

**CODES OF MERCHANT HOUSES: THE CODE OF THE OKAYA HOUSE
(1 8 3 6)**

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.

The Okaya house was based in Nagoya in central Japan and had its origins trading in hardware. This code was written by Okaya Sanezumi, under whose leadership the house prospered, in 1836.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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**Codes of Merchant Houses:
*Excerpts from The Code of the Okaya House (1836)***

1. Remember your duties to your parents.

We cannot distinguish between cause and effect unless we remember that our parents are the “cause” of our existence. Neither can we make filial piety the “cause” of our actions unless we remember the debt of gratitude we owe our parents.

2. Honor your superiors.

Everyone, young or old, should consider the distinctions between master and servant and between superior and inferior to be basic, and so honor those above him.

...

4. Instruct your descendants.

Teach your children when they are young to lead pure lives. Teach them to obey their parents, to respect their elders, never to tell even a small lie, to move about quietly, never to neglect their work, to be always alert, never to walk about aimlessly, and never to dress or eat extravagantly.

5. *Be content with your Way.*

Samurai study the martial arts and work in the government. Farmers till their lands and pay their taxes. Artisans work at their family industries and pass on to their children the family traditions. Merchants have trading as their duty and must trade diligently and honestly. Each of the four classes has its own Way, and that Way is the true Way.

...

[Yoshida, ed., *Shōka no kakun*, pp. 114–24; trans. adapted from Ramseyer, “Thrift and Diligence,” pp. 227–30]

Questions:

1. On what philosophical assumptions is this code based?
2. How does the author provide justification for the place of merchants in Japanese society?
3. Why does the author bid his descendants to “be content with the Way”?
4. Do you sense an entrepreneurial ethic in this text? What does this tell you about merchants in Tokugawa Japan?

Longer Selection

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2. *Honor your superiors.*

Everyone, young or old, should consider the distinctions between master and servant and between superior and inferior to be basic, and so honor those above him.

3. *Maintain peace within the neighborhood.*

Peace in a neighborhood depends on peace in each house, but peace in a house depends on the attitudes of its members. If each person in your house maintains a healthy attitude and works faithfully, everyone will be on good terms with his colleagues, and your house will win the respect of the neighborhood.

4. *Instruct your descendants.*

Teach your children when they are young to lead pure lives. Teach them to obey their parents, to respect their elders, never to tell even a small lie, to move about quietly, never to neglect their work, to be always alert, never to walk about aimlessly, and never to dress or eat extravagantly.

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6. *Avoid bad behavior.*

Although the world is limitless, everything in it is either good or bad. That which follows the Way is good, while that which goes against it is bad.