

Chugen (Household Servant): Status and Role

A consideration of the servants in samurai households, called *chugen*, can help visitors gain a deeper understanding of life in the samurai houses of the Edo period (1603–1867).

Chugen

Chugen are first mentioned in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when they make an appearance as low-status soldiers who accompanied their samurai masters. It is said these soldiers were called *chugen* (meaning roughly “middle place”), because their rank fell between that of the lowest-ranking samurai (*ashigaru*) on the one hand and that of the messengers-cum-porters (*komono*) on the other.

During the Edo period, consecutive generations of *chugen* came to serve specific samurai families. Although there are stories of *chugen* who, in return for devoted service, were well-treated by their samurai families and who ultimately formed mutually beneficial relationships with them, there are also stories of *chugen* making use of samurai authority to further their own interests.

While some *chugen* commuted to the residence, others were quartered in the *nagaya-mon* (“longhouse gate”).

Life

Between 1830 and 1868, a *chugen*’s average annual salary amounted to 360 kg of rice, or three *ryo*. A *ryo* was the standard unit of currency at that time. *Chugen* also received five cups of brown rice per day. While a *chugen*’s meals were usually provided by his samurai master, *chugen* were quite poor, and many remained unmarried their entire lives. Some had no choice but to wear their masters’ discarded clothing, and also took on side jobs like making straw sandals or cultivating *bonsai* trees to supplement their incomes.

Clothing

Chugen typically wore cotton clothing that they made themselves unless accompanying their masters on business, in which case they were provided with clothes bearing a symbol unique to the family they served. Spear-carriers, sandal-bearers, and umbrella-holders often wore straight-sleeved coats called *happi* with their masters' crests sewn onto the back of the garment. Those who carried their masters' wooden chests of extra clothing (*basamibako*) and other cargo-bearers wore navy or yellow *happi* with a crest. *Chugen* would also be given an appropriate *happi* for special occasions like the New Year's celebration or coming-of-age ceremonies for the family's children.

Work

Within wealthy households, the individual roles and duties of each *chugen* were well-defined, along with their status with respect to one another. However, in less prosperous samurai households, *chugen* often had to shoulder numerous responsibilities simultaneously.

In principle, a *chugens* work was to watch the traffic in and out of the gates of the residence, manage and clean the grounds, bring water, draw baths, care for the horses, and accompany their masters on business. When attending their masters outside the residence, they might act as pike-bearers, carry sandals, haul trunks full of clothing, or lead horses. *Chugen* of especially high-ranking samurai might also bear their masters' palanquins.