp oil became available and people stay up later at night. The distribution of sugar was increased and a large variety of confectionaries became available.

One of the most respected figures today from the Edo period is Uesugi Yozan, a feudal lord in what is now Yamagata Prefecture. He is credited with turning his debt-ridden domain into one of the most productive regions in Japan by developing new rice paddy fields, cultivating lacquer trees and safflower, and encouraging samurai to take up farming. He is famous for implementing belt-tightening measures such as recommending that people eat simple meals and wear cotton clothes. He described his policies and reasoning behind them in a book on how feudal lords should think and behave.

Rules in the Edo Period

During the Edo period only samurai were allowed to carry weapons, life was ordered according to strict Confucian principals of duty and family loyalty, and people were restricted to their villages and only allowed to leave on special holidays or to visit special shrines.

There were also rigid caste-like rules that defined what people could wear eat and eat. Social status was defined by birth and social mobility was prohibited. The result of all this was peace, stability and flourishing of sanctioned arts such as kabuki, haiku poetry, ceramics, lacquerware, painting and weaving but little freedom.

People were told the size and kind of house they could live in, based on class and rank more than wealth. Farmers, no matter how rich, could not have grander homes than low-ranking samurai who often owed money to the farmers.

The Tokugawa passed a strict dress code, forbidding merchants from wearing embroidered silk, to curb inflationary spending and keep a lid on social pretension. People were told the designs and materials to use for their clothes they wore and objects they used. There were even rules that designated the food people ate and the dates when people were supposed to change from their winter clothes to their summer clothes.

There was little tolerance for criminals and lawbreakers. By some counts more than 200,000 criminals and political rebels were beheaded or tied to wooden crosses at the Kozukabara execution grounds in Edo. Nearby was the bridge of tears, where the family of the condemned saw their loved ones alive for the last time.