

THE EDICTS OF THE TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE: EXCERPTS FROM
LAWS OF MILITARY HOUSEHOLDS (BUKE SHOHATTO), 1615

Introduction

The unification of Japan and the creation of a lasting national polity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries required more than just military exploits. Japan's "three unifiers," especially Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), enacted a series of social, economic, and political reforms in order to pacify a population long accustomed to war and instability and create the institutions necessary for lasting central rule. Although Hideyoshi and Ieyasu placed first priority on domestic affairs — especially on establishing authority over domain lords, warriors, and agricultural villages — they also dictated sweeping changes in Japan's international relations.

Although the Tokugawa shogunate proved a durable political system, it lacked the elaborate legal codes and sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus of the Chinese imperial state. One of the most important Tokugawa legal documents, the Laws of Military Households (*Buke Shohatto*), was issued in 1615, only one year before Tokugawa Ieyasu's death, and provided basic regulations on the behavior of lords and warriors.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period*, edited by David J. Lu (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 206-208. © 2001 M. E. Sharpe. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

**The Edicts of the Tokugawa Shogunate:
*Excerpts from Laws of Military Households (Buke Shohatto), 1615***

1. The study of literature and the practice of the military arts, including archery and horsemanship, must be cultivated diligently.

"On the left hand literature, on the right hand use of arms," was the rule of the ancients. Both must be pursued concurrently. Archery and horsemanship are essential skills for military men. It is said that war is a curse. However, it is resorted to only when it is inevitable. In time of peace, do not forget the possibility of disturbances. Train yourself and be prepared.

2. Avoid group drinking and wild parties.

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6. The castles in various domains may be repaired, provided the matter is reported without fail. New construction of any kind is strictly forbidden.

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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8. Marriage must not be contracted in private [without approval from the *bakufu*].

... To form a factional alliance through marriage is the root of treason.

...

10. The regulations with regard to dress materials must not be breached.

Lords and vassals, superiors and inferiors, must observe what is proper within their positions in life. Without authorization, no retainer may indiscriminately wear fine white damask, white wadded silk garments, purple silk kimono, purple silk linings, and kimono sleeves which bear no family crest. ...

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12. The samurai of all domains must practice frugality. When the rich proudly display their wealth, the poor are ashamed of not being on par with them. There is nothing which will corrupt public morality more than this, and therefore it must be severely restricted.

13. The lords of the domains must select as their officials men of administrative ability.

The way of governing a country is to get the right men. If the lord clearly discerns between the merits and faults of his retainers, he can administer due rewards and punishments. If the domain has good men, it flourishes more than ever. If it has no good men, it is doomed to perish. This is an admonition which the wise men of old bequeathed to us.

*Take heed and observe the purport of the foregoing rules.
First year of Genna [1615], seventh month.*

Questions:

1. On what philosophical framework are these laws based?
2. What was the Tokugawa shogunate seeking to accomplish through these rules and regulations?
3. Do you think that the shogunate was able to enforce these laws? How would it have done so?
4. How do you think you would have reacted to these laws as a samurai at the time?