

TOKUGAWA SAMURAI

The **battle of Sekigahara** in 1600 represents one of the great turning points in Japanese history. It brought **Tokugawa Ieyasu** (1542-1616) to power, and saw the establishment of the Tokugawa bakufu, with its headquarters in Edo (which later, much later, became Tokyo). Ieyasu and his fourteen successors ruled Japan more effectively than any previous shōgun had been able to do, bringing a decisive end to civil war.

The consequences for the samurai were enormous. They now knew a security their ancestors could never have dreamt of. But 268 years of almost total peace brought problems also. The military role of the samurai disappeared, but the samurai themselves did not. They remained as a standing army, waiting for an emergency that seemed never to come.

Few of them, therefore, found any real occupations. They continued to draw their salaries, but apart from bureaucratic positions there was little work for them to do. A prime example of this is **Asahi Bunzaemon** (1674-1718), a provincial samurai whose duties occupied him for no more than three days a month. However idleness did not mean that samurai spent the entire Tokugawa period (1600-1868) free of care.

Peace presented them with new challenges. For the most part they moved into castle towns - with Edo being by far the largest - where they were immediately caught up in Tokugawa Japan's commercial revolution. Instead of managing their own tracts of land, they became dependent on salaries paid by either the shōgun or one of the 260 daimyō who employed them. This effectively took away their independence.

City life, combined with rising prices, and exacerbated by the tendency of daimyō to cut or freeze samurai salaries, resulted very quickly in poverty for many samurai, who were forced to pawn their goods, or borrow from moneylenders. **Watanabe Kazan** (1793-1841), a prominent samurai administrator is a case in point. Accustomed to seeing themselves as the cream of society, samurai resented the prosperity of merchants they considered their inferiors.

With no fighting to be done, the incentive to keep up their military skills soon disappeared, although ironically the peaceful Tokugawa period was the golden age of the martial arts - but as hobbies, sanitized and commercialized.

The result was a demoralized samurai class, locked in an occupation devoid of any real military meaning, with little chance of advancement, and with declining material rewards. Paradoxically however, it is precisely at this time, in the Tokugawa period, that the samurai ideal is articulated most forcefully. The less that ideal corresponded with reality, the more stridently it came to be expressed.