

Ashigaru (Foot Soldiers): Aspects of Their Lifestyle

In the Edo period (1603–1867), Japanese society was broadly divided into four classes: samurai, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. All people, including samurai, were bound by strict social rules relating to their class. However, as these details from the lives of *ashigaru* (foot soldiers) show, flexibility within the system and opportunities for social mobility did exist.

Good News from the Formal Entrance

There was a particular custom among the *ashigaru* communities in Kanazawa: whenever a superior wished to contact an *ashigaru*, he would send an envoy to the *ashigaru*'s residence a day ahead of time. How the envoy then delivered the message was dependent on the nature of the message. If the news was good, the envoy would enter by the formal entrance (*genkan*) and announce his message from there. Bad news, on the other hand, would be conveyed from the kitchen or side entrance. In this way, an *ashigaru* family would know from the envoy's approach whether he carried good tidings or bad.

Advantages of Retinue Service and Staying in Edo

During the Edo period, the Tokugawa military government (shogunate) implemented a system called "alternate attendance" (*sankin-kotai*). Its purpose was to ensure the continued ascendancy of the Tokugawa by weakening the independence of feudal domains and depleting the resources of the other domain lords (daimyo). This system required daimyo to divide their time between their own domains and the Tokugawa capital, Edo (now Tokyo), where they were forced to maintain one or more official residences, in which the official wives and male heirs were expected to live. Details varied, but in the case of the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa centered on Kanazawa), the daimyo were expected to spend every other year in Edo, alternating between living there and in their own domain. For all the daimyo, traveling to Edo was a costly and time-consuming exercise. They did not travel alone, but were accompanied by a huge retinue of samurai retainers, servants, and various attendants. It is said that the daimyo of the Kaga domain—lord of one of the richest and largest domains of the day—traveled with no fewer than 2,000 and sometimes as many as 4,000 people in his retinue.

Ironically enough, despite the ordeals of *sankin-kotai*, *ashigaru* who accompanied their daimyo to Edo generally found their duties there less burdensome. Whereas at home they were frequently required to perform military duties and to act as servants to their superiors in the administration of the

domain, work in Edo was simple. More often than not, their duties in Edo involved no more than standing guard at the gate of the daimyo's residence (*bantei*). Work in Edo was also well-paid. Many *ashigaru*, therefore, were eager to accompany their daimyo to Edo.

Buying *Ashigaru* Status

In principle, the rank of *ashigaru* was not a hereditary status passed from parent to child. However, for the most part, children followed in the footsteps of their parents. The number of *ashigaru* permitted in the Kaga domain was fixed, so a person could join their number only on one of two occasions: either at the retirement or the death of another *ashigaru*. At such a time, a child hoping to become an *ashigaru* required a recommendation for the position.

In circumstances when *ashigaru* did not have children to succeed them, they could “sell” their status to a successor. This created an informal system of adoption whereby, for a price, a merchant or farming family could buy their child *ashigaru* status and have the child adopted into an *ashigaru* family.

As a general rule, there was no social mobility in the Edo period, as the classes were hereditary and fixed. However, for those hoping to become *ashigaru*, this small loophole allowed for a certain degree of fluidity.

The “Peach Division”

In one corner of an *ashigaru* district in the Kaga domain, there was an area full of blooming peach trees. As was the custom in Kaga, all the houses in this area were freestanding individual buildings, and they were generally referred to as the “Peach Division.”

As a general rule, *ashigaru* in other domains were not permitted to live in freestanding houses with gardens. They were therefore unable to plant fruit trees like peaches. This anecdote about the “Peach Division” demonstrates that *ashigaru* in Kanazawa enjoyed a better way of life than those in other areas.