The ties that Bind: amakudari and shukko

Definition

The literal translation of the term amakudari is ‘descent from heaven’ and refers to the practice of bureaucrats taking post-retirement positions in public and private corporations. The retired officials receive full salaries from their new organizations along with their civil service pensions. Amakudari began in the 1930s when the government started to strictly regulate the economy for the war effort. Business owners employed bureaucrats in order to determine future government directives.

Amakudari was fostered by the civil service after the war because bureaucrats were retired by the age of fifty-six or fifty-seven, earlier than in the private sector, to make room in the ministries for younger officers. The ministries wanted to provide retiring officials with a new source of income that enhanced their pensions. Ostensibly the system provided an incentive for officers who would otherwise seek employment in the private sector rather than the civil service, where salaries were lower. However, the system also served the interests of the bureaucracy because it created a network of former bureaucrats and their erstwhile colleagues throughout the public and private sectors, thereby increasing the bureaucracy’s power to control economic and industrial policies. In effect, amakudari has acted to establish a control mechanism in the political economic system, expediting the use of such policy instruments as ‘administrative guidance’, discussed in Chapter 5. The relationship between a bureaucrat and his former colleagues, who are posted in businesses
in a sector under their ministry's administrative jurisdiction, automatically tightens the ministry's grip on that sector. Logically, the more territory there is within a ministry's jurisdiction, the more positions there may be in companies whose industries are within that jurisdiction. Originally, the elite bureaucrats were the main beneficiaries of *amakudari* but gradually officers in middle management (*kacho*) as well as non-career officers have also come to be included in the system.

**Rules and regulations**

The National Personnel Agency places bureaucrats who have reached retirement into private and public corporations. The agency encourages business owners to hire bureaucrats in an advertisement that it runs on its website: ‘Wouldn’t you like to use the skills of civil servants?’ The advertisement shows an executive sitting at a desk explaining a document to staff. The executive appears to be a retired official. The words beneath the picture read: ‘His abilities are amazing! Wouldn’t it be great if civil servants could come to work for our companies after they retire?’

The agency reassures companies that its ‘use of the human resource system’ is fair and impartial, and that it will take care of the details, instructing interested parties to apply through the Federation of Economic Organization (*keidanren*) whose members are in big business. The agency also promises that it will make inquiries at the ministries for employees who will meet the companies’ needs.¹

Ministry officials also find post-retirement positions for fellow colleagues in the industries their ministries administrate, but the National Public Service Law stipulates that bureaucrats cannot, for a period of two years, legally move directly to positions in private companies attached to the sectors their ministries regulate. However, they can move immediately to special corporations, public corporations and industrial associations, where they linger for two years on a salary before going on to the private sector.

**Manifestations of *amakudari***

The Japanese call their country ‘bureaucrats’ heaven’ because of the lucrative post-retirement positions awaiting elite bureaucrats after