

1-1-2013

Tokugawa Bakufu Political System [Encyclopedia Entry]

Michael Wert

Marquette University, michael.wert@marquette.edu

Published version. "Tokugawa Bakufu Political System," in *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia* by Louis G. Perez, Editor. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Greenwood, 2013: 433-434. [Publisher link](#). © 2013 by ABC-Clio, LLC. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.

Tokugawa *Bakufu* Political System

The Tokugawa *bakufu* political system represented a mixture of pre-Tokugawa shōgunal institutions and innovations implemented by the early Tokugawa shōgun. Hereditary *daimyō* continued to rule over semi-autonomous domains, relying on their own lands for resources, and supported by samurai loyal only to them. The shōgunate established a general set of rules for maintaining tenuous control over the *daimyō*, but relied upon *daimyō* cooperation to maintain domestic stability and even international relations—for example, by asking *daimyō* to engage with the Ryukyu Kingdom, Korea, and the Ezo lands to the north. The Tokugawa shōgunate devoted its attention to a centered, but not centralized, rule over Japan. Much of its administration was focused in Edo and, to a lesser extent, the surrounding Kanto region, with offices in key cities such as Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagasaki. In many ways, however, the Tokugawa shōgunate mirrored the domains. For example, it depended on its own lands—nearly one-fourth of all land in Japan—for economic resources. Likewise, it created similar recruitment and promotion structures for its own samurai.

Of the nearly 22,500 Tokugawa samurai, nearly 17,000 worked within the shōgunate's bureaucracy. Many of these samurai received little compensation and were generally underemployed; some even struck out on their own as rōnin, finding various odd jobs where they could. Managing these lower-ranked samurai, often called "housemen" (*gokenin*), was a constant struggle for the shōgunate. The regime wanted housemen to use their time constructively—for example, by maintaining preparation for possible military activity. Some acted as intendants who managed the Tokugawa lands located throughout the Kanto plain that surrounded Edo. Others worked as minor functionaries in the various magistrate offices. The rest of the Tokugawa liege vassals, known as the "bannermen" (*hatamoto*), ranged in rank and income from 500 to 9,500 *koku*, a rank just below *daimyō*. Although many were indistinguishable from housemen, bannermen could theoretically claim special privileges—for example, having an audience with the shōgun. Bannermen staffed the mid-level bureaucratic positions: the Edo city magistrate, commissioners of finance and foreign relations, and inspectors. Each position brought with it financial benefits on top of their hereditary stipends. More importantly, these roles gave ambitious vassals a chance to affect Tokugawa policy. A small percentage of bannermen also managed fiefs, similar to *daimyō* domains, from which they could draw material and human resources.

Above the liege vassal samurai were the vassal *daimyō* (*fudai*), whose putatively close connection to the Tokugawa progenitor, Ieyasu, made them trustworthy for protecting the Tokugawa realm. This group also staffed the higher posts, such as the Keeper of Osaka Castle, the Kyoto Deputy, Master of Court Ceremony, and the Magistrate of

Temples and Shrines. More importantly, they filled the highest positions, acting as the junior and senior councilors who set Tokugawa policy. Although the title "Great Councilor" (*tairō*) existed, it was largely titular, except when it was occupied by Ii Naosuke. None of the previously described positions were permanent, and mechanisms were in place to break political impasses, such as the ability to create ad hoc committees, create new magistrate offices, or assign trusted men to concurrent positions. Some office-holding *daimyō* were essentially glorified bannermen: they might have small fiefs, but lacked the castle stronghold that defined the classic image of a *daimyō*. Instead, they spent most of their time in Edo focused on their shōgunate duties.

Many of the roughly 23 Tokugawa-relative *daimyō* (*shimpan*) were, like the outer *daimyō* (*tozama*), shut out from formal shōgunate positions. Nevertheless, the "Three Houses" (*sanke*) were important because they provided a pool of heirs should the shōgun fail to produce one. Moreover, the smallest of the three, the Mito domain, maintained a hereditary role, by custom, as adviser to the shōgun. Although close to the Tokugawa legacy, the proximity of these domains did not lead to simple acquiescence to the shōgunate. In Mito's case, the early 19th-century *daimyō*, Tokugawa Nariaki, criticized the Tokugawa shōgunate for not "expelling the barbarians" from Japan.

Several informal channels existed within the shōgunate that allowed outsiders to gain at least a minority voice. *Daimyō*, regardless of their status, as well as noble families in Kyoto could influence the shōgun and shōgunal politics through their "women of the great interior" (*Ōoku*)—hundreds of women who served the shōgun and managed his domestic needs. Thus they played an important function in the political cliques

that tied together key liege vassals, noble families, and *daimyō*. Moreover, wealthy merchants and other commoners who lent money to the shōgunate submitted memorials regarding, for example, how to reform shōgunal finances. Gradually the shōgunate allowed input from outer *daimyō* and court nobles, thus weakening its position as the ruling institution in Japan.

Michael Wert

See also: Buke Shohatto; Civil Wars, Sengoku Era; Ii Naosuke; Muromachi *Bakufu*; Tokugawa Ieyasu; Tokugawa Nariaki.

Further Reading

Bolitho, Harold. *Treasures among Men: The Fudai Daimyo in Tokugawa Japan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

Totman, Conrad D. *Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Totman, Conrad D. *Politics in the Tokugawa Bakufu, 1600–1843*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.