Status Identities of Outcastes (Senmin) and Peasants (Hyakusho) in Late Tokugawa Japan

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This paper focuses on how outcastes (senmin) and peasants (hyakusho) developed an awareness of their status identities and struggled to improve their status in Tokugawa Japan, especially from the late 18th century.

Late Tokugawa Japan is usually described as a transitional period in which the existing status system (mibunsei) moved towards collapse under the pressure of ordinary people expressing mounting dissatisfaction with the status quo. However, a closer look at the rights movements of outcastes and peasants attempting to improve their status and protect their interests reveals that far from eroding the status system, their efforts actually tended to reaffirm it.

For example, when sanmaihi jiri tried to get rid of status prejudice against them, they appealed to the public to recognize their nobility and refrain from regarding them as outcastes like eta (kawata) or kinin. Kawata too objected to being labelled as eta, claiming that they were actually peasants (kawata-hyakusho) and attempting to shift discrimination against them to other outcastes by describing those they saw as genuine eta or outcastes as beggars. Further, when peasants found themselves in confrontation with outcastes, especially with regard to agricultural interests, they often claimed that from the outset outcastes lacked both the right and qualifications to engage in agriculture.

Although these people engaged in serious discussion about their identities, their views unfortunately did not match the reality. Not all outcastes were beggars (while, in fact, some beggars were of peasant status), and many outcastes had been engaged in agriculture for a long time. (Recent studies show that the living standards of most outcastes were almost the same as those of peasants.) The above history of struggle to clarify status identities thus reveals bitter contradictions and dilemmas, with the rights movements creating an ever wider gap between subjective identity (how people viewed their status and that of others) and objective identity (actual status).

Clinging to a status system may seem like an old-fashioned, feudalistic attitude, but the fact is that similar movements have taken place in modern Japan too. As such, divisions such as “modern” and “pre-modern” (or feudalistic) are essentially meaningless, and we would do well to develop a new paradigm for thinking about historical time.

Keywords: senmin, hyakusho, perceptions of self and others, liberation movement, status