

Ashigaru (Foot Soldier) Stipends and Advancement

Ashigaru Stipends

Members of the samurai class were employed by the domain lord (daimyo) and received stipends for their services. Their positions were inherited, and they were granted fiefs from which they derived their income. The status of *ashigaru* (foot soldier), on the other hand, was technically not a hereditary position, nor did a foot soldier derive his income from land assigned to him. Low-ranking samurai like *ashigaru* were paid at fixed times throughout the year in vouchers called *kiri-mai* that could be exchanged for rice or hard currency.

A typical *ashigaru* in the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa centered on Kanazawa) received a yearly salary of about 20 to 25 *hyo* (two *hyo* being roughly equivalent to the amount of rice one person eats in a year). Since *ashigaru* families included an average of six people, half of an *ashigaru*'s annual salary went directly to purchasing the food needed for basic subsistence.

Ashigaru Side Jobs

To supplement their salaries, *ashigaru* often took up side jobs at home in their spare time. This was often piecework, and included making lanterns, dolls, children's toys, and decorations for traditional holidays such as Obon (a Buddhist summer event commemorating one's ancestors).

The “Kaga Sodo” Incident

Even though their lives could be difficult, many *ashigaru* invested heavily in education and culture. Some, like Otsuki Tomomoto (1703–1748), even found remarkable opportunities for advancement.

The “Kaga Sodo” incident was an infamous episode in the history of Kanazawa when an *ashigaru* named Otsuki Tomomoto rose well above his initial rank and subsequently met with an unfortunate fate. This event, which ended in a series of deaths, has been retold in countless stories and even depicted in the traditional plays known as *kabuki*. The historical facts are as follows.

In the eighteenth century, the Kaga domain was in serious economic difficulty. The daimyo at the time, Maeda Yoshinori (1690–1745), therefore charged an *ashigaru*, Otsuki Tomomoto, with finding a

solution to these economic problems. Tomomoto subsequently devised a way to repair domain finances by cutting expenditures and investing in agriculture to boost rice production. Yoshinori was so pleased with Tomomoto's proposal that he promoted him to high samurai rank. This did not sit well with those who already held this rank, and they treated Tomomoto with open hostility. When Yoshinori fell sick and died, they then banished Tomomoto to a distant mountainous area, where he took his own life. The daimyo who succeeded Yoshinori also died early, and the one after that was nearly poisoned. All these events— fluctuation in the fortunes of the domain, and the early demise of successive daimyo—has since been termed the “Kaga Sodo.”