Tea Cultivation by Former Bakufu Intellectuals of Western Learning

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Sliding towards poverty from the loss of stipends and livelihood following the Meiji Restoration, shizoku (former samurai) became involved in land settlement and reclamation projects around the country. Shizuoka Domain, which had been reduced to a mere 70,000 koku, absorbed vast numbers of former hatamoto and gokenin relocated to the area without remuneration. From the domain’s inception in 1868 (Meiji 1), the indigensation of retainer bands moved quickly as shizoku were encouraged to cultivate unopened lands. Following the domain’s replacement by Shizuoka Prefecture, the prefecture continued to lend support to programs that encouraged shizoku businesses.

At the same time that the domain, then prefecture, were lending support to shizoku, a small group of former Bakufu retainers began to cultivate tea independently without economic support from either government. Its members included Akamatsu Noriyoshi, Hayashi Dokai, Watanabe On, Fujisawa Tsuguyoshi, and Yatabori Ko. Yatabori and Akamatsu were both elite officers, products of the Nagasaki naval training center who had held executive positions in the Bakufu navy. Hayashi was a Dutch-medicine doctor with ties to the Juntendo in Sakura, while Watanabe was an England Studies scholar who taught at the Kaiseisho. Fujisawa was born to the Katsuragawa family of Dutch Studies scholars and had held an executive post in the Bakufu army. Each held positions in Shizuoka at either the domain’s military academy or its hospital in Numazu. With official posts in the domain government, they differed from the unremunerated relocates and had incomes sufficient to "feed themselves." Still, beginning in 1869 (Meiji 2) they began to cultivate tea as a business in the Totomi region using only their own funds.

With their knowledge and experience of the West, they studied soil and vermin, implemented the latest techniques of tea cultivation, and attempted direct export to America. With the science and information they brought to their business, they contributed significantly to the improvement of local industry. Yet, while their actions did aid the finances of a troubled domain and contributed to the benefit of the nation, they were not exclusively motivated by "public" consciousness. Indeed, their activities were in large part private economic activities aimed at individual gain and wealth.

Following the domain’s dissolution they relocated to the capital where their outstanding talents were put to use in the service of the Meiji government. They continued to operate their tea plantation in Totomi, however. Following his retirement to the area, vice-admiral and baron Akamatsu pursued his early Meiji hope of enjoying life in the country. Whether in office or the countryside, the actions taken by Akamatsu and the others in the cultivation of tea cast an image of modern individuals at the forefront of "self-reliance".