Tokugawa Yoshimune, the eighth shogun

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Figure 1: Depiction of Tokugawa Yoshimune from 1929, by Kano Tadanobu

Although Westerners readily identify Tokugawa Ieyasu as the emblematic figure of the Edo period, he was not the only shogun to leave his mark on that era in Japanese minds. Born in November 1684 in Kii Province (south of present-day Mie Prefecture), Tokugawa Yoshimune became the Tokugawa regime's eighth shogun in 1716. His rise to the head of the bakufu came amid substantial economic and social unrest, partly due to the shogunate's heavy debts, accumulated over several generations of lavish spending. True to Confucian values of austerity and harmony, Yoshimune undertook a broad reform of the political apparatus. He dismissed several important figures, such as the reformer Arai Hakuseki, strengthened the bakufu's ties with the daimyo, and appointed auditors to monitor expenditure by the court and its vassals.

As that last measure illustrates, this transformation came with a clear determination to regain control of public spending. Yoshimune sharply restricted the number of hereditary senior official positions, costly in subsidies, and prevented the reissue of gold coins, preferring a gold-silver alloy that was cheaper to produce. Continuing this economic pragmatism, he enlisted the daimyo's contributions, allowing them to reduce their journeys to and from Edo[1] in exchange for loans to the shogunal administration.

These changes extended beyond the administration's relations with its vassals and officials to civil society. Yoshimune's contribution in this sphere particularly interests historians. It combined increased shogunal control over growing economic activity in towns and countryside with the formalisation of a more modern economic framework. Throughout his reign, Yoshimune issued several so-called frugality laws to spread Confucian morality and preserve social order. At the same time, however, he allowed a rice exchange to be established in Osaka and, in 1728, authorised buying and selling rice for speculation, reforms that appear decidedly modern.

This ambiguity also appears, to a lesser extent, in culture. Yoshimune celebrated traditional Japanese craftsmanship, particularly sword-making[2], yet lifted the ban on Western books in 1721. This decision greatly helped spread Western knowledge in Japan before the Meiji era and enabled the emergence of Western studies, rangaku, which proved crucial to the country's development.

This tension between a desire for social control serving the samurai class and established order, and the development of a form of proto-capitalism open to the outside world, has greatly inspired modern Japanese popular opinion. It readily recognises in this the familiar alliance of pragmatism and respect for tradition that constitutes the Japanese spirit. Although Yoshimune's role in Japan's development and his contemporaries' perceptions of him remain debated by historians, he is nevertheless a complex figure. As such, he aptly illustrates the richness of the Edo era, which

[1] The sankin-kōtai system, inherited from the early Tokugawa shogunate, required daimyo to spend almost every other year in Edo. By imposing regular, particularly costly journeys, the shogunate ensured their loyalty and limited their ability to raise an army.

[2] Yoshimune was indeed a great patron of Japanese swordsmiths. In 1721, he organised a national competition to identify Japan's finest master smiths.

cannot be reduced to two centuries of stagnation and inward-looking isolation, as most Westerners long believed.

References

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