Promotion of Vassals in the Tokugawa Shogunate: to Clarify the Actual Situation by Studying Shusse Sugoroku Games

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Most of conventional research on the bureaucracy in the shogunate-and-domain-system society has focused on organizational reforms of the Tokugawa shogunate accompanied by changes of people in power such as shoguns and high-ranking officials. These organizational reforms and administrative changeovers, however, always trigger the aggressive appointment of new officials, combined with the criticism of the previous administration on its policies and the dismissal of former officials responsible for these policies. Therefore, in addition to the study of views of top-ranking officials organizing the shogunate bureaucracy, the study of views of vassals composing it about their promotions and demotions in the government is crucial in clarifying the real situation of the organization. This article examines vassals' views on promotion in the shogunate bureaucracy by using three games of sugoroku (Japanese backgammon) on the theme of samurai's advancement in life and career, Edo Bakushin Shusse Sugoroku, Odaimyo Shusse Sugoroku, and Oyakugae Sugoroku, as research materials while evaluating their validity as historical sources.

In the first chapter, by comparing Edo Bakushin Shusse Sugoroku and Odaimyo Shusse Sugoroku, this article reveals their outlook on promotion; it not only means climbing up the bureaucratic ladder but also includes the fruits of promotion such as an increase in stipends, advancement in family status from omemie-ika (the unprivileged who were barred from seeing a shogun) to omemie-ijo (the privileged who were allowed to do so) or from hatamoto (vassal) to daimyo (feudal lord), and upgrading of the class of anteroom and official rank and post. Promotion seems even associated with the inheritance and prosperity of samurai family. Another attribution of the two games is to attach importance to relationships of gift-exchange, socializing, with superiors and other relevant officials. The connection is described to be inseparably linked with promotion and upgrading. In the game, the strength of relationship is indicated by the number of gifts, which seems to depend more on the functional role and authority than on the hierarchy of officers. Moreover, like in the real world, both sugoroku games provide a wide range of status levels from the lowest (footman, the bottom of the omemie-ika servants) to the highest (feudal lord with a stipend of ten thousand koku or over), and the throw of dice, a kind of destiny, determines the class of players when starting or arriving at the cell of “inheritance.” Thus, the games are designed to make players realize that the historical family rank, status hierarchy, is closely connected with advancement in life and career. On the other hand,
the games include exceptional promotions such as from Sado magistrate to grand chamberlain or Fushimi magistrate. Though such upgrading seems unlikely, it can be considered as a common view of promotion of shogunate vassals at that time because both sugoroku games include these kinds of promotion.

The three games of sugoroku covered by this article do not simply allow players to get promoted by throwing a dice but provide a realistic view of demotion and punishment. This is considered to be important because players can understand what kind of risks each rank or position has. In the second chapter, this article focuses on the rules of starting kobushin and lifetime kobushin in Oyakugae Sugoroku. Kobushin (vassals holding no post in the government) is one of distinctive human resource cultivation systems of the Tokugawa shogunate, and the sugoroku clearly indicates the two meanings of it: general kobushin holding a stipend of less than 3,000 koku but no post and punished kobushin forfeiting his post due to a penalty or purge.

By examining the primary historical materials written by Honda Nariaka, who managed kobushin from the end of the Kansei period to the Kyowa period (from 1800 to 1803), this article studies how general kobushin got recommended for and promoted to posts. It is discovered that, despite conditions that they had to have both literary and military accomplishments, in practice vassals were judged for recommendation or promotion based on the different criteria depending on respective posts such as guard, housekeeper, and treasurer.

With regard to the lifetime kobushin, this article examines the changes of chief financial officials, comptrollers, and Osaka magistrates from the Kyoho period to the Tenmei period (from 1716 to 1789), which is estimated to be when Oyakugae Sugoroku was created. As a result, it is discovered that the profile of lifetime kobushin in Oyakugae Sugoroku reflects the actual penalties, purges, and forfeitures of officers in the above-mentioned three ranks at the middle of the 18th century. The relations between lifetime kobushin and other posts described in Oyakugae Sugoroku could have reminded contemporary vassals and their children of the actual changes of people in power and the subsequent shifts of policies and purges of officers and officials of the previous regime.

In the study of the bureaucracy of the Tokugawa shogunate, these games of shusse sugoroku have fallen under the secondary or tertiary historical sources. Each of the games includes opinions and views of its producer. However, they are designed to generally reflect the reality. The processes of advancement in life and career described in those games strongly reflect the real world. Examining their validity based on the primary historical sources, therefore, this article concludes that those games can serve as effective research materials.

Key words: Edo shogunate, Bureaucracy, Shusse sugoroku, Kobushin (vassals holding no post), Gift exchange