

# Sword Prices, *Origami*, and *Samurai* Income

by

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## Income and *bakufu* economics

To understand the financial situation of a *samurai* during the Edo period, we first have to go into the contemporary salary, i.e., the form of his income, and the precise circumstances with which he was confronted. The following discussion is based on data for a *samurai* with the function and rank of *hatamoto* (旗本) the so-called „bannermen“, because it is for this group that the most detailed records exist.

The administration of the Tokugawa *bakufu* consisted basically of three ranks of hereditary vassals to the Tokugawa family : the high-ranking *fudai* (普代), the above-mentioned *hatamoto*, and the group known as *gokenin* (御家人), the so-called „housemen“ of the *shōgun*.

The *fudai* were strictly speaking *daimyō* (hence also the term *fudai-daimyō*, 普代大名) who had been on the side of Tokugawa Ieyasu before the Battle of Sekigahara, and who therefore received strategically important fiefs as well as high political posts.

The *gokenin* carried out most of the basic administrative functions of the *bakufu* and also formed the base of the standing army. The *hatamoto* ranked somewhere in between, depending on their income and the importance of their family origin, and held managerial posts and controlling functions.

The income of a *hatamoto* consisted of his „basic salary“ (*hondaka* 本高 or *kokudaka*, 石高) plus an increase (*yakudaka*, 役高) depending on his office or rank. The basic salary was received either through the grant of a fief (*chigyō*, 知行). From those rice yields he had to pay a tax of 65 *koku* per 100 *koku* to the *bakufu* – or through an indirect payment of rice (*kirimai*, 切米). Mostly, additional stipends (*fuchi*, 扶持) were paid, which were equivalent to maintenance costs for one or more obligatory retainers.<sup>\*1</sup>

By definition the office *hatamoto* meant a financial scale of 100 to 10.000 *koku* income a year. The great majority were somewhere between 500 and 1.000 *koku*.<sup>\*2</sup> Those figures are rather meaningless for the real income of a *hatamoto*, because his entire salary, and in most cases more, was used up on his duties within the military government. That is he had to buy and maintain men at arms, horses, equipment.<sup>\*3</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup> One *fuchi* was equivalent to 1,8 *koku* of rice because the basis of this figure constituted the assumption that an average person needed five portions of rice per day. One rice portion was equivalent to one *gō* (合, 0,18 l = 1/10 *koku*), so 360 \* 5 = 1.800 *gō* = 1,8 *koku*.

<sup>\*2</sup> We know from status records of direct vassals („*Gokenin-bungen-chō*“, 御家人分限帳) of the second year of Hōei (宝永, 1705) that at the beginning of the 18th century, about 5.000 *samurai* held the rank of *hatamoto*. Those documents reveal further that of those 5.000 *hatamoto*, over two thirds had an income of under 400 *koku* and only about 100 earned 5.000 *koku* or more.

<sup>\*3</sup> This was strictly regulated and depended on the basic income in *koku*. For example a *hatamoto* with 500 *koku* had 7 permanent non-*samurai* servants, 2 sword-men, 1 lancer, and 1 archer on standby. That means that when we incorporate the calculations of footnote 1, just 20 *koku* (1,8 *koku* \* 11 men) were used up for their rations.

The above-mentioned real income, that is what the *samurai* or *hatamoto* had at the end of the day, depended constantly on the prevailing price of rice. Essentially he received his basic salary in rice, whether through the grant of a fief or as a direct payment in rice from the *bakufu*. However, 50 years after the establishment of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, the government had already transferred the payments almost entirely into cash rather than rice, because in any case the recipient had to pay for the necessities of life in money rather than in rice.

As a basis for payment in cash, the *bakufu* used its own conversion, termed the „posted price“ (*harigami-nedan*, 張紙値段) which differed from the actual market price. Those *hatamoto* who earned their income from a fief also had to exchange rice into cash at the „posted price“. Their profit or loss therefore depended strongly on the divergence of the posted from the market price of rice.<sup>\*4</sup> More money was used up in paying exchange fees to the rice brokers, the *fudasashi* (札差; literally „note exchanger“). All those factors contributed in the end to the bankruptcy of the *samurai* and the prosperity of the merchants.

In earlier years, the harvested rice was stored in the storage houses of the fiefs (the *kura*, 蔵, 倉, or 庫) and transported to its final destination along the main roads. Because Japan's roads were as everybody knows rather bad, it was of course impractical to transport huge amounts of rice all the time from A to B. Therefore, intermediate rice stores emerged along those main roads and soon, rice was transferred between those stores by paperwork. In cities like Ôsaka rice brokers (the aforementioned *fudasashi*) developed who offered to store rice temporarily in return for a certain amount of money. They issued papers to the *samurai* which noted the amount of rice which he had stored at the *fudasashi*'s. The rice brokers on the other hand made use of the old intermediate stores, and soon paper money-like notes circulated. The merchants accepted these notes from the *samurai* because they could be sure of re-changing them into rice at the broker's.

Basically it can be said that the problem of shortage of money because of the obligatory duties to the *bakufu* was rife among all classes of *samurai*. High-ranking *hatamoto* with an income of from 1.000 to 3.000 *koku* were the worst affected, because top earners had certain reserves, and on the other hand the duties of the lowest ranks could be neglected.

This becomes clear from the records of a *samurai* of the Chôshû fief (長州) with a basic income of 100 *koku*. After subtracting the cost of rice for feeding his family and seven obligatory retainers, he was able to change the remaining 17 *koku* and 4 *shô*<sup>\*5</sup> of rice for 915 silver *monme*.<sup>\*6</sup> From this amount, 120 *monme* was used for the rent of his house in Hagi (萩, capital city of the Chôshû fief), 250 for a cook and a man, and the remaining 545 for food and clothes for a half year. If he could not cover the money for the other half through an officially approved second job, he had to borrow.

<sup>\*4</sup> The posted *harigami-nedan* was posted three times a year, and salaries were also paid three times a year. At first, the *bakufu*'s posted price was higher than the market price but the more the government was confronted with difficulties, the worse the conversion became, and the less the actual amount paid out to the recipient.

<sup>\*5</sup> 1 *shô* (升) is 1/10 *koku*, so 1,8 litres of rice.

<sup>\*6</sup> 1 *monme* (匁) is 3,75 g.

A further example of a higher-paid *hatamoto* was the Master of Court Nagasawa Motochika. After taxes to the *bakufu* from his basic income of 1.960 *koku* and changing the rest of rice into cash, 483 *ryō*<sup>\*7</sup> remained. After spending this money for his obligatory duties he had to borrow a further 373 *ryō* to cover all the expenses of the first year of Shôtoku (正徳, 1711).

The first real difficulties faced by the *bakufu* arose during the Kyôhō period (享保, 1716-1736). At the end of the 17th century, the coin reserves of the *bakufu* were running short, because the major gold and silver mines were exhausted. Added to that, there was a short period of abundance during the Genroku period (元禄, 1688-1704) caused by unusually high prices for rice, and steady prices for consumer goods. This was the administrative outcome of the preceding periods, and it left the *hatamoto* with a new taste for the finer things of life ; but with the same income.

As a direct result, the government debased the gold coinage, to increase the amount of money in circulation. During the Edo period, the amount of gold, and later silver, coin was adjusted eight times by recoinage. The first of those recoinages felt exactly within the Genroku period, in the year 1695, and the gold content was lowered from 86% during the early Tokugawa era to 57%. To control the resulting inflation, the gold content was gradually raised at the next and next-but-one recoinages of the Shôtoku and Kyôhō periods in 1714 and 1716 to 84%, and later 86%. Only the fifth recoinage during the Genbun period (元文) in the year 1736 gave some stability to the currency in circulation, although precious metal was rated so highly that its export was strictly forbidden.

The next problem of coinage and increased rice production in the course of the *bakufu*'s economic measures was the now dropping rice price. In order to increase the circulation of more coins, Tanuma Okitsugu (田沼意次 1719-1788)<sup>\*8</sup> minted silver in the late 18th century. Initially this was circulated only as small lumps, calculated on the basis of their weight in *monme* (see also footnote 6, page 2).

All the reforms and acute measures taken by the *bakufu* such as reversion of *samurai* loans were of no avail. Lenders responded with usurious interest and arbitrary fees, and by the beginning of the Tenpō (天保) period in 1830, Japan's ruling class was bankrupt.

### Sword Prices and Affordability during the Edo Period

As we have seen, a *hatamoto* saw himself confronted with obligatory duties which he had to pay for out of his basic income, and which kept him on a short lead. A fundamental obligation and a mark of his very occupation was the Sword which he carried. I would now like to compare the prices of Swords at the time with the average income of a *gokenin* or lower ranking retainer of one of the fiefs (*hanshi*, 藩士), because here, the obligatory duties could be left out. This basic income was about 3 *ryō* plus a stipend of one *fuchi*. By the way of illustration, prices are given in terms of copper coins (*mon*, 文). 1 *ryō* was equivalent to 4 coin strings (*kan*, 貫), of which one counted 1.000 copper coins. Therefore the average income was about 12.000 copper coins per year so 1.000 per month.

<sup>\*7</sup> 1 *ryō* (両) was the unit for a gold piece of 16,5 g and further, 1 *ryō* was about equivalent to 1 *koku* of rice.

<sup>\*8</sup> *rōjū* (老中) elder of the tenth Tokugawa *shōgun* Ieharu (家治 1737-1786, r. 1760-1786)

The Ôsaka-Shintô swordsmith Inoue Shinkai (井上真改) received 15 *hakugin* packs of silver coins (白銀)<sup>\*9</sup> for a long sword, which is 11 ¼ *ryô*. Again converted into *mon*, this make 45.000 copper coins – about four times the amount of an average *hanshi*'s annual basic income ! Tsuda Sukehiro (津田助広) received 7 ½ *ryô*, or 30.000 coins, and Kunisuke (国助), Yoshimichi (吉道), or Tadatsuna (忠綱) 5 ¼ *ryô*, ie., 21.000 coins. During the Shinshintô period, a blade by Suishinshi Masahide (水心子正秀) cost 7 ½ *ryô* and his pupil Taikei Naotane (大慶直胤) charged 5 *ryô*, 20.000 coins, but gave a 50% discount to customers from his own fief (he came originaly from Dewa, 出羽).

By way of further illustration, I would like to quote some prices of daily life during the Edo period. An overnight stay with board at one of the hostels run by the *bakufu* cost 200 *mon*. A simple stay in a private inn ranged from 30 coins in very best cockroach-quality to 70~100 coins for so-to-speak starred hotels. One litre of *sake* cost about 15 to 20 coins, a river-crossing by ferry about 15 coins, new *waraji* straw-sandals 25 coins, a massage 50 coins, and a prostitute working in one of the above-mentioned inns from 500 to 600 coins – ie., equivalent to about the half of a monthly wage.

Another example : in the fifth year of Genna (元和, 1619) Tamiya Heibei Shigemasa (田宮平兵衛重正), the founder of the Tamiya school of swordsmanship (*Tamiya-ryû*, 田宮流), ordered a blade by Hizen Tadayoshi (肥前忠吉) who charged the very high amount of 100 *kan*, so 100.000 copper coins. Thereupon Heibei resigned his post with the Ikeda family (池田) and had to change his employer two to three times. He ended up finally with the wealthy Owari-Tokugawa family. It took him fully four years to raise the sum for his blade !

As today, in ordering one could of course made compromises in the raw materials for a Sword (i.e. the amount of *tamahagane* for the blade construction), as well as in the polishing, or the mountings. But we can safely say that the vast majority of simple *hanshi* and *gokenin* wore off-the-peg *kazuuchi-mono* (数打ち物) and higher-paid *hatamoto* and *daimyô* orderd individual *chûmon-uchi* (注文打ち).

Regarding swords, anyone might think that during the peaceful Edo period the demand for blades was sooner or later met. But here the obligatory and semi-obligatory Sword donations came into play. Especially at New Year ceremonies held by the *bakufu*, various *daimyô* and other retainers had to give or receive Swords and other prescribed goods. Every vassal, concubine, messenger, servant, kitchen help, and bank clerk, knew very well exactly what to expect, from the first day of the year to the 15th day which ended the whole pomp. On the 17th day, the festivities of the *mato-hajime* (的始, the ritual breaking-in of the archery *dôjô*) took place, and one day later, on the 18th day of the first month, the staff responsible for the ceremonial target practice in the shrine grounds (*matoi*, 的射) as well as the participants in the ritual of the first shooting match in the evening (*kuji-mato-hajime*, 籤的始), were presented with Swords. There were further occasions when it was incumbent to present Swords, for example the visit or departure of the *shôgun* (the so-called *o-nari*, 御成), a succession to a family headship, participation in a battle, the granting of a charter, a promotion, the posthumous granting of a rank or title, as well as meetings, reunions, gatherings and so on.<sup>\*10</sup>

<sup>\*9</sup> For larger transactions, gold or silver coins were integrated into sealed money packages (*tsutsumi-kane*, 包み金). Silver coins were packed with different sums but the standard was 3 *bun* (分) per 1 *hakugin*. 1 *bun* is ¼ *ryô*, so 1 „standard“ *hakugin* was equal to 0,75 *ryô*. In our case this makes 15 *hakugin* \* 0,75 = 11,25 *ryô*.

<sup>\*10</sup> It is important to note that – at least in the protocols of official ceremonies conducted by the *bakufu* – the names of swordsmiths or their signatures were rarely mentioned. It would appear that for ritually presented Swords attention focused on their mountings, in the sense of a ceremonial Gword (*gijô no tachi*, 儀杖の太刀)

## ***Origami* and their Declaration of Value**

*Origami* (折り紙) [ literally „folded *oru* ; 折る paper *kami*, 紙 ] were originally urgent notes written on one side of paper which was just folded twice. Later, this form of writing was used for informal letters and communications. Because the Hon´ami as well as the Gotô families wrote their judgments, incorporating declarations of value (*kantei-sho* 鑑定書, or *kiwame*, 極め), on such papers, the term „*origami*“ was applied to their documents.

Already during the times of the Muromachi *bakufu* the Hon´ami family acted as Sword appraisers and polishers for the Ashikaga family, but any judgments or declarations of value which might be issued were rather un-standardized, and in addition were not restricted to the Hon´ami family. Only when Tokugawa Ieyasu created the „Centre for Sword Appraisal“ (*tôken-kiwamedokoro* 刀剣極所) in the second year of Genna (1616) under the supervision of Kôtoku (光徳), of the ninth generation of the Hon´ami family, which was granted the monopoly to issue Sword appraisals. Generally, appraisals of the first 14 generations may be regarded as reliable ; whereas those of the 15th generation Kôjun (光純) fell into the time affected by the financial crises of Tanuma Okitsugu, and as a result his *origami* are also known as „Tanuma *origami*“ and have to be taken with a grain of salt.

Appraisals from this time onwards drifted away from the original sense of declaring a specific value for a blade and were rather made with a focus on business factors.

In general the issuing of *origami* was arranged as follows : every 8th, 9th, 10th, 14th, 17th, 20th, 24th and last day of the month, the heads of the several Hon´ami branch-families gathered in the mansion of the main family, which was the *tôken-kiwamedokoro*. Blades were brought and appraised and every third of a month, *origami* were issued under the supervision of the head of the Hon´ami main family. If there was disagreement over a blade, three further opportunities were given on the third day of the second, seventh, and eleventh month of the year for a re-submittal. This system continued unchanged until the Meiji period.

On the *origami* of the Hon´ami family we find a declaration of value in the form of „*dai-kinsu X-mai*“ (代金子 X 枚), which means „value, so and so much pieces of *kinsu*“, whereas one *kinsu* was equivalent to one *ôban* (大判). 1 *ôban* on the other hand was worth – according to inflation – 10 to 7 smaller *koban* (小判) which had the value of 1 *ryô* (16,5 g gold). For example an *origami* with the declaration of 20 *kinsu* gold-pieces means 200 in terms of *ryô* which is further 800.000 copper coins. If we call to mind, the average gross income of a *hatamoto* was about 500 to 1.000 *koku*, which makes net about 150 to 300 *ryô*.

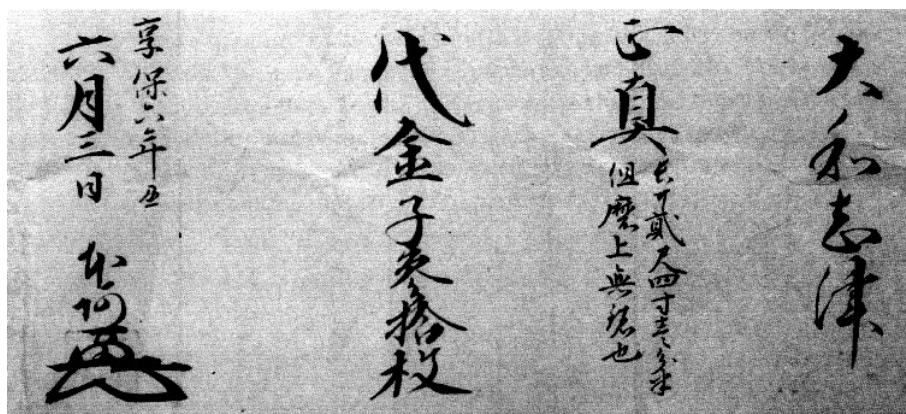
### **The Structure of an *origami***

Hon´ami as well as Gotô *origami* had a standardized form ( picture 2 ) which stated on the right outside – at the beginning of the *origami* – the nominal attribution to a maker, followed by the confirmation of authenticity (*shôshin*, 正真). Under it came a short description of the blade, then the declaration of value, the date as well as the signature, and the *kaô* of the appraiser. On the reverse of the *origami* at the point where the *kaô* is located, an ink seal ( picture 1 ) was stamped with the character „Hon“ (本) for „Hon´ami“. The small brass seal which is still in the family was granted to them by Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The short description of the blade gave its length, *horimono* if any, and the amount of shortening. In rare cases, we also find mention of a broken *kissaki*, the condition of the polishing, or that *machi-okuri* has been carried out. This means that when an *origami*-papered blade has a *bôhi* which is not mentioned in the *papers*, it can be reckoned 100% as an *atobori* (後彫り) which has been cut later on.



Picture. 1: ink stamp (*koku-in*, 黒印) of the Hon'ami family



Picture 2: Hon'ami-origami

The layout of a Hon'ami *origami* <sup>\*11</sup> ( from right to left ) :  
*Yamato-Shizu* (大和志津)  
*shôshin* (正真)  
*nagasa ni-shaku yon-sun ichi-bu-han* (長サ貳尺四寸壹分半), „length 2 *shaku* 4 *sun* 1,5 *bu*“  
*tadashi suriage mumei nari* (但磨上無銘也), „shortened and without signature“  
*dai-kinsu sanjû-mai* (代金子参拾枚), „value 30 *kinsu*“  
*Kyôhō roku-nen ushi* (享保六年丑), „6th year of Kyôhō [1721], year of the ox“  
*roku-gatsu mikka* (六月三日), „3rd day of the sixth month“  
Hon'a (本阿) plus *kaô*

According to the date and the *kaô*, this *origami* can be attributed to the 13th generation Hon'ami Kôchû (光忠), who was the head of the Hon'ami main family from the tenth year of Genroku (元禄, 1697) to the tenth year of Kyôhō (享保, 1725)

#### Acknowledgements

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<sup>\*11</sup> This *origami* belongs to the *tokubetsu-jûyô* blade depicted in the Solingen Museum exhibition catalogue : Selected Fine Japanese Swords from European NBTHK Collections = *Ausgewählte japanische Kunstscherter aus europäischen Sammlungen der NBTHK*. Deutsches Klingens Museum Solingen. NBTHK 2002. page 118 sqq.