

An Analysis of the Role of Women in Tokugawa Bushi Families

Even today, Japanese women are still harshly discriminated against, more severely than in other countries. One of the main contributions is the rooted traditional knowledge about families and about women, which should be in a subordinate position. This essay studies the situation of women in samurai families, in Mito Domain, which is the best representation of a traditionally ideal family. Women in the bushi family of Mito Domain of the Edo era, characterized by docility and obedience, were the product of education and power hierarchy within the kinship, different from other females in commoners' families where women had relatively more participation in society but were still restricted.

Since this essay aims to examine the role of women in the Tokugawa samurai family and how it was formed, it is necessary to have a working definition of the subject, females. In addition, the women in this essay mainly refer to bushi-class women rather than commoners since they are feminized to different extents which will be explained later. The nature of those women was suppressed and constrained to a feminized symbol. Their value and ethic were tightly linked to families and only within families, which made them alienized from themselves into a family being, thus, marginalized from society. Besides the range of women's activities, the role of women is also objectified to be obedient to males in their family, which finally formed one of the core underpinnings of Tokugawa society, male-dominated families¹.

Women were educated and regulated to act in an obedient manner in school and society. The knowledge of how to behave properly as a woman was rooted in the ideology of the family model, influencing women through schools and other people, including other women. Women, during socialization, first were separated from males and most social activities both physically and psychologically, which prevented them from getting touch with things out of the house, defying their identity as an individual social component but a belonged being of the family. Since young, in the Mito Domain, girls were taught separately from boys and learned different things, mostly sewing.² As they grew up, they hardly interacted with males without proper reasons or got out of home individually, as those behaviors would make them disdained³ and sometimes, were regulated by laws⁴. Thus, the sight of women was largely restrained within

¹ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37.

² Yamakawa Kikue, *Women of the Mito Domain* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 31-32.

³ Yamakawa Kikue, 16.

⁴ "Injunctions for Peasants" (1619), in David Lu, *Japan - A Documentary History* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 212.

households. Most women had no idea what was happening outside the home⁵ and men also thought women should not know it. In addition, their values and virtues were judged depending on how well they served the households⁶, which made them in a completely dependent position to men and only existing for them.⁷ Those, all together, marginalized women from society, limited their space of freedom inside the family and regulated them to conduct in a manner of tenderness, daintiness, and obedience.

But not all women in Tokugawa were in such a case. There was a clear difference between women of the bushi family and those of different social status, such as farmers and common city dwellers. Even though those women were in a similar position inside families, many of them were directly involved in economic and social activities. As described in the book, *Women of the Mito Domain*, even though the housewives of bushi families could not go out to purchase daily supplies like food, they could buy those from wives of farmers and fishermen by letting them get into their houses to trade.⁸ Also, those women often worked on the farm to assist their husbands depicted by the movie, *The Twilight Samurai*.⁹ For those living in or moving in cities, women from rich families sometimes directly acted as manager or co-manager of the family business, and those from impoverish household sometimes worked as prostitutes.¹⁰ Those females were still a participant in society and production, but there was obviously the same trend to feminize and objectify them since the entire culture was rooted on the ideology that women should be in the subordinate position.¹¹ For instance, if a farmer was not paying their tax, the government would take away their wife as security.¹² Women, officially and legitimately, were still treated as family property despite their distributions in the reality.

In conclusion, Women of bushi families were trained to be and only be servants of household and behave obediently, while those of the commoners' families had more relative freedom to involve in social activities. The ideology that women should consider serving their families as the primary duty is still existing and influencing today's Japanese society.

⁵ Yamakawa Kikue, 29-30.

⁶ "The Great Learning for Women" (1716), in Constantine N. Vaporis, ed. *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 18-20.

⁷ "Solitary Thoughts" (1818), in Constantine N. Vaporis, ed. *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 21-22.

⁸ Yamakawa Kikue, 16.

⁹ *The Twilight Samurai*, directed by Yoji Yamada (Japan: Shochiku, 2002), online;

¹⁰ Andrew Gordon, 33.

¹¹ "The Great Learning for Women" (1716), in Constantine N. Vaporis, ed. 18-20.

¹² "Injunctions for Peasants" (1619), in David Lu, 213.