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箪笥 (Tansu) : The Japanese chest. 2

In this newsletter, we continue our examination of Japanese storage devices. After discussing the art of boxing, then the Japanese *kura* (蔵) institution, then the *ishô-dansu* (衣装箪笥), we are now presenting the *chôba-dansu* (帳場箪笥) and other tansu used by Japanese tradesmen and sailors.

Bakumatsu-Meiji (1840-1890) *choba-dansu* from the Gifu area. *Hinoki* wood (Japanese cypress) with *Kuwa* wood (mulberry) for the drawers and the little door.

In our previous issues, it was explained that the word *tansu* derives from the portability of the object, either on the shoulder with a pole, or carried by its handles. One of the most portable forms of *tansu* (with two porters and a pole) is the *chôba-dansu*, a unique category of furniture owned by members of the merchant (*chônin* - 町人) class.

During the early Edo period, in which most Japanese homes contained no furniture except for storage coffers and small tables, the merchant's shops were the main customers of Japanese carpenters. A little background of the Edo society will help to explain why. The *Pax Tokugawa* of two and half centuries, starting from the beginning of the 17th century, was based on a structural freezing of the distribution of social classes, assuring a rigid control of society.

At the top of the hierarchy was the samurai class, below that the farmers, then artisans, and finally merchants, with these last two classes not really thought of as distinct, but called *chônin* (townsmen). Such an organization was following the Chinese Confucian theory of class order, replacing the aristocratic scholarly elite on top with the samurai.

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Portable artisan chests (*gyôshô -dansu* 行商箪笥) entirely built with *kiri* wood (paulownia). Behind the doors are 9 drawers of various sizes (see detail bellow).

Just as in China, the Japanese merchant's class, considered non-productive and mere takers of profit from the creations of others, and therefore logically placed in the bottom tier, were to become the wealthiest and take roles well above their supposed social standing. Ironically the Shoguns and Daimio accelerated the economic development of the country and the enrichment of such townsmen by severing the samurai from the land to make them a leisure-oriented urban class whose pleasures were provided by… the wealthy *chônin*. The system of the *sankin kôtai* (参勤交代), forcing daimyos to a periodical migration between Edo and their *han*, accompanied by large entourages of samurais and often their families, while keeping their wives and heirs in Edo at all times, contributed to the nourishing of extravagant tastes amongst the ruling class, while enriching merchants and artisans and contributing to the growth of commercial exchanges and a money-based economy.

Thus, the growth of an urban economy brought prosperity to the *chônin*, who became the moneylenders of the samurai, and their prosperity enabled them to live a luxurious life at odds with their placement at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They could have afforded to fill their homes with elaborate furniture as a way to invest some of their capital, but they did not, because of laws restricting their purchases. As in many other societies, most notably in neighbouring China, but also in antiquity and medieval and pre-modern Europe, Japanese shoguns attempted to maintain class distinctions by periodically issuing sumptuary laws (*kenyakurei* - 倹約令).

The sumptuary laws concerned all classes. The size of peasants' houses was restricted and ordinary farmers could not have *tatami* mats or *shoji* (paper covered sliding doors). The furniture was limited to one long chest for the better farming family, and trunks only for the lesser families. Below is a list of prohibitions directed at *chônin* issued in an edict in 1719[1] and covering all details of their lives, from clothing to transportation and including houses and furnishings:

Built with *kiri* wood (paulownia), carried on the back, this is one of the heaviest *gyôshô-dansu*, weighing 26 kg … empty. It could have been a *kusuri dansu* used by an itinerant merchant, certainly a strong pharmacist!

Servants of chônin *should not wear silk.* Chônin *should not wear wool capes. Entertainment by* chônin *should not be elaborate.* Chônin *should not have household articles with gold lacquer decorations.* Chônin *should not use gold and silver leaf in their buildings. Three-story houses should not be built.* Chônin *should not have gold lacquer on their riding saddles or braided-thread cruppers. Saddle cushions should not be made of materials other than pongee, cotton, and wool blankets. The weddings of* chônin *should not be elaborate.* Chônin *should not wear long swords or large short swords.* Chônin *should not dress in an outlandish fashion*.

[1] Donald H. Shively, *Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan*, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Vol. 25 (1964-1965).

The *chônin* whatever his real wealth could be, had, in theory, to scale his house, furniture, means of transportation, clothing and food according to his status at the bottom rank of the society. Most *chônin* had only "professional" furnishings, including one special tansu on display in their shop. A merchant who could order a good chest from the best cabinet maker of the time, or have it imported from a famous cabinet making area like Sakai-Osaka, Matsumoto, Nigata, Yonezawa or Edo, would be taken seriously by his patrons. He often chose to have one *cho-todana* (帳戸棚) or a *cho-dansu* (帳箪笥), sometime a *kuruma-todana* (車戸棚 - on wheels) to keep his account ledgers and other tools to run his business and to serve as well as a display in his shop. These modest chests, almost as tall as they were wide, usually measured less than a metre across, but were comparatively heavy because of their numerous drawers and intricate doors. Since this piece of furniture was the only mean to show the wealth of the shop, without being too ostentatious, even though *chôba-dansu* (帳場箪笥) were often unfinished wood and apparent simple design and discreet ironware, they were solidly constructed by the best carpenters, so they would look modest, but in fact were pieces of art using sophisticated joinery and the best cabinetry techniques of their time, and often having one or several complex hidden compartments behinds doors and drawers.

Also found in shops were specialised tansu, such as the *kusuri-dansu* (薬箪笥) for pharmacists, with dozens of small drawers, and smaller portable chests like the *kakesuzuri-bako* (掛け硯箱 - portable writing box), the *shoko-dansu* (書庫箪笥 - document chest), the *fumizukue* (文机 - low desk) and the *zenibako* (銭函) or *kinko* (金庫) to store currency, usually built of strong, heavy woods such as *keyaki* (zelkova).

Edo era *hyakume dansu* (百目箪笥) or "100 eyes" pharmacy-chest (*kusuri-dansu*). *Hyakume* do not always have exactly 100 drawers, but very close, usually between 98 and 100. Built with *kiri* wood (paulownia), *kusuri-dansu* are highly sought by collectors, although very few are in original shape, with all original marked drawers like this one.

Craftsmen and traders, including metal or wood workers, hairdressers, doctors, wood printers, and many other professions, had specialised chests in which to keep their tools, and their tansu where often portable - either because they worked without a shop of their own, or because they travelled from place to place to offer their services. Portable artisan chests (*gyôshô-dansu* 行商箪笥) where often made of *kiri* (paulownia), a prized light wood, and they were carefully repaired from time to time as can be observed on the (rare) chests that have been preserved.

Taisho era *kakesuzuri-bako* (portable writing box) with built-in *soroban* (abacus). Mulberry and kiri-wood (polownia). On top was an ink stone and brushes for writing. *Kakesuzuri-bako* were commonly used in shops, or on the road by itinerary merchants.

FUNA-DANSU

One of the most highly sought-after chests by collectors nowadays is the *funa-dansu* (sea-chest), a shipboard strongbox used by sailors, built with such care and perfection that they are often considered the summit of the work of Japanese carpenters.

Japanese seamen were famed in the South Eastern seas prior to 1635, when the Tokugawa shogunate prohibited Japanese from travelling overseas. Coastal trade was never prohibited, however, and an extensive system of sea routes ran around Honshu during Edo and early Meiji, of which the Noto peninsula of the Kaga han took the lion's share. One reason for that success is that Kaga han was the largest rice producing area (after the Shogun), and it exported part of its output, mainly to Osaka. The safest and cheapest route for this was by sea.

Late Edo *funa-dansu* from Sado island (Ogi). This is an early type of *chobako funa-dansu* with a *kendon-buta* (drop-fit door) revealing 6 drawers including 2 money boxes. Built with thick metalwork on *keyaki*-wood (zelkova) wiped with transparent lacquer (*fuki-urushi*).

Sea tradesmen were often farm owners, and were not classified as *chônin*. Like their urban cousins, however, they had a strong desire to show their affluence and influence through their possessions. Since the coastal ship specifications were closely regulated to stop vessels from leaving Japan (i.e. to limit seaworthiness), standard boats could not be impressive, so sea captains chose the *funa-dansu* as the status symbol for a successful sea tradesman. Furthermore, since the sea trade was prosperous and profitable, not only captains but also lieutenants had their own *funa-dansu*, leading to a competition to display the most impressive sea-chest when disembarking from a harbour and getting ready for starting trading negotiations with the port community. The most impressive and well-built *funa-dansu* were built in harbours on the Japan sea coast, particularly in the harbour of Ogi on Sado island. Ogi harbour was a good refuge for boats sailing from Osaka around Honshu, via Hokkaido in the North or via Shimonoseki in the South. Sado craftsmen started to produce extravagant *funa-tansu* which were appreciated by the wealthy sailors working the profitable *kitamae-bune* (北前船) route, sailing from Hokkaido to Osaka on the Japan Sea. The harbours of Sakata (today's Yamagata prefecture) and Mikuni (today's Fukui prefecture) also produced very fine *funa-dansu*, mostly custom-made for the many sailors who came from those areas. Those tansu are

Interior from same *chobako funa-dansu*. Drawers interior is made of *kiri*-wood (paulownia).

equally sought-after today. This is because, although they were less showy than those from Ogi, they were extremely well-built. Besides those three *funa-dansu* producing centres, Edo and Osaka had a small production, as well as Sendai, but the Pacific coast sea-chests were less lavish, as the sailors on that side of Japan were mostly transporting cargo for a fee (*unchin-zumi*- 運賃積み) rather than acting as merchants selling their goods (*kai-zumi* - 買い積み) for a higher profit, as was the case on the Japan Sea side.

Funa-dansu came in three types: the ***kakesuzuri*** for a ship's papers, the ***chôbako*** (帳箱) for account books, money and documents, and the ***hangai*** (半櫃) for clothing. The *kakesuzuri* is the earliest type, appearing at the end of the 18th century, and remaining in production until the end of the 19th. Easily recognizable with a handle on the top for convenient transportation, the *kakesuzuri* is almost cubic with more depth, exhibiting large hinges and lock plates, with two straps of iron on the door on the earliest models, usually all made of *kiri* (paulownia) wood, and evolving with more intricate iron decorations and the use of *keyaki* (zelkova) wood for the outside (but still *kiri* wood for the interior). The outside wood and front of the interior drawers were finished with clear lacquer. The *chobako* style, emerging in the early 19th century, is the most sophisticated, with 4 sub-styles: *kendon-gata* (a drop-fit door), *kannuki-gata* (a lock-bar), *hikidashi-gata* (drawers), and *fukugo-gata* (a mix of doors and drawers). It is heavier and oblong with a large front and has two side handles instead of one on the top. Constructed in *keyaki* (zelkova) wood wiped with clear lacquer for the outside and *kiri* wood for the interior, they are decorated with thick iron metalwork. Finally, the *hangai* (half chest) style was a low chest but wider than the *chobako* style (about 80 cm long) so it could be used to store a captain's best clothing. Captains had to wear formal clothes to deal with city or government officials. All *hangai* funa-dansu had a drop-fit door, with one or 2 deep drawers inside. They used the same wood and wiped lacquer finish as the *chobako*.

The first two types of *funa-dansu* were used to store important documents and the tools needed for the sea trade business. Just as land travel was restricted during the Tokugawa period, sea travel and trade was even more subject to tight control. In each harbor, sea traders could be asked for several type of documents: the *funa kansatsu* (船鑑札 - ship's registration), the *fune ôraitegata* (船往来手形 - ship's passport), a safe-conduct document certifying that the crew was not Christian, the *senchû gojomoku* (船中御条目- charter rules) used when the ship was chartered by the bakufu,

Late Edo sea Chest (*funa-dansu*), *kakesuzuri* type, with *jugi-gata* (cross-face) decoration, from Sado island. *Kiri* wood (paulownia).

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the *senchû nikki* (船中日記 - logbook) that needed to be stamped by port authorities when entering and leaving harbors, the *okurijo* (送り状- bill of lading) detailing the cargo and destination and the *baibai shikiri* (売買仕切 - the trading logbook). Also, the display of the Rising Sun flag was mandatory when transporting rice for the bakufu, and it was stored in the *funa-dansu* when not in use[2].

The solid construction of the *funa-dansu* was therefore not just to insure the safety of valuables such as currency resulting from sales, but also all the ship's documents, for which the captain could face criminal charges if not able to produce them on request. The tight construction, especially with the use of *kiri* wood for the interior (the wood is supposed to absorb moisture and expand to fills the gaps of drawers to keep the inside air-tight in case of immersion), was said to make the *funa-tansu* unsinkable, and the many hidden caches and numerous locks gave a chance to the captain to recover his property if the *funa-dansu* washes ashore if his ship had somehow sunk.

Funa-dansu from previous page viewed from top.

Behind the little door are 2 small drawers and 2 unusual secret compartments (not shown). Detail from the *choba-dansu* from the first page.

Our next newsletter will be the last chapter on Japanese storage devices. We will introduce the *mizuya-dansu* (水屋箪笥- kitchen chest) and the *kaidan-dansu* (階段箪笥- step chest).
You can visit *www.dentsdelion.com/NEWSLETTER/Newsletters.htm* to read our previous issues.

[2] Kazuko Kaizumi, *Tansu*, Hosei University, 1982.
Kazuko Kaizumi, *Traditional Japabese Chests, A Definitive Guide*, Kodansha International, 2010.