



A daimyo procession at Kasumigaseki in Edo. Utagawa Hiroshige II, 1863, public domain

The Alternate Attendance System in Tokugawa Japan

Not only did alternate attendance enable shoguns to exert their authority over regional lords, it had a profound political, social, economic and cultural impact on Tokugawa Japan.

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Tokugawa Ieyasu came to power in Japan after more than 100 years of endemic fighting among warlord states and samurai houses. The Tokugawa shoguns restored central authority through a complex system of political, social and military controls, combining a central administration based in Edo with about 250 semi-autonomous domains governed by daimyo (domainal lords).

The shoguns managed to retain power until the 1860s, but they remained vigilant over potential enemies and alert to signs of social and political instability. Ieyasu had assumed power not through peaceful means but by defeating his enemies in battle in 1600 at Sekigahara. He and his successors were acutely aware, especially during the seventeenth century, that they, too, could be overthrown.

The Tokugawa shoguns sought to maintain peace and stability—thus cementing their own power—by controlling all segments of the population. The greatest danger, however, was posed by the daimyo. The new

regime assumed that the domainal lords who had fought on the losing side at Sekigahara would continue to be hostile. Nor was there any guarantee that domains that had supported Ieyasu would always be loyal to the Tokugawa house. The daimyo, moreover, maintained their own armies and collected their own taxes, and thus might present a serious threat to the Tokugawa shogunate (government), especially if several of them joined forces.

The shoguns exerted their authority over the daimyo by threatening to confiscate their land or transfer it to new domains, by controlling key marriages and succession, and by other means as well. However, the single most important way they sought to control the daimyo was the system known as alternate attendance.

Based on much earlier but more limited practices, alternate attendance was formalised and made considerably more comprehensive in the 1630s and 1640s, after which it remained essentially intact until 1862.¹ It required daimyo to:

» Sandra Wilson, 'The Alternate Attendance System in Tokugawa Japan,' *Agora* 55:3 (2020), 23–27 «

- travel from the provinces every second year according to a schedule in which they were assigned a specific time slot for their journey
- 'attend' the shogun's court
- remain in Edo, usually for a year
- leave their wives and most of their children behind when they returned to their domains.

The system of alternate attendance codified and expanded older forms of feudal service owed by vassals (in this case, daimyo) to their lords (shoguns). Essentially it was a form of military service required of daimyo in return for the domains granted to them by the shogun, and the right to rule those lands.

The continued presence of family members in the capital was a way of guaranteeing the good behaviour of the daimyo while they were in the provinces, and again institutionalised and extended earlier practices. Family members were effectively hostages—the wives of daimyo spent almost all of their married lives in Edo, and daughters of daimyo spent their whole lives there.² Many daimyo themselves were born and raised in Edo.

The daimyo paid all their own expenses on their journeys and in Edo. A hugely expensive system, alternate attendance was designed to drain the coffers of the daimyo, thus restricting their economic capacity to threaten the shogun's government, and keeping them under the eye of shogunate officials.

Alternate attendance also functioned as a 'performance' that underlined the authority of the central government. Constantine Vaporis points to the contrast with the Queen's royal progresses in Elizabethan England (1558–1603). While Queen Elizabeth I displayed her authority when travelling around the country, the Japanese shogun displayed his by staying in one place and compelling others to travel to him.³

On the Road

The daimyo procession was essentially a military display, with samurai in service to the daimyo marching along the roads to and from Edo. Many processions were spectacular displays of the daimyo's wealth and power, which was signalled not only by the size of the military contingent but also by the splendour of the soldiers' uniforms, the ornamentation of weapons, and the array of lacquered boxes bearing the daimyo's crest and containing costly gifts for the shogun as well as other goods. Daimyo were also accompanied by large numbers of ancillary attendants, including personal servants, secretaries, poets, concubines, doctors, veterinarians, cooks and porters. Lords might travel with a portable bathtub and toilet, and with their pets: all required people to carry them and care for them.⁴

While a normal retinue would consist of 150–300 people, major daimyo would be accompanied by more than 1000 warriors and servants. In the case of the large domain of Tosa, the retinue often numbered more than 2000 people; Kaga, the biggest domain outside the Tokugawa family, had 3500 men in 1802.⁵

Because a daimyo knew he would travel along the route to Edo every other year, it was worth his while to spend money in his own domain on roads, bridges and other facilities. While this contributed to rural development, it also depleted the daimyo's financial reserves.

Journeys from the more distant provinces could take a considerable amount of time. The procession to and from Tosa, in Shikoku, might require a month each way.⁶ Along the road, the daimyo retinue spent money on food and water for the travellers and horses, as well as on accommodation and luggage services.

As people had to spend money across a large geographical distance, daimyo processions contributed to the growth of a money economy in Japan (as opposed to barter or other forms of exchange), and to a reduction

1 Regulations for daimyo visits to the capital appear in the 1615 'Laws of Military Households (Buke shohatto),' which established the fundamental rules for the whole military class. An amendment to these laws, proclaimed in 1635, institutionalised the system of alternate attendance. Both documents appear in *Japan: A Documentary History, Vol. 1—The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period*, David J. Lu, ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 206–208.

2 Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Tour of Duty: Samurai, Military Service in Edo, and the Culture of Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 1–2, 12–13.

3 Constantine N. Vaporis, 'Lordly Pageantry: The Daimyo Procession and Political Authority,' *Japan Review*, 17 (2005): 34.

4 *Ibid.*, 16–17.

5 Constantine N. Vaporis, 'To Edo and Back: Alternate Attendance and Japanese Culture in the Early Modern Period,' *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 23: 1 (1997), 29, 31; James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 39.

6 Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 36.



The 53 Stations of the Tokaido by Utagawa Hiroshige II (c. 1833–1834). This image is the first in the series, and depicts a procession led by standard-bearers setting out over the Nihonbashi bridge in Edo. Public Domain

in the number of currencies. Some standardisation of the spoken language also resulted, as people had to make themselves understood to others who used a variety of dialects.

On the major routes, specialist towns grew up to service the needs of travellers. These 'post-stations' provided lodging, stabling, food, medicines and entertainment. Effectively, they became tourist towns. By the late Tokugawa period there were 250 such towns at intervals of 5–10 km along the main routes. On the most heavily travelled road, the Tokaido, which ran from Kyoto to Edo, there were 179 post-stations.⁷

Alternate attendance also promoted the growth of the larger urban centres on the way to Edo, especially Osaka—one of Japan's 'three metropolises' along with Kyoto and Edo—through which many daimyo retinues passed. By the mid-seventeenth century, Osaka had become a major centre of commerce and manufacturing. The city's rapid growth was prompted especially by its emergence as the main rice market for western Japan. In Osaka, daimyo sold the rice they had received as tax, or other goods, to obtain cash for the expenses associated with their travel and residence in Edo.⁸

Life in Edo

The duties of the daimyo and his retainers once in Edo were not onerous: the main point was simply to be there, and to be seen to be at the command of the shogunate. The daimyo attended receptions and ceremonies at Edo Castle, and engaged in gift-giving and other rituals. For instance, they might be required to make a pilgrimage to the Tokugawa family shrine at Nikko, or to the mausoleum of Hidetada (the second Tokugawa shogun) in the southern part of Edo. They could be obliged to provide retainers for guard duty around Edo Castle, to help protect Tokugawa family temples from fire, to repair roads within the Tokugawa jurisdiction, or to carry out works on river banks under the direction of the shogunate. Retainers might also be required to undertake tasks at their domain's compounds.⁹

Alternate attendance had an enormous impact on the city of Edo, helping to transform it from the castle town of a single daimyo to the central city of Japan. Edo's population had already been boosted by the establishment there of the shogun's government. From a village of 100–200 people before Ieyasu's victory at Sekigahara, Edo had grown to 30,000 people by 1600 and by 1610 had reportedly become 'a clean, well-organized city' of 150,000.¹⁰

7 Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 154; Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 27.

8 Nakai Nobuhiko and James L. McClain, 'Commercial Change and Urban Growth in Early Modern Japan,' in *Cambridge History of Japan*, Vol. 4, John Whitney Hall, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 559; Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, 154; Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 2–3.

9 McClain, *Japan*, 39; Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 13.

10 Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, 67, 153.

The 53 Stations of the Tokaido by Utagawa Hiroshige II (c. 1833–1834). This image is the final in the series, and depicts a daimyo procession arriving at Kyoto.

Public Domain



Alternate attendance brought a further influx of people, not only the travellers from the provinces but also commoners from surrounding areas to provide for their needs. By 1720 it was the largest city in the world, and probably the first city with a population of one million.¹¹

Because of the obligation to reside in the capital in alternate years and to leave their families there at other times, the daimyo spent enormous sums on lavish Edo residences while also maintaining their castles in the domains. Many daimyo had three or more residences in Edo to house the people necessary to support them—one in the central city area and others in suburban locations. The extra residences could contain large numbers of people. In 1684, Tosa domain had more than 1000 permanent staff residing in Edo, not counting the travellers who came with the daimyo's retinue. About 25–30 per cent of Edo's population, or more than 250,000 people in the early eighteenth century, lived in more than 600 compounds established by the daimyo across the city.¹²

In Edo and its outskirts, the great urban daimyo mansions prompted the development of new land, including large

land reclamation projects. Later, in the Meiji period (1868–1912), the government confiscated most of these properties and converted them into government offices, military installations, embassies and other educational and cultural facilities.¹³

Edo became a major centre of consumption. The presence of large numbers of warrior families in the city required a huge array and volume of consumer goods and services. Merchants and artisans flocked to the capital to provide them.

Cultural life also flourished. While in Edo, the daimyo and his retainers had much free time since little was required of them in terms of official duties. They could spend it on recreation, study, cultural activities and military training. From around the mid-seventeenth century, Edo became a cultural centre to rival Kyoto, long considered the cultural capital of Japan.¹⁴ The mixing of so many people in Edo helped to break down barriers among people from different parts of the country and from different social classes, and promoted the exchange of ideas among them. The system of alternate attendance thus played an important part in the emergence of a shared 'national' culture and a greater level of national integration, a

11 Ibid., 153; Satoru Nakamura, 'The Development of Rural Industry', in *Tokugawa Japan: The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan*, Chie Nakane and Shinzaburo Oishi, eds., trans. Conrad Totman (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990), 84.

12 Vaporis, 'To Edo and Back,' 29, 30.

13 Hidenobu Jinnai, 'The Spatial Structure of Edo,' in Nakane and Oishi, eds., *Tokugawa Japan*, 143.

14 Nishiyama Matsunosuke, *Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600–1868*, Gerald Groemer, trans. and ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), II, 29–30; Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 238.

development that would later assist the Meiji government in its extensive programme of modernisation.¹⁵

The obligations of the alternate attendance system were drastically relaxed in 1862. This was a sign of weakening shogunate control over the daimyo, together with a recognition of the danger of foreign intrusion. Daimyo were relieved of much of the expense of alternate attendance so that they could spend money to strengthen coastal defences. The time that daimyo spent in Edo was reduced to 100 days every three years, and daimyo families were permitted to return to the provinces.¹⁶ As a result, Edo lost half of its population in less than seven years.¹⁷

Conclusion

Alternate attendance almost certainly did help the shogunate to maintain military control over the daimyo by reinforcing the

authority of the central administration and by diverting wealth to peaceful pursuits. It succeeded in draining daimyo finances. As much as 70–80 per cent of a daimyo's total income, which came from rice and other produce paid as tax by farmers in his domain, might be spent on expenses relating to the obligation to travel to and reside in Edo. Most daimyo became indebted to Edo's merchants and money-lenders.¹⁸

The system also generated far-reaching economic and social change throughout the 250 years of Tokugawa rule. Alternate attendance amplified the political power of the shogunate, promoted urbanisation and stimulated economic growth. It helped to create a national economy centred on Edo and Osaka, and contributed to the development of a 'national' culture in Japan in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

15 Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 205–236.

16 Henry D. Smith II, 'The Edo-Tokyo Transition: In Search of Common Ground,' in Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 349–350.

17 Vaporis, *Tour of Duty*, 173.

18 Toshio G. Tsukahira, 'Sankin kotai,' in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, Vol. 7 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 14.

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