## Tokugawa society

**History** 



TOKUGAWA SOCIETY One of the major contradictions in Tokugawa society was between control and freedom. On the one hand, the daimyo tried to draw power closer to himself and to centralize control of the various activities going on in Japan at the time. On the other hand, Japan had in many senses never been more free—people could get more education than ever before, they could travel and do business more freely than ever before. Throughout the Edo period there was a kind of tension between centralized control of Japan and the way that power was shifting to ordinary citizens contemporaneously.

The Edo period began when the daimyos began to centralize control and bring warring and competing factions together. Money was spent by this new government in order to maintain unity and control of the regions. Roads were built which allowed tradespeople and business people to trade more extensively throughout Japan. Because Edo had been built into such a large city (more than twice the size of Kyoto or Osaka, for example), it had become a central market. You had to have a presence there if you wanted to get rich. And the daimyo and the people at his court were the final economic arbiters. Roads, for example, helped to centralize the economy, but they also helped to unify and centralize the culture. Ideas and novelties passed quickly through the country. In the past, it might have taken decades for a new method of farming or a new invention to shift from one region to the next. Now with more trade and mobility these ideas and their attendant culture moved quickly around the country. It is difficult to overstate the importance of roads to the unity—both economic and cultural—of Japan during this period. Nihonbashi, for example, was a spot in the center of Edo from which all distances were measured in Japan. It was also a place where the Tōkaidō https://assignbuster.com/tokugawa-society/

Road began. This was the main highway linking Edo with the ancient capital, Kyoto. These roads had symbolic value but also huge practical value.

While the central government was exerting more control over the lives of Japanese than it ever had before, the Japanese had never been more free.

The business and cultural climates were very unrestricted within the limits imposed by the central government. People could get rich both through their business acumen and as artists and craftspeople. Merchants, for example, were seen by many to be part of the lower classes, but because of the wealth they were able to generate, people were forced to respect them and pay them notice. This was novel. In the past the levers of economic wealth had been held by only a few. Now the government had more power than ever before, but contradictorily individuals could also shape their lives more significantly than before. A merchant was not far off from the power wielded by a samurai.

The Edo period was one of prosperity and contradiction. As the government gained more power, more was also shifted towards ordinary citizens. They could travel more extensively and they could generate more income for themselves within the centralized limits imposed by the daimyos.