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Tokugawa Peasants: Win, Lose, or Draw?

by Conrad Totman

Homo sapiens has been trampling the daisies for some 45,000 years now, most of that time as a hunter-gatherer surviving on the ecosystem’s indigenous production. Five to ten thousand years ago, in response to biological changes wrought by the last glacial melt-off, humans started manipulating their environments in unprecedented ways, favoring some plants and animals at the expense of others as a means of increasing and stabilizing their food supply. In due course these measures gave rise on all continents save Antarctica to systems of grazing and agriculture, that is, the formation of homocentric biological communities consisting of humans and collaborating species of plants and animals. Conjointly they displaced other life forms by establishing control over ever more of the earth’s surface for the purpose of biomass production that ultimately was managed by the humans for human benefit. Even more recently, perhaps because excessive manipulation and distortion of local environments created biosystem breakdowns that generated hardship and crisis, humans began congregating in organized hordes and using the resulting power to extend their environmental exploitation. That process gave them experiences that increased the sum of human wants, which fostered yet more efforts at acquisition and eventually culminated in the urbanized, large-scale industrial societies of today.

Save for a few errant anthropologists and archeologists, few of us denizens of urban, industrial society show much interest in our hunter-gatherer forebears, having never encountered their type and feeling no particular need for them. But we do show some interest in our agricultural antecedents, enough tillers and herders still being around to preserve a sense of kinship. More compellingly we still have a need for their production, although the creation of human food directly from inorganic material is surely but a few decades away.

This continuing interest in agriculturalists (but not necessarily in agriculture, which creates problems because the one cannot be understood without the

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other) is evident in the English-language corpus dealing with Tokugawa Japan. Tillers of the soil, being most of the Tokugawa population, have appeared in studies of the era for a century now and currently occupy a prominent place in both specialized monographs and broader interpretative essays. In fact, the recent publication of no less than four English-language books on the subject prompts this survey of the scholarship.

Review of the Literature

Tokugawa peasants—let’s not quibble about the term, it’s short and serviceable—first appeared in English-language studies around 1890 in the legal-institutional writings of D. B. Simmons and John H. Wigmore. From this beginning an important line of scholarship arose that sought to understand the context of law and judicial procedure within which peasants (and others) lived. Major contributors to this line of study have been John Carey Hall early in the twentieth century, Dan F. Henderson after World War II, and the editorial committees originally established by Wigmore to produce the massive Law and Justice in Tokugawa Japan, which finally bore fruit after 1969. These several works are treasure troves, and not only for scholars of law. The student of Tokugawa peasants can derive from the translations of lawsuits much insight into what peasants cared about, how they attempted to gain their objectives, and how they were dealt with by others, notably rulers but also merchants, neighbors, and kin.

Related to these studies of legal institutions are works illuminating other dimensions of village organization and procedure. The earliest, which date to the 1890s, were soon eclipsed by essays of Kan’ichi Asakawa, and even these have been superseded by more recent scholarship, especially books and essays of the past thirty years. These include Harumi Befu’s sensitive studies on village headmen, William Kelly’s careful examination of irrigation in Shōnai domain, Alden Myers’s study of early bakufu legal policy toward villages, Richard Varner’s lucid and insightful essay on village men’s groups, and Jennifer Robertson and Thomas C. Smith’s dissimilar treatments of agronomic writings. Several of Smith’s other studies of village society also fall into this category, most notably his classic, The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan.

Policies of the Meiji government gave rise to a key aspect of Tokugawa peasant studies—that dealing with peasant unrest. Land reform and other

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2 Wigmore, 1891, 1892.
3 J. C. Hall, 1911, 1913; Henderson, 1965, 1974, 1975; Wigmore, 1969–.
6 Smith, 1959. Smith’s several articles are currently being prepared for reissue in book form by the University of California Press.
state policies exacerbated rural hardship, generating social problems that have engaged Japanese scholars throughout the twentieth century. During the 1930s the topic found its first major expression in English in Hugh Borton’s pioneering study, *Peasant Uprisings in Japan of the Tokugawa Period.* Shortly thereafter E. H. Norman, writing between 1938 and 1945, prepared broad interpretative studies of Japan that emphasized the hardship and exploitation endured by Tokugawa peasants. 7

For two decades after that, during the Occupation and subsequent economic recovery and growth, the issue of peasant suffering received little notice; rather, Meiji and postwar land reform and rural change commanded most of the limited attention that scholars writing in English devoted to Japanese agriculture. 8 When investigation into hardship and unrest among Tokugawa peasants revived in the 1960s, it was inspired by the broader flowering of interest in social history, *mentalités,* and history ‘from the bottom up’. ‘Peasant consciousness’, meaning specifically political consciousness, became the focus of some of the most innovative work, notably that of Irwin Scheiner. 9

One subject in this genre is peasant narratives of village upheaval. Treated initially as a form of folk tale, these narratives came to be seen as revealing ‘the peasant mind’. Heinrich Reinfried’s translation titled *The Tale of Nisuke* is the major example to date. Anne Walthall, in her three articles and new book, *Social Protest and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Japan,* has been particularly sensitive in interpreting peasant mentality. 10

Other scholars have given more attention to the political and institutional context of rural unrest, usually by examining particular incidents. Although David Davis’s study of late medieval *ikki* focuses on the sixteenth century and is thus pre-Tokugawa, it deserves note in this context. Patricia Sippel produced an excellent piece on the turmoil of 1866 in Musashi province. Stephen Vlastos has examined peasant activity within Fukushima in an insightful essay and in his thoughtful new book, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan.* William Kelly’s disciplined new volume, *Deference and Defiance in

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9 Scheiner, 1973, 1978. See also Marti, 1977–1978; Robertson, 1984a, 1984b; and Winston Davis, 1984. Studies of popular religion are related to peasant mentality, of course, but they are omitted here lest the topic grow unwieldy.

Nineteenth-Century Japan, examines incidents spanning thirty-five years of Shōnai domain history. Some scholars have applied quantitative techniques or other analytical devices to the study of peasant activism. W. Donald Burton has fashioned two interpretative essays that place unrest of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a broader context of class struggle, and Herbert Bix published an article on Miura Meisuke and the peasant rebellion in Nambu domain in 1853. Bix’s new book, Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590–1884, places a substantial body of detailed information on several instances of peasant protest between 1720 and 1884 into a methodically explained interpretative structure. He argues that the oppressive hand of the feudal rulers was gradually thrust aside by the energies of the peasant masses engaged in increasingly conscious class struggle against exploitative overlords, only to be snared in the end by the emperor-system state of the Meiji period.

Prior to this recent upsurge of interest in rural disorder, scholars established precedents for managing the huge and amorphous topic of ‘the Tokugawa peasantry’. The solutions that emerged were both obvious and effective: namely, focusing on a locality, a part of the era, or a segment of the topic. Smith’s essays often focused on segments of the whole, such as land tax or by-employment practices. William Chambliss, in his path-breaking Chiaraijima Village: Land Tenure, Taxation, and Local Trade, 1818–1884, utilized two key techniques—local focus and restricted time period—that were employed later by Sippel, Kelly, and Neil L. Waters. Geographical focus also shaped the work of Vlastos, William B. Hauser, who studied the cotton industry around Osaka, and Linda Johnson, who examined an important merchant-landlord in Shōnai. In its analysis, Chiaraijima is true to its day, explaining the significance of the record in terms of economic development and ‘modernization’. But it is timeless in its judiciousness, its analytical openness, and its readiness to live with the ambiguity of the human record: specifically, Chambliss concludes that the village of Chiaraijima was relatively well off and its recorded Tokugawa tax burden not truly oppressive. But he also finds the disparity between rich and poor growing, and he concludes that Meiji leaders

12 Sugimoto, 1975; Hashimoto, 1982. The Sugimoto piece has serious problems of assumption and analysis.

The year 1868 rarely provides a useful ending date for students of rural Tokugawa affairs, so the subject often merges into examinations of Meiji developments. Three recent works that focus on the Meiji peasantry but touch pre-1868 antecedents are Roger W. Bowen, Rebellion and Democracy in Meiji Japan: A Study of Commoners in the Popular Rights Movement, University of California Press, 1980; Penelope Francks, Technology and Agricultural Development in Pre-War Japan, Yale U.P., 1984; and Neil L. Waters, Japan’s Local Pragmatists: The Transition from Bakumatsu to Meiji in the Kawasaki Region, Harvard U.P., 1983.
overcame the insufficiency of taxation largely at the expense of poorer villagers. Whereas Chambliss, Sippel, Kelly, and Waters examine late-Tokugawa and Meiji developments, other scholars have dealt with the pre-Genroku peasantry. Some of this scholarship focuses directly on agriculture, but much, as in works by John W. Hall and Philip C. Brown, examines the larger polity and the position of villagers therein.

The issue of modernization that Chambliss addressed is central to Smith’s work, and for several years after their books appeared, it dominated English-language writings on the Tokugawa peasant. Indeed, it pervaded studies of post-1550 Japan as a whole. Two of the most enthusiastic exponents of this approach have been the economists Kozo Yamamura and James I. Nakamura. Yamamura’s aggressive anti-Marxism and Nakamura’s generous optimism have shown up in a number of works whose overall thrust is that the condition of the peasantry improved as the Tokugawa period advanced. The levels of agronomic skill, product diversity, and economic complexity rose, and in consequence standards of living improved. These changes, good in themselves, were even more commendable for being crucial to the praiseworthy economic achievements of twentieth-century Japan. The arguments of these works are sharply at odds with those of Burton and especially of Bix, but the analysis is rather more akin to theirs in its monochromatic tenor than to that found in the works of Seymour Broadbridge, Chambliss, Kelly, Sippel, Vlastos, and Waters, who perceive and convey a stubborn complexity and ambiguity in human affairs.

In recent years, demographic study has gained considerable momentum. To some extent a subcategory of modernization historiography, it has sought to explain the peculiar large-scale population trends of the Edo period: the steep growth of the seventeenth century and the stasis of ca. 1720–1850. The demographers have cautiously challenged an older view that saw this stasis as grim consequence of tragedy: infanticide, famine, and general peasant impoverishment. The revision has not been easy, however, and may be more a

15 Smith, 1952; Yamamura, 1981.
16 John W. Hall, 1968, 1981; Brown, 1981. Also, several essays in Hall, Nagahara, & Yamamura, 1984, convey information and insight on the situation of the peasantry at the beginning of the Tokugawa period.
17 The best-known expression of this phase of study is the separately edited and titled volumes in the series Studies in the Modernization of Japan, published by Princeton U.P. They contain a number of essays that touch on the Tokugawa peasantry.
19 An eloquent and influential statement of this view is G. B. Sansom, Japan: A Short Cultural History, Appleton-Century-Crofts,
matter of phrasing and perspective than substance. In 1972, Susan B. Hanley and Yamamura published a scholarly quantitative demographic study in which they concluded that ‘famines were probably the most important factor in restricting population growth and, in fact, may have been the primary cause of most of the abortion and infanticide that took place.'

In 1977, Smith suggested that conscious family planning pursued to promote household well-being may have been the key factor in infanticide, and two years later Hanley expressed the opinion that ‘the primary use of [abortion and infanticide] was not to prevent starvation in times of famine, but rather was to raise or maintain the standard of living for the family.' By 1981, Nakamura, expressing himself with a mild more certitude than our level of knowledge may have warranted, confidently attributed Japan’s ‘success’ in population management to rational family planning by samurai and peasants alike.

A year earlier, however, Hayami Akira of Keiō University concluded that abortion and infanticide were primarily instruments of the poor, practiced consciously to limit family size, a view not sharply at odds with that held by Honjō Eijirō a half-century ago. Indeed, it seems to bring us back to the somewhat tentative view expressed by an official of Sendai domain in 1754, when he wrote:

Up to fifty or sixty years ago a couple of farmers used to bring up five or six or even seven or eight children, but in recent years it has become a fashion among the farmers not to rear more than one or two children between a couple, though it is not clear whether this is due to the luxurious habits that prevail among them or some other causes. As soon as a baby is born, its parents put it to death. All this is ascribable to their poverty. They prefer leading as best a life as they can without encumbrances to bringing up many children to hunger and penury, and restrict the number of their children to two or three. Even rich families are contaminated by this evil custom.

Although it introduces much statistical material, the recent demographic scholarship has made little progress in explaining long-term swings of Tokugawa population. Perhaps the problem is that numbers measure outcomes but can only impute intent, and the relationship of intent to outcome is

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New York, 1931; revised edition, 1943; see esp. pp. 513–19. Another influential work that portrayed an oppressed peasantry was Honjō, 1935, esp. chapters 5 & 8.


Hanley, 1979, p. 31; Smith, 1977. Also see Hanley & Yamamura, 1977, which, together with Smith, 1977, is the major work on this topic. It contains an excellent bibliography listing earlier studies in English as well as Japanese. Demographic essays listed there are omitted here.

Nakamura, 1981.


Quoted in Honjō, 1935, p. 178. A little further on, the official suggests that the practice is ‘partly responsible for the waste of agricultural fields’, owing presumably to the labor scarcity that it caused. The comment suggests something about why the practice dismayed him: no workers=no yield=no tax income and greater likelihood of a drain on the exchequer to fight famine.
rarely clear, even to the actors. What is more noticeable in these recent writings is that whereas the older literature expressed overt dismay at the living conditions that led peasants to commit murder—to use an alternative term for infanticide—when faced with a choice between starvation and murder, or alternatively outrage insofar as peasants seemed to be making the same choice when the option was more creature comforts, the newer literature is either silent on the issue or implicitly commendatory.

The demographic scholarship has been more successful as a method of studying small-scale patterns and trends in migration, village composition, marital arrangements, and other social topics. Hayami has been the most prolific scholar in this field and has ably guided the work of several non-Japanese demographers.25

In sum, during the past century, and especially during the past thirty years, there has been a dramatic increase in the range and magnitude of scholarship concerning the Tokugawa peasantry. Intense interpretative disagreements have also emerged, and these are reflected in attempts to place the peasantry in the larger context of Japanese history, as is evident in Charles J. Dunn's descriptive treatment of Tokugawa society and Mikiso Hane's eloquent denunciation of the suffering he finds so prevalent among common people.26

**Interpretative Issues in Ecological Perspective**

Four book-length studies in twelve months: clearly the field is thriving. It is also rich in controversy, a sign that it attracts lively minds.

At present, the basic interpretative debate juxtaposes scholars who see Tokugawa rural history as essentially an optimistic story of progress and human betterment against those who view it as a grim account of human degradation and immiseration that generated revolutionary rage. In part the disagreement springs from different reading of the same evidence. More commonly it arises from difference in perspective—an economic vs. a political perspective—that leads to the use of different sorts of data for different purposes and, sometimes, to a mutual disregard of one another's evidence and assessments. In the end, however, economics and politics are inseparable, so the bodies of scholarship overlap and clash. At the hypothetical extremes, dogma obviates study: if feudalism and capitalism are systems of exploitation,

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A valuable recent study is Kalland & Pederson, 1984. It touches the related topic of natural disaster, famine, and disease, which is currently receiving considerable attention in Japan but only beginning to command interest abroad. A pioneering work in English is Ann Jannetta's forthcoming study of epidemics during the Edo period, to be published by Princeton U.P.

26 Dunn, 1972; Hane, 1982.
and if Tokugawa society was feudal, then by definition it was exploitative, and scholarly research is superfluous to the argument. If, on the other hand, free markets are efficient and humans rational optimizers, and if the rural Tokugawa economy allowed these forces to operate, then the result, ipso facto, must be favorable.

Fortunately, few scholars of the Tokugawa peasantry are about to fall into such determinist positions. As is widely recognized, simple answers are inadequate because ambiguities abound. What was the real tax rate? It certainly wasn’t the mechanical 40, 50, or 60% that rulers proclaimed, but it included a vast array of supplemental imposts that drove the real levy well above the 30–35% that evidently was a common basic rate. How stern was Tokugawa law enforcement? Kirisute gomen was an empty phrase, but for people with neither spare time nor cash, threats of fine and jail, to say nothing of corporal punishment or expulsion, were damaging enough. How did the practitioners of infanticide and geronticide feel about their activities? Should their choice among miseries really be considered a ‘free’ or ‘rational’ choice? How much new land was opened to tillage? A great deal, that is certain, but it is far from certain what portion constituted a net economic plus and what portion ultimately imposed costs on humankind and the ecosystem that exceeded its benefits. What were the real trends in well-being and distribution of advantage? Is it better to celebrate or decry relative gains in the face of absolute losses or absolute gains in the face of relative losses? Answers abound; persuasive answers do not.

One reason why some answers fail to persuade is that they stem from analyses that omit significant dimensions of the problem. As a case in point, the labor- and land-intensive agriculture that became normative during the Tokugawa period is commonly treated as a case of agronomic improvement, but is it clearly deserving of our unalloyed celebration?\(^{27}\) It yielded high output per acre of arable, admittedly, and this is an important criterion in Japan, given its dearth of tillable land surface. However, in view of intensive agriculture’s massive requirements of fertilizer, whether it resulted in greater output per acre of total land (and offshore) area devoted to food production is another question. Further, in terms of labor input per unit of output (whether measured by volume, weight, nutrient value, rice-equivalency, or market price)—or in the more fundamental terms of energy input-output ratios—the value of in-

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\(^{27}\) To note a more fundamental critique, an unstated premise of most of the pertinent scholarship is that maximizing biosystem production for human use is an absolute good. That premise is unsatisfactory from an ecological perspective, which holds that optimal biosystem functioning maximizes the durability of the system as a whole, a postulate that generally means maximizing species diversity rather than the interest of a single species.

However, that critique derives from a synecological approach whereas the body of this essay is based on a narrower human-focused autecological perspective.
tensive agriculture was dubious. If forced to speculate, I would guess that in both labor and energy terms the long-run trend was unfavorable. In particular, when deep-tillage practice was applied to shallow, immature, low-quality, forest soil on sites that required substantial terracing, the tiller became trapped in an inflexible, high-risk, high-input, low-yield operation that could be sustained only by the most attentive husbandry and also by lavish use of litter, which was essential to raise soil friability and water-retainable powers to a level sufficient for cropping. Moreover, because the forest growth that provided fertilizer material was no longer available to produce other goods, such as timber and fuel, in many places the agricultural regimen generated severe disputes over woodland-use rights.

Perhaps the most fundamental omission in the current scholarship is the general failure to examine the possible effects of ecosystem changes of the Tokugawa period.28 Deforestation, with its many ramifications, illustrates the issue. Much forest cover was lost during the seventeenth century, and with its disappearance nearby crop land faced a greatly increased risk of frost, flood, and drought. Even without abnormalities or fluctuations of climate, the sharp reduction in forest cover was bound to multiply incidents of crop failure. In addition, during that same century more and more upland and northerly areas were opened to tillage, and these new lands crowded the biological boundaries of crop viability (for reasons of both climatic marginality and soil character) and exacerbated the danger of crop failure. Where tillers added new crops to their repertoire, they pushed cultivation to its new limits, perpetuating the problem of risk.29 The consequences—crop failure, famine, and harsh adaptive measures—became painfully apparent from the 1720s onward and are reflected in the 1754 lament of the Sendai official.

The opening of land wherever possible, which rulers and tillers alike fostered far more than they opposed, increased the portion of total food production chronically at risk of failure. It also deprived older and better arable plots of green fertilizer by diverting it to new fields. As green fertilizer grew scarce, more burdensome and expensive to obtain, and its provisioning less dependable, substitution became necessary and possible. By the mid-eighteenth century, for example, fish caught off Tōhoku were being brought to shore, unloaded, dried, baled, reloaded aboard coating vessels, shipped south


29 It may be borne in mind that, although not directly a problem of climatic marginality, crop specialization of the eighteenth century, which is commonly celebrated as evidence of improved and more productive agronomy, had the negative effect of exacerbating village vulnerability to crop failure because of political restraints on food distribution.
to Chōshi, transferred to river boats, hauled up the Tone to its south fork, sent down to Edo, punted over to riverbank warehouses, unloaded and stored, sold, reloaded on boats to go out into the Tama region, punted down the coast and upstream, unloaded, hauled overland to villages, and finally carried out to the fields and applied. Doubtless all that activity, if quantifiable, can be interpreted as evidence of rising GNP, but what really did it all achieve? Wasn't the whole process merely a huge application of human labor and marine biota to accomplish what the tiller previously had achieved by walking up into nearby hills, cutting brush and grass, hauling it home, and, after some degree of preparation, spading it into his fields? Pound for pound, fishmeal (despite its shortcomings as a soil builder and maintainer) is much more nutritious than mulch and amenable to more precise management. But how do we calculate the labor or energy cost per unit of recovered nutrient value? How was it being paid for, who was gaining, and who (besides the fish) losing in the transaction?

The problem of calculation is immensely complicated by the quality of available data. So much of the economy was unmonetized, especially labor inputs, that when we manipulate available figures, we risk creating a 'garbage in, garbage out' syndrome. Many agricultural costs were concealed by government price and wage manipulation, corvée labor requirements, and obligatory contributions, and by local practices that wrote off labor time as an uncalculated cost of survival.

For example, a major and escalating source of corvée work that affected villagers throughout Japan was woodland abuse. Pervasive deforestation and land overuse produced chronic soil erosion that filled stream beds, initially near the erosion site and later downstream. As watershed forests deteriorated and streams rose, flooding became more common and destructive, until preventive measures became preferable to clean-up and repair. Someone had to dredge the streams and build ever higher levees, and with the problem broadening and transcending village boundaries, riparian repair projects needed coordination at high levels. As streams that had flowed below land level in 1600 rose, by the nineteenth century, to 5, 10, even 15 feet above the plain, corvée labor duties proliferated, river work became highly organized, and miscellaneous new taxes were imposed to pay for administering the projects. However, the work rarely added any socially useful product, except where it permitted the conversion of more dry fields to irrigated culture, which practice itself involved complex ecological tradeoffs. In some areas, the dike-building may not even have sustained previous levels of yield, if only because higher levees required broader bases. The labor cost did not show up directly in food prices, however, and this skews the meaning of any food price indices. Moreover, the tax receipts did not translate into a higher level of living for the

30 For a recent study of another escalating corvée duty, see Vaporis, 1986.
rulers and did not necessarily appear in the records of central finance offices, but they still came out of somebody’s pocket.\textsuperscript{31}

Insofar as the increasing cost of social maintenance was paid in labor time, it created a demand for workers, unskilled workers in particular, that was not compensated through increased production. In conjunction with the increased labor needs of intensive agriculture—which were being experienced in the face of a non-growing national labor pool—the demand for workers manifested itself in a labor shortage and consequent higher rates on those jobs for which wages were recorded.\textsuperscript{32} Basically these developments may have meant that in order to survive, the average Japanese of ca. 1750–1850 must devote a greater portion of his life to work than had his seventeenth-century ancestors.\textsuperscript{33} In toto, the added labor inputs may have resulted in higher output per capita that translated into a higher material ‘standard of living’, but whether the gains were subjectively appreciated or objectively proportional to the added human effort (or the added cost to the biosystem) are different questions.

Through examining this sort of ecologically dictated rise in the cost of production, which rippled out through society in a host of subtle ways, we gain an important clue regarding what seems to have been going on in Tokugawa history: that the cost of maintaining human society had risen appreciably by the middle of the era. George Sansom, in a faint echo of an older Malthusian literature, cut to the heart of the matter when he observed that, given the technology and social institutions of the day, ‘the wealth of Japan was adequate neither in amount nor in distribution to the needs of her society.’\textsuperscript{34}

To say much the same thing in more ponderous terms, during the seventeenth century most of the cost of social growth had been passed along, in the usual human fashion, to the non-collaborating parts of the biosystem, that is, those plants and animals that were not nurtured because they were considered plentiful or useless. Insofar as that strategy did not suffice, the humans, in what also seems to be customary fashion, differentiated among themselves, with the more powerful squeezing the less powerful to attain the arrangements they wanted.

\textsuperscript{31} A plea for study: riparian (riverine as distinct from irrigation) affairs are an important but unexplored aspect of Tokugawa history, rich in comparative and ecological significance, and critical to any attempt to discuss the Tokugawa economy. The documentation, although scattered, is cumulatively extensive, and Japanese scholars have done admirable research on the topic, as a perusal of bibliographical sources reveals.

\textsuperscript{32} For a different interpretation of wage dynamics, see Saitô, 1978, and also Nishikawa, 1978.

\textsuperscript{33} This is not to argue that seventeenth-century Japanese necessarily worked fewer hours or days. After all, they handled the lumber and rock provisioning, canal dredging, and other chores that built the monuments and cities during the early decades, and also the land clearance that opened so much terrain to cultivation by 1700.

However, these efforts increased current production and benefited subsequent generations, whereas most of the added labor costs of later centuries served only to sustain existing levels of social production and capital.

\textsuperscript{34} Sansom, 1943, p. 515.
By the early eighteenth century, the archipelago’s human population had consumed most of the accumulated biomass that was accessible, primarily through an excess of self-indulgent construction activity. Moreover, topography of the realm and political restraints against oceanic and foreign operations severely limited access to new areas of exploitable environment. In the absence of a policy of foreign conquest and exploitation analogous to that of western Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century or chemical-physical manipulation and massive fossil-fuel exploitation in the twentieth-century manner, the people of Tokugawa Japan were reduced to dependence on contemporary biological production.\(^{35}\)

That development threatened them with a reduction in consumption levels. To avoid such an outcome, they could reduce the consumption level of collaborating biota (that is, keep fewer horses, oxen, dogs, etc.), or wrest more yield from surviving non-collaborating biota (that is, open more land, catch more fish,\(^ {36} \) cut deeper into the forest, or consume forest growth more completely). Or they could increase output relative to human population through some combination of increased human energy inputs (more hours of work) and accelerated rates of biomass production in areas already under exploitation (that is, utilizing fuller-yielding plants, replacing coniferous forests with deciduous broadleaf ones, or shifting to plantation forestry).

Insofar as these measures failed to meet their wants, the people confronted something akin to a zero-sum game in which they were compelled to jockey among themselves, passing the added cost of survival on to others as best they could. None fully succeeded, nearly everyone paid part of the price. The capital plant of the ruling elite—castles, palaces, mansions, etc.—deteriorated; cities grew shabby; the samurai class became ever more impoverished; and urban merchants took shelter under protective oligopoly arrangements in which they surrendered almost all flexibility and opportunity for gain in return for security. It is hardly surprising that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rulers glorified the age of the founders, urban people recalled the wonders of pre-1657 Edo, and merchants enshrined Genroku as an era of unparalleled opulence.

\(^{35}\) Ground coal from Kyushu did begin to be used, but the rate was too modest to constitute a significant factor in the larger picture.

\(^{36}\) A second plea for study: fisheries are a topic comparable to riparian affairs, but perhaps more accessible and richer in anthropological implications.


And out in the countryside the peasantry paid its full share of the price. Cultivators became more vulnerable to crop failure, corvée demands, and supplemental tax levies. At the same time they faced increased costs of production and dependence on cash-denominated supplies that they could not easily afford but needed because of their tillage practices. Many attempted to supplement their income by taking on added work or shifting to more lucrative jobs. They tried to cut costs or erase debts by eliminating unproductive household members and mortgaging their fields to those landed neighbors who were more successful in juggling the increased costs of production upward to urban people or downward to their tenants. But even those relative winners, the landlords, paid a price, discovering periodically and with ever greater frequency and trauma that their poorer neighbors, recognizing something of what was going on, would take forceful exception to it in outbursts of anger, frustration, and revenge. This violence provided psychological compensation, and often transient material alleviation, for woes that the system as a whole neither could nor would remedy.37 So it is not surprising that here, too, collective memory recalled a better day when rulers were virtuous, village leaders heroic, and the community harmonious. The memory was skewed, no doubt, but it may have contained an element of truth thanks to the seventeenth century’s less constricting ecological context.

Between their moments of revenge, peasants experienced more moments of routine, when the laws and regulations of society, both those formally projected by rulers and those informally understood by the ruled, shaped and channeled human activities. During the years of routine, the implications of ecological limits bore in on society relentlessly, molding a value system that maximized a person’s chances of survival: discipline, frugality, restraint, and attention to work. Rutherford Alcock, writing in the early 1860s, had this to say of villagers near Edo:

There is no sign of starvation or penury in the midst of the population—if little room for the indulgence of luxury or the display of wealth. Their habits of life are evidently simple in the highest degree. A bare, matted room—not over large but generally clean—and the basic utensils of daily life. . . . There is something to admire in this Spartan simplicity of habits, which seems to extend through all

37 There seem to be grounds for arguing that the late eighteenth century was the nadir, and that during the early nineteenth century matters improved. New silvicultural techniques were reversing downtrends in timber production, easing other pressures on woodland, and there may have been a retreat from cultivation of marginal lands that improved the efficiency of total biosystem usage. The payoff appeared by mid-century in renewed population growth.

But insofar as the existing technology and social organization persisted, this revival could only have been an interregnum until a new level of maximum utilization had been reached, pushing the system again to the level of periodic catastrophic readjustment.
their life, and they pride themselves upon it. ... Certainly so much austerity, and such universal absence of luxury, must go far to enable all to live upon little. . . . 38

Isabella Bird, writing in 1878, revealed the much poorer condition of those eking out a living in inner valleys, where villagers often dwelt at the very margin of the ecosystem’s carrying capacity. 39 Traveling north from Tokyo, she discovered that the rich alluvial rice plains, such as those surrounding Yamagata and Yonezawa, were prosperous. But in mountain villages,

The houses were mean, poor, shabby, often even squalid, the smells were bad, and the people looked ugly, shabby, and poor, though all were working at something or other.

Crossing the mountains from Nikkō to Aizu Wakamatsu, she was moved to write of a village where she stopped to rest:

The crowd was filthy and squalid beyond description. Why should the ‘quiver’ of poverty be so very full? one asks as one looks at the swarms of gentle, naked, old-fashioned children, born to a heritage of hard toil, to be, like their parents, devoured by vermin and pressed hard for taxes.

After leaving Niigata, she commented several more times on the miserable condition of mountain villages, finding them ever more destitute the further north she moved. Finally, a few miles south of Aomori,

The farming hamlets grew worse and worse, with houses made roughly of mud, with holes scratched in the side for light to get in, or for smoke to get out, and the walls of some were only great pieces of bark and bundles of straw tied to the posts with straw ropes.

Both Alcock and Bird, like so many sojourners in Japan, commented on the care with which every foot of arable land was handled, making the countryside noteworthy for its tidiness. Despite all the diligence and care, however, what Alcock pictured for us on the advantaged terrain around Edo was an intensely neat, barebones economy. And what Bird found in the mountains were villagers habituated to a most abjectly primitive existence. What the two seemed to be describing was a society that had learned by long and hard experience the necessity of making do, given the technology and social organization of the age, on the yield of an ecosystem whose limits had been reached.

In terms of the optimist-pessimist debate, then, an ecological perspective seems to suggest that the overall picture of rural Tokugawa society presented by the latter is more plausible. It also suggests, however, that to gain a satisfying understanding of the historical dynamics that produced that picture, we must pay greater attention to the ways in which environmental factors


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interacted with human ones to produce a web of advantages and liabilities that defies explication in terms of simple general categories.

Examining this fuller set of relationships may help us better understand the dynamics of peasant unrest and the ambiguous implications of socioeconomic change when they occur in a society that is pressing the carrying capacity of its environment. In our own day, when we face a similar but vastly more convoluted form of the same problem on a global scale, we may do well to observe how the people of Tokugawa Japan handled their problem, the ways they coped, the price they paid, by whom and how, and to give thought to what price we may want our own children and grandchildren to pay if the earthly ecosystem that sustains Homo sapiens is to continue producing daisies for the trampling.

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