

CODES OF MERCHANT HOUSES: THE TESTAMENT OF SHIMAI SŌSHITSU

Introduction

Although merchants were accorded low social status in the Tokugawa order and the Confucian orthodoxy of the time, commerce thrived in early modern Japan. Beginning in the seventeenth century, merchant houses (and especially those of wealth and age) began issuing codes, essentially lists of instructions intended for later generations to follow. These written codes echoed the military house codes that had a much longer history in Japan.

Shimai Sōshitsu (1539-1615) was a successful merchant in Hakata, an important commercial center in northern Kyushu. The house of Shimai traded in sake, was involved in money lending, and supplied provisions to Hideyoshi's armies during the invasions of Korea in the 1590s. This code, one of the earliest among merchant houses, was written in 1610 and was addressed by Shimai Sōshitsu to his heir, an adopted son.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Codes of Merchant Houses: *Excerpts from The Testament of Shimai Sōshitsu*

1. Live an honest and sincere life. Respect your parents, your brothers, and your relatives, and try to live harmoniously with them all. Honor and treat with respect everyone you meet, even those you see only occasionally. Never behave discourteously or selfishly. Never lie. In fact, never say anything that even resembles a lie, even something you heard from someone else.

2. ... Such a faith is an intolerable obstacle to anyone devoted to his house. Not one person in ten understands the things of this life or of the next. Birds and beasts worry only about what is immediately before them, and humans are no different. In this life they first should make certain that they do not sully their reputations. If even Buddha himself is said to have known nothing of the world to come, how can any ordinary mortal know such things? Until you reach fifty, therefore, do not worry about the future life. ...

...

4. Until you are forty, avoid every luxury, and never act or think like one above your station in life. In matters of business and moneymaking, however, work harder than anyone

else. ... Always behave as one whose station in life is half that of yours. Although some people may suggest that you [should] be more visible and assertive, ignore all such advice and maintain a low profile. Until you turn fifty, be temperate in all things, and avoid all ostentation and finery, anything, in fact, that might call attention to yourself. Do not cultivate expensive tastes, for you should ignore such things as the tea ceremony, swords, daggers, and fine clothes.

...

...

13. Those with even a small fortune must remember that their duty in life is to devote themselves to their house and its business. They must not become careless, for if they buy what they want, do as they please, and, in general, live sumptuously, they will soon spend that fortune. ...

Although a samurai can draw on the produce of his tenured lands to earn his livelihood, a merchant must rely on the profit from his business, for without that profit, the money in his bags would soon disappear. No matter how much profit he makes and packs into his bags, however, if he continually wastes that money, he may as well pack it into bags full of holes. Remember this.

...

These seventeen articles were written not for Sōshitsu's sake but for yours. They are his testament, and you should follow them closely. They should be as important to you as the Great Constitution of Prince Shōtoku. Read them every day, or even twice a day, and be careful to forget nothing. Write a vow on the back of a votive tablet promising never to violate any of the articles and put it in my coffin when I die.

*[Yoshida, ed., Shōka no kakun, pp. 35–62;
trans. adapted from Ramseyer, "Thrift and Diligence," pp. 210–226].*

Questions:

1. Why do you think Shimai Sōshitsu felt it necessary to write this code?
2. Based on this code, what do you think were the core values of merchants during the Tokugawa period? How did these values differ from those of the samurai elite?
3. Why does the author mention the Constitution of Prince Shōtoku at the end of the code? How does this code resemble the Constitution?
4. What does this document tell you about the lifestyle of a prosperous merchant in early seventeenth century Japan?

Longer Selection

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**Codes of Merchant Houses:
The Testament of Shimai Sōshitsu**

1. Live an honest and sincere life. Respect your parents, your brothers, and your relatives, and try to live harmoniously with them all. Honor and treat with respect everyone you meet, even those you see only occasionally. Never behave discourteously or selfishly. Never lie. In fact, never say anything that even resembles a lie, even something you heard from someone else.

2. Although those who are elderly may reasonably pray about the life to come, you should ignore all such issues until you are fifty. You may follow only the Pure Land or Zen Buddhist faiths, and you must have absolutely nothing to do with the Christian religion. ... Such a faith is an intolerable obstacle to anyone devoted to his house. Not one person in ten understands the things of this life or of the next. Birds and beasts worry only about what is immediately before them, and humans are no different. In this life they first should make certain that they do not sully their reputations. If even Buddha himself is said to have known nothing of the world to come, how can any ordinary mortal know such things? Until you reach fifty, therefore, do not worry about the future life. ...

3. Dice, backgammon, and all other forms of gambling are strictly forbidden in this life. Even *go*, chess, the martial arts, the *nō* chants, and the *nō* dances are forbidden for people under forty. ...

4. Until you are forty, avoid every luxury, and never act or think like one above your station in life. In matters of business and moneymaking, however, work harder than anyone else.... Always behave as one whose station in life is half that of yours. Although some people may suggest that you [should] be more visible and assertive, ignore all such advice and maintain a low profile. Until you turn fifty, be temperate in all things, and avoid all ostentation and finery, anything, in fact, that might call attention to yourself. Do not cultivate expensive tastes, for you should ignore such things as the tea ceremony, swords, daggers, and fine clothes.

...

... Do not build a new house unless you are over fifty. Those who are that old may build what they like and can afford. Yet most people are poor by the time they die, for fewer than one

in ten or twenty who build a fortune by their own talent carry it to their graves, and those who inherit their wealth are even more likely to lose it and die impoverished. Remember this.

5. Until you are forty, do not invite out others or let others invite you out. Once or twice a year you may invite out your parents, brothers, or relatives, or go out at their invitation, but — do not forget — even this you may do only occasionally. ...

...

8. Never wander outside the shop or visit places where you have no business being. ... Since you will generally be in the house, you yourself should tend the morning and evening cooking fires and handle the firewood and embers. You should pick up all trash inside and behind the house, chop up the pieces of rope and short bits of trash to use in plaster, and use the long pieces to make rope. Collect and clean pieces of wood and bamboo longer than five *bu* and use them as firewood. Save all paper scraps, even pieces only three or five *bu* long, to use in making fresh paper. Do as I have done, and waste absolutely nothing.

9. When you need something, go and buy it yourself, regardless of whether it is firewood, two or three *bu* of small fish or sardines, other purchases from the seaside or the town, or even timber. Bargain for the items and pay as little as you can ...

10. In general, use few servants, especially few female ones. ... They should wear small braided hats instead.

11. Keep a steady supply of coarse *miso* on hand for your servants, and when you make the *miso* soup in the mornings and evenings, carefully filter the *miso*. You should add to the residue salt and cucumbers, eggplants, gourd melons, and onions, and serve this as a side dish to the servants. You can give them the stalks as well, and when rice is expensive, you may feed them some sort of hodgepodge. But if you do give your servants such a dish, you and your wife should eat it as well. Even if you intend to eat rice, first sip at least a bit of the hodgepodge, for your servants will resent it if you do not. ...

13. Those with even a small fortune must remember that their duty in life is to devote themselves to their house and its business. They must not become careless, for if they buy what they want, do as they please, and, in general, live sumptuously, they will soon spend that fortune. ...

Although a samurai can draw on the produce of his tenured lands to earn his livelihood, a merchant must rely on the profit from his business, for without that profit, the money in his bags would soon disappear. No matter how much profit he makes and packs into his bags, however, if he continually wastes that money, he may as well pack it into bags full of holes. Remember this.

14. Rise early in the morning, and go to bed as soon as the sun sets, for you will waste oil if you burn lamps during evenings when you have nothing important to do. ...

...

17. Live in harmony with your wife, for the two of you must work together diligently. Both of you should live modestly and carefully and consider always the good of the house and its business. A contentious, unhappy marriage destroys a house, for it distracts the husband and wife from their work. ...

These seventeen articles were written not for Sōshitsu's sake but for yours. They are his testament, and you should follow them closely. They should be as important to you as the Great Constitution of Prince Shōtoku. Read them every day, or even twice a day, and be careful to forget nothing. Write a vow on the back of a votive tablet promising never to violate any of the articles and put it in my coffin when I die.

Keichō 15 [1610], 1st month, 15th day

Kyohaku [Shimai] Sōshitsu [seal]

To: Kamiya Tokuzemon [adopted son of Sōshitsu]

[Yoshida, ed., *Shōka no kakun*, pp. 35-62;
trans. adapted from Ramseyer, "Thrift and Diligence," pp. 210-226]