Tokugawa Period Economy and Society

At the end of a long period of civil war, the Tokugawa clan emerged in 1603 as the preeminent political family in Japan. The Tokugawa ruled over Japan from 1603 to 1868, a period known as the “Great Peace.” The first Tokugawa ruler, or shogun, established a new capital in Edo (today’s Tokyo). Edo was the Tokugawa family’s traditional domain. In order to centralize power and assert its authority over any rival regional lords, or daimyo, the Tokugawa shogunate issued and enforced social laws. These laws were based in part on Confucian ideals of the well-ordered society, in part on shrewd political strategy. Some of the Tokugawa government’s rules and regulations regarding the four social classes—the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants—had unintended consequences.

The hereditary samurai class was officially the highest social rank in the Tokugawa class system. During the preceding era of civil wars, the samurai had served their regional lords, or daimyo, as warriors. Now in the “Great Peace” of the Tokugawa period, the government required samurai to move off of the land and into castle towns. There, they served their daimyos as bureaucrats and attendants. To show their elite position, the samurai were permitted to carry swords and wear luxurious fabrics, such as silk. By law, however, they could not engage in trade or farming. Thus samurai found it difficult to profit from peacetime pursuits. As a result, many samurai, though high in status, grew poor during the period.

With the movement of daimyo and samurai into regional castle towns, Japan underwent a period of rapid urbanization. Building roads, houses, and government structures required skilled labor; workers required housing, food, and other services. Businesses sprang up to supply the needed materials and goods. Castle towns grew dramatically during the period, as they became regional centers of trade and government administration. To aid economic growth, the Tokugawa government established a monetary system, with standardized coins. This system greatly simplified trade among regions of the country. By 1700, Osaka, a port city and commercial center, had a population of 400,000; by the same year, Edo’s population had grown to 1 million, making it one of the largest cities in the world.

Meanwhile, the three lower classes profited handsomely from a growing population and growing urban centers. Farmers, who made up 90 percent of the population, became increasingly well-off during the period, as more land was made available for agriculture, farming techniques improved, and food production grew. As cities developed and expanded, the urban demand for goods other than food allowed farmers to produce silk and other products in small-scale rural factories. Artisans supplied the skilled labor to build the great castle towns and to maintain and build the roads, bridges, buildings, and infrastructure of an urbanizing society.

The merchant class, officially at the bottom of the Tokugawa social structure, benefited greatly from the period’s economic growth and rapid urbanization, growing prosperous and powerful during the period. The samurai, whose incomes were still paid in fixed amounts of rice, had to trade their rice for cash with the merchants, who controlled this exchange. They became increasingly indebted to merchants, whom they borrowed from to maintain an upper class lifestyle they could no longer afford.

The Tokugawa shogunate established policies and practices that allowed for a remarkable period of peace and prosperity. Its policies also undermined the power of the samurai class and
unintentionally provided an opportunity for the lowly merchant class to emerge as a dominant force in the shaping of Japan's urban culture.