TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO BOURGEOIS (CHONIN) SOCIETY IN JAPAN

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It would be impossible to clearly demarcate a transition period of history particularly for such a gradual process of change as the shift of real power in Japanese society from the military to the chonin class. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the gradual evolution of Japanese society and some of the forces which were in operation and to show how the conflicts and inconsistencies of the feudal structure itself worked to undermine the predominance and preeminence of the position of the samurai class. In order to do this, it would be necessary to go back to the Muromachi period, at least to the Sengoku era, circa 1467-1567, for the beginning of the process which culminated in the predominance of the power of the chonin class in the Tokugawa period.

The decline in the political power and control of the Ashikaga Shogunate brought about what Japanese historians have come to regard as the most lamentable period of their national history. Yet for all the gloom induced by the epoch, it had its brighter side for it was the incubation period of modernism, though perhaps the darkest hour before the dawn of modern age. Along with the strong disrespect of law and authority which had all but broken down, there was a marked flouting of traditions and conventions. In the naked power struggle which turned the country into a battlefield for a whole century, there unfolded the condition of gekokujō, that is, the subversion of the superiors by the subordinates. This was an age in which upstarts could and did rise from obscurity to fame and power. It was quite natural that there should have been a conspicuous and powerful leveling process at work in

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society affecting the social customs and manners, language, and cultural tastes and activities in the face of the weakening of the moral and spiritual foundations of the life of the upper classes.

The breakdown of rigid controls in society released the pent up energies of the masses, giving rise to the vigorous activities of the commoners and helped to create a condition of unprecedented social mobility abetted by widespread political confusion and instability. Many samurai sold their family genealogies to commoners while ambitious and able peasants trained themselves and became proficient in military arts, bought samurai genealogical charts, and attained high military positions, some of them eventually rising to the top level as daimyos.

Peasants thought nothing of organizing themselves into all sorts of *ikki* for action against oppression from above particularly against the authorities in protest of heavy taxation. They even managed to force the government to issue proclamations for the cancellation of debts which were euphemistically known as *tokusei*. Mobs frequently carried out organized assaults on pawnbrokers and money lenders who were notorious for their usurious practices with which they exploited the poor. Sake brewers who made enormous profits at the expense of the common people also became the targets of their ire and assault. These mass outbursts occurred with disturbing frequency as the people saw how much power they could wield when effectively organized.

In this amoral age virtually all the classes of society were motivated by the relentless and ruthless pursuit of profit. Corruption was rampant and official positions and court ranks could be purchased openly at fixed rates. But at least there were some compensating factors. In the face of selfish individualism born of disorder and chaos, there emerged the spirit of adventure and enterprise among the common people.

The degeneration of the nobility and the ineffectiveness of the government as well as the samurai class gave undreamed of opportunities to the common people to assert themselves. In such an age as the Sengoku, characterized by the "survival of the fittest", family background was no longer of overriding importance. An individual’s ability and frequently sheer force, counted for more than anything else in finding a niche in society. At least in the struggle for power, might made right.

The breakdown of the authority of the Shogunate made it necessary for the military men to depend upon their own strength, and the daimyos were forced to adopt the policy of developing and strengthening the economy of their domains. Thus, in spite of, or perhaps more because

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